



Half Dome Trail Stewardship Plan



Solitude, Recreation, Preservation... Wilderness

How many people are too many for a wilderness trail? At what point do man-made improvements cause an experience to cease being primitive recreation? Half Dome, one of the most popular attractions in Yosemite National Park, lies in designated wilderness. In 2008, up to 1,200 people a day tackled the famous trek up the cables; the high level of use has led to both safety and environmental concerns. The National Park Service (NPS) is developing a plan to provide long-term stewardship of the Half Dome route in a manner that is consistent with the Wilderness Act and the NPS Organic Act.

Wilderness

Americans have long cherished the dream of the wild frontier and the promise of the unknown. In 1964, in a nearly unanimous vote, Congress passed the Wilderness Act (Act) “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.” The Wilderness Act describes wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where

man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” While the Wilderness Act provides descriptions and guidelines, it does not provide use numbers or prescribe specific management actions. For example, the Act states that wilderness provides “outstanding opportunities for solitude,” but it does not define the number of people allowed before solitude is impacted.

Half Dome

Ever since Josiah Whitney in his 1870 Yosemite Guide-Book called Half Dome “perfectly inaccessible,” Half Dome has stood as a challenge to hikers. In 1919, the Sierra Club developed a cable system that provides access to the summit of Half Dome for visitors without technical rock climbing ability. In 1984, Congress designated Half Dome as wilderness. Today, the hike to the summit of Half Dome is arguably the most iconic and popular wilderness excursion for visitors to Yosemite National Park.

The Half Dome trail’s popularity is taking a toll on its wilderness environment. Initial monitoring along the trail has revealed:

- Vegetation damage and soil loss on and near the trail corridor, including many sections that are very wide and deeply eroded

- Habituation of wildlife along the trail corridor, and particularly at the summit and subdome, from improper food storage and feeding
- Threats to a population of the Mt. Lyell Salamander, a California Specie of Special Concern
- Severe crowding on the subdome, summit and cables, including long lines to use the cables
- Very high encounter rates on the entire trail

Increases in the number of people hiking to Half Dome are impacting the environment so that it no longer reflects the “natural conditions” and “solitude” required by the Wilderness Act. Crowding on the Half Dome cables can increase exit time from the summit and the amount of time visitors are exposed to hazardous natural conditions such as slippery wet rock, extreme temperatures, and lightning.

The Plan

To address impacts caused by increased visitor use of the Half Dome trail, the National Park Service is developing a management plan. The purpose of the plan is to provide long-term stewardship of the Half Dome route in a manner that is consistent with the Wilderness Act and the National Park Service Organic Act. More specifically, the plan will:

- Consider all ways to preserve and enhance wilderness character. This may include a range of alternatives from removal of the cables, to access restrictions potentially involving day-use permits

- Institute management prescriptions that protect and enhance the natural and cultural environment
- Establish thresholds and management prescriptions for appropriate social conditions on the Half Dome trail
- Provide unimpeded travel conditions, so that visitors may manage their own risk
- Commit to a program of ongoing monitoring to ensure the goals listed above are met

Data gathered during an interim permit system enacted in 2010 will help inform the plan.

Help Us

The National Park Service cares for Half Dome and Yosemite National Park on behalf of their true owners, the American people. Public interest and participation in this plan to manage and secure Half Dome and its wilderness setting is always welcome.

To find out more about the Half Dome Trail Stewardship Plan:

Visit the park’s planning website at www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/planning.htm

Write to:
Superintendent
Attn: The Half Dome Trail Stewardship Plan
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite, CA 95389

Attend a Public Open House on the last Wednesday of the month from 1 to 4 p.m. in the Auditorium in Yosemite Valley.