



## Restoration of the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias Environmental Impact Statement

### Public Scoping Report



April 2012

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# **I. INTRODUCTION**

This report summarizes public scoping comments submitted on the proposed project, Restoration of the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, for which an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is being prepared, according to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Public scoping comments will be used to assist the park in developing a No Action Alternative and a range of reasonable and feasible project alternatives that meet the project purpose and need, and then analyzing the environmental effects of each alternative in the EIS.

Public scoping for the project was conducted from August 30, 2011, through February 3, 2012. The National Park Service held public open houses on August 30, September 28, and December 7, 2011 and January 25, 2012, to inform interested parties about the proposed project and to solicit comments from members of the public in order to understand the spectrum of concerns, interests, and issues that should be considered in the planning process. The park also conducted a public site visit at the Grove on October 14, 2011. Approximately 20 interested individuals attended.

Public comments also were solicited by mail, fax, email, through the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) system, and on comment forms that were made available during public scoping meetings. During the public scoping period, 44 comment letters were received. This report provides a summary of concerns expressed in this correspondence.

## **A. Project Background**

The Mariposa Grove ecosystem includes approximately 500 mature giant sequoia trees in an upper and a lower grove. It is the largest of three giant sequoia groves within Yosemite National Park. The Grove contains several special-status species, historic properties, and archeological resources. Paved roads, parking areas, a campground, and other infrastructure were constructed within the Grove from the 1930s into the 1970s. Since then management practices have evolved along with our understanding of ecology and the giant sequoias. After nearly a century of fire suppression, prescribed fire was reintroduced to the Grove in 1971, as resource managers recognized that heavy fuel build-up could threaten the Grove's survival. Growing concerns about visitation impacts also led to the decision to prohibit private vehicles in the upper grove. In the park's 1980 General Management Plan, the National Park Service outlined goals and actions to protect and restore the Grove and improve the nearby south entrance to the park. Some of these actions have been implemented, such as removal of the campground and lodge. However, several major actions have yet to be fully designed or implemented, such as relocating parking from the Lower Grove; improving facilities; upgrading utilities; and redesigning the South Entrance Station. The Restoration of the Mariposa Grove EIS will provide schematic design alternatives for restoring natural conditions in Mariposa Grove as well as improving visitor experience and access within the Grove and at the nearby South Entrance to the Park. The EIS and associated resource studies will evaluate and disclose the potential impacts of the project to these and other park resources.

## **B. Project Purpose and Need**

The primary purpose of the Restoration of the Mariposa Grove Ecosystem project is to restore degraded habitat and natural processes critical to the long-term health of the Grove and improve the overall experience for visitors at both the Grove and South Entrance. The proposed project will develop a range of alternatives to restore the Grove and improve the visitor experience consistent with the goals outlined for the Mariposa Grove and South Entrance areas in the 1980 General

Management Plan. Site design alternatives may include actions such as parking lot relocation away from the giant sequoias; improving trails and transportation access within and to the Grove; repair, replacement and or removal of deteriorating infrastructure and utilities; redesigning traffic circulation; and accommodating parking, visitor orientation information, and shuttle stops in the vicinity of the South Entrance with.

## **C. Public Scoping Comment Review**

Public scoping letters received during the scoping period are reviewed and analyzed in a series of steps. For example, each letter received is first reviewed to determine the discrete points expressed by the author, each of which is considered to be a “comment.” Each discrete comment is then “coded” to associate that comment with a particular resource topic or element of the plan (e.g., cultural resources or the plan’s relationship to other projects). Once all letters have been coded for individual comments, similar comments are grouped together, and a “concern statement” is generated to capture the main points expressed by the comments.

The National Park Service planning team then screens each concern statement to identify what types of concerns were raised, whether a concern is within or outside of a project’s proposed scope of work, and how the planning team should address comments in the EA. An “in-scope” screening code was assigned to those concerns that will be considered in the development of alternatives to be evaluated in the EA. An “out-of-scope” screening code was assigned to those concerns that were determined to be beyond the purpose and need, or “scope,” of this project.

## **D. How to Use this Document**

The remainder of this Public Scoping Report is divided into two sections. Section 2, entitled “Concern Statements / Scoping Comments,” summarizes the scoping concerns, by topic that will be considered in the development of alternatives for the EIS. Section 3, entitled “Other Comments (Beyond Project Scope),” acknowledges comments that were determined to be beyond the stated purpose and need, or “scope,” of this project. Concerns presented in the “Concern Statements / Scoping Comments” section include supporting quotes, which are verbatim excerpts from individual public scoping letters. These supporting quotes are followed by comment author attributes, such as whether the comment author was an individual or an organization (if an organization – a general description of the organization type), the city and state of residence of the comment author, and the assigned letter and comment number. For example, “(Individual, Merced, CA, #1-1)” indicates a letter from an individual from Merced, California; the letter was the first scoping letter received; and the quote is the first coded comment from that specific letter.

## **E. Results of Public Scoping**

During the public scoping period, the park received 44 letters (one duplicate) from 41 individuals and 2 organizations. Analysis of these letters identified 126 discrete substantive comments, from which 15 general concern statements were generated.

The main public scoping concerns submitted to the National Park Service to consider during planning for this project relate to the following topics:

- Ecology and Natural Resources of the Grove
- Visitor Use and Experience

- Public Health and Safety
- Transportation
- Soundscapes
- Park Operations
- NEPA Process

All comments received during the scoping period have been reviewed and considered for relevancy and substance. Concern statements were developed to summarize and categorize comments, as listed below. The complete public scoping letters can be viewed electronically on the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) database at <http://www.parkplanning.nps.gov/mariposagrove>, or on the park’s planning webpage, <http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mgrove.htm>.

## II. CONCERN STATEMENTS / SCOPING COMMENTS

### F. Ecology and Natural Resources of the Grove

**Concern #1: The current visitor amenities at the Grove are adversely affecting the Giant Sequoia trees.**

“Eliminate all tram routes that would impact the route system of the Sequoias and definitely remove the tram routes from the Upper Grove.” (Individual, Colorado Springs, CO, #10-2)

“Remove the parking lot at the Grove, thus helping those roots that spread several hundred feet get the air and nutrients they need (re-mulch area after pavement is gone).” (Individual, Cheboygan, MI #28-1)

“Protect the trees by not allowing nothing more than indigenous animals into the grove. This means no cars, roads, trails, parking lots, bathrooms, stores, garbage cans, maps, names on trees, and/or any identifying traces of man.” (Individual, La Grande, OR, #4-2)

“Whatever infrastructure, maintenance, shuttle or tram repairs that need to be done for the Mariposa Grove, please ensure that it does not commence on top of the roots of the sequoia trees. All maintenance and repairs need to happen at a distant location. It is appalling to see employee vehicles, tram repair equipment and extra trams parked directly on the roots of the Giant Sequoia trees! Thank you for your effort in creating an environment where the Giant Sequoia trees can continue to grow and thrive. The mariposa Grove is a treasure beyond compare.” (Individual, N/A, #30-12)

**Concern #2: Continue prescribed fire; it is vital to maintaining the health of the grove.**

“Keep on doing the control burns, fire is vital to the health of giant sequoias.” (Individual, Yosemite, CA, #1-3)

“Stop the senseless controlled burns. They are always out of control.” (Individual, N/A, #16-2)

**Concern #3: Long-term sustainability of the Grove’s ecosystem health is important and should be considered in the Grove’s management.**

“Perhaps this is a lofty wish, but I would like to think that the Mariposa Grove of 150 years in the future would resemble that Grove of 150 years in the past, when Yosemite Grant was signed by Lincoln.” (Individual, Yosemite, CA, #1-6)

“I hope we are visionary enough to look far into the future and work to ensure the survival of the Giant Sequoia trees for those beyond us. The Giant Sequoia ecosystem will change and evolve, as the earth and all living things are dynamic. We must do what is necessary to ensure that Giant Sequoia trees continue to thrive, not only as an individual species, but as a part of a much larger ecosystem where many other plants and animal species are co-dependent with the Sequoia trees.” (Individual, N/A, #30-10)

## **G. Visitor Use and Experience**

**Concern #4: The Grove parking lot often fills to capacity, forcing temporary closures of the parking lot and road.**

“The parking situation at the Grove and at Wawona is a mess. In the short time that I volunteered at Wawona, I talked with visitors numerous times that were so completely frustrated because of the lack of parking, both at the Grove and at the parking lot where the grocery store and post office are. Then they got themselves in a driving loop, having driven directly to the Grove, then turned away because the parking lots were full, drove back to the main Wawona parking lot, only to find that also full.” (Individual, Coarsegold, CA, #36-3)

**Concern #5: The Grove parking lot and its associated noise and traffic diminish the visitor experience.**

“Removing the parking lot in the lower grove will enhance all visitors experience.” (Organization, Yosemite Conservancy, #11-1)

**Concern #6: Information and signage are inadequate to properly orient visitors when traveling to the Grove, upon arrival at the Grove, and within the Grove.**

“The signs and maps in the Mariposa Grove need to be updated and made to be more accurate. Many trail junctions do not have any trail signs and most mileages are incorrect. The maps and signs have confusing and incorrect information with junctions that do not exist. I frequently find Park visitors that are confused or lost on some of the lesser-known trails in the Mariposa Grove.” (Individual, N/A, #30-9)

“The signs on the lower trail need to be updated. They are positioned incorrectly and the distance appears not to be accurate. We hiked out of our way to get to the Faithful Couple due to incorrect sign positioning.” (Individual, Riverbank, CA, #7-1)

“You can’t have too many signs! As we two fifty year olds made our way to the Fallen Wawona Tree, we took wrong trails because we felt trails weren’t marked as well as they should be.” (Individual, Turlock, CA, #37-1)

“The Sierra Club supports establishing an informational and orientation kiosk in nearby Fish Camp to familiarize visitors with Mariposa Grove and other Park destinations prior to arriving at the Park’s



south entrance station. Advising visitors to visit the Grove before proceeding to other distant Park destinations might help to reduce traffic volume from visitors back-tracking the Wawona road to visit the Mariposa grove passed by earlier in the visit.” (Organization, Sierra Club Yosemite Committee, #34-5)

**Concern #7: Vehicle operation on Grove roads adversely impacts the visitor experience.**

“The Mariposa Grove visitor experience would be enhanced with the removal of all vehicles on grove roads. The effort to see some of the impressive sequoias, once you've entered the grove's border, entails about the same amount of effort to visit lower Yosemite Falls. Thus I would remove the current tram system that travels on the grove's roads to provide more of a wilderness experience. Yes, a bit more effort is required to see the sequoias in the upper grove, such as the Galen Clark Tree. There's also more effort to see Upper Yosemite Falls than Lower Yosemite Falls, but that's part of the Yosemite experience.” (Individual, Buffalo Grove, IL, #2-1)

“Protect the trees by not allowing nothing more than indigenous animals into the grove. This means no cars, roads, trails, parking lots, bathrooms, stores, garbage cans, bridges, maps, names on trees, and/or any identifying traces of man.” (Individual, La Grande, OR, #4-2)

“No cars beyond the entrance.” (Individual, Benicia, CA, #6-1)

**Concern #8: Grove accessibility should be improved for disabled visitors.**

“...disabled parking. The Trees has 2 disabled parking spots. What's the ADA requirement???” (Individual, Mariposa, CA, #5-4)

“Addition of a visitor center in its place as well as establishing short trails in the visitor center area (one or more of which could be ADA accessible) will also improve the visitor experience.” (Individual, Palo Alto, CA, #11-2)

“Also, I could hike the trail just fine, but my mother became winded and did not get to see most of this area. She sat at the space in the front by the gift shop. Would there be a way to transport the elderly or disabled (or out of shape!) people through this section of the park?” (Individual, The Woodlands, TX, #42-2)

**Concern #9: Additional recreation opportunities should be provided at the Grove.**

“Near the south Park entrance there should be built. . . picnic areas to accommodate people who bring their own food. . .benches and areas to relax and sit. . .” (Individual, N/A, #30-1)

**Concern #10: Protect the grove by limiting/managing visitation.**

“Limit the number of visitors in order to protect the Grove.” (Individual, New Milford, NJ, #31-4)

“Another way to protect them is to limit visitation by establishing a sustainable number of visitors per day.” (Individual, Yosemite, CA, #1-2)

“The Mariposa Grove is the largest and most spectacular grove of Sequoia trees in Yosemite National Park. There is increasing numbers of people that desire to see the trees. To protect this species and provide for a quality experience for Park visitors, will it be necessary to implement some sort of permit system, as is now being put into place for Half Dome? How many human beings can the Mariposa Grove ecosystem accommodate? Are there a finite number of people that should be

allowed into the Giant Sequoia Grove on any given day? I believe there is some sort of cap on numbers of human beings in the grove that will allow the Mariposa Grove to remain healthy and viable for a very long time. I don't know what the number is, but I am sure there is one.” (Individual, N/A, #30-11)

## **H. Public Health and Safety**

**Concern #11: Road configuration, pedestrian crossings, and access at the South Entrance are unsafe for visitors and staff.**

“My main concern is the South Entrance. The road was developed in the 1930's and obviously is a poor design now, with the park visitor numbers as they are now. The "T" intersection needs to be removed and some type of road realignment designed to improve safety of the entrance station and staff and a more smooth vehicle flow through the entrance.” (Individual, Paicines, CA, #12-1)

“First, safety. NPS ought to consider stripping lanes at the south entrance, painting arrows for turns, painting double yellow lines into Big Tree area, paint pedestrian walk and parking slots at RR facility and parking lot. Most folks try to obey directions, but if they can't see the lines, they plain just don't know what's expected of them.” (Individual, Mariposa, CA, #5-1)

## **I. Transportation**

**Concern #12: Inadequate parking at the Grove contributes to long shuttle rides and traffic congestion at South Entrance.**

“In the past, there were discussions of new parking near the entrance for the Mariposa Grove. I believe that should be seriously looked at again. This would get rid of the major traffic congestion that occurs at the grove parking lot. This would also be able to eliminate the commercial bus issues that have plagued the grove for years (the restriction of the 40 foot plus buses) and have a shuttle bus system to transport visitors to the grove.” (Individual, Pinnacles National Monument, CA, #12-3)

“The capacity of the parking facility at the south entrance is substantially below the demand for parking there. And if adequate parking is to be provided so that visitors are encouraged to see the grove via shuttle bus, do you want to have that parking facility adjacent to the south entrance, thus rendering a potential bottleneck of vehicles at the south entrance? Perhaps you can explore an alternative site for Mariposa Grove shuttle bus parking, albeit a site that is closer to the grove than the Wawona gas station, although running shuttle buses from "downtown" Wawona in addition to another site sounds fine.” (Individual, Buffalo Grove, IL #2-4)

“Second, parking. 28 max parking at gate area, 110 max in Big Trees. How many folks did the volunteer counters count on an average day? NPS sets employees and public up for a frustrating day. Parking full at Big Trees and at entrance. Drivers sent to Wawona. Parking lot full in Wawona; drivers head back to Trees; oops, sorry, we're still full - go back to Wawona. Come to Yosemite, drive in circles and increase pollution. (but we put visitors on hybrids). Let's get rid of limited parking and provide shuttle only parking. Something new - if you want to see the Trees you have to park and take the shuttle. If NPS keeps encouraging the mobs to visit the park, NPS needs to be responsible and provide a place to park.” (Individual, Mariposa, CA, #5-2)

## **E. Soundscapes**

**Concern #13: Noise from vehicle traffic and tram audio presentations is adversely affecting the Grove's soundscape.**

"Noise pollution in the lower and upper grove is obnoxious and is especially problematic in the lower grove where DNC trams, park shuttles, and tour buses operate. The Sierra Club supports Park actions that would reduce this problem by relocating these and all other inappropriate activities and structures further west out of the lower grove." (Organization, Sierra Club, CA, #35-3).

"I am writing this with mixed opinions. I love what you are doing to stop traffic in the grove. I HATE the tram's audio, the tram is intrusive enough in the pristine silence of these magical trees. I've jumped out of my skin on 5 occasions from the loud boom of the audio tour. It is NOISE pollution! If there is any way to give people headsets-or get rid of it, please do! I understand you need to cover accessibility [unreadable] but paved roads and a tram are enough to diminish the experience for others. PLEASE find another solution for the audio. I would LOVE it. Thank you." (Individual, NA, #40-1)

"If the open-air tram is allowed and encouraged to operate in the Mariposa Grove, I believe that the interpretive message, which is very informative and well done, should be made available to the public only through earphones of some sort. To hear the engine of the tram is invasive enough, but to hear the audio message projected throughout a large part of the grove is quite disruptive." (Individual, N/A, #30-5).

## **F. Park Operations**

**Concern #14: The bathroom facilities are inadequate.**

"Please keep up the bathrooms. The smell is overpowering." (Individual, N/A, #23-1)

"Toilet situation is out of the Stone Age. Would expect improvements by our next visit." (Individual, N/A, #24-1)

"Big Tree bathrooms unacceptable. Separate rooms for men and women are necessary. Need cleaning on an hourly basis." (Individual, N/A, #26-1)

## **G. NEPA Process**

**Concern #15: The Mariposa Grove planning process is not integrated with other park planning efforts.**

"It is my feeling that your goal is and has been to micro manage the court's mandate by circumventing the main Merced Wild and Scenic River related planning with as many other little planning agendas that you can come up with, like this one, to see where you can redesign things in such a way as to accommodate more people." (Individual, #44-1)

### **III. OTHER COMMENTS (BEYOND PROJECT SCOPE)**

Some comments from the correspondence were about subjects not relevant to this project (beyond the scope of the project). Others were determined to be non-substantive in content. These letters and/or comments did not provide enough information to be put into context regarding the project, were simply anecdotes about experiences related to Mariposa Grove, or were clearly outside the scope of this decision-making process. However, these letters will remain as part of the Administrative Record for the project.

### **IV. CONCLUSION**

All substantive comments received during public scoping will be considered in the development of alternatives for the project, which will be presented in a draft environmental impact statement expected to be released for public review this fall (2012).