

Mount Whitney Case Study

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In 1873 John Muir climbed 14,494' Mount Whitney. Over 100 years later, on the east side the Whitney Trail cuts through a place we now call the John Muir Wilderness. On the west side access is gained through the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park Wilderness. Each year 19,000 people attempt to climb Mt. Whitney from the east, primarily via the Mt. Whitney Trail. An additional 4,000 people climb from the west on the John Muir Trail, and then descend the Mt. Whitney Trail.

For the last 30 years, access to this area has been managed with an evolving limited entry quota. Initially access was only limited from Whitney Portal. Today there are many access points that deliver visitors to Mount Whitney. Some visitors begin their journeys to the summit over 200 miles away, in Yosemite National Park. Others may travel the High Sierra Trail, from Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks, and finish their trip on the Mt. Whitney Trail. There are numerous other trailheads on the Inyo National Forest from which backpackers begin trips that end at Mount Whitney.

One of the biggest challenges facing managers the Mt. Whitney area managers is human waste. Since the 1960s, several types of toilets had been installed along the trail; each promised to solve the human waste problem. The latest generation of toilets was a dehydrating system. Despite countless renovations and retro-fits, the toilets never functioned very well. A helicopter was needed to fly 4,000 pounds of human waste out each year. In 2004, climbers were asked to pack their human waste to Whitney Portal Trailhead using kits known as WAG Bags. Forest Service rangers removed the toilets at Outpost Camp & Trail Camp. Park Service rangers removed the toilet near the summit. In 2007, Whitney climbers voluntarily packed three tons of their human waste out to the trailhead. With the success of this pack out program, there is now a safe and sanitary way for each individual to deal with their human waste.

Another challenge came in the form of day use on the Whitney Trail and day use on the Mountaineers route. Initially day use was only limited on the Whitney Trail. Day users would go up the more difficult Mountaineers route and then come down Whitney Trail. Now day use is limited in the Whitney zone and you can choose which route to take to the summit.

Our next challenge will be attempting to reduce the number of accidents and injuries on Whitney. We have improved our web site and trailhead information. We have five rangers patrolling the area that provide up to date information to climbers. We have supported research efforts to explore altitude sickness and contributing factors. We hope to increase climber awareness and reduce the number of Search & Rescues.

The future for Whitney? We anticipate that 20,000 people each year will get the opportunity to climb Whitney. We will continue to monitor use and conditions. We will adapt our management to preserve resources and maximize access.