

Yosemite National Park

Merced Wild & Scenic River

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Visitor Use and User Capacity



The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) requires the National Park Service (NPS) to “...address resource protection, development of lands and facilities, user capacities, and other management practices necessary or desirable to achieve the purposes of this Act.” In general, planning for and managing visitor use (including addressing user capacity) for a Wild and Scenic River must take into account what people do, where they do it, how many people can be accommodated, and what effect this use has on the river’s resources and other people’s experiences. The Merced Wild and Scenic River Plan Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) analyzes five action alternatives that protect river values, and provide for different levels of visitation and subsequent levels of development.

What is user capacity and why is it important?

WSRA’s implementing guidelines define user capacity in the context of a management plan to mean “the quantity and mixture of recreation and other public use which can be allowed without adverse impact on the resource values of the river area.” Under the guidelines, public use should be regulated and distributed where necessary to protect and enhance river values. Public use may be managed by designating appropriate river access points, by limiting public access to the river in certain areas, by issuing permits, or by other means available to the managing agency through its general statutory authorities.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit has interpreted these mandates to mean that a comprehensive river management plan “must deal with or discuss the maximum number of people that can be received” in the river area, and that the NPS must “adopt specific limits on user capacity” that “describe an actual level of visitor use that will not adversely impact” river values. The Merced River Plan has been developed to be consistent with WSRA and its guidelines, as interpreted by judicial opinions. Each action alternative includes a user capacity and strategies for managing use.

Is user capacity based on science or value judgments?

Both science and value judgment play a role in the development of user capacity. Several parts of the user capacity process involve decisions that include value judgments. While scientific inquiry can tell us a lot about the consequences of different choices, ultimately, science cannot tell us what the “right” choices are.

When determining user capacities, are biological values more important than other factors?

Some suggest that natural areas have biologically-driven user capacities that deserve greater consideration than other values, but the user capacity scientific literature indicates that all capacities depend on value judgments. If biological conditions are sensitive to the amount of use, they may be the limiting factor and determine capacity. In other cases the limiting factor for capacities may be some other factor such as transportation circulation, parking, or social conditions at attraction sites and beaches.

Isn't there really only one capacity for Yosemite Valley that the plan should work around?

No, user capacities are an outcome of a decision-making process and part of a larger management program. They are the result of a series of judgments in the plan about the desired future for both environmental and experiential conditions. Managing user capacity requires a variety of strategies and tools to effectively protect river values from the kinds and amounts of use that take place in the river corridor. Limits on visitor use are one tool that may be appropriate in some situations depending on the management objectives and goals for the area. Where other strategies are effective, limits on the level of visitor use may not be necessary. Because the Merced River Plan alternatives employ different management strategies and numbers of campsites, parking spaces, boardwalks, fences, etc.; the alternatives can provide for different user capacities while still protecting river values.

Why does the plan have different user capacities in the alternatives? Do they all protect river values?

All of the Merced River Plan alternatives protect river values, but they do so in different ways. User capacities, resource conditions, and infrastructure are foundational elements to the alternatives and changing one has implications for the others. User capacities in the different alternatives show how higher and lower amounts of use fit with infrastructure and other management actions to produce different resource conditions, protecting river values in different ways. These represent choices for the kind of place the Merced River corridor will be and the experiences it will offer visitors in the future. All alternatives protect and enhance river values, as required by WSRA, while offering a reasonable range of choices about the Merced River's future as required by NEPA.

Find Out More

If you're interested in learning more about the Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, you can download the entire document at www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm. For those that have the time, reading the entire document will convey the fullest understanding of the plan. For those interested in an overview of the Merced River Plan, park staff suggest you begin with:

- Summary Guide for the Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan/ DEIS
- Chapter 6: Visitor use and Capacity
- These sections of Chapter 8: Alternatives:
 - o Actions Common to Alternatives 2-6
 - o Overview section of Alternatives 2-6 (includes map series for each alternative)
 - o Full narrative for Alternative 5 (Preferred Alternative)

Find Out More

Comment on this draft environmental impact statement by visiting the Merced River Plan Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/mrp_deis. Electronic comment submittal through PEPC saves resources and allows for direct entry to the NPS comment analysis system. Comments can also be submitted by email to yose_planning@nps.gov or by U.S. mail at the following address:

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