



## User Capacity Management Program For the Merced Wild and Scenic River

Olmsted's words ring prophetic to anyone familiar with Yosemite National Park. Since the 1850s, the promise of Yosemite's scenic wonders has attracted visitors from around the world. In the early part of the twentieth century, National Park Service Director Stephen T. Mather envisioned a Yosemite where modern conveniences and comforts would be established "to meet the ever-increasing demand for every type of experience." By 1917, annual visitation reached what was considered then a staggering 34,510. Today, more than 3.5 million visitors are drawn from all over the world to experience Yosemite National Park.

*"...in a century the whole number of visitors will be counted in millions. An injury to the scenery so slight that it may be unheeded by any visitor now, will be one of deplorable magnitude when its effect is multiplied by these millions...the slight harm which the few hundred of visitors of this year might do, if no care were taken to prevent it, would not be slight, if it should be repeated by millions."*  
--Frederick Law Olmsted, August 1865

### What is this project about?

The National Park Service is required to address user capacity in park planning. As part of the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan*, the National Park Service made a commitment to develop and implement a Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) framework, in addition to the other elements of the park's User Capacity Management Program, to meet the requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

### How does the park address use in the Merced River corridor?

Addressing use in a national park as vast and complex as Yosemite requires a network of mechanisms and methods to assist park managers in making decisions. Yosemite National Park's *User Capacity Management Program for the Merced River Corridor* (February 2004) describes the various management tools employed by the National Park Service to address visitor use within the Merced River corridor. In concert, these tools provide an elaborate network of protection and enhancement for the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor. The elements of the park's User Capacity Management Program are highlighted below.

- **GOVERNING MANDATES** The protection of park resources—including the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Merced River corridor—falls within the governing mandates established by the park's enabling legislation, federal and state legislation, Director's Orders, along with the park's regulations, policies, and mitigation measures (known as Best Management Practices).
- **FACILITY LIMITS** In the developed areas of the river corridor (which account for approximately 17 miles of the Merced River in Yosemite Valley, El Portal, and Wawona), capacity limits are set for both concession-operated and administrative facilities. These include campgrounds, lodging facilities, food and retail concessions, parking areas, administrative offices, employee housing, maintenance facilities, and utilities.
- **WILDERNESS CAPACITIES** Since 1972, the Trailhead Quota System has addressed visitor use and its effect on the backcountry areas of Yosemite, which includes approximately 51 miles of the Merced River corridor. The scientific methods used in Yosemite's wilderness have long been held up as a model for wilderness management throughout the United States.

- **MANAGEMENT ZONING** Management zoning throughout the Merced River corridor (as adopted in the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan*) classifies park areas and prescribes future desired resource conditions, visitor activities, and facilities.
- **VERP FRAMEWORK** The park's Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) program safeguards the quality of both park resources and the visitor experience. Simply put, VERP in Yosemite serves as a report card to measure how well the park is protecting and enhancing the Merced River's Outstandingly Remarkable Values. The park recently adopted a set of indicators and standards (through the VERP framework) to quantitatively monitor and maintain environmental and social conditions in the Merced River corridor. These prescriptions—coupled with a monitoring program—will give park managers the information and rationale needed to make sound, science-based decisions about visitor use.

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## What are the next steps?

Because user capacity management in general—and VERP specifically—are iterative processes, new standards and indicators will likely be developed by park staff and subject-matter experts. Existing standards and indicators may be refined as data is gathered and evaluated. New or refined indicators and standards will be presented to the public, along with the results of parkwide monitoring activities, at which time the public will be invited to provide comments.

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## Public Participation

Here are some ways to stay involved as the park moves forward with its User Capacity Program for the Merced River Corridor.

- Attend future National Park Service open houses in Yosemite Valley to talk with project specialists and take a look at the latest available information. Visit the park's planning web site ([www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning)) for schedule.
- Add your name to the park's planning mailing list (to address/fax/email below) and receive the *Planning Update* newsletter as well as other planning-related notices. You can also sign up for the new electronic newsletter by submitting your email address to the park (see below).

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The status of this and other Yosemite National Park improvement projects will be periodically updated on the park's planning web site. Visit online: [www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning).