

Charlotte Lake End Of Season Report, 1996

Another lovely Sierra summer, wetter than it's been in a few years, and plenty of business for the Charlotte Ranger. I arrived on foot on June 24, at which time all lakes were unfrozen and most snow had melted. I hiked out on September 11. I patrolled the Muir Trail from Rae Lakes to Tyndall Creek, and the Bubbs Creek trail from Sphinx Creek to Vidette Meadow. I also hiked over Kearsarge, Glen, Gardiner, Forester, Junction, Shepard, Baxter, Longley, and Millie's Foot Passes. Unmaintained trails patrolled included Baxter, Gardiner and Sixty Lakes Basins, Center Basin/Junction Pass, and Vidette Creek.

I contacted 2,008 visitors, if my calculator was working right, answering the usual myriad questions, 90% of which concerned bears and food lockers. I removed many unused or illegal firesites, picked up uncounted bags of trash, and did site maintenance and rehabilitation in all camp areas. I was able to do a thorough job of removing fire sites from Lake Reflection this year. I eliminated a billion rock ducks. At least. I spent a day working with the trail crew on the Glen Pass project and coordinated with VIP Steve Nave when he was in the area.

Logistics were much smoother this year than they have been since the demise of Sierra District. We owe thanks and appreciation to Cindy Purcell who is a great addition to the staff.

VISITOR USE

Visitation was steady and not exceptionally heavy except during the end of July and the first three weeks in August. Many foreigners in the early season. Large groups in August. Most people were either on the Rae Lakes loop or the ever-popular Kearsarge to Whitney trek. Kearsarge Lakes get more destination hikers than any other area, most of whom are oblivious to the one-night limit. This is clearly the busiest, most impacted place in the patrol area. There is a light, steady stream of traffic through Gardiner Basin and to Charlotte Dome.

On average nights for much of the season there were 3-5 parties at Charlotte Lake, normally 10 - 20 people. However, during the busiest four weeks there could be 10 parties and well over 50 people at the lake, at which time I felt like I was running a KOA campground. The pressure manifested as full bear box and 55-gallon drums, lots of noise, and people camping in marginal or unacceptable sites. I believe **the issue of a one-night limit needs to be discussed**. Historically, there was a limit, and USFS regulations still include Charlotte in the list of places with one-night limits. A large sign at the Onion Valley trailhead advertises this restriction. In his report last year, Rob Hayden recommended reinstating the limit. In his report from a few years earlier, Durkee recommended getting rid of the limit in all USFS material. I'm on the fence: I think that during most of July and September, people can stay as long as they want without it being a problem. **During the busiest times**, though, people staying more than one night certainly contributes to overcrowding.

The real problem when it's busy is not the NUMBER of parties, but the **SIZE of the parties**. All it takes is one large group to make the lake seem very busy. If a large party spends an extra night at the lake and then two more big groups come in, it's a nightmare. A large and extremely vocal group (okay, they shrieked nonstop the entire time they were there) was packed in to Charlotte (complete with full bar) for a 3-night stay. It was crazy-busy that whole time. Although this may have been an isolated incident, it would be disastrous if Charlotte became a destination spot for large stock-supported groups. A one-night limit would certainly alleviate this type of problem.

Another way to look at the crowding issues at Kearsarge and Charlotte is via the quotas for Onion

Valley. Lower quotas? Separate quotas for the east side, Kearsarge, and Charlotte?

I'm convinced that the best, fastest way to eliminate all impact problems in my patrol area would be to move the Onion Valley trailhead to 6,000 and remove the road. In my dreams. The next best solution, which would reduce impacts all over the Wilderness, would be to reduce group size. In my next lifetime. Which leaves one-night limits and/or quota reductions. In any case, the rangers are probably far more bothered by the noise, congestion, and trash than the visitors are. Furthermore, the limits are difficult to enforce: the one at Kearsarge Lakes is being virtually ignored, as far as I can tell. This issue needs to be evaluated in light of the guiding philosophy of the new Wilderness Plan when it emerges.

STOCK USE

Stock use picked up in late July and continued to be fairly consistent through August. Most trips were spot trips or food cache drops by Sequoia Pack Trains. I saw their packer Ken a number of times, and we had a good rapport. I found him to be very cooperative and concerned. There were a number of food-storage related problems. It needs to be made crystal clear to the commercial packers that they are NOT to take over the food storage lockers. Food caches need to be dropped ONLY in the 55 gal. drums at Charlotte, NOT at Kearsarge nor at Vidette unless there is someone there to receive them. When groups are spotted in, they need to deal with their food in some way other than taking over the nearest bear box. I suggest that every pack station have a bunch of the large size canisters which they loan to groups who are spotted in. Barring that, the group needs to post a bear watch each night and hang food. Likewise, it is unacceptable for all-expense groups to take over boxes. They have folks in camp all the time who can watch the food.

There were a few private groups this summer, and 3 llama parties I know of. Rick and I both had encounters with private users this summer who seemed to put their best efforts into getting information about where/when/how they could graze, and met with a frustrating maze of ignorance and misinformation. Naturally, they called the Forest Circus, since that's where their trailheads were. Since permits now go through a private contractor, the abysmal information people used to get has now turned into no information at all. WE need to make sure that somehow private stock users get the information they need. It was easier when there was a NPS office on the east side, but that problem needs to be dealt with. The USFS/NPS relationship seems to be disintegrating.

Since the trail crew was at Charlotte all summer, the meadows below the drift fence were grazed by 7-8 head of NPS stock every week all summer, higher than normal use.

VISITOR ASSISTANCE

In addition to the usual education and information-giving, I gave away food to the hungry, food-hanging rope to the needy, loaned the water filter, provided a ski-pole hiking stick for someone with a hurt knee, provided map and route information, had messages delivered, and stored food caches.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

I gave verbal warnings for burning trash (no wood), camping too close to water, food storage (no incidents) and camping on grass. I wrote two citations for dogs in the backcountry. Several incidents of improper food storage were reported to USFS Ranger Jason, and an attempt was made to follow through with NPS citations. However, due to complications in working between the two agencies, letters will be mailed to the violators by way of written warning. For the first time this year I received a report of food stolen from a bear box, in Kearsarge Lakes. I got the report several days after the incident occurred and was unable to follow up.

I found very few new illegal fire sites this season. Probably it will be a greater problem in the late

season when it's colder and darker. Maybe we're finally making headway on this one, though.

SAR

I had **three medevacs**: one for a **dislocated shoulder**, and two for a **trailcrew person suffering from** what may or may not have been **altitude-related problems**. And then of course there was the Morgenson search. The only other first aid cases I had were blisters and an allergic reaction to mosquito bites.

FACILITIES

Signs

The Charlotte patrol area is literally littered with signs. Most are old aluminum with red routed letters on wooden posts. There are at least **two signs on separate posts at every trail junction**. I propose that all of these be **removed** and, when necessary, **replaced with minimal signing** on a single post. **I think the main trails do not need signing; the spur trails only can be signed**. I'm including a schematic drawing of my recommendations. Hayden submitted an inventory in 1994 of all the signs in the area. M Scattaregia wheeled all the trails for mileages in 1991. The sign at the **Kearsarge Lakes junction (upper)** is very unclear. It states that **grazing and stock travel is prohibited in the Bullfrog Lake basin**, but doesn't address Kearsarge Lakes. It needs to be more specific that **grazing is prohibited at both Kearsarge and Bullfrog and that stock travel is prohibited on the low trail**.

Cabin

The cabin seems to be in fine shape. Might be nice to be able to **mop the floor** somehow. Also I recommend that some **enamel paint and sandpaper** be sent in next year so the **stove table could be painted**. If a **propane stove/oven** can be procured, per Hayden's suggestion last year, that would be even better. If not, we **need a new Coleman oven** - the old one is warped and rusty. Is there a plan to install a **stovepipe** that fits correctly, or is the current pipe to be left as is? I did notice that when it rained hard the stovepipe dripped. **Would it be possible to get rid of the blue metal box that had something to do with recording weather information and seems not to be in use anymore?** Maybe this could be removed and flown out in October.

The solar system is great! The **fluorescent light** that was sent in last Fall didn't work at all so I used my own, but it wasn't an overhead so I also used lanterns. The battery recharger was terrific. I had one panel, a battery, and an inverter, and that worked fine for my needs.

Campsites

Clearly the installation of the food lockers is causing devastation in the areas around them. People want to be able to spit and hit a locker from where they're camping, so they crowd around the boxes as if their lives depended on that proximity. Of particular concern for me is the **Center Basin junction** which looks like napalm was dropped on it. I predict that **if the locker remains where it is, there won't be a shred of vegetation on the ground in five years**. I will ask Rick to check an alternate location, per a suggestion I found in an old Durkee report just before I left.

Otherwise, I believe the answer is in pushing heavily and/or **requiring the use of canisters**. I disagree philosophically that it's okay to sacrifice certain areas, where we put the lockers, and allow them to be totally thrashed. **I believe we should encourage dispersed camping and light impact through the use of canisters and education**. See attached memo regarding food lockers. Again, **group size is a factor** here. I have seen several new sites created at Kearsarge this summer, not because there aren't plenty of sites but because some big group wanted to camp together within spitting distance of a food locker. This happens at the Center Basin junction as well. It didn't happen at Charlotte because they'd have been in big trouble if they created new sites there. Anyway, the whole place is one big impacted campsite already. I was able to keep people off the sites close to the water at Charlotte, for the most part, through a note on the bear box.

Trails

The trails in the district are in good shape. There are **wet places near the Mt Rixford drainage** which **could use some work, and JT is aware** of these spots.

Several people worked under trail crew leader Mark Hanson to rebuild the Glen Pass switchbacks which washed out last Fall. They did an excellent job and deserve commendations for their hard work. They were camped at Charlotte all summer.

COMMUNICATIONS

Radio communication with Grant Grove was much better this season. Also **there was much more consistency in the checks - who and how**. Thanks to all who took and gave messages this summer. The rechargeable batteries are also a boon. I was able to keep an extra battery recharged all the time and this worked well.

The radios, however, have got to be replaced by something decent. The two Kings I used both had problems throughout the season despite trips to the radio doctors. It is far more important that we have something solid, sturdy, and working than that we have programmable radios. Whatever we get needs to be thoroughly checked out before being sent into the field. I can't help but wonder if Morgenson wouldn't be with us today if he'd had a radio that worked. Maybe not, but maybe.

As a side-note: I had a little multi-tester with me and tested a bunch of the AA batteries that were sent in for use with the clam-shells. There wasn't a single one that tested in the green. Too old?

BEARS AND FOOD LOCKERS

This is my bandwagon for the summer. See the attached memo. Despite the existence of the lockers, people continue to lose food to bears. Jason reported that during the busy season, there was food lost every single night in the Kearsarge Lakes Basin. There were even a few incidents at Charlotte about which I heard through Jason. Rob outlined the reasons in last year's report, and I summarized them in the memo. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the USFS is just not dealing with the problem, and the same bears that patrol on the west side of the pass are being well-fed by backpackers on the east side. This is a problem both agencies share, and we should deal with it together. Both Jason and I believe the answer lies not in more lockers, but in the use of canisters, possibly mandatory.

I think **food lockers are incompatible with the concept of Wilderness**. My objections: people continue to lose food to bears despite the existence of the lockers; there is unacceptable concentration and impact around the boxes; people use them inappropriately as trash cans, receptacles for unwanted food, and places to cache food; no matter how many we put in there will always be a demand for more; **people are becoming so dependent on the boxes that they are helpless without them; we are encouraging people NOT to take responsibility for themselves,** which is antithetical to what I believe should be happening in the Wilderness. If the lockers were the only solution, I'd support them. However, I think canisters are a far superior answer.

We need to work with the USFS to insure that canisters are readily available for purchase and rental on the east side and to publicize their availability. We should encourage and maybe help the use of canisters by packers who spot people in. And I think **they should be required at Kearsarge Lakes, on the east side of Kearsarge, and possibly on the whole Rae Lakes loop.**

WILDERNESS PERMITS

From the standpoint of the "customer", the new permit reservation system on the East Side worked just fine. Everyone seemed satisfied. From the standpoint of the NPS ranger, the new system just

Moved to
Cache 3-8-97

In box
in cache
✓ Warehouse order
2/22

exacerbates the longstanding information void among people entering the parks from the east. My observation was that most people never even looked at the permit or attached information that was mailed to them. Most permits received by mail were not signed and the party had not read any of the regulations printed on the sheet. A large majority of folks I talked with this summer had never spoken with a human being during the course of applying for and receiving their permits.

The USFS seems to think that if they mail out scads of printed material people will get the message. They're dead wrong. The more stuff people get, the less they read. And they don't read anyway. The contrast between the awareness of people who get their permits from the NPS and those who get them from the USFS is enormous. We do a great job of educating visitors. The USFS does none; for them it's strictly an administrative procedure. I know we've been fighting this war for years, but we've just lost another big battle. If they're going to continue using the contractor, there should at least be a requirement that people pick up their permits in person. That way they could get some minimal information, such as about the bear problems in our areas and the existence and location of bear boxes and the availability of canisters.

Having a Wilderness Ranger on the east side makes a huge difference. I have no doubt that things would've been a lot worse without all the work Jason did to educate people. But if people were getting the kind of information our folks give with the permits, it would be a huge leap forward. Is SEKI still giving the USFS \$\$ for permit-writing, and if so, don't we have a say in any of this?

Finally, the fact that people don't need to check in means that we have no way to gauge actual numbers of people using the backcountry. My permit inventory showed that at least half of the people who get permits from the USFS have up to half as many people in their party as the number on the permit. None of these people called to reduce the number of reserved spaces on their permits.

I am enclosing a copy of the Onion Valley trailhead info the USFS gives out. It shows the cabin and bear box @ Charlotte incorrectly, the lowest box in Kearsarge Lakes is misplaced on the map, and it lists several lakes as being one-night limits which aren't as far as SEKI is concerned. Any chance of working with them on a revision?

Thanks for everything this season - it's been a pleasure!

Lo Lyness

CHARLOTTE
NEEDS FOR 1997

- Moleskin - EMS Cache
- TP, IPT - SC Cache
- Coleman oven or small propane range - Cedar Grove
- MSR stove repair kit (we should each have one of these) - nitrogen, DEI
- 1 box matches - TARGET, DEI
- overhead light to run off solar system (Flourescent light)
- paint and sandpaper for stove table, unless a propane range is acquired - warehouse
- 2 boxes propane canisters if no overhead light is purchased - warehouse/done
- 3 clean mattress covers - done
- 3 clean pillowcases - done

Don't need any white gas, plastic bags, or burlap sacks ✓

One large and one small propane tank are out there, as are a first need filter, sunshower, firepit shovel, nomex shirt and hard hat, 3 water bottles, 3 rolls of slide film, 4 boxes of marginal AA batteries, two head lamps, two sheets, and an ice axe.