

SEASON END REPORT
CRABTREE MEADOWS
JUNE 8-OCTOBER 10, 1998

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A. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

CONTACTS

Backpacker--2033

Day Hiker--310

Stock--97 Animals including pack and saddle (horses, mules and burros--no llamas). Commercial 50% (primarily Cottonwood Pack Station and Rock Creek Pack Station), Private 30%, Administrative 15%.

START OF SEASON--Rangers arrived in the backcountry in late June and early July. Heavy snowpack kept visitation light early in the season. One rescue occurred in conjunction with a break-in to the Ranger Station prior to the arrival of the summer Ranger.

LAW ENFORCEMENT--Violations addressed in the patrol area included illegal campfires, improper food storage, garbage left in campsite, vegetation damage, dogs in closed areas, grazing in closed areas, abandoned property, and excessive group size. Warnings and on the spot service projects, such as garbage collection, were utilized successfully to correct behavior and educate wayward visitors. Numerous dogs signed into the Mt. Whitney register throughout the summer.

CITATIONS--Two violation notices were issued for dogs in closed areas. Both in October, one on the summit of Mt. Whitney and one at Lower Rock Creek Lake. Both recipients expressed surprise at seeing a Ranger in the backcountry late in the season.

MEDICALS--Minor medicals included treatment of countless blisters, strained ankle, strained knee, varying degrees of altitude illness and lacerations. One backpacker was met who was self evacuating with a thumb injury, broken and nearly torn off, after falling into Whitney Creek.

TRANSPORTS--A backpacker pulled a rock onto himself after stepping off the Mt. Whitney trail on the west side incurring a severe flesh wound to his left arm and requiring air transport for symptoms of shock. Two backpackers were transported via stock, both for injured knees. Two backpackers were transported for various injuries after falling from the snow covered Mt. Whitney trail prior to the arrival of the Ranger. One day hiker was reported suffering severe altitude illness on the summit of Mt. Whitney and was ultimately transported via helicopter by Inyo County Search

and Rescue.

FATALITY--One fatality occurred due to a climber falling from the Mountaineer's Route on the north slope of Mt. Whitney.

SEARCHES--Participated in two hasty searches involving overdue hikers on the Mt. Whitney trail. Both searches were quickly resolved on the east side of the mountain.

RESCUES--No rescues were conducted in the patrol area.

WEATHER--Heavy snow pack and late spring snowfall contributed to snow on trails into mid-July and on passes into mid-August. Summer weather ranged from 45F overnight on the summit of Mt. Whitney in July to 18" snow at Crabtree in October, though generally moderate throughout.

~~FIRES--No fires burned in the patrol area.~~

B. USE PATTERNS

BACKPACKERS--Evidence of hikers and skiers were present in the patrol area when the Ranger arrived in late June. Visitation remained low until late July due to lingering snowpack. The Mt. Whitney register indicates that the peak is climbed throughout the winter with steady use beginning in May. Weather remained mild into October (all snow from an early storm melted by the first week of August) and visitation remained constant. The main use of the patrol area is the Mt. Whitney/John Muir Trail Corridor. Alternate areas such as the Crabtree and Wallace Creek drainages received only moderate use during peak visitation in August. The most heavily travelled stretch of trail (likely in the entire park) is the traverse from Trail Crest to the summit of Mt. Whitney.

STOCK USE--Meadow opening dates were delayed for all areas beyond the "wet year" opening dates, ranging from 2-6 weeks. This seems to be the case every season, See RECOMMENDATIONS. In turn stock use was light and late in the season. Stock use was concentrated at Lower Crabtree Meadow by private and commercial parties. Lower Whitney Creek Meadow was open to the aforementioned groups and saw at least 31 stock use nights. Wallace Creek Waterfall meadow reopened to grazing with a 36 night limit. Rock Creek Pack Station intended to use the quota with a two night stay of 18 animals but changed plans due to inclement weather. Subsequently the meadow was not grazed at all. Cottonwood Pack Station, Rock Creek Pack Station, and Glacier Pack Trains were the primary commercial users in the Crabtree area. Cooperation was generally good with packers contacted in the field with Glacier Pack Trains notable for "No Trace" camping practices.

ADMINISTRATIVE USE--The Trail Construction Crew was in the Crabtree area, in the vicinity of Hitchcock Lake and at the

meadow above the Ranger Station, from August 22 to September 23. The Kern Trail Crew was also at the Hitchcock camp, with packer and stock staying at Sandy Meadow, from August 29 to September 14. Various park employees made the trek to Mt. Whitney during the summer including the Western Region Chief Ranger and Sequoia District Ranger. The Kern Subdistrict Ranger made two visits to Crabtree, as did the Plant Ecologist (one planned the other entirely spontaneous).

COMMERCIAL USE--Contacted various commercial groups during the season such as Sierra Club Outings and Adventure 16. The later ran a trip from Cottonwood Pass to Whitney Portal approximately every two weeks through the summer. These groups were typically in compliance with Park minimum impact regulations. Also contacted several Mt. Whitney guides based on the east side of the range typically guiding 1-4 clients up the East Face and Mountaineer's Routes on Mt. Whitney. One of these guides provided assistance by being the first to respond in the Jeff Wingo incident.

C. NATURAL RESOURCES

BEAR ACTIVITY--There was no known bear activity in the patrol area until mid-September when a bear obtained food at the Kern Trail Crew Camp at Sandy Meadow. The bear in this incident obtained a large quantity of food and exhibited seemingly aggressive behavior towards the packer. Both the Crabtree and Tyndall Rangers provided assistance in keeping the animal out of camp while an alternate food storage method was devised. Once food was hung, the bear stopped appearing in camp and no further incidents were reported.

WILDLIFE--The Crabtree Ranger was heckled by a Northern Goshawk who was nesting on the spur trail to Lower Whitney Creek Meadow. A Pine Marten was observed chasing a Northern Flying Squirrel up a giant Jeffery Pine at Junction Meadow. A group of three bucks travelled together in the vicinity of the Ranger Station and were frequently noticed bedding down behind the building. In early season a female yellow rumped warbler spent her days on a window sill of the Ranger Station tapping on the window.

VEGETATION--Residual Biomass Monitoring was conducted at Wallace Creek Waterfall Meadow and Lower Whitney Creek Meadow. Exclosures were erected in both of these meadows during the summer season. Wallace Creek Waterfall Meadow was reopened to use this season with a 36 stock night use limit. Use was monitored and ultimately the meadow saw no stock grazing. Met with the Plant Ecologist and looked at Lower Whitney Creek, Crabtree and Sandy Meadows and discussed use and monitoring issues. The Plant Ecologist also made an independent visit to Wallace Creek Waterfall Meadow to assess conditions. Concerns were raised regarding monitoring of Lower Crabtree Meadow (it is a heavily utilized meadow but currently not part of the

monitoring program), opening dates of meadows in the patrol area, and potential sensitivity of Sandy Meadow (See RECOMMENDATIONS).

CULTURAL RESOURCES

PREHISTORIC SITES--One obsidian chip site was visited and found intact. No prehistoric sites were rediscovered this season.

HISTORIC SITES--The main historic site in the patrol area is the shelter on Mt. Whitney. The building was found vandalized in early season. Hikers had broken both exterior and interior doors on the administrative side of the shelter. These were both repaired by the Park Historic Restoration Crew. On the last patrol of the season the public side of the shelter was found vandalized. The door jam was bent so that the counter weight would not pull the door closed. The door jam was rebent to make the door functional. However if snow accumulates in the door jam during the course of autumn use, snow may amass in the public side as it does in the administrative side. Facilities at the Lower Whitney Creek were photodocumented.

E. BACKCOUNTRY FACILITIES

CABIN--The cabin had been vandalized prior to the Ranger's arrival in early summer. The door was partly broken from its hinges. The door was rehung to make it functional and was replaced entirely by late summer. Roofing material was sent in and has been stored under the SW corner of the cabin. The roof did not leak this summer. Snow supports for the cabin were replaced. The pit toilet is in good condition and on the verge of going "HISTORIC"! It will have capacity for at least one more season. Every item in the vicinity of the Ranger Station that could not walk off was painted NPS brown with outdoor enamel. The cabin was emptied of years of accumulated junk which was flown out.

SIGNS--All signs in good condition with the exception of one of the fire elevation signs which has been vandalized. It is temporarily serviceable and it is likely to be removed with the Wilderness Management Plan going into effect. All signs and backcountry facilities were inventoried this season to be mapped on GIS.

F. TRAILS

TRAIL ACTIVITIES--The Trail Construction Crew was working in the area for over one month. Work was primarily focused on the traverse from Trail Crest to the summit of Mt. Whitney. Rock slides were removed. Sections of trail which had washed out were repinned and built up. The trail quality has improved dramatically and countless compliments were

received. The Crabtree and Tyndall Rangers also worked with the Construction Crew to reroute a trail out of the meadow between Timberline and Guitar Lakes. The Construction Crew additionally built a rock causeway at a bog at Timberline Lake. The Kern Crew joined the Construction Crew in work on Mt. Whitney while they were in the area, as the Crabtree Ranger had completed most of the regular trail maintenance duties such as rocking trail and clearing water bars.

PROBLEM AREAS--The Construction Crew Foreman also assessed the sections of trail most in need of work. They are as follows.

1. John Muir Trail between Timberline and Guitar Lakes--There are two sections here where water flows on the trail during the entire season. These sections have been lower priority than recent reroutes conducted above and below due to the mostly rocky nature of the soil.

2. Pacific Crest Trail between Lower Crabtree Meadow and the Mt. Whitney Junction--A section of trail goes through a seep in a meadow. It is a quagmire and in need of reroute if possible or a large causeway.

3. Timberline Lake--Water flows on trail for half of season. In need of another causeway.

4. Timberline and Guitar Reroutes--In need of check dams and fill. This can be conducted by the area Ranger.

G. CAMP AREAS

CONDITIONS--Campsites which see most use are those associated with food storage boxes and also Guitar Lake. These are plagued with numerous fire pit scars, ill attempts at proper disposal of human waste, soil compaction, depletion of dead and down wood and erosion at the most accessible water source. The boxes are great for food storage but the concentrated camping detracts significantly from the wilderness experience. Sadly, it seems that few campers know or care about what they are missing--the opportunity to camp alone in relatively pristine spots. The majority of campers opt for camping at boxes and foregoing the rest rather than carry a food storage canister.

SANITATION--Human waste (non)disposal is notably problematic along the Mt. Whitney corridor with Crabtree Ranger Station, Guitar Lake and the Mt. Whitney trail and summit seeing the most use. Human waste and toilet paper on the surface were extensively photodocumented at the Crabtree Ranger Station. Waste piles had to be reburied weekly during peak summer visitation. Though most hikers likely are capable of properly burying their waste, due to the sheer numbers of campers at Crabtree Ranger Station and finite distance they are willing to walk from their campsites, it would be appropriate to

install a pit toilet. See attached map. We have concentrated camping in the area with the presence of a Ranger Station and food storage box. A sensible step would be to also concentrate human waste. The need for a toilet at Guitar Lake has been established by previous Rangers at Crabtree. I also noted limited space for disposal and consistent toilet paper and feces on the surface. I concur with the need for a toilet. See "Guitar Lake Pit Toilet Proposal". The Mt. Whitney toilet has undoubtedly improved sanitation on the summit however both feces and toilet paper are routinely discovered on the summit and traverse from Trail Crest. Additionally, by mid-summer when the sun had hit the aforementioned stretch of trail, the pungent stench of urine is perfuming the air. All of these areas discussed are along a corridor with Mt. Whitney as the destination. We need also to address the excessive numbers of day and overnight hikers present in this area which are the cause of the sanitation problem. The Mt. Whitney Zone has failed to alleviate overcrowding within the National Park and likely the same is true of the National Forest.

FIRERINGS--Three sided fire pits are maintained in most camp areas. They are routinely enlarged and used as garbage receptacles. Fires seem particularly popular at the Crabtree Ranger Station camps and several hours per week are spent maintaining the pits. This Ranger is looking forward to a more conservative fire regulation in the Wilderness Management Plan.

FIREWOOD AVAILABILITY--Firewood availability is low in all camps with food storage boxes. Winter downfall and accumulation is low judging from the minimal amount of debris present on top of the snow in spring.

FOOD STORAGE--Compliance with food storage regulations is high as most visitors are camping exclusively at food storage boxes. Some visitors carry canisters, though many of these hikers end up at food storage box locations anyway.

H. PERMIT SYSTEM

TRAILHEADS--The quota system ~~has~~ failed to protect the Mt. Whitney Zone from over use. Because this was my first season at Crabtree Meadows and a low visitation year I will not hazard a guess at what realistically would help. However, the ~~impacts of overuse~~ are apparent and one component of altering this situation is surely to reduce the number of campers in the area. Campers are funneled in to the Mt. Whitney Zone from the PCT, JMT, Mineral King, Cottonwood Pass, New Army Pass, Cedar Grove, Shepherd Pass, Kearsarge Pass, Whitney Portal.... There is compliance with the permit system with hikers using the area, there are simply too many hikers permitted into the area.

ISSUING OFFICE--Trailhead information was provided to only a fraction of park visitors using the Crabtree Area. The majority of visitors entered the park via east side trailheads with permits obtained through the mail. These hikers never stopped at a permit issuing office. They never received pertinent information from a live person. They receive printed material with their wilderness permit. Often times the permit envelope has not even been opened and if it is, none of the information has been reviewed. This strips the permit process of one of its primary, valuable functions--the visitor talking with a Ranger prior to entering the wilderness. I like to think that if hikers heard from a Ranger what snow conditions are over their intended entry route, how to properly defecate in the woods, where to graze horses, etc. they would have a better wilderness experience ~~and the wilderness~~ would be better for it.

J. NEEDS FOR NEXT YEAR

- Stethoscope
- Oxygen (canister sent out in 1998 to be refilled)
- Toilet paper
- Paper towels
- Burlap sacks
- Plastic bags
- Writing pens
- 6V flash light batteries (2)
- Medical tape
- Large capacity (>30g) scale for RBM kit
- Sponge
- Dish towel
- Quality chopping axe
- Petersen Guide to Western Birds
- ~~Discovering Sierra Mammals~~
- NO nails needed
- Set of stainless steel cooking pots

K. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Meadow opening dates should be adjusted. Each season (dry, normal, wet) we seem to push all meadow opening dates back at least one week if not longer. If these dates were adjusted we would be more likely to adhere to the opening schedule we set initially, avoiding confusion with stock users. I would like to watch the meadows for a couple years prior to formulating specific recommendations. Additionally, the specific meadows in the patrol area need to separate opening dates rather than falling under the broad drainage headings. For example, Upper Crabtree and Lower Crabtree Meadows should have different opening dates.
- Meet with Cottonwood and Rock Creek Pack Stations at beginning of season to discuss conditions.
- Meet with NPS and Forest Service Trailhead Rangers at

- beginning of season to coordinate activities.
- Somehow improve exchange of information between Kings and Sequoia Rangers. For example, it would be helpful to have a weekly summary broadcast of trail conditions along the length of the JMT through the Parks. Also, it would help to know when new regulations are enacted such as the mandatory camping at food storage boxes north of Forester Pass and mandatory use of food storage canisters east of Kearsarge Pass. Without this type of information, I have inadvertently been dispersing inaccurate information.
 - Toilet at Guitar Lake and Crabtree Ranger Station.
 - Coordinate Mt. Whitney honey bucket flight to come ASAP after bucket is pulled from outhouse.
 - Complete trail work as prioritized prior in this report.
 - Paint interior of Ranger Station.
 - Lower fire limit to 10,000' so that it is below tree line.
 - Crabtree Meadow drift fence is now in a state of disrepair, it would be a good time to remove it. The area packers have not indicated that it is in any way critical to keeping their stock at Crabtree.
 - Remove Lower Whitney Creek drift fence.
 - Add Lower Crabtree Meadow to Residual Biomass Monitoring Program.

 - Remove Mt. Whitney shelter.