

Undesignating Wilderness

— *By George Nickas*

The Forest Service has adopted a new strategy for dealing with the resource impacts in Wilderness caused by recreation overuse, but the plan isn't what you'd expect. Rather than reducing human impacts and crowding, the Forest Service has simply decided that some places in Wilderness will not be managed as Wilderness any more. Instead, they'll be managed as high-use recreation areas. Bill Worf, the Forest Service's first Wilderness program leader has decried the new strategy as "nothing short of the defacto undesignation of Wilderness."

Researchers have long documented that impacts from recreation use are increasing throughout the Wilderness System. They've noted that management strategies based on user education and "leave no trace" messages alone have not been enough to stem the damage. While many managers reluctantly acknowledge that problems exist, for a variety of reasons they've been unwilling to risk public criticism or political threats for imposing controls on recreation use. Ignoring the problem has been bad enough, but now the Forest Service has given the status quo its blessing.

The Forest Service plan is laid out in a document simply titled, "Wilderness Recreation Strategy." The strategy has three parts: 1) protect opportunities for high quality wildland recreation experiences outside Wilderness (this piece of the strategy is being implemented through such efforts as the President's roadless area initiative); 2) make it a priority to protect low use Wilderness to ensure nondegradation (this has not and probably will not be implemented); and 3) downgrade some existing Wildernesses or parts of Wildernesses to be managed as high-use recreation areas. It's this third part, the notion that the Wilderness resource can be divvied up so that one component part (i.e. recreation) can be emphasized and the others discarded that threatens to unravel the Wilderness System.

The strategy professes a desire to limit the areal extent of the new high-use class of wilderness, but that's wishful thinking. Cramming more people into these places will cause more impacts, more crowding, and the high-use areas will keep spreading. The new strategy stands on faith alone — the belief that tomorrow's managers will have the courage to intervene where today's managers won't, and the hope that users who are resisting limits today will support limits tomorrow. Both assumptions run against the grain of reality. All the new strategy really accomplishes is to avoid, or at best postpone, the tough decisions about recreation use that need to be made today. As time goes by there will be fewer options, tougher choices and more degraded Wilderness.

Zoning Wilderness into various degrees of pristineness has long been a part of Wilderness management planning, but the new strategy is fundamentally different. The zoning concept, as it has been historically applied, is guided by the policy of "non-degradation." In short, the non-degradation policy dictates that the wilderness character of each area will be maintained or improved. It recognizes the inherent diversity in the

system – that not all areas will provide the same degree of solitude or exhibit the same lack of evidence from past human use. It requires that when a conflict arises between protecting Wilderness or allowing resource use, that Wilderness values must dominate. Non-degradation recognizes that while no area is ever likely to reach the ideal of “absolute Wilderness,” that the ideal must remain the goal. It also recognizes that some existing conditions are unacceptable and must be improved. This has been the guiding, albeit illusive, policy of national forest Wilderness management since the Wilderness Act passed. It has been memorialized in the Forest Service Manual (see Figure 1).

With the new strategy, the policy of non-degradation is replaced by the policy of accommodating visitor use as the overarching goal for wilderness management. All of the many values of Wilderness—from solitude for humans to security for wildlife—will be forced aside to facilitate ever-increasing recreation use. Conditions that have heretofore been deemed unacceptable will now be appropriate (see Figure 2). Maintaining or improving existing Wilderness conditions will no longer be necessary, thus managers will have vast latitude to decide how much degradation to allow. Controlling impacts in high-use areas won't be possible without resorting to the kind of management tactics usually associated with developed recreation areas. It won't be long before more and more trails will be graveled and boardwalked to halt erosion. Toilets will be installed to protect water quality or because many of the new users will find digging cat holes too unappealing. Camping will be restricted to designated campsites with permanent fire grills to limit the profusion of bare ground and fire rings. Firewood will be packed in by rangers or concessionaires in order to protect what little remains of dead or downed wood. Hitchracks and corrals will be provided to contain stock. Rangers will be on regular patrol, and may even offer educational campfire discussions including tales of how it was a few decades back when Wilderness was wild. The purpose of the Wilderness Act, to secure for present and future generations an enduring resource of Wilderness, will have been vanquished as a guiding force for Wilderness management.

All of us who visit Wilderness can cite plenty of evidence where the current management strategies aren't working. In its best light, the Forest Service's new strategy represents the very real concern that many parts of the Wilderness System are steady decline and that management must change. (See the article by wilderness researcher David Cole on page 3 for a discussion of options faced by managers.) The FS strategy suggests that the only way to save some parts of the Wilderness System is to sacrifice others. Promoters of the new strategy hope to gain some protection for more pristine areas by granting managers the option to write off others. It's a choice that's unacceptable to Wilderness Watch, but one that Wilderness advocates and managers are being forced to confront. And in that light, the new strategy may be doing Wilderness a favor.

Editor's Note: Upcoming issues of the Watcher will discuss in greater detail some of the key challenges surrounding recreation use. If you would like a copy of the new Forest Service “Wilderness Recreation Strategy,” please contact our office.