Geocaching Proposal: Implementing Regulations to prohibit Geocaching in National Forest Wilderness Areas

And Suggestions for a Successful Geocache program on other areas of the National Forest.

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Background:

This paper provides the analysis and rationale for promulgating regulations to prohibit the new recreational activity of geocaching within National Forest Wilderness Areas.

What is Geocaching?
Geocaching (also known as GeoStash or GPS Stash) is an outdoor adventure game, similar to a treasure hunt, using an electronic device called a global positioning system unit (GPS) that can determine your approximate location on the planet. This activity started soon after the U.S. Department of Defense turned off the selective availability of the GPS signals in May 2000. This improved the accuracy of most recreational GPS units to 10 - 20 meters. Individuals and organizations set up caches (a marked container with a log book, trinkets, and other items to swap), determine a GPS reference coordinates for them and then share the locations of those caches on the internet. GPS users then use the location coordinates to find the caches. Those who find the cache are instructed to log their find, and they may swap objects left in the cache. Typically, the caches are hidden from view and, on occasion, have been found buried or concealed by manipulated vegetation or rocks. Participating in a cache hunt is an activity designed to take advantage of the features and capability of a GPS unit and enjoy the freedom of access to public land.

What is Geocaching.com?
The general website for geocaching is http://www.geocaching.com. When you enter this website you can type in your zip code and see all the cache sites in your area along with the site's latitude, longitude, a narrative description of the site location, the contents of the cache, and sometimes a map. The site also contains listings of new events and activities such as "Cache In, Trash Out" events. Geocaching provides an opportunity to hone orienteering skills, provides the opportunity to get outdoors, and it can be a wholesome family activity. It can also be conducted with minimal impact to the environment when conscientious land use ethics are followed.

Who are Geocachers?
One survey in Minnesota found that geocachers are primarily middle aged, white, and possess high educational and income status. The most geocachers search for, rather than hide caches, and prefer to find them in public park areas. More than 80 percent of respondents agreed that geocaching had increased their visits to parks and recreation areas. Seven benefit factors emerged related to geocaching: physical fitness, experience nature, learning, stimulation, relaxation, autonomy, and socialization. These benefits sought differed by group type but not

geocaching experience levels. Geocachers indicated moderate to strong attitudes toward environmentally responsible behaviors. Preferences for geocaching include finding caches in well-maintained areas and clear policies about geocaching.

Why are we involved?
National Forests and other public lands have become increasingly popular locations for this activity. This is often done with no notice to or permission from the agency operating the area. Forest personnel may often become aware of a geocache placement by unusual off-trail activity, information provided by forest visitors, or through Internet postings. The increased recreation activity associated with geocaching can create resource impacts that the manager needs to be aware of in order to protect natural resources.

Many geocaching participants feel that their activities have such a low impact that they neither warrant informing forest staff, nor warrant forest staff interfering with them. However, it is clear that geocaching activities have the potential to cause serious adverse impacts to forest resources and violations of NF regulations. There may be some locations where geocaching would have an educational value and not cause unacceptable impacts or violate NF regulations. The prevailing opinion is that geocaching activity must be carefully monitored and controlled through the permitting process.

What is Agency Management?
Each federal agency manages geocaching differently. The National Park Service prohibits geocaching in National Parks. Their regulations prohibit unattended property. The Bureu of Land Management accepts geocaching as legitimate use. However, geocaching is not considered a commercial use and is not under a Special Recreation Permit (SPR). Geocache users are asked to register geocache locations with the local BLM office. The BLM's policy is to discourage use in Congressionally designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, cultural resource sites, areas with threatened and endangered species, or other special fragile areas. The Fish and Wildlife Service does not have any specific policy or guidance on geocaches. The Forest Service also has no national policy or regulations specific to geocaching. Local units are testing various methods for registering cache sites. Many wilderness managers, however, are removing geocaches and are educating users on the undesirability (and illegality) of placing caches in designated wilderness area.

The Problem:

Wilderness is a place where the imprint of humans is substantially unnoticed, where natural processes are the primary influences and human activity is limited to primitive recreation and minimum tools. Self discovery is a vital component of the wilderness experience. Wilderness managers work hard to keep trail signs and other directional signs at a minimum in wilderness areas. Facility infrastructure is limited to trail networks necessary for access to major destinations and for travel through the wilderness.

Geocaching has many threats to wilderness. General recreation impacts to wilderness include, crowding, loss of solitude, heavy recreational use causing soil compaction, vegetation loss and

introduction of non-native species. The addition of geocaches often directs people to specific areas within a wilderness without any trail infrastructure causing an increase in social trailing, trampling of vegetation, and human waste issues. While geocachers pride themselves on a policy of "Cache in, Trash out" some geocache sites become a magnet for litter. When the placement of a cache involves ground disturbance, there is potential for scarring, noxious weed invasion, and vegetation loss.

Geocaches are essentially private property left on public land. It is considered abandoned property after a certain time limit. Some consider these caches to be litter. Some sites are never visited and never picked up. Overtime some cache containers can loose their integrity, allowing moisture to damage their contents. Animals can discover, open and scatter contents of the caches.

Geocaches have safety concerns. Caches may contain inappropriate or dangerous items. Some geocaches use old ammo cans or PVC pipes and some have been found with hazardous materials. Due to the concern over interior contents, most geocaches now use clear Tupperware containers so people can see inside the container before they open it. However, closed containers, still pose a threat of unknown contents, including explosive devices that could be harmful to forest managers and visitors.

Caches may also be placed in dangerous or inappropriate areas. Some caches have been found on cliffs and underwater. The cache location may actually put visitors at risk or entice them into situations beyond their capabilities. The location of a cache may invite the public into an area we do not inspect for hazards. Because most cache sites are off-trail, visitors may become lost or disoriented leading to increased search and rescue and additional resource impacts.

Geocaching has a number of resource and information issues. Because a person placing a cache may not know all the local rules and regulations, the cache may be directly in conflict with resource objectives. Geocaching websites have been known to post erroneous information encouraging wheeled vehicle access in violation of posted rules. Geocaches have been placed in inappropriate locations, such as closed or restricted areas, where the cache encourages illegal or inappropriate use. Caches have been posted in areas with direct impacts to threatened or endangered species habitat, nest sites, fishery spawning areas, and other sensitive locations. Food items left in caches have potential to disrupt grizzly bear recovery objectives. Caches have been placed in sensitive natural or cultural areas. Disturbance to cultural artifacts has occurred in the past.

Geocaching has social issues as well. Geocaching can lead to inter-group conflict because of the off-trail travel and the use of the modern technology. The geocaching activity is often viewed by other wilderness users as inappropriate in wilderness and a disruption of their experience. The off-trail travel and social trailing from searching areas creates unacceptable impacts to natural resources for most visitors.

The NEED:

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Clear direction is needed for National Forest Wilderness managers and Line Officers on how to manage geocaching in wilderness areas. Geocaching activity has elements that are in conflict with wilderness regulations and policy, yet the lack of direction is creating situations where the activity is condoned or even authorized inadvertently. A consistent approach to geocaching in National Forest wilderness nationwide is appropriate.

Applicable Regulations
Current regulations have been used to enforce a prohibition on geocaching in wilderness, but not uniformly around the country. There are several National Forest regulations that are especially applicable.

- 36 CFR 261.9(a) damaging any natural features or other property of the United States. This prohibition can be used when caches are dug into the ground or are placed such that they create a ground disturbance.
- 36 CFR 261.9(c) damaging any plant that is classified as a threatened, endangered, sensitive, rare or unique species. This could be used if certain types of vegetation were cut or cleared to place the cache.
- 36 CFR 261.10(e) abandoning any personal property. If property is left unattended, or if it presents a threat to Forest resources, it may be impounded. Some argue that caches are never abandoned, since the owner will eventually return to check on its contents, but for our purposes, when it is left unattended it is considered abandoned.
- Many National Forest wilderness areas also have a Forest order prohibiting the placement of caches with their boundaries.

What is Proposed:

Nationally recognize that geocaching should be prohibited in designated Wilderness Areas and Wilderness Study Areas.

It may also be desirable to promulgate regulations prohibiting geocaches in biodiversity hotspots or other sensitive plant or animal locations, in and around historical and cultural sites, and in any other area designated because of safety or resource concerns.

Proposed Wording
In the Wilderness Area prohibitions:
36 CFR 261.16 (d) storing, caching or leaving unattended, equipment, personal property or supplies for more than 24 consecutive hours.
>   (We would define cache to include geocaching containers as well as typical hunting camp caches, other food and water storage devices, and equipment stashes within wilderness. May want to mimic 36 CFR 2.22 which the Park Service uses.)

In the general prohibitions:
36 CFR 261.10(p) placing personal property for any reason that will be unattended for greater than 24 hours without a special use permit authorization or where authorized by the appropriate forest official. (Use this wording if a time frame is needed and it is decided a special use permit

in necessary for areas outside of wilderness. May need to keep ability to specify some locations, such as a trailhead, where vehicles may be left for several days or weeks at a time.)

Interim Management Actions

Strategies for Wilderness Areas

Information
- Place notices at trailheads that caches, including geocaches, are inappropriate in wilderness.
- Post forest orders prohibiting caches, including geocaches, at trailheads, offices and wherever visitors will see them.
- Provide information to store owners selling or promoting GPS devices about the inappropriateness of placing caches, including geocaches in wilderness areas.
- Contact websites promoting geocaching, and request specific prohibition information and disclaimers be placed on the website notifying readers that geocaching is prohibited in National Forest wilderness areas.

Removal
- Periodically check websites promoting geocaching and identify caches within your wilderness area. Contact cache owner and request removal. Explain the reasons why caches in wilderness are inappropriate.
- Periodically, check known cache locations and remove the cache. Post notice on the website that the cache has been removed along with reasons why caches in wilderness are inappropriate.
- If circumstances warrant leaving a cache temporarily, place a notice or education message in the cache, explaining the inappropriateness of the cache in wilderness and a date for its removal.

Law Enforcement
- Only use law enforcement as a last resort, or when resource damage or conflicts result.
- If unauthorized geocaches are found, they should be impounded and appropriate enforcement action taken. Forest Service will contact the cache owner via email, the geocaching.com website, phone, or any other means available. The cache owner will be notified that the cache needs to be removed or relocated to an appropriate site outside of the wilderness area within 30 days of the notification date.
- If the cache is not removed within the 30 day period, the Forest Service will remove the cache and dispose of it. At this point the owner of the cache is subject to a violation for abandoning personal property on the Forest.
- Issue citations generally when:
  - A cache is found in an area specifically prohibited for geocaching
  - A cache is placed in such a way that it damages natural features
  - A cache owner has been notified twice about the removal of a cache but continues to leave it inside of the wilderness
  - A cache owner who has been notified about the inappropriateness of caches in wilderness continues to place new caches in wilderness.

- Report the removal of a geocache on an Incident Report Form.

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Talking Points
For Geocaching in Wilderness Areas

- Placing a cache on National Forest System lands may be violating Forest Service regulations. These regulations are intended to protect the fragile environment and the natural, cultural and historical resources found on National Forest lands. You are ultimately responsible for the cache so please make sure you know what the rules are.

- Geocaching is an illegal activity in National Forest wilderness if personal property is left unattended. Caches are not allowed in wilderness areas.

- Geocaching sites can become attraction points that are sources for litter, human waste problems, trampling of vegetation, social trailing, and other impacts to natural resources. Participants need to be schooled in and practice Leave No Trace techniques.

- Geocaching in wilderness is inappropriate because it requires the placement of a cache, encourages a form of non-primitive recreation, and decreases aspects of wilderness recreation like self-discovery, reliance on primitive skills, and enjoyment of nature.

- No cache is to be placed in a wilderness area. The purpose of a wilderness area is "to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition". Caches placed in wilderness areas will be removed.

- People looking for caches should use Leave No Trace techniques, and stay on designated trails. See www.lnt.org for more information.

- Approved caches should be accessible from established trails, using authorized forms of travel. Many trails are accessible to off road vehicles, and others are not. A travel map, available free of charge at the local ranger district, will clearly indicate designated uses of trails. Some cache descriptions have encouraged unauthorized access to their caches. Know before you go. Obey all travel restrictions.

Interim Management Actions

Strategies for areas where caches are approved

First determine if a special use permit or other authorization is to be required. If so,
- Locate a person or group that is responsible for the cache and have them register the cache. (See Registration Forms below)
- Make sure the cache is safe and environmentally sound.
- Prepare an environmental assessment or other appropriate National Environmental Protection Act document identifying areas of the Forest where caches will be allowed.
- Issue a letter of authorization or Special Use Permit with special stipulations to mitigate concerns.
- If sites are not registered within a reasonable amount of time after notification, then the cache should be removed from public land, normally, the cache would be determined to be abandoned property after 72 hours unless the appropriate authorization has been obtained.
- Monitor the use to assess public health and safety and environmental protection issues.
- If the activity/sport becomes too large and begins to conflict with other authorized uses, appropriate steps should be taken to properly manage the activity.

It may be appropriate for the Forest Service to consider that geocaching does not require a special use permit, but can be authorized via a recreation use permit. The following conditions could apply to recreation use permit:
- the activity is not a commercial endeavor
- the activity complies with land use decisions and designations, (i.e., special area designations and wilderness interim management policy)
- the activity is not associated with an organized event
    - it does not award cash prizes
    - is not publicly advertised
    - poses minimal risk for damage to public land or related water resource values, and generally requires no monitoring.

A recreation use permit could have special stipulations attached that would address any circumstances or situations that need mitigation.

If the geocaching activity or event does not meet the above conditions, the event should be treated as any other organized recreational group or competitive activity or event for which the Forest Service would require the event organizer to obtain an Special Use Permit.

Guidelines for Placements of Caches
- All caches must be registered with the local Forest Service Office.
- No caches should be placed in prohibited areas, such as National Forest Wilderness Areas, Research Natural Areas, and other areas so designated.
- Unregistered caches will be removed and a violation notice will be issued.

- Caches must be at least ½ mile apart. This will prevent the proliferation of caches around popular sites by different people.
- Caches must be available to the general public; no member only or subscription caches are allowed.
- A cache site must not remain longer than one year. A cache may be rotated to a new location, at least ½ mile distant, after the 12 months.
- Caches should contain relevant Leave No Trace (LNT) or Tread Lightly (TL) education materials. Encourage participants to practice LNT or TL techniques in placing and visiting geocache sites.
- To protect threatened and sensitive species and resources, caches must be at least 200 feet from water sources and should be placed in such a way that there is no ground disturbance, ie no burying or covering caches with soil.
- Caches must not contain any food or hazardous materials.
- Cache containers must be no larger than one cubic foot nor smaller than a quart. It is preferable that containers be made of clear plastic so contents are visible. They should have some form of latch or other closure to deter wildlife.
- Information on how to contact the cache owner must be available either in the cache or on the originating website.
- Containers must be labeled on the outside so that it would not be mistaken as containing hazardous substances.

Registration Forms

See sample Registration Form at end of this paper.

Suggestions for a Successful Cache Program

Line Officers who contemplate permitting (or conducting) a geocaching event should apply the criteria found in Special Use Management Policies, assess the impact on forest resources and values, and make a determination specific to the Forest or District involved. If unacceptable adverse impacts cannot be avoided or mitigated, the activity cannot be permitted. Line Officers are reminded that cost recovery regulations apply to permits issued for geocaching activities. Cost recovery fees should recover costs incurred by the Forest or District, while fostering the cooperation of the geocaching community.

One of the biggest challenges of geocaching is communicating our policies and regulations to the geocaching community. Special education efforts may be necessary to outreach to this group of users. It is especially important to explain why the placement of caches is prohibited in certain areas and places.

Tips and ideas
Types of Caches
- Virtual caches should be encouraged in lieu of physical caches.
- If a fee is charged for physical caches, waive it for virtual caches.

- Cache containers should be no larger than one cubic foot nor smaller than a quart. It is preferable that containers be made of clear plastic so contents are visible.
- Encourage geocaches in areas outside of wilderness as part of the third leg of the wilderness recreation strategy.
- Contents of the cache are subject to inspection by forest staff at any time; forest staff will have the authority to remove any items deemed unacceptable. Examples include food, medications of any type, pornography, weapons of any type, or other items that are unsuitable for the general public or pose a safety threat. A log book is encouraged in lieu of exchange items.

Education
- Promote education about forest resources and technology through developing "virtual geocaching" trails and interpretive materials.
- Take GPS coordinates of existing sites and locations and include them in standard publications or develop new materials as needed.
- Create GPS orienteering courses to help visitors learn to navigate in the forest.
- Partner with local outdoor stores to provide listings of GPS virtual caches and interpretive materials.
- Create a GPS interpretive trail using coordinates and printed brochures or audio tapes.
- Use geocache websites as important sources of dispersing conservation education/LNT messages.
- Identify geocache groups and clubs in the area and utilize their internal communications tools, like meetings, newsletters and e-mail to share pertinent information.

Safety
- Request the cache searchers to leave a note on their vehicle dashboard identifying the operator as being a geocachers.

Monitoring
- Create a posted scavenger hunt to encourage folks to take monitoring pictures for us. Come up with a list of coordinates for areas that we would like to visit but can never get too, and ask participants to take pictures of the area from several perspectives from the fixed coordinate point. We could even supply disposable cameras for the task.
- Enlist volunteers to GPS trails, portages, and campsites.
- Geocaches and any contents that are removed by forest staff are to be documented in a incident report. Forest staff should periodically review the geocaching websites to monitor caches placed within the park.

Helpful Definitions

Geocaching: Geocaching is a web-based activity where participants hide a cache and take a location position with a GPS receiver. The position coordinates are then published on a website with an invitation to search for the "treasure." Caches often contain a notebook or logbook and something that the finder may take. The finder is asked to put another item in the cache for others to find and will often report the find on the website.

Types of geocaching:
Offset caches - These are caches are published coordinates that direct users to a specific location, such as an existing historical monument, plaque, or even a benchmark that you would like to have your cache hunter visit. From this site the cache hunter must look around and find offset numbers stamped/written in or on some part of the marker site, or continue based on instructions posted to geocaching.com
Multi-caches - These are a variation where the first cache gives coordinates (or partial coordinates) to the next location, which gives a location for the next site, until a final site location is given. A minor variation would be when multiple caches have hints to the final cache. There may be multiple locations involved with a multi-cache.
Virtual caches - These caches are actually just coordinates for an existing landmark or feature, such as a waterfall, lake, scenic view or campsite. Often a question will be posted at the cache website for the finder to answer about the landmark that will act as proof to the "cache" originator that you were actually there.

Other terms for geocaching: GPS Stash Hunt or Global Positioning Stash Hunt

Similar Activities:
Letterboxing: (www.letterboxing.org): Letterboxing started in Dartmoor, England, and is a phenomenon similar to geocaching in that a player takes directions from a website and uses those directions to find a hidden object. In the case of letterboxing the directions come in the form of a riddle and the hidden object is a stamp which the finder can use to stamp a piece of paper to prove that he or she visited the site.

The Degree Confluence Project: An international, web-based activity where people try to visit various latitude and longitude integer degree intersections and report their findings and post a picture on the website (www.confluence.org). The organizers allude to a quasi-scientific motivation of the project and even suggest that it be repeated periodically to get a feel for global change.

Benchmarking: An activity where people search for USGS location benchmarks in order to take a GPS coordinate and a picture of the site. They then send the picture and the location coordinates to the nearest USGS office.

TimeCapsules: An activity where a specialized container is filled with family memorabilia and then buried on National Forest lands. Location information is recorded and safeguarded for retrieval at some point of time in the future.

Geocache Site Registration Form

Cache Name:_____

Coordinates:_____

Distance to next closest cache:_____

Cache Owner:_____

Geocache Handle:_____

E-mail:_____

Phone:_____

Date to be placed:_____Date to be removed by:_____

Container and contents
description:_____

_____

_____

Rules for Placement:
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Return registration to District Office.

Approved by: _____.   _____
                   District Ranger   Date