Managing the Density of Recreation Use in Wilderness

BY DAVID N. COLE

Managing the density of recreation use is among the most contentious aspects of wilderness management. Ideally, wilderness should not be crowded. There is little controversy about this. However, as population expands, demand for recreational access to wilderness increases. In some areas, managers have responded by implementing limits on recreation use. Usually limits apply just to overnight use; day use remains unlimited. In other areas, recreation use has been allowed to increase unabated. Increasingly in the United States both decisions to limit use and decisions not to limit use are challenged by wilderness advocacy groups with opposing viewpoints. Particularly controversial are questions about whether to limit day use and whether to base use limits on concerns about experiential conditions, as opposed to concerns about ecological impacts of recreation.

For decades, managers and researchers have searched for better ways to make decisions about appropriate use levels in wilderness. While progress has been made, it has been limited. Planning frameworks— such as Limits of Acceptable Change and Visitor Experience and Resource Protection— provide a template for making decisions but still require managers to make value-based judgments about appropriate conditions. Studies of wilderness visitors provide insight into current visitors’ opinions about appropriate conditions and preferences for management. However, it is not clear to what extent prescriptive decisions about appropriate conditions should be based on the opinions of the average current visitor.

Given the continued contentiousness of these issues, the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute and the Wilderness Institute at the University of Montana sponsored a workshop to address the question of what science has contributed and can contribute to decisions about where use limits are needed, what those limits should be, and on what they should be based. Discussion was largely confined to situations in which concern for the visitor experience is the basis for use limits, since this is more controversial than limits based on ecological impacts. Copies of eight individual articles from the proceedings of the workshop can be downloaded at www.wilderness.net/research.cfm, or a copy of the entire proceedings can be ordered from the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute (leopold.wilderness.net).

The general conclusion of the workshop was that progress has been made in grappling with the issue of appropriate visitor densities in wilderness. To date, most research has involved administering post-trip questionnaires to visitors at individual wildernesses. While further research of this type will provide additional insights, most workshop participants felt that supplementing this work with different research questions and methodologies is key to making further progress. Research should focus on consequences of use limits, such as effects on

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Squamish Nation Releases Draft Land Use Plan
The recently released Squamish Nation draft land use plan calls for the establishment of four “Wild Spirit Places” covering 8.5% of their traditional territory. Located in the southwest corner of British Columbia, the Squamish Nation Territory includes some of BC’s most contentious land use conflict zones, including the old growth forests of the Elaho Valley—the site of several environmental protests and a violent attack on protesters by loggers. The “Wild Spirit Places” would be off-limits to industrial logging or other commercial developments and managed by the Squamish Nation. The Squamish Nation Land use plan can be viewed on the Squamish Nation website www.squamish.net.

University of Montana and University of Natal Offer New Master’s Degree in Protected Area Management
Based on a relationship developed during the 6th World Wilderness Congress in Bangalore, India, the University of Natal, South Africa, and the University of Montana, USA, will be launching a joint master’s degree in protected area management this coming July. The program provides a one-year master’s degree, targeting professionals in wilderness, park, or wildlife reserve management. The program includes one semester of coursework with the remaining time applied to either a field-based internship or a research project. The material and activity will have a southern African context, but will welcome students with a global perspective. The Universities are working together with the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, South African National Parks, KwaZulu Natal-Wildlife, and the Wilderness Action Group to develop supporting research programs that facilitate student, faculty, and managerial exchange. A symposium at the 7th World Wilderness Congress in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, began the process of compiling resource materials in a southern Africa context in support of this program. For more information contact Wayne A. Freimund, Director, Wilderness Institute, The University of Montana at waf@forestry.umt.edu or Charles Breen, Coordinator, Protected Area Management Program, The Centre for Environment and Development, The University of Natal at breen@mweb.co.za. For more information, visit the UM website at www.forestry.umt.edu/wi/Africa.

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used distribution and participation by different user groups. Research conducted at regional scales would help managers make decisions for their individual wildernesses that optimize the benefits provided by a regional system of parks and wildernesses. Finally, more in-depth research is needed on the nature of the wilderness experience and how it is affected by visitor density.

REFERENCES

DAVID N. COLE is research biologist at the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, P.O. Box 8089, Missoula, Montana 59807, USA. E-mail: dcole@fs.fed.us.