Strategy V. Modify Type of Use and Visitor Behavior

TACTIC 27: TEACH A WILDERNESS ETHIC

PURPOSE
To contribute to changes in visitor behavior that reduce social and resource impacts of wilderness recreational use. May also result in visitors applying minimum impact practices with better judgment in varying situations as a result of a deeper understanding of overall purposes and values of wilderness.

DESCRIPTION
Teaching a wilderness ethic stresses the philosophy of wilderness values and individual responsibility in relation to these values. It should motivate wilderness visitors to change their behavior and adopt specific minimum impact practices. It focuses on the “why,” the foundation for careful wilderness use, in contrast to the “what” and “how” of tactics 25 and 26. It takes time to instill an ethic. Therefore, the opportunities for ethics education must often be provided away from the wilderness.

CURRENT USAGE
Unknown, but probably infrequent except for abbreviated treatment. Teaching a wilderness ethic seems less common than educational programs focused more narrowly on recommended visitor behavior.

COSTS TO VISITORS
Low. The only cost is in time spent in the educational process. Hopefully, such costs should be more than offset by an improved appreciation and understanding of wilderness, as well as pride in having mastered improved skills in minimizing impact. Costs usually are incurred off-site and there is minimal pressure on the visitor to behave in any certain way.

COSTS TO MANAGEMENT
Low to moderate. Costs involve developing educational materials and providing educational opportunities. Because a wilderness ethic is relatively general, costs of developing materials can be shared widely. If educators can be persuaded to present classes on wilderness ethics, even the costs of educating visitors can be low.

EFFECTIVENESS
Although never evaluated, there is much to suggest that this approach has considerable potential. Wilderness visitors tend to be highly committed to the idea of wilderness. They also tend to be highly educated; therefore, they are likely to understand relatively complex subjects and to adjust their behavior accordingly. This technique attacks all problems directly and has low costs for both visitors and managers. Positive benefits from this technique will not be immediate, however, because there usually will be a lag period between education, behavioral changes, and resultant effects on the resource.

COMMENTS
Educational programs have been developed for grade school students and college students, although most programs focus narrowly on specific low-impact practices. More work is needed on both the curriculum of educational programs and how to effectively teach people.

SOURCES
Echelberger and others (1978), Bradley (1979), Fazio (1979), Martin and Taylor (1681).