Strategy V. Modify Type of Use and Visitor Behavior

TACTIC 28: ENCOURAGE OR REQUIRE A PARTY SIZE AND/OR STOCK LIMIT

PURPOSE
Large parties are a source of conflict, with many visitors considering them to be inappropriate and undesirable. There is also some evidence that large parties cause more ecological impact (for example, they are more likely to create large campsites) than many small parties. A party size limit, without reducing total use, would reduce certain problems.

DESCRIPTION
Either encourage visitors to keep parties small, with suggestions about desirable maximum sizes, or establish and enforce a specific maximum party size.

CURRENT USAGE
Common. This is one of the most widespread regulations in wilderness. Although usually a regulation, there are probably some areas where limits are encouraged but not required. Established party size limits range from 5 to 60; the most common limit is 25. Limits between 5 and 50 have been established for packstock; the most common limit is 20. Some places have established more stringent limits for more vulnerable places such as off-trail areas.

COSTS TO VISITORS
Low. Most parties are small. Median size is usually around three; in nine western areas, only about 6 percent of all parties were larger than 10 persons (Lucas 1980). Thus, relatively few visitors would pay any costs, even with a limit as stringent as 10 people. Costs are high for those visitors who prefer or must travel in large parties (such as outfitted or organized groups). Such costs might be reduced by permitting use by large groups under special conditions (for example, if they obtained special permits and/or visited specific locations, or had special skills or equipment that reduced their impact). Informing visitors of limits during trip planning is critical to maintaining low costs to the visitor.

COSTS TO MANAGEMENT
Low to moderate. Information about limits must be disseminated and regulations must be enforced. Any special provisions for oversized groups must be established and administered.

EFFECTIVENESS
Should be very effective in reducing one source of visitor dissatisfaction—encounters with large groups—if the limit is low enough. Effectiveness in reducing ecological problems may be less dramatic than many assume. This is particularly true where limits are high, as they usually are. The importance of a limit on party size to minimizing resource damage is greatest where impact is likely to occur quickly. Thus, limits are most important in fragile areas, in little-used and relatively undisturbed areas, and where parties travel with stock.

COMMENTS
It is possible that a party size limit could reduce the number of parties if larger parties go elsewhere. On the other hand, a reduction in party size might increase the number of parties in some areas. Present knowledge is inadequate to predict which outcome is more likely. There can also be a problem with large parties that split into several smaller groups to comply with the party size limit but then rejoin within the wilderness. Visitor acceptability of party size limits is generally high. Selecting a specific number for a party size limit requires judgment. No formula exists to calculate an ideal number. The situation is parallel to setting speed limits. In our opinion, however, party size limits larger than about 10 persons seem unlikely to have much positive benefit. (As noted earlier, provisions for allowing larger parties under special circumstances may be desirable.)

SOURCES