Guiding Principles for Posting Wilderness Information on Forest Web Sites

The following paper was developed by the Wilderness Information Management Steering Team as guidance to forests developing or maintaining wilderness information on local internet web sites. It should be noted many of the following comments are not internet specific, but pertain to wilderness information dissemination in general.

For specific guidance on web format, graphics, and other agency requirements, consult with your public affairs staff and/or webmaster in charge of your internet site.

Information Posted on Wilderness.net:

Our current agency policy is to post a core set of relatively stable data on Wilderness.net, our national interagency presence on the Internet, for all wildernesses we manage. Forests may decide to depend entirely on this site for delivering wilderness information over the web, or they may decide to post additional, potentially more time sensitive and/or detailed content, on a local site. Forests posting additional information should be aware of the information posted on Wilderness.net to ensure consistency. This information is updated yearly through the Infra-WILD upward reporting process, and it is the responsibility of the lead wilderness data steward to make sure this information is complete and accurate.

The current set of data provided to Wilderness.net includes:

1. General wilderness information (name, official acres, location, public laws)
2. Wilderness narrative (general text about a particular wilderness)
3. Wilderness regulations (along with discussion of why specific regulations are in place)
4. Wilderness permits and fees (presence/absence only – no details)
5. Public contact information (address & phone number)
6. Links to local web sites

It is important that the information you provide on a local web site be consistent with what is posted nationally, and if not, to make the necessary edits. It is also important that the URL for your web site be listed on Wilderness.net to ensure those interested in more detailed, or more time sensitive information, have a direct pathway to your site.

Principles for Forest Web Sites:

Voluntary adherence to the following general principles will improve our ability to further wilderness stewardship objectives, provide a valuable service to the public, and achieve greater consistency and quality of wilderness related content on forest web sites:

#1 – Use the web to further wilderness stewardship objectives:

The web is a wonderful tool to “tell the story of wilderness.” It provides a tool for disseminating the wilderness values message. Use the web to increase awareness of the Wilderness Act, and the implication of the act on the use and enjoyment of wilderness. Focus on why the wilderness resource is special and how it contrasts with other lands.
An example might be to explain the role of fire and how your wilderness has or is planning to accomplish allowing fire to play its natural ecological role.

**#2 – Information should not promote “attractions”:**

Web sites should not provide site-specific text and/or photos calling attention to unique or special attractions within a wilderness. Not only does this advertising cause the potential for degradation of the wilderness resource through increased attention and visitation, but it also diminishes the opportunities for mystery and self-discovery. Wilderness is managed in contrast to other public lands but it is designated “for the use and enjoyment of the American people”. To balance these objectives consider providing wilderness recreation and resource information for all of the trails or areas within a particular wilderness and allow the visitor to seek or select the experience they are looking for.

- The only exception to this principle is the need to provide place-specific, accurate and timely information that relates to wilderness visitor health & safety.
- Images and/or video should be used minimally and should be general in nature and specific site labels should be avoided. Valid uses of images may include the conveyance of information on wilderness appropriate practices or interpretative aspects.

**#3 – Provide visitor services:**

Provide services over the web where feasible and consistent with wilderness stewardship priorities. Not only does this provide a valuable service to the public, it reduces workload to the front desk staff. It is suggested you talk to your front desk staff to better understand the questions they often receive to provide information of greatest interest to the public. Examples include:

- Information on office locations and hours of operation. It is also advisable to include emergency contact information for situations that might arise outside of business hours.
- Information on outfitter & guide services under special use permit in your wilderness (such as list of current permit holders with contact information, update annually).
- Information on permit systems and fees, if appropriate.
- Methods for making permit reservations online, if appropriate.
- Methods for purchasing appropriate maps online, if appropriate.
- Provide links to other recreation information, such as trails and major trailheads.

**#4 – Steer non-wilderness dependent activities away from wilderness:**

Offer general trip planning services and/or links to steer non-wilderness dependent activities away from wilderness. Create and/or market opportunities for high quality wildland recreation experiences outside wilderness on and off National Forest lands.

Another method is to be clear and straight-forward about wilderness conditions and the experience being offered. Many times the public is not specifically seeking a typical wilderness experience and has no idea what challenge a wilderness trip might entail.
#5 - Provide links to appropriate sites:

Provide links only to appropriate sites which further wilderness stewardship objectives:

- Whenever you provide links to external sites, make sure it is obvious to the visitor they are leaving a web site managed by the Forest Service.
- At a minimum, we suggest all regional and forest sites with wilderness content link to the Wilderness Information Network (www.wilderness.net), which is the national interagency wilderness presence on the Internet. We also suggest links to Leave No Trace (www.lnt.org) to encourage wilderness appropriate practices.
- We suggest links to Recreation.gov (www.recreation.gov) to encourage use of non-wilderness dependent recreational opportunities.
- Provide links to local volunteer organizations or wilderness education associations.
- Provide links to appropriate state agencies, such as those responsible for hunting and fishing regulations or canoe registration.
- The only links to commercial enterprises should be those with which the FS has a formal relationship (cooperative agreement, special use permit, etc.). If contact information is listed for any permitted outfitter-guides, be sure to list them for all permitted outfitter-guides to avoid accusations of favoritism.

Suggested Wilderness Content for Forest Web Pages:

- General narrative about the Wilderness. Keep it brief and focus on why it is special. How does it contrast with other lands on the national forest? Be consistent with the narrative information on Wilderness.Net and provide more detail where appropriate. Consider adding resource information: such as special geology, botany, and wildlife.
- Inspiration: A little wilderness history, inspiring unlabeled photos, wilderness quotations.
- General location information and major access points (some of this information provided in the web portal).
- Current road, trailhead and trail conditions (open/closed, snow line elevation, etc.)
- Regulations, permits, fees (provide enough details to understand the process for getting a permit).
- Leave No Trace methods (either in text or link to LNT site)
- Points of contact for those wanting additional information.
- Volunteer opportunities or links to local volunteer organizations
- Current management priorities, issues, planning processes. It is desirable to contradict the notion that wilderness is only established for recreation management purposes.
- Safety Information: In addition to information on current conditions, provide general guidelines, such as treating water, wildlife concerns, 10 essentials, leaving itineraries at home etc.
- Additional Information: Is there an education program? Do you have additional brochures (bird lists, plant lists, travel planners) etc.? Do you have a Wilderness Education Box or videos (DVD’s) for loan etc? Are there local guided hikes available?