

Mandatory Wilderness Permits: Some Indications of Success

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ABSTRACT—Backcountry visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park in summer 1973 were surveyed to learn their reaction to a highly restrictive control of wilderness use. Pre- and post-visit questionnaire sampling revealed a high degree of user acceptance for the program. Of several communications media tested in an experimental phase of the study, a brief audio-visual presentation at the point of permit issuance was most effective in increasing users' knowledge of concepts and procedures for low-impact wilderness use.

How does the affected public react to use of mandatory permits in wilderness management—a subject that has stirred some controversy (1, 3, 4)? We report some answers from a study to evaluate perhaps the most restrictive permit system ever devised for the control of wilderness use.

Parameters for judging the degree of "success" were user perception of the permit system and researcher observations of administrative procedures. The field portion of the study was conducted from July 8 through September 8, 1973, a period of peak use in the area and maximum stress on the system. User data were obtained primarily from pre- and post-visit questionnaires involving a total of 1,020 backcountry recreationists.



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Locale and Use

Rocky Mountain National Park in northcentral Colorado was selected for the study because of the extreme popularity of its backcountry¹ and the high degree of control its system imposed on users. While not yet typical of other wilderness-type areas, the park has a microcosm of management problems with which many areas may eventually be confronted.

More than 23,000 visitors used the park in 1973 for backcountry camping or technical mountain climbing. About 200,000 day hikers also penetrated almost every section of its remote areas. Although day hikers were under no restrictions, all other users were required to obtain a permit, in person and no sooner than 24 hours in advance of departure. Overnight use of the backcountry was rationed by requiring visitors to camp only at designated campsites or within trailless, "cross-country zones" at specific locations predetermined and described (within 1/8 mile accuracy) by the visitor. The number of permits issued was based on the number of designated campsites (about 150) and permit allotments per cross country zone (about one permit per square mile, or a total of 63). Because of the need for map-reading ability and other wilderness expertise, the latter permits were not generally publicized and were issued only when specifically requested.

User Reaction to Permit System

It has been pointed out many times, and well illustrated with case histories in natural resources management, that public acceptance, or at least sufferance, is essential to the success of any management program (2, 5). In Rocky Mountain's program, there was indeed much "sufferance" to be endured! For

¹Backcountry and wilderness are used synonymously. At the time of this study, the area was under consideration for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and approval seems imminent.

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example, as many as 400 individuals were turned away in a single week of August 1973; there was a plethora of rules; and long lines and waits of up to 1 1/2 hours were common at park headquarters, the principal point of permit issuance, during peak use periods.

Nonetheless, visitor reaction indicated a very high degree of support for the program. For example, 69 percent of those queried in the pre-test and 86 percent in the follow-up survey viewed the system as *necessary*. Even those unable to obtain a permit saw past their immediate inconvenience: 67 percent and 80 percent, in the two surveys, said the system was necessary. Only five percent of the total sample suggested scrapping the program entirely, with rejectees so inclined slightly more than visitors in other categories.

In their post-visit response, 50 percent of those sampled said the number of backcountry users was at an optimal level. An additional 34 percent believed that despite the controls, there still were too many users in the wilderness setting. Most attributed the overuse to both overnight users *and* day hikers, rather than one or the other.

Another measure of support for a program might be the degree to which an affected public complies with the program's requirements. A check of 912 camping parties contacted in the backcountry revealed that 91.7 percent were in compliance with the permit regulation. Enforcement by individual rangers differed considerably, but 258 citations were issued during the year for backcountry camping without a permit. Rangers who

issued citations for violations did so with the support of most users, although more people had reservations about this question than toward any other in the study. Nearly 20 percent were undecided both before and after their visits, but 69 percent of the principal user group (those camping at designated sites) viewed enforcement as necessary before their visit. The figure rose to 75 percent afterwards. Second only to complaints against horse use on park trails, the need for better enforcement received the greatest number of unsolicited comments of anything in the study.

A weakness in the program seemed to be in convenience for those who attempted to comply. For one thing, because there were no provisions for advance reservations, hundreds of individuals who were unable to obtain permits were totally unprepared for the disappointment and had no alternate plans. Many had come long distances with the expectation of spending their vacations in the park's high country.

Another problem was that many visitors were faced with long lines and waits when attempting to apply for a permit. Delays in the issuing procedures were due primarily to (1) visitors needing assistance from rangers in planning their itineraries, (2) visitors not understanding requirements of the system or knowing which campsites currently had "openings," and (3) rangers attempting to issue permits while being continuously interrupted by phone calls from the public seeking information or from personnel at ranger stations needing campsite availability information (from the central control file) before issuing permits.



Figure 1. Most backcountry users in Rocky Mt. National Park viewed rationing as a necessary management tool to avoid wilderness scenes like this.

Nonetheless, perhaps because of desensitizing effects of such modern phenomenon as gasoline lines, airport stack-ups, and rush hour traffic, 67 percent of the principal user group still viewed the system as "convenient." This figure, however, dropped to only 52 percent of the mountain climbers, 46 percent of the rejectees, and 33 percent of the group leaders.

The ultimate test of tolerance toward a system may be the number of people who would be willing to return to the area in the future if given the opportunity. In the case of Rocky Mountain National Park, a resounding "yes" was the response to this question by 93 percent of all overnight campers and mountain climbers in the sample. Even 87 percent of the rejectees would again take their chances on getting a permit.

Opportunities for Education

There is little question that the permit system achieved the managerial goal of reducing impact on campsites, and to a lesser degree on trails. Also, users informally interviewed in the backcountry were nearly unanimous in their praise of the system as a means for increasing their chances for at least some degree of solitude and a more enjoyable camping experience. This view was lucidly described in a popular article by Taylor (1972) who contrasted his visits to California's Rae Lake area before and after rationing.

Another significant benefit accrued to management during the study in Rocky Mountain National Park:

the opportunity to interpret wilderness camping to prospective visitors. Several communications media were tested to find an optimal method of attaining this goal. Illustrated newspaper feature articles and a ½ hour color television program reached an audience numbering over ½ million readers or viewers in Colorado. Nonetheless, so few backcountry users in the survey received these mass media messages that the effect may be considered negligible. Even if these had been national media, they represented a classic example of the poor results from a "shotgun approach" to disseminating information. There is no doubt that many people were reached with the interpretive messages and perhaps even influenced by them, but these people did not comprise the *target* audience—those using the backcountry of Rocky Mountain National Park.

To zero in on park users, brochures were handed to some permit applicants, and others were encouraged to view an 8½ minute sound/slide exhibit. In this case, because of the permit requirement, the user public was definitely able to be reached.

For experimental purposes, numbers of users exposed to each media (all having identical interpretive "messages") were obtained through the post-visit questionnaire. Of the media tested, only the sound/slide exhibit increased visitors' knowledge of low-impact camping concepts and procedures significantly more than pre-testing and other extraneous factors influenced a control group.

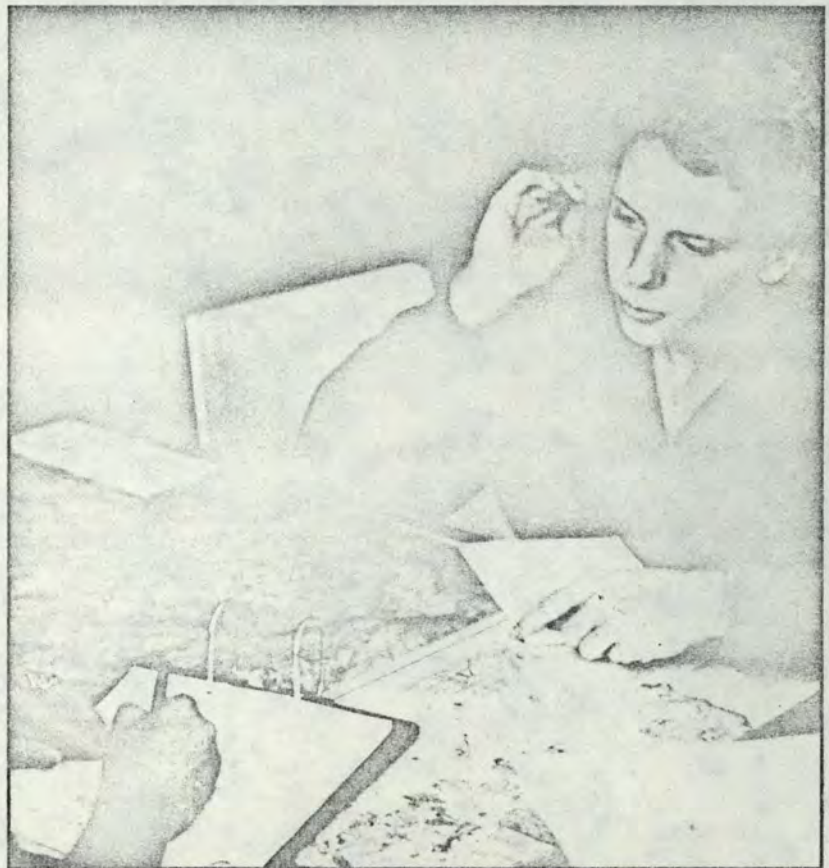


Figure 2. Obtaining mandatory visitor permits should be made as convenient as possible.

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A mandatory permit system has the advantage of providing an effective method of channeling wilderness users past a specific point of contact. It is then possible to expose them to the most effective educational medium. It is not a perfect method, for it is a distasteful thought to envision *requiring* visitors to view a slide presentation. Therefore, it is likely that the small minority who need it most may choose not to take the time to watch, and thereby will still not be reached.

In Rocky Mountain National Park the educational opportunities presented by the permit system were especially important. The majority of backpackers were novices (31 percent in their first year of the activity and 21 percent in their second). Most were also visiting the park's backcountry for the first time. Testing showed that it was these individuals who gained most from interpretive input. This would indicate that park rangers have a significant opportunity to influence large numbers of recreationists at a point in their personal development when they are especially amenable to learning how to use the wilderness in ways that will help preserve its unique qualities. The resulting benefits would accrue not only to the immediate area, but to any wilderness area used by the individual on subsequent trips. Most importantly, the visitor himself benefits. To most, it seems there would be self-satisfaction in possessing the knowledge necessary to be a responsible caretaker of land which invariably evokes emotional involvement. Ultimately, through responsible use, the visitor himself will be protecting those qualities he looks for and wishes to have preserved for future generations.

Conclusions

Hendee and Lucas (3) were correct that fear of massive public resistance to mandatory wilderness permits is unwarranted. However, although most visitors in highly impacted areas may be understanding of the necessity for permits and rationing, they also will expect fair treatment through enforcement of the rules. Additionally, the administering agency has a humane obligation to streamline the issuing procedures to enable the visitor to obtain a permit as expediently and conveniently as possible. This may require the option of making advance reservations, and certainly includes individual attention from an adequate number of personnel assigned to assist in planning trip itineraries and issuing permits.

If coupled with a conscientious effort to obtain maximum benefits from a permit system, the program can be extremely valuable as an educational arm of management. A brief, audio-visual presentation is likely to be the most effective method of interpreting low impact wilderness use; and a mandatory permit system has the advantage of assuring that most visitors will be exposed to this medium.

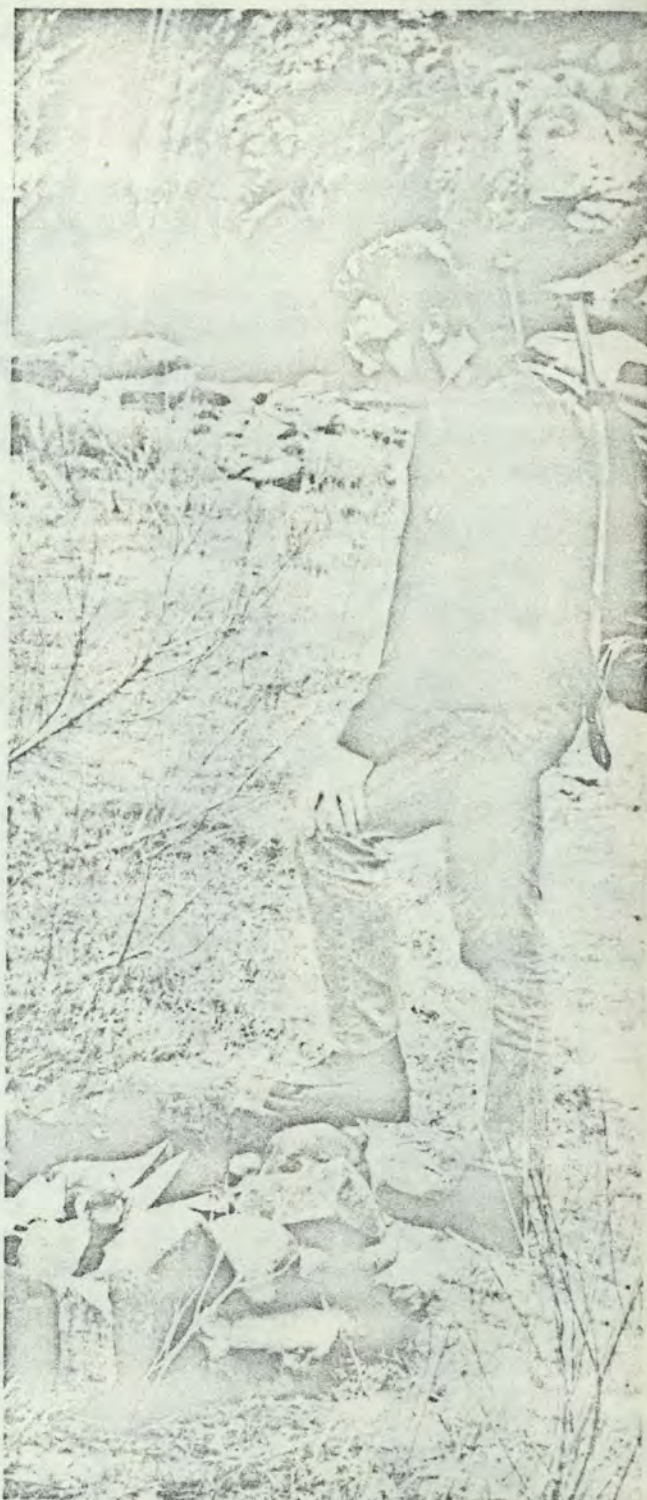


Figure 3. Mandatory permits provide the agency with opportunities to interpret low impact camping procedures which in turn may ultimately reduce litter and blackened rock rings in the wilderness.

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