

We Have Too Much Wilderness?

The Desolation Wilderness of California, which lies along part of the crest of the Sierra Nevada east of San Francisco, offers a grim example of the fate in store for many presently untrammelled beauty spots as the human pressure upon them increases.

Because it is close to the population centers of San Francisco and Sacramento, and because it is relatively small and accessible, Desolation has become one of the most popular hiking and camping areas in California — so popular, according to the current issue of the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, that beginning this summer nobody will be allowed into the wilderness without a permit. And the Forest Service expects that it soon will have to limit the number of persons permitted to enter or to camp at any one place and eventually to require advance reservations for specific dates. The Forest Service is convinced that unless it takes drastic measures, the 100,000 "visitor days" logged in Desolation in 1970 will grow to 200,000 by 1975 and that will mean the end of the wilderness.

The human pressure has been particularly hard on Desolation because, as writer Robert S. Wood points out, "it is too small, too pretty and too easy to get into." But Desolation is by no means the only wilderness now suffering from over-use.

The wilderness area closest to the Lewiston-Clarkston valley is the Eagle Cap in the Wallowa Mountains about two hours by car from Clarkston. The pressure on this small wilderness has been increasing steadily every year to the point where, during the last weeks of August, the competition between horses and hikers makes the trails a traffic hazard. A member of the *Tribune's* editorial staff, who has backpacked frequently in the Wallowas, hiked up to Glacier Lake one day last summer and on five miles of trail encountered 40 to 50 hikers and a couple of dozen horsemen coming down. And during that week in the Wallowas, the wilderness was not only teeming with hikers and horsemen but with deer hunters — an incompatible and potentially hazardous mix.

The pressure on the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness area to the east of us and the Idaho Primitive area to the southeast is far less severe because of their size and relative isolation. Today their wilderness quality remains unimpaired, but the pressure

of population is certain to make some impact even there in the years to come and it is all too easy to foresee the day when a hiking permit or an advance reservation may be required in Idaho, too.

Those who maintain that we already have plenty of wilderness, and need not set aside more, should consider the condition of Desolation and Eagle Cap. These two, among others, have already been over-run to the degree that in some seasons their wilderness values are lost.

The Forest Service is considering easing the pressure on some wilderness areas by creating a new "backcountry" classification to apply to semi-wild regions outside the wilderness system where toilets and permanent stoves would be permitted along with some other activities barred from classified wilderness areas. Many of the people now hiking in the wilderness areas probably would be just as happy in the "backcountry," or so the Forest Service believes. Where suitable national forest land is available, such a classification undoubtedly would help. And in the present wilderness areas it is going to be necessary to increase entry and use restrictions. But the principle need is for more classified wilderness.

The Minam River Valley lying adjacent to the Eagle Cap Wilderness should be added to it. The so-called Magruder Corridor in east central Idaho, now being considered for classification, should have it. Altogether some 56,000,000 acres considered potential wilderness at the time the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964 remain unclassified; their status should be determined before the review period runs out.

Within a few years there will be no place left in the United States outside the wilderness areas where it will be possible to get away from the noise of engines and see the country the way it used to be. While areas suitable for wilderness use exist they ought to be preserved, for wilderness once lost can never be retrieved.

Many of us in the inland Pacific Northwest now think we have all the wilderness we're ever going to need. And in California only a few years ago it never occurred to anybody that he would one day have to get a permit to hike along the crest of the Sierra. — L.H.