

No Recipient, No Subject

To:
From: George Whitmore <geowhit@qnis.net>
Subject:
Cc:
Bcc:

Oral testimony on the Yosemite Valley Plan at an oversight hearing conducted by the National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands Subcommittee of the Resources Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, 27 March 2001.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and staff! Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

I am George Whitmore, Chair of the Sierra Club's Yosemite Committee.

I was born in central California, and have been fortunate enough to have lived there, near Yosemite, most of my life. I have experienced Yosemite intensively and extensively over many years---starting as a child in the 1930's, and including many memorable years in the 1950's as a rock climber.

We agree with the stated intent of the Yosemite Valley Plan, and are pleased that the Park Service did respond to public comments on the draft Plan to some extent by cutting back on planned expansion at Yosemite Lodge, and softening the draconian cuts in lower cost accommodations. However, we still have some very large concerns.

Those concerns focus largely on transportation issues, and on the impact which unceasing, INFINITE growth in day visitor usage has on a very FINITE Yosemite Valley. These two concerns are obviously closely interrelated.

Former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt's often-stated view that, "There is room for everyone in Yosemite, they just can't bring their cars", was overly simplistic. Unfortunately, it was the mandate the Park Service was given, and it resulted in a flawed Plan.

The new Valley Plan has abandoned the concept of limits which was in the 1980 General Management Plan. At the same time, no program has been put in place to address the consequent problem of ever-increasing stress on the visitor experience and on the natural resources.

The only response to more and more day visitors seems to be planning for more and more busses, without acknowledging that BUSES can become the problem, instead of cars.

Busses obviously could be part of the solution. Our concern is with the excessive focus on them which fails to recognize that they are ALREADY well on the way to becoming a worse problem than the cars.

There are several different bus systems serving Yosemite now:

- The long distance excursion, or tour, busses;
- The regional busses (including YARTS) which operate from the gateway communities;
- The in-Valley shuttle busses; and,
- Those which transport people to other points within the Park.

In general, our comments apply to ALL types of busses.

These existing busses already are having an impact which needs to be reduced. They need to be:

- Cleaner (meaning fewer air polluting emissions);
- Quieter;
- Smaller (to reduce the demand for wider and straighter roads); and generally
- Less intrusive.

There is a serious need to convert from diesel to less harmful

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technology, and that is one area which probably would benefit from increased funding.

But---especially in the absence of cleaner, quieter, smaller, and less intrusive---we object to the seeming acceptance of busses as being a cure-all.

Of course, what is driving the demand for more and more busses is the given parameter that, "There is room for everyone in Yosemite?.."

The concept of limits is certainly not foreign to the public. We encounter it routinely in so many aspects of everyday life, and we ADJUST accordingly. To take an extreme example, even with an operation such as Disneyland, where large crowds and crowding are accepted, sometimes the demand threatens the quality of the visitor experience, so the company takes steps to manage the demand.

It totally escapes us why this is considered NOT acceptable for Yosemite Valley.

We believe that, if the Park Service would try a reservation system for day use, they would find it accepted by most people. Especially if some of the available space were set aside for those who plan to visit at off-peak times, or simply choose to take their chances.

Such a system would eliminate the need for degradation of both the visitor experience and the natural resources which this Plan would allow---a degradation, incidentally, which would be in violation of the Park Service's own Organic Act.

We feel that the concepts employed in this Plan, while undoubtedly well-intentioned, have generally been taken too far. The zeal to "improve" Yosemite Valley has resulted in a massive urban redevelopment plan. But this is not a city. It is the crown jewel of our National Park system---the Incomparable Valley, a World Heritage Site, the holy of holies.

It deserves much better of us.

I would be happy to take any questions you might have.

To: yojo@batnet.com
From: George Whitmore <geowhit@qnis.net>
Subject: media contacts
Cc:
Bcc:

Hi. Thanks for the messages. I got about ten different messages (phone and e-mail) in the space of six hours, most of which I was not home. Sorry your last phone message got cut off; I have had almost no problem with that since getting a separate line for the FAX, and that is also now the computer line. Hopefully you will get this before you leave home Wednesday morning. I will try to make this very succinct.

First, last, and above all else, I appreciate you! Because of you there is some hope for Yosemite. Because your media contacts have worked out well, I have confidence in you.

That having been said, we have to recognize that reporters usually try to stir the pot---they want controversy. I think some of that may already be brewing with their coverage of the River Plan.

They have been calling Carl Pope and Mike Paparian, and I think also you, and Mike thinks they may be about to call me. I told Mike I thought his talking points were good, but that we need more emphasis on the NPS' unseemly haste in the planning process. It just doesn't stand to reason that a good plan could be expected to come out of a hastily cobbled together process.

In other words, we are skeptical. But since we haven't seen the plan yet we certainly can't have an opinion on the plan, only on the process. I urge that our position be one of open-minded skepticism. If we are critical of the plan without even having seen it, I fear it damages our credibility.

Earlier today I talked to Mike on the phone, read his e-mail talking points, called him back, found that an LATimes reporter wanted feedback, and by then it was 4:45 p.m. and I had to leave the house. I gave Mike ideas similar to those expressed above and asked him to call the reporter since they probably would not be answering their phones after 5:00 p.m. Mike e-mailed me back with a report. It sounds like the reporter was excessively interested in personalities within the Club. If I wanted to be paranoid I guess I would say it sounded like Richard Wiebe had been talking to the reporter.

The reporter (Jim Rainey 213-237-7087) apparently felt he was not getting an adequate explanation of why we are concerned about the Lodge Plan. Mike didn't feel he had the details, and neither do I; maybe you can give him the numbers to demonstrate our claim that the NPS is proposing to replace lower cost accomodations with higher cost ones. Also, he probably does not understand that much of the Lodge complex is in the wrong place, and why we feel that much of the new stuff they were proposing would also be in the wrong place. He probably doesn't understand that the 1997 flood was just a foretaste of what many of us will live to see. And he may never have heard of concerns about development in rockfall zones. And he may not have heard that we believe the NPS is mandated to protect and restore natural processes in Yosemite. But I guess I am starting to sound like an extremist. Maybe you better talk to him instead of me!

Love you, kiddo. In the interest of succinctness I guess I better stop. Let me know how it goes tomorrow.

No Recipient, El Chorro agenda?

To:
From: George Whitmore <geowhit@qnis.net>
Subject: El Chorro agenda?
Cc:
Bcc:

Hi Alan---

There is significant turmoil within the Yosemite Committee as a result of the Southern Division of the C/NRCC having passed David Underwood's resolution at their meeting on Sunday 7 January in L.A. (David sent out the text of it on Monday 8 January to a number of people, including you, if you want to refresh your memory as to what it called for.)

We are in the process of setting a Committee meeting date to discuss this and other matters, including how to address the subject of "limits." I dread the prospect of spending many hours going through David's seven points one by one, especially when many of the points are off-target, in my estimation. (David seems to be very defensive about his resolution, claiming that it is now Sierra Club policy for example.)

Which gets to my question: As RCC Chair, how do you plan to handle the action of the Southern Division? Is the item automatically on the agenda, and none of us have any choice in the matter? If so, could we avoid wasting time on it by having a substitute motion placed on the floor immediately? Could the Southern resolution not be taken up if someone (the mover and seconder? Robin?) so requested prior to the El Chorro meeting?

Why am I concerned? The resolution came from David, and is not consistent with the views and positions of the Yosemite Committee. There is a distinct possibility of a very large argument between David and the rest of the Yosemite Committee on the floor at El Chorro. If the full body wishes to take up their time with such a process, they can so choose. But I would think they would prefer to have it resolved by the Committee before it ever comes up at El Chorro.

I realize you may wish to confer with Robin and Allan, so you may not wish to respond to this immediately. It would help in planning our Committee meeting if I heard back in due course, though. Thanks. George.