

DATE: 27 May 69

TO: Tulare County Board of Supervisors
FROM: Tehipite Chapter, Sierra Club
P. O. Box 5396, Fresno, California 93755
SUBJECT: Wells-Seaborn Development, Silver City

Gentlemen:

My name is George Whitmore. I am from Kingsburg, and I am speaking for the Sierra Club. I am the Conservation Chairman of the Tehipite Chapter, which encompasses the central San Joaquin Valley, and I am speaking with the concurrence of the Sierra Club's national headquarters in San Francisco.

We wish to go on record as being in opposition to the proposed development of Silver City as described in The Schematic Development Plan of October, 1968, and taking into account certain amendments presented at the meeting of the Planning Commission on May 14, 1969.

The Silver City proposal is, of course, relevant only when considered in conjunction with the Disney proposal for Mineral King. Likewise, our opposition can be understood only in the context of our opposition to the larger proposal for the entire Mineral King enclave.

Many of the reasons for which we oppose Disney also hold true for the Wells-Seaborn proposal. A few of these include:

1. High density developments are incompatible with the purposes for which the national parks were established, and therefore should not be permitted immediately adjacent to national park boundaries. In the case of Mineral King-Silver City, development would be essentially within the national park.
2. Aside from the adverse influence upon Sequoia National

- Park, these developments would inundate a very limited area with far more people than could reasonably be accommodated. The result would be severe problems of water supply, sewage and garbage disposal, air and water pollution, soil erosion, earth compaction, and just plain trampling of the terrain at a rate faster than it can recover. When range land is overgrazed, the land is destroyed; just as surely, although perhaps more subtly, the presence of too many people will destroy land which wiser use would have conserved for future generations.
3. Natural beauty will be destroyed. While Disney plans to resort to (and I quote a Disney report) "extensive bulldozing and blasting in most lower areas and extensive rock removal at higher elevations," a recommendation in the Wells-Seaborn proposal describes the trees as being "generally overmature and decadent" and calls for the logging of vast numbers. A forest composed only of vigorous young trees, lacking the mature monarchs, might be beautiful in the eyes of some, but it most certainly would not be natural.
4. Good regional planning concepts are being ignored. Semi-developed areas such as Mineral King-Silver City should serve as a transition, or buffer zone, between mass recreation developments (and their accompanying high-density dwelling units) and the true wilderness areas of the national park and national forest back country. We do not object to condominiums or tramways as such, but

we feel they should generally be located in areas which have already undergone some degree of "civilizing".

Areas in a relatively natural condition are dwindling so rapidly that every effort must be made to avoid their complete loss.

The above reasons might be summarized by saying that the proposed development of Silver City would intensify the tragedy of Mineral King. The Disney proposal is bad enough by itself. Wells-Seaborn and similar proposals will only compound the problems and thereby generate further hostility toward Disney for having started it all.

Our main concern is with the Disney proposal. From the very start we have been concerned over the fact that, once begun, such a development is extremely difficult to control. Both the Forest Service and Disney have stated that they recognize that Mineral King has ecological and esthetic limitations, and that the development will be kept within those limits. Yet only one month ago Robert Hicks was still distributing a brochure which states that "All of us promise that our efforts now and in the future will be dedicated to making Mineral King grow to meet the ever-increasing public need. I guess you might say that it won't ever be finished."

Like a cancer which has once become established, there is no stopping its malignant spread across the landscape. Silver City is just the first manifestation of the spread of this ugly disease. Given the Disney impetus, the Wells-Seaborn proposal was inevitable. Other attempts to convert our natural heritage into dollars will follow the pattern Disney has laid down. Given the existence of a

high-speed highway into this area, there will be intense pressure to capitalize on its presence. We question whether the Forest Service has either the expertise, the financial resources, or the political muscle to defend the public interest against the inroads of multi-million dollar developers.

It remains to be seen whether the Supervisors of Tulare County can see beyond the illusory vision of "progress" typified by tramways, condominiums, automobiles, and asphalt. They might do well to remember that many residents of Tulare County came here to escape the tentacles of "progress" in southern California. They sought a more relaxed way of life close to the fields, orchards, and mountains of Tulare County. They sought clean air and clean water and space to breathe. These things they found--for a while.

Gentlemen, the decision is yours. May it be one with which your grandchildren can live.

George W. Whitmore

George W. Whitmore
Conservation Chairman

-/-/-

MINERAL KING

A Statement to the Tulare County Planning Commission

December 11, 1970

Tehipite Chapter, Sierra Club

My name is George Whitmore.

I live in Kingsburg, and I am speaking for the Tehipite Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Our Chapter encompasses all of Mariposa, Merced, Madera, and Fresno Counties, part of Tuolumne County, and the northern portion of Tulare County.

We have approximately 700 members.

We are told that the purpose of this hearing is to seek facts. We welcome the opportunity to bring some of the facts into the light of public scrutiny. Opinion will also enter in, but we believe that you are probably seeking that, too.

We have taken note of the specific questions you have asked, and will direct our comments to those in due course.

For some years now we have been told that the access road which the taxpayers will have to buy for Disney will cost in the neighborhood of 25 million dollars. This has impressed most people as being rather a huge sum of money to spend simply in order to set Disney up in business.

But recent inquiries by us have turned up the fact that there is an additional 14 million dollars worth of highway which must be provided for Disney's benefit. This is the stretch of Highway 198 from Success Reservoir to Three Rivers. The Division of Highways has stated that this project is entirely contingent upon the Disney development. Thus the true cost to the taxpayers is not just the 25 million dollars for Highway 276 from Three Rivers to Mineral King; to this must be added the additional 14 million dollars for Highway 198.

We are wondering when, if ever, the news media are going to let the public know that the true cost of the highways we must provide for Disney is 39 million dollars, and not a mere 25 million.

Congressman Mathias recently mailed a questionnaire to all the residents of Kern and Tulare Counties. One of his questions was "Do you favor the development of Mineral King into a year-round recreational area?"

And of course a majority of respondents indicated that yes, they were in favor of recreational development. This was hardly surprising, because many of us would have answered "yes" to that question.

But note carefully that the question was not "Do you favor the present Disney proposal?" with its million people a year, its fifty mile an hour highway, and its cost to the taxpayers of 39 million dollars for that access road. It was merely "Do you favor year-round recreational development?"

What did surprise us was that one-third of those who responded said "NO", in spite of the incessant barrage of Disney and Forest Service

propaganda which the "news" media continually spew forth.

We suggest that those county officials who are promoting the Disney interests so vigorously remember that one-third of the voters disagree with what you are doing.

Even though we are continually being told by both Disney and the Forest Service that Yosemite does not provide a valid comparison, the Disney firm nevertheless has recently pointed out that Yosemite Valley now has more trees than it did some years ago.

This well known fact was cited in an attempt to convince the public that Yosemite's infamous asphalt, smog, and congestion must not be harmful to its flora, so why worry about Mineral King?

This is the type of statement which causes us to fear that the planners of this development are woefully ignorant of even the most basic ecologic principles. The most elementary student realizes that the flora of a 4,000 foot elevation valley such as Yosemite is far more resistant to abuse than is the flora of a fragile 8,000 foot valley such as Mineral King, or the 10,000 foot basins which surround it.

Also, we wonder why Yosemite was chosen for this comparison when the people who made it, namely the Disney organization, have been telling us for years that such a comparison is not valid because Mineral King is going to be "different".

We didn't realize that they meant it was going to be worse!

We would remind you that, even though Yosemite Valley and Mineral King Valley are worlds apart ecologically, some valid comparisons can still be made in order to help visualize the amount of area and numbers of people involved.

To put half as many people into Mineral King as into Yosemite, even though there is only one-seventh to one-eighth the amount of space available, means a four-fold increase in congestion. To speak of thousands of acres or millions of visitor-days means nothing to anyone until it is compared to something we are familiar with, and for this reason it is valid to envision Mineral King as being four times more crowded than Yosemite.

It is visions such as this that have prompted the New York Times to cry out that "The only word to describe this hideous project is scandalous. Has Southern California not been raped, polluted and desecrated enough already? Have the Forest Service bureaucrats no sense of shame about taking a wonderful portion of the nation's natural heritage entrusted to their care and surrendering it to the exploiters?"

Or, in the words of Congressman Phillip Burton, "The perversion of public land to private profit through this ugly project is scandalous."

The Sierra Club is not opposed to the principle of private profit. We are opposed to the giving away of public lands, and we are also opposed to perversion, scandal, and ugliness.

To answer the Planning Commission's questions directly, we feel that both the quantity and quality of water in the Kaweah will inevitably be degraded by placing a small metropolis on its headwaters.

You can give it tertiary treatment if you like, but the fact remains that most downstream users don't like to drink sewage--even if it has been decolorized, deodorized, and sanitized.

Regarding the private inholdings, we feel that the best way of avoiding the esthetic and tax hazards of mountain subdivisions is not to encourage them. And in this case the sole encouragement consists of the Disney development and the high standard road accompanying it. If you eliminate those encouragements, you will automatically have prevented many other problems which otherwise would ensue.

We submit that the Forest Service made a grave error of judgment some years ago when they decided to allocate this resource to Disney without first seeking the advice of its owners, namely the citizens and taxpayers of the United States of America.

But rather than proceeding in a headstrong manner, persevering in the face of criticism and thereby compounding the problems, we suggest the Forest Service ^{should} bring the entire project to a standstill.

Following a suitable cooling off period, perhaps a fresh beginning could be made. Hopefully all agencies and citizen groups could then cooperate in arriving at a completely new plan for this valley--a plan which would truly be in the public interest and which would be worthy of the splendid resource that is Mineral King.

-/-/-

Sierra Club
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San Francisco
California

STATEMENT OF GEORGE W. WHITMORE
SIERRA CLUB
BEFORE THE NATIONAL PARKS AND RECREATION SUBCOMMITTEE
OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INTERIOR AND INSULAR AFFAIRS
REGARDING THE WILDERNESS PROPOSAL FOR
KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK
MARCH 25, 1974

Mr. Chairman, I am George W. Whitmore from Kingsbury, California. I am representing the Sierra Club. As you know, we are a national organization with approximately 150,000 members throughout the entire United States.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify on the proposal for a Kings Canyon National Park Wilderness. I have lived in Central California for most of my life, and have visited Kings Canyon National Park many times, backpacking and climbing in many different parts of the Park.

As you know, this is considered to be one of the finest gems in the National Park System. I trust that my numerous visits are ample evidence of the fact that I agree with that opinion.

It is our understanding that the Wilderness plan under consideration today has been proposed by Congressman Bob Mathias, and that the Park Service has prepared a map which reflects Mr. Mathias' wishes. We understand that this map bears the number 102 - 20,003 - A, is dated September 1973, and shows a proposed Wilderness of 750,690 acres. The proposal shown on that map is the one we will respond to.

We wish to commend Mr. Mathias and the Park Service for what is basically a very fine proposal. They have shown excellent judgement

in recognizing that Kings Canyon is essentially a wilderness park, and that the vast bulk of it should remain in its natural condition for the benefit of future generations.

We are especially pleased that the present proposal is greatly improved over some of the earlier drafts. Most of our previous objections have been accommodated very nicely.

There is essentially only one basic principle which leads us to recommend a further improvement. The principle is that the top of the cliffs around the valley of Kings Canyon proper should be protected from possible future pressure for tramways or other developments. Such development would be inconsistent with the natural values which the valley rim presently provides. Since those are the values for which Congress established the Park, we feel that Congress should now take steps to help perpetuate those values. This means placing the valley rim within the Wilderness.

Our policy calls for bringing the Wilderness boundary to the base of the cliffs. As a personal note, I would like to add that whether the boundary comes to the base of the cliffs or to a point several hundred feet off the valley floor appears to be immaterial from our point of view. However, from the Park Service point of view it apparently does make a difference, since they have previously stated that they oppose bringing the Wilderness boundary to the valley floor because it would then be unduly subjected to the influences of nearby developments.

It appears to me that leaving the boundary a few hundred feet off the valley floor would satisfy the Park Service objection, and

I feel confident that the Sierra Club would be satisfied with such an arrangement. I earnestly suggest that this resolution of the conflict be seriously considered.

The above suggestion is valid only along those portions of the valley which have a road directly below the canyon walls. On the southern side of the river upstream from the Roaring River bridge there is no road. This portion of the valley floor should be included in the Wilderness, just as should all of the valley floor east of Copper Creek.

I should note that we are not opposed to tramways or other mechanical contrivances per se. We are opposed to them in locations which we feel have a higher value when preserved in their natural state.

If it is felt to be desirable for the incapacitated, unfit, or elderly to be able to get to a high elevation point from which to view the back country, I would like to point out that there are places where such arrangements could be made without undue disruption of natural and scenic values.

Two such locations are Lookout Peak and Mitchell Peak on the Park boundary just a few miles south of Kings Canyon valley. These peaks are excellent viewpoints, and there is already a Forest Service road which goes practically all the way to them.

If the Park Service wishes to develop a viewpoint for motorized access, I suggest that they get together with the Forest Service and consider the best possible plan for the development of the Forest Service's Big Meadow area. Some inter-agency contact exists, but

the public interest would be better served if more planning were done on a regional basis. All too often the planning seems to stop at the boundary of the administering agency.

I have mentioned the desirability of better inter-agency planning in the Big Meadow area because it relates directly to the Wilderness proposal for Kings Canyon National Park. The point is that we feel there is a viable alternative to tramways inside the Park. I trust you will accept these comments in that light.

In closing, let me reiterate that we feel that Mr. Mathias and the Park Service have made what is basically a fine proposal. We do feel that there is still one major way in which it could be improved, and that is by extending wilderness protection to include the rim of the Kings Canyon valley.

Thank you.

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Testimony of
George W. Whitmore
Speaking for the Above Organizations
In Support of
H.R. 1771
To Add Mineral King to Sequoia National Park
Before the Subcommittee on Parks and Insular Affairs
House Interior Committee
27 October 1977

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is George Whitmore. I reside in Kingsburg, California. This places me in close proximity to Mineral King, and I have often visited it and its surrounding lands over the years. As an aside, I might note that I have done my share of downhill skiing in the past.

I am speaking for the California Wilderness Coalition and the Kern Plateau Association, as well as for myself. We share most of the views expressed by other supporters of this bill. But, in the hope of avoiding repetition of testimony, we will limit our remarks to a few of our most strongly felt concerns.

One of the greatest of these is the relationship between Mineral King and the wilderness lands which surround it. The California Wilderness Coalition strives to protect all wildlands in California, while the Kern Plateau Association is concerned mostly with the Kern and Little Kern River drainages. We are especially concerned about the fate of those lands which adjoin Mineral King in Sequoia National Park and the Little Kern River drainage of Sequoia National Forest. Development of the type proposed for Mineral King would inevitably impact not only the wildlands in Mineral King, but also the wilderness values which presently exist in the adjoining lands.

Another concern is that Mineral King's present status as an isolated fragment of National Forest land surrounded on three sides by National Park land is an anomaly which hampers rational land management planning. Local Forest Service representatives repeatedly have stated that their mandate is to develop their lands, including Mineral King, whereas the Park Service is required to preserve National Park lands. This misguided Forest Service thinking has resulted in the ridiculous situation presently before us, wherein the Forest Service is hell-bent on establishing a high-density recreational development in the midst of lands which are otherwise being protected in a relatively natural state. This is an anomaly which, we believe, most rational land managers would have long since recognized.

We are also gravely concerned over the prospect of the public being denied access to its own lands by the imposition of entrance and user fees so high as to

drive away citizens of modest means. The Mineral King EIS made clear what we had long suspected--that the Disney development would establish an economic barrier which would effectively keep out many people who presently use Mineral King, and the burden would be especially high for families with children.

We note that some supporters of the Forest Service proposal claim that they are for "equity" in access to public lands. We simply cannot buy the concept that the wealthy should be more equal than the rest of us, and we trust that Congress will not be misled by this fatuous argument.

These are our main concerns, and we also share the numerous concerns which will have been expressed by others who advocate addition of Mineral King to Sequoia National Park.

We believe that the only satisfactory resolution of the many problems created by Disney and the Forest Service is to add Mineral King to the National Park system. The Forest Service has long since abdicated its responsibility to manage Mineral King in the public interest, and it is clear that it is incapable of acknowledging that it made an error of judgment twelve years ago. We have clearly reached an impasse, and it is time for Congress to intervene.

We do not accept the concept of a "scaled-down" development as being the solution. The topography and climate of Mineral King are such that it would simply not be practicable to provide winter access unless the existing road were completely re-built. This would be such a costly undertaking that it could be justified only by having it lead to a major development. A modest development would prove to be economically infeasible, and expansion of the facility would be inevitable. Talk of a "scaled-down" development is misguided at best, and a subterfuge at worst. We trust that Congress will not be misled.

We should make it clear that we are not opposed to large-scale recreational developments as such. We do feel that they should be located and planned in accordance with sound land management planning concepts, and not simply be determined by the vagaries of boundary anomalies such as presently exist at Mineral King.

A large-scale recreational development does not belong in a small and fragile alpine valley such as Mineral King. Such a development would be more appropriate in a less fragile area, and should be located closer to the large population centers it is intended to serve. The latter point is especially important in view of our increasing energy problems, and the opportunity to ameliorate them by minimizing the need for travel.

As for the claimed need to provide more skiing opportunities for those who have chosen to live in Southern California, it should be pointed out that practicable alternative sites apparently exist. Slate Mountain (Peppermint) and Sherman Peak--both in Sequoia National Forest--have been mentioned repeatedly, but the only

Forest Service response has been to say that the Mineral King issue must be resolved before they will consider other possibilities.

This attitude seems irresponsible, and we suggest that one of the best ways to get additional ski facilities started in the planning process would be for Congress to break the deadlock created by the Forest Service's intransigence on Mineral King.

We urge Congress to settle this matter once and for all by adding Mineral King to Sequoia National Park. The Park Service could then get on with rational land management planning for the area as a whole, while the Forest Service would be able to put the whole Mineral King affair behind it and get on with the business of reviewing other potential ski sites. We believe that such an approach would be beneficial to the vast majority of the public, and urge its speedy adoption.

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