To: file
From: George Whitmore <geowhit1954@comcast.net>
Subject: MRP (George 4:12 pm, 4 Feb 05)
Cc:
Bcc:

I think there may be significant stuff buried in footnotes. As we learn more, my understanding of it could very well change, but here's the way I see it at the moment.

The NPS says they will, for the next five years, neither increase nor decrease existing overnight accommodations. (But campsites would increase by 128 over the Valley Plan figure.) Yet they also seem to imply that they will proceed with the construction/reconstruction at the Lodge and Curry. This is very interesting, because the planned reconstruction was to have resulted in a reduction in capacity, at least at Curry. (There would have been a slight increase at the Lodge.)

So if they rebuild, but don't change capacity from what it is now, they will be building more than the Valley Plan called for. If the VERP process indicates they should have fewer overnight accommodations, are they going to tear down some of the newly constructed buildings? It seems unlikely.

I'm not sure, but I think the Valley Plan amended the 1980 General Management Plan by shifting more to day use and away from overnight accomodations. There are fewer overnight accomodations now than called for in the 1980 GMP, and the VP called for still fewer.

Again, I'm not sure, but it looks to me like they are using the MRP process to reverse that and build more overnight accommodations than called for in the Valley Plan. The fact that the Valley Plan called for an across-the-board reduction in all overnight accomodations was one of the few things we liked about the Valley Plan, and it looks like now they are going back on that.

I hope I'm wrong. George

Sherri Maurin, 10:29 AM 2/24/05 , San Franciso report

To: Sherri Maurin
From: George Whitmore <geowhit1954@comcast.net>
Subject: San Franciso report
Cc: rmackie@sierratel.com, samcogswell@earthlink.net, bwendt@sierratel.com, marshpitman@sbcglobal.net, MarkR2121@aol.com, John Modin
Bcc:

Sherri,

Thank you so much for this detailed report!

I just got through the first part about the 18 months when the phone rang, and I have to go off to help a friend with a personal crisis.

However, the part I did read constitutes the smoking gun that could blow this whole plan out of the water....and right onto Gayle Norton's desk!

This is huge, of incredibly great significance.

My first reaction was to go out and start shouting it from the rooftops. But then I remembered Gayle Norton, and the individual who happens to be sitting in the Oval Office.

This is of immense importance, but what we should do with it is not self-evident. We need to discuss it among ourselves.

Unfortunately, I have to leave right now to help my friend. I am printing out your message so I can study it while I am away from the computer. For the time being, I suggest not spreading this around. In particular, do NOT go to the media with it. We MAY want to take it to Tollefson, but I would have to think about that for a while.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. You may have single-handedly saved Yosemite from the clutches of Delaware North, Sherri. More later. George

To: file
From: George Whitmore <geowhit1954@comcast.net>
Subject: DMRP oral comments (revised 9 pm, 11 Mar 05)
Cc:
Bcc:

NOTE: THERE ARE CHANGES FROM WHAT WAS ACTUALLY PRESENTED AT GROVELAND. Paragraphs where changes have been made are marked with ***.

My name is George Whitmore, and I reside in Fresno. I am Chair of the Sierra Club's Yosemite Committee. I am speaking on behalf of the Sierra Club.

The following comments have been prepared in written form to ensure that what I say comes across as intended.

Because we will be somewhat critical of the Draft Merced River Plan Revision, we want to make it abundantly clear that we are NOT attacking the individuals within Yosemite National Park, or the consultant entity, who were responsible for giving direction or who actually were involved in preparation of this Plan. That includes those from the Denver Park Service office with whom I have had interaction. Without exception, I find all of you to be likeable, open, and helpful, and I have the distinct impression that you are all well-intentioned and that you would like to see a high quality visitor experience made available, while providing a very high level of resource protection.

Those are goals that we share.

We believe that the direction which has resulted in a poor Plan has come from elsewhere, not the people with whom I have had the pleasure of talking.

The Draft Merced River Plan is a mass of contradictions, illogical statements, confusing and inconsistent jargon, and so-called "information" presented in such a way as to defy analysis. The document is internally inconsistent, rendering meaningless any public attempt to comment on content.

The extensive series of public meetings which the National Park Service has been conducting throughout California have made it abundantly clear that those who have attempted to read the document or understand the issues are totally confused. Even some in a sister land-management agency have said that the Plan is a "convoluted mess", and have asked, "How are we supposed to comment on it?" These are people who work for a living analysing EIS's.

DISCLOSURE of the intended action is at the very heart of the NEPA requirements under which this Plan/SEIS was produced.

The Plan/SEIS utterly fails that most basic requirement --- to let the public know what it is that the Park Service intends to do.

The present situation is so chaotic that the Park Service needs to continue taking comments to find out what the problems are, then issue a Revised Draft Plan or possibly a Supplement.

The Revised or Supplementary Draft then would require a NEW COMMENT PERIOD. Only then would the public be able to make comments that are relevant. In the absence of a new document and a new comment period, the final result probably would be subjected to further litigation.

A new draft, or supplement, and a new comment period, would be the only way that the Plan could be NEPA compliant. The present document simply doesn't cut the mustard.

*** Because a new Draft or Supplement would need substantial changes from the current Draft to make the Plan understandable, a new comment period would be necessary and critical. The present Draft requires a MAJOR overhaul if further litigation is to be avoided. Any minor tinkering that would avoid the need for a new comment period would NOT be adequate.

*** Should excessive impacts be identified by the VERP process, the Park Service's

preferred alternative does NOT describe any meaningful way of addressing those impacts other than directing people away from the impacted areas and into different areas of Yosemite Valley or the Park. This would transfer the impacts to new areas, not reduce or eliminate them. The methods required to keep visitors out of areas they had intended to visit, and move them into areas not of their choice, would in themselves adversely affect the quality of the visitor experience. In other words, there would be a huge impact on the visitor experience as well as on the natural resources. Yet we find little, if any, discussion of these impacts.

In fact, buried in the document is a statement to the effect that these draconian actions could be taken without any further environmental review. If you are going to cram people into a "one size fits all" straightjacket, micromanaging the visitor experience, and damaging the natural resources in the process, we believe it requires further review, AND PUBLIC COMMENT.

*** A revised document could avoid this unacceptable proposed management direction if it proposed a day use reservation system for vehicles. People could be assured of getting into the Park, and once in they could be free to enjoy the Park in a way that they would choose, rather than in a way that the Park Service would choose for them.

*** It is essential that a new document contain significant discussion of a day use reservation system for vehicles as a necessary management tool to deal with excessive impacts while preserving the quality of the visitor experience.

It is imperative that a Revised Draft or Supplement be issued, with a new public comment period. This would entail some delay, but the alternative would be further chaos, delay, and frustration.

Thank you for listening. 11 March 2005

To: Yosemite Committee
From: George Whitmore <geowhit1954@comcast.net>
Subject: Epiphany
Cc: Bridget Kerr, Joyce Eden, Bart Brown, Jeff McGraw
Bcc: Yosemite Committee bcc's

It is 3:00 a.m., and an epiphany has just come upon me as I awoke from a sound sleep.

I DO understand the DMRP. It is suddenly crystal clear.

There is nothing confusing about it at all.

The Park Service has absolutely no intention of addressing user capacity, and they have attempted to conceal their refusal by burying it in a mass of paper with numbers, jargon, illogical comparisons, and inconsistent statements.

All the while PURPORTING to address the issue of user capacity which was mandated by the Ninth Circuit.

The DMRP provides for "business as usual " while masquerading as a legitmate planning process.

The cynicism of those who have perpetrated this crime is beyond the pale.

I say "crime" because it is a fraud which they are attempting to commit for the purpose of enriching vested interests.

The criminals are at a higher level than the Superintendent. He is merely a pawn who is being forced to do that which he knows is wrong. His only alternative would be to take early retirement, as did his predecessor.

The Bush administration, with its rampant immorality and arrogance, has certainly set the stage for this travesty. Their direction has been very clear: Turn the peoples' temple over to the money changers.

I owe much to those who have made this epiphany possible. The past few weeks have been spent talking extensively and intensively with many people, and the pieces of the puzzle have suddenly come together. I am especially indebted to an NPS person who told me that I understood the Plan better than I thought I did. And to others who have related conversations they have had with those who understand the inner workings of the Park Service. Dear friends, all of you.

Including those who were at the meeting yesterday. Very intense and chaotic, and not conducive to getting a good night's sleep. But dear friends, all.

I strongly feel that we now have an understanding. The big question is what do we do about it.

As to VERP addressing user capacity, that is a crock. The NPS has always:

(1) Observed, (2) decided there is a problem, and (3) addressed the problem that is observed.

To carry on endlessly about formalizing this through some bureaucratic rigamarole merely creates a smokescreen behind which they can continue to spread asphalt and pour concrete. VERP provides information, but addressing user capacity requires action. Action is what is totally lacking in the DMRP.

If there is a problem, deal with it. Don't carry on endlessly with reams of paper, all the while sprinkling holy water on the money changers.

OK, I wouldn't say that publicly. Only to dear friends. George

P. O. Box 5572
Fresno, CA 93755

22 March 2005

Superintendent, Yosemite National Park
Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite, CA 95389

Sir:

The following comments are submitted by me personally, and should not be confused with remarks which I will be submitting on behalf of an organization.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS. I commend the effort put forward so far by you and your staff and recognize this is a huge undertaking. This is an extremely important planning document, the implementation of which will have long-term impacts on all areas of the Merced River corridor managed by the NPS, but particularly on Yosemite Valley. My comments focus on the user capacity program portions of the DEIS.

General Comment: I found the Draft SEIS to be unwieldy and difficult to understand. It would be good to do a thorough edit on the document to reduce volume, redundancy, internal inconsistencies, and unclear or unnecessary statements (for an example, please see my Comment #4 below). I have heard many people say they cannot comment on Yosemite National Park's planning documents because they are too large and incomprehensible. This is not in the best interest of full disclosure or cooperative planning. Although I am very interested in this issue, I did not have time to read the entire document. I focused on Alternative 2, and did not really have a lot of time to devote to Alternatives 3 and 4

Comment #1. I think the range of alternatives proposed in the Draft SEIS is not adequate to comply with the intent of NEPA. It appears that three of the four alternatives cannot be implemented as presented.

Alternative 1 (No Action) cannot be adopted due to the findings of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. I do not believe it is feasible to implement either Alternative 3 or Alternative 4 because the NPS does not have the capability to monitor and control visitor use of the river corridor on a segment by segment basis, or on a management zone basis. Thus, Alternative 3 and Alternative 4 are not viable alternatives. In fact, the Draft SEIS itself says monitoring of visitor use of the river corridor on a segment by segment basis, or on a management zone basis is infeasible. For Alternative 3, the SEIS (page II-61 para 2) states: "For this reason, it is infeasible to try to manage visitor levels strictly within the river segments separately from the larger developed areas." Regarding Alternative 4, the Draft SEIS (page II-69 para 5) states: "…effective real-time monitoring and management

of visitor levels per management zone would be very difficult and would require a substantial investment in infrastructure and personnel." These alternatives are not viable alternatives if they cannot be implemented. I strongly feel the NPS needs to develop a broader range of feasible alternatives for analysis in the SEIS.

Comment #2. The NPS should fully analyze the alternative that was "considered but dismissed from further analysis" that proposed a corridor-wide daily quota with VERP (p. II-74).

It is readily apparent that portions of the Merced River corridor within Yosemite, particularly in Yosemite Valley, are suffering the effects of too much visitor use. One way to stop or reverse these effects is to limit the numbers of people in the corridor on a daily basis through a daily quota, preferably in combination with a day-use reservation system. Clearly, a well-developed and scientifically based VERP program also is needed to ensure the daily quotas are set at a level that will not degrade ORVs. It is not valid simply to state that such an alternative "was not carried forward because there are similar alternatives that achieve the same effect with more environmental benefits." This reader is not convinced.

According to the NPS, the wilderness user capacity program has been extremely well-supported by both park management and wilderness users, and is often held up as an example of science-based and defensible management practices in wilderness management. Why can't the NPS adopt a similar process for other developed areas of the park, including Yosemite Valley?

Comment #3. Page II-35 para 3 states "Current park policies and existing use levels are considered to be protective of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values."

I believe this is a subjective assumption that could lead to irreparable long-term harm to ORVs of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. It is an assumption that should be substantiated (or refuted) with data. For example, how do we know current levels of use of the Merced River corridor with all of the associated accoutrements needed to support those visitors (e.g., utility lines, roads, structures, employee housing, school, day care center, etc.) are not harming aquatic invertebrates, or changing the hydrologic regimes of the Valley? If these ORVs are, in fact, being harmed, perhaps the focus of the NPS should be to reduce visitation, and concurrently reduce the size and scale of the infrastructure needed to support those visitors.

Comment #4. The DEIS is confusing relative to the duration of "interim limits." The quotes below illustrate this issue.

- The interim facility limits proposed *will remain in place until VERP is fully implemented.* II-31 para 2

- These interim limits *would remain in place for up to 5 years or until the National Park Service is confident that the VERP management program is providing sound guidance on appropriate visitor use levels within the river corridor.* II-31 para 4

- *Until the VERP management program is fully operational*, interim user limits expressed as facility constraints and bus quotas would be put in place to ensure protection of the river's Outstandingly Remarkable Values. II-32 para 1

- These facility limits would be put in place *while the VERP program was being refined and implemented, a process which could take up to 5 years.* II-33 para 1

- The interim facility limits established in Alternative 2 *would remain in place for up to 5 years, until the VERP program is refined and provides robust data on desired conditions.* II-37 para 1

What does it mean for VERP to be fully implemented, or fully operational, or refined and implemented, or robust? Won't VERP be implemented indefinitely? This should be clarified.

Comment #5. The DEIS claims there are 2,097 day use parking spaces in Yosemite Valley. The NPS should provide maps of all parking places considered in this total in the Draft SEIS.

Based on personal observation, many NPS-sanctioned day use parking places have significant adverse impacts on ORVs – affecting both natural resources and visitor experience. An example is the area where cars are parked on busy weekends on top of the bike path between the Sentinel Bridge shuttle bus stop and the 3-way stop sign at Sentinel Drive and Northside Drive intersection. Details should be provided, even in this "interim" period, on what constitutes a sound parking space.

Comment #6 How did the NPS select the appropriate "interim limits" for commercial buses?

The current number of bus parking spaces in Yosemite Valley (38) is used to manage 92 commercial or transit buses per day. Data from commercial bus use from August 1996, and transit bus use from August 2000 were used to determine the maximum allowable. Why were these months selected?

Comment #7. Appendix D (User Capacity Alternative Assumptions) must be made more accessible to the reader.

The information in Appendix D is critical to an understanding of the proposed alternatives. The Appendix should be expanded and brought forward into the text of the SEIS. Tables D-1, D-2, D-4, and D-5 should all be in the same format, and should be set up alongside one another for easy comparison.

Table D-1 presents Estimated Daily Visitor Capacity information. Footnote f in this table is confusing. Is this truly the AVERAGE occupancy of lodging and campsites or the MAXIMUM POSSIBLE? I suspect the latter. The text that is footnoted should not exceed the size of the table. Suggest putting important footnoted information in separate tables to increase readability.

Table D-2 footnote d should be clarified. What happens during this 18 month transition period? Will the stated maximum number of lodging units (1,262) and therefore the stated maximum number of overnight visitors is (4,213) be exceeded as a result of this "transition" period? These stated maximum levels should never be exceeded.

Comment #8 Table II-7, page II-36 lists Current Capacity Levels for Yosemite Valley with a segment total of 20,569.

What is the source of this number? How was it derived? This information is not contained in Appendix D as stated.

Comment #9 It makes no sense to increase the number of campsites during the "interim period," or to set the maximum annual cap at 5.3 million visitors (as was proposed in Alts. 3 and 4), which is much larger than the park has ever experienced.

Any development in Yosemite Valley that increases the number of overnight or day visitors above current levels should be put on hold until the VERP process is fully operational and the NPS knows that the levels of use they are prescribing are not going to result in unacceptable impacts to ORVs.

Any increase over present levels of use undermines the credibility of the entire VERP program. Suppose that five years from now the VERP program revealed that present levels of use violated VERP standards and threatened the integrity of ORVs. Would the NPS then remove the new facilities or campsites that are already in place? How can we assume that ORVs will not be harmed by an increase in camping before we have any data to support such a claim?

Comment #10 I do not believe the user capacity program (VERP) presented in the Draft SEIS will ensure the protection and enhancement of the river's Outstandingly Remarkable Values.

Chapter 1, page 8 of the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS states "This plan revision will amend the existing Merced River Plan (and General Management Plan) by defining a user capacity program for the Merced River corridor that will be implemented to ensure the protection and enhancement of the river's Outstandingly Remarkable Values." The foundation of the user capacity program proposed in the Draft SEIS is a Visitor Experience and Resource Protection VERP program. The proposed VERP program will not ensure the protection and enhancement of the river's Outstandingly Remarkable Values. Some of the inadequacies of the proposed program are illustrated below.

- The *Number of Social Trails* indicator does not (as the Draft SEIS states) reflect the health of sensitive vegetation. It reflects only the extent (area) of trampled or pulverized vegetation (that may or may not be native vegetation), or bare soil within a small area. Further, the standard for this indicator is based on a subjective determination that the number and length of such trails as they existed in 2004 was acceptable. Why is 2004 used as the baseline for social trails? By what standards was the number and length of social trails existing in 2004 deemed "acceptable?" Perhaps there already were too many trails that were too long in 2004. Why is this indicator not consistent across zones? For some it is number of social trails, for others it is length of social trails. More work should be done to establish the number and length of trails that truly is acceptable, and this should be based on both resource values and aesthetics.

- The *Wildlife Exposures to Human Food* indicator does not reflect health of wildlife resources (as the Draft SEIS states), it only reflects numbers of a relatively small number of species that are exposed to, or eat human food. This is a good and important thing to measure, but it is misleading to state that it will reflect the health of wildlife resources. A range of wildlife species, such as aquatic invertebrates, should be monitored directly.

- The standards for *Riverbank Erosion* are based on a 2005 baseline. This assumes that the situation that existed in 2005 was acceptable and adequate to protect ORVs. Are there any data to support this assumption? The standards for this indicator should be subject to peer review by both governmental and non-governmental experts. *Standards developed to protect natural resources in Merced River ORVs in perpetuity must be grounded in science. If scientific data are not available for establishment of standards, studies to acquire such data must be pursued, and no increase in visitation should occur until the data indicate such an action would not harm ORVs .*

  How will the condition classes be determined? How will ecological impacts of riverbank erosion be quantified to ensure resources are protected? This is an example of where I feel technical peer-review is required.

  Has the detailed methodology been developed for long-term monitoring of erosion sites? If so, this information should be available to review?

- The standards for *Water Quality* are self-contradictory and confusing. What does anti-degradation mean? It is assumed to mean no degradation from present conditions, but later the standard says there is an "absolute minimum" related to state fecal coliform levels. Which is it? No degradation or the absolute minimum? Please clarify water quality standards and develop a peer-reviewed monitoring plan.

  How will the baseline conditions be determined? When and where will water quality be measured to establish the baseline? Conditions will be very different if

measured at Swinging Bridge in January, or May, or better yet, August, when the water can become stagnant. Perhaps it would be best to develop a standard based on upstream water quality (above Little Yosemite Valley). It is important to note that the "safe" levels of fecal coliform relate to human health, and will not necessarily protect other organisms (e.g., aquatic invertebrates). How does the NPS propose to ensure long-term viability of aquatic organisms?

Comment #11. The proposed indicators and standards are too limited to adequately protect Merced River ORVs. There are no proposed indicators and standards related to vegetation loss and alteration, wildlife health, air quality, etc.

The NPS must include indicators for vegetation and wildlife health. How do we know visitation is not adversely affecting birds, aquatic invertebrate, and native vegetation, or increasing nonnative species density or distribution? How do we know visitation is not adversely affecting air quality, natural soundscapes, dark night skies?

Comment #12. To protect Merced Wild and Scenic River ORVs, the NPS should consider taking the following steps:

1. initially adopt the existing GMP visitation numbers;
2. adjust those GMP numbers downward to conform with existing overnight facilities and legitimate, paved parking spaces – these numbers would constitute the interim limits;
3. establish a peer-reviewed set of desired future conditions for both resources and visitor experiences within the river corridor (independent of existing MRP zoning); and
4. develop a scientifically credible set of indicators and standards to determine if numbers of people and patterns of use are continuing to degrade resources and visitor experiences, or are allowing conditions to improve toward the desired set of conditions established in #3 above. The NPS's objective should be an overall improvement of conditions in the Merced River corridor, not maintaining the status quo or allowing further degradation to occur.

Comment #13. I believe if the number of visitors in Yosemite Valley is not limited, and the proposed VERP program is pursued, the result will be further ecological deterioration of Yosemite Valley and ongoing degradation of the quality of the visitor experience.

Comment #14. I suggest the numbers of people allowed in Yosemite Valley and other areas of the river corridor be based on the number of people the NPS can effectively manage.

At present, in the busy season, NPS employees are unable to control speeders, keep litter picked up, keep bathrooms clean, or make frequent informal contacts with visitors.

Comment #15. Any surveys conducted to develop standards for quality of visitor experience must include people who do not come to Yosemite Valley.

This must be done in order to factor in those people who are already displaced (AT ANY SEASON) because of actual or perceived crowding. Thus, if people don't come in summer but come at some other time, then summer is too crowded.

Comment #16. I think it is a mistake to assume that the NPS should encourage more visitation in the "shoulder seasons" of spring, fall and winter because that only creates a greater cumulative impact on resources. The crowding problem may be reduced when compared to summer, but the resources suffer even more.

Once again, I thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to the Draft SEIS for the Merced River.

Sincerely,

George W. Whitmore

To: Jennifer T. Nersesian
From: George Whitmore <geowhit1954@comcast.net>
Subject: Questions/comments on hazard tree removal
Cc:
Bcc: Yosemite Committee, Yosemite Committee bcc's, Yosemite Committee cc's, Joyce Eden, Bart Brown, Dick Kunstman, Laura Whitehouse, Carl Zichella, Sierra Nevada Ecoregion T.F.

Jen, here are some questions/comments on the hazard tree removal operation. We also concur with the issues raised by John Buckley.

Some of the words below may appear to be somewhat direct, but I thought it would be desirable to be up front with our concerns rather than letting it come out gradually.

Thank you for having requested this. I appreciate the fact that you are taking the lead in following through.

We will want to be meeting with Mike Tollefson on this subject. It would be very helpful if that could be arranged prior to the 1st of August, as I will be gone for the first three weeks of August. I realize you are not Mike's appointments secretary, but you are in a position to figure out when would be a good time. Could I prevail upon you to follow up on that, too, along with everything else you do?

Thank you, Jen. George

COMMENTS WHICH HELP TO EXPLAIN THE REASONS FOR THE DETAILED QUESTIONS WHICH FOLLOW.

These comments are based on observations made during May, June, and early July of 2005 along the Wawona Road between the South Entrance and Bishop Creek in Yosemite National Park. At the time, the thinning operation which results in the stacked burning piles with paper caps had not been extended south of Bishop Creek. Apparently around the 1st of July the thinning operation resumed, starting at Bishop Creek and extending south.

None of our observation or comments pertain to the thinning operation. All of our observation and comments refer to what is apparently supposed to be a hazard tree removal operation, but which has all the hallmarks of a conventional commercial logging operation.

The vast bulk of what we observed appeared to have absolutely nothing to to with removal of hazardous trees, but was oriented almost exclusively toward the removal of sound, non-hazardous trees. Since the boles of the trees were missing, we can only assume that they were included in the loads of logs we have seen being trucked out of the Park.

What was especially striking was the practice of what might be called "group selection" cutting, wherein six to eight vigourous young trees were cut and removed from a very small area, leaving a mini-clearcut. This has everything to do with the practice of commercial forestry, nothing to do with national park management, and nothing to do with hazard tree removal.

We also noted removal of the lesser of two competing trunks coming out of a common base. (The removed trunk had been leaning AWAY from the road.) This is commercial forestry, not national park management.

We noted the cutting (it was not removed) of a black oak. In attempting to determine why it had been cut, we noted that it had had a broken top. The cutting of non-commercial species, and trees with broken tops, is straight out of the commercial forestry handbook. It has nothing to do with national park management.

(We could find nothing in the 1993 Guidelines which suggest that a missing top is a reason to remove a tree. For those who believe a missing top means the tree is about to fall over, we suggest a review of the history of the well known tree at the base of Vernal Fall. That tree lived for many years with the entire top half missing, died quite recently, and is still standing.)

The particular black oak mentioned above had been felled in such a way that it grievously damaged an adjoining black oak, splitting it and laying it horizontal to the ground.

In one case of group selection cutting, the operator had created a very convenient

bypass, thus enabling vehicles to drive around a chain and continue on what was supposed to be a closed road. The sole focus had been to cut and remove the group of trees, with no regard to any other consideration.

Numerous recently cut stumps 18 to 36 inches in diameter were found where there is essentially no visitor activity. Some of these trees had been so vigorous that the stumps were still bleeding.

Much of the cutting had resulted in large amounts of slash left behind, thereby creating severe fuel loading. Again, the name of the game was to export logs to the mill, with no regard to any other consideration.

While countless vigorous young trees in areas not used by the public had been removed, some clearly hazardous situations were allowed to remain. E.g. A mature black oak with large dead limbs extending over the roadway.

In one case, a tree of perhaps 18 inch diameter had been notched, back-cut almost all the way through, and was left standing because it wanted to fall in the direction opposite that intended. Anyone who might happen to walk into that particular area would be at severe risk.

Evidence was found that these types of abuses have been occuring over a long period of time. Just because the Park may have been mismanaged in the past is no reason to let the abuse continue.

We have some photographs already, and are collecting more. Since they require explanation, perhaps they would be most useful during a meeting.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE:

Is the hazard tree removal program under the Maintenance Division?

If so, why?

If not, where is it in the Park's organizational structure?

Who is in charge of the hazard tree removal operation?

What is the person's title?

Where is the fuel reduction thinning operation in the Park's organizational structure?

Who is in charge of the fuel reduction thinning operation?

What is the person's title?

We have been told that the hazard tree removal operation and the fuel reduction thinning operation have been combined. Is this correct? (From our observations on the ground, these appear to be two totally distinct operations run by different crews, with different standards of supervision.)

Does the tree-removal staff have any interaction with resource oriented staff?

Or does the tree removal staff have absolute authority to do whatever they wish without regard to any other considerations?

On-site inspection suggests that there is no oversight of the tree-removal operation. Why is there no internal review process to ensure that the program is being conducted in an acceptable manner?

Why is there no on-the-ground supervision to ensure that the hazard tree removal guidelines are followed?

HAZARD TREE REMOVAL GUIDELINES:

Have the 1993 Regional Guidelines for Hazard Tree Removal been updated?

Is there a Yosemite supplement to the Regional Guidelines?

Are trees selected for hazard removal marked in advance?

Who marks them?

Or are they selected on the site and then immediately cut?

If so, who makes the decisions as to which trees are cut?

RECORD KEEPING:

Are records kept as to how many trees are removed from the Park during each operation, either by number of trees or volume?

Are there any records as to:

1. The locations of the removed trees,

2. The diameter,

3. The species,

4. The condition,

5. The reason(s) for removal of specific trees?

Can these records be compared on a year-to-year basis?

Are these records available to the public?

TERMS OF CONTRACTS:

To the extent that non-Park personnel are used, presumably there is a contractual agreement. Are these contracts available to the public?

Under what authority are the contracts entered into?

Is there a competitive bidding process?

If not, how are the contractors selected?

Does the Park Service pay the contractors, or is it the other way around, with the contractors paying the Park Service?

If the latter, where does the money received by the NPS end up?

Is the contractor supposed to clean up the excessive fuels generated by removal of the boles?

If not, then how is this problem (slash/fuels) supposed to be addressed?

If the contractor is being allowed to remove sound trees in order to pay for the removal of other trees, under what authority is this being done?

VISTA CLEARANCE:

Although it is not directly related to the hazard tree or thinning operations, we are curious why there seems to be zero interest within the Yosemite administration in maintaining the views formerly available from many roadside points. Is anyone in charge of evaluating vista clearance, and doing anything about it? There seems to be an obsession with removing trees which have commercial value, but no interest whatsoever in maintaining the world-famous views which provided the basis for establishment of the Park.

To: Jennifer T. Nersesian
From: George Whitmore <geowhit1954@comcast.net>
Subject: Additional questions/comments on hazard tree removal
Cc:
Bcc: Yosemite Committee, Yosemite Committee bcc's, Yosemite Committee cc's, Joyce Eden, Bart Brown, Dick Kunstman, Laura Whitehouse, Carl Zichella, Sierra Nevada Ecoregion T.F.

Hi Jen,

Thanks for the phone call. It's good to hear from you.

Here are a couple additional comments, followed by a few more more questions.

COMMENTS:

Number 1.

As I have driven the Wawona Road repeatedly over many years, I have always been impressed by the views of large specimen trees next to the road. It used to be different from what one sees along the road in a National Forest. But I have come to realize that I just don't see as many of those trees as I did in the past. It is gradually beginning to resemble something more typical of what one sees in a National Forest.

This was impressed upon me as I hiked the Pohono Trail yesterday. There are large numbers of majestic huge trees of various species, and I got to realizing that there probably were areas along the road that used to look like this. But now you have to go on a hike to see it.

Now I have a good idea what has happened to those specimen trees that used to be along the road, and I realize what a loss this has been for the quality of the visitor experience. One should be able to see such trees from the road, and not be forced to go on a long hike to see them.

Number 2.

The other comment is that John Modin was on the Tioga Road yesterday, and reports that the logging damage is far worse even than along Wawona Road. Particularly in the Gin Flat area. Huge numbers of stumps are plainly visible from the road.

In one area, I think down the Tamarack Flat road, he noted a very large pine which had been felled by natural forces. Because of the very high value of the log at the mill, a logging crew had come in and cut the trunk into a log ready to be loaded and hauled away. John saw no evidence of any other recent logging activity in that area.

QUESTIONS:

---To take the last comment first, the question is what justification is there for removing the (commercially valuable) bole of a tree which has fallen naturally?

---Why has there been no NEPA review of the hazard tree removal operation? What is going on clearly exceeds the bounds of what should be permitted under a categorical exclusion. So much damage is occurring that mitigation is needed, and a NEPA process would bring that into play.

---Who is paying to clean up the slash/debris left by the hazard tree removal operation? Normally the logging contractor would be required to clean up the slash. But what appears to be happening is that the thinning crews are gathering the logging slash into burning piles, even though the thinning crews did not generate that slash. If the taxpayers are funding the thinning operation, does that mean the taxpayers are paying to clean up the mess left by the logging contractors?

I'm sorry we didn't get the questions to you all at one time, but some of this arose from what we observed just yesterday.

Thank you so much, Jen, for seeing to it that this issue is being addressed.

George

To: Niki Nicholas
From: George Whitmore <geowhit1954@comcast.net>
Subject: Additional questions/hazard tree removal
Cc:
Bcc:

Hello Niki,

It was good to see you at the Open House.

On the issue of hazard tree removal, there are two additional points that I think have not been raised previously.

FIRST POINT (lack of natural appearance):

One feature common to all the areas we have checked was human-caused unsightliness. Natural processes tend not to be neat and tidy, but at least the result looks natural, because it is. The scarring and ugliness of the sites we inspected was obviously of human origin. Little attempt is being made to conceal the human intervention, or to make it appear natural in origin.

My personal opinion is that one of the biggest objections to what we saw is that the Park Service is allowing the visitor to perceive the Park as being a place where people manipulate and manage the forest. The visitor will see that natural processes are not are not being allowed to prevail, and will assume that human intervention is required.

I submit that this is not an acceptable message to be sending the visitor. How can the public be expected to agree with the 1980 General Management Plan, which says "allow natural processes to prevail", when the Park Service's actions indicate otherwise?

SECOND POINT (inconsistency with Fire Management Plan):

A few years ago many people were very upset over a Draft Fire Management Plan that was put out for review. It proposed to cut huge numbers of trees, and to send them to the mills. We felt that the management of the forest would be "kept honest", so to speak, if the trees were not looked upon as having a commodity value. And the surest way of achieving that would be not to export them from the Park, thereby breaking the linkage of trees and money.

In fact, this concern was addressed in the Final Fire Management Plan. It calls for various alternative uses for felled trees, including leaving them where they fall to fill the role of downed trees in a natural ecoysystem. They would be exported from the Park only as a last resort.

But with the hazard tree program, the export of logs to the mills appears to be a very high priority, with practically everything that is cut being exported.

What we had successfully argued against in the Fire Management Plan is now occurring under a different program. And since it is being done on a categorical exclusion, there is no opportunity for the public to voice their concern.

I don't know whether a CE might have made sense for this program at one time, but it no longer does. The impact of the program is so great that an EA, at the very least, is called for. (The Fire Management Plan was done with an EIS and extensive public involvement.)

Thank you for trying to address these additional concerns in the "white paper" you are working on.

George

kerr@cwia.com

From: George Whitmore [geowhit1954@comcast.net]
Sent: Thursday, October 27, 2005 1:35 PM
To: Bridget Kerr
Subject: Written testimony 27 Mar 01

Hello Yosemite Committee + Mike McCloskey, Joe Fontaine, Alan Carlton, Barb Boyle, Melanie Griffin, Dan Lavery, Carl Pope, Bruce Hamilton, & Carl Zichella---

Below is the final text of our written testimony as delivered to the Subcommittee staff this afternoon. (Dan Lavery converted it into a word processing format before delivering the 75 copies to the Subcommittee, so the physical appearance is vastly improved over what you see below.) Dan also made numerous changes in the text which I requested after sending him the first draft this morning. What you see below may look familiar, but it is substantially different from what you have seen previously. Imperfect as it may be, THIS IS NOW THE FINAL VERSION. To avoid confusion, please delete any earlier versions which you may have.

Several people managed to get suggested changes to me in time for me to consider them; I incorporated most of the suggestions. Some of them were of crucial importance, and I thank you all. Some ideas came in too late for me to fold them in; Dan was working on it right up to the last moment, which I greatly appreciate.

Starting with the call from Melanie just a few days ago saying we had been invited to testify, this has been a real roller coaster ride. Especially Barb Boyle, but also Melanie, and finally Dan, as well as others in the Washington office, have all been of immense help in helping to put it all together (including figuring out how to pay for it!). I am reminded once again of the tremendous effectiveness of the Sierra Club's unique staff/volunteer way of operating. (For those who were not in on the earlier exchanges, I learned just yesterday afternoon that the testimony had to be submitted in hard copy in less than 24 hours, so we were really scrambling.)

Thank you one and all for helping to make it happen! I will be leaving Sunday morning, and returning Wednesday evening, so do the best you can with the inevitable media contacts (refer them to Barb Boyle [916] 557-1100 ext 105 if at all possible; Barb has done a good job of figuring out the nuances of our thinking). I will probably have a cell phone with me (559) 779-8625, and will be staying at the Embassy Inn (202) 234-7800. Love you all!! George.

To: George Whitmore <geowhit@qnis.net>
>Cc: bboyle@mcsweb1.com, Melanie.Griffin@sierraclub.org
>From: Daniel.Lavery@sierraclub.org
>Date: Thu, 22 Mar 2001 17:25:22 -0500
>X-MIMETrack: Serialize by Router on Jenkins/Sierraclub(Release 5.0.5
|September 22, 2000) at
> 03/22/2001 05:25:28 PM
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>
>Testimony of
>George W. Whitmore
>Chairman of the Sierra Club's Yosemite Committee
>before the
>Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands
>Committee on Resources
>U.S. House of Representatives
>
>Oversight hearing on the Yosemite Valley Plan
>
>March 27, 2001
>

>
>We offer our reactions to the final Yosemite Valley Plan.
>
>We recognize that changes were made in the final Valley Plan in
>response to comments that we and many others made. We are particularly
>pleased that the Park Service recognizes that "restoration of highly
>valued natural resources is a priority, especially along the length of
>the Merced River." We are glad to see there is now essentially no net
>increase in number of accommodations at Yosemite Lodge. And we welcome
>the decision not to move forward with the idea of constructing a new
>parking facility at Taft Toe.
>
>ASSUMPTIONS
>
>However, we continue to question many of the assumptions that underlie
>this Plan.
>
>Because too many sites have already been degraded, we do not believe it
>is wise to shift development to new areas (even if the overall
>footprint were to be reduced). The Plan does not confine development
>to existing sites.
>
>Moreover, the Plan is far from clear in limiting the factors that
>impose stress upon the Valley's environment. These stresses include
>vehicles, emissions, roads, parking places, facilities, and unlimited
>visitors. While it would limit the space for automobiles, it would
>leave open growth in bus traffic, particularly tour and YARTS busses,
>and satellite parking in other areas of the Park. And after casting
>doubt on the validity of the 1980 General Management Plan's (GMP)
>visitor limit, this plan would look to a future Visitor Experience and
>Resource Protection (VERP) process to define new parameters, which
>might, or might not, be more effective in protecting the visitor
>experience and natural resources.
>
>We feel it is a serious mistake to have eliminated the 1980 GMP's
>approach to the ever-increasing demand for access to Yosemite Valley
>without having some other mechanism in place to deal with it. Unless
>the problems created by infinite stress on a finite resource are
>resolved, the Organic Act's mandate for enjoyment by the public while
>leaving the resources unimpaired will be violated.
>
>And the plan for restoration in the Valley is far from clear. The Plan
>does not enable one to see what the aims are for each parcel to be
>restored, nor to what standards these areas would be restored, nor how
>fragmentation would be overcome. Furthermore, it appears that much of
>this restoration should move forward regardless of whether other parts
>of the Plan are ever implemented.
>
>Finally, we are disappointed that this plan was developed in such
>haste, before it was clear that a legally compliant plan for the
>management of the Merced Wild and Scenic River was in place. The River
>Plan, which should stand as the foundation for all planning in the
>Valley, is still under litigation. Questions still exist as to whether
>adequate planning has been done to identify, enhance and protect
>Outstandingly Remarkable Values
>(ORVs) for the river. And the Valley Plan seems to confound these ORV
>values with Highly Valued Resources, which seem to stand in their place. We
>strongly recommend that the Park Service recognize the possible need to
>make relevant changes in the Valley Plan if court decisions require
>revisions of the River Plan or a new River Plan.
>
>CHANGES FROM THE DRAFT
>
>However, we do note changes, some of them for the better, that were
>made in developing the final Plan. We are glad to see that, overall,

look this up

>there will be twenty fewer lodging units than in the draft Plan, and
>the number at Yosemite Lodge would go down by 135 (though that would
>still constitute six more than are there now). And we welcome the
>effort to retain more low-cost units at Curry Village and Housekeeping.
>
>We also note, however, that some elements in the final Plan are less
>satisfactory than in the draft. More bus trips would be expected each
>day during peak periods (285 instead of 231), while the saving in
>energy use would be less (37% instead of 52%). And more employee beds
>would remain in the Valley (723 in contrast to 683).
>
>VALUABLE GOALS
>
>But we do recognize that the Plan would be designed to achieve some
>very important goals compared to the existing situation:
>
>--A reduction of nearly 300 overnight lodging units (with 164 to be
>removed from the flood plain); --A reduction of 554 employee beds in
>the Valley; --And a net gain of 71 acres that would be restored in the
>Valley (though we regret the loss of 75 acres of undeveloped land in
>the process.)
>
>We applaud plans to remove unnecessary developments and facilities,
>including:
>
>--The Cascades Diversion Dam;
>--Rip rap along the banks of the Merced River;
>--The village garage;
>--The concessionaire headquarters; and
>--The tennis courts at the Ahwanhee Hotel.
>
>PROBLEMS OF PARTICULAR CONCERN
>
>But, nonetheless, we see some problems in the Plan that still need to
>be addressed in a satisfactory manner.
>
>(1) DIESEL BUSSES
>
>While we welcome the pledge to use "the best available fuel and
>propulsion system technology to minimize noise and air pollutant
>emissions," additional busses should not be added until satisfactory
>technology which will reduce air and noise pollution is in hand and
>will be used for existing and any new busses. We recommend immediate
>replacement of existing shuttle buses with new buses with much lower
>emissions. We note in Table 4-31 (p. 4.2-123) that if diesel fuel is
>used that NOX emissions in 2015 would be worse with the shuttle bus
>system to remote sites than under the "No Change" alternative. NOx
>emissions would increase by 32%.
>
>We cannot agree with any change that would increase, rather than
>decrease emissions and produce worse air quality or move impacts to new
>or expanded areas. The discussion in the EIS of air quality is
>conspicuously silent on the question of whether air quality standards
>would be met with this increase in NOx emissions. Diesel fuels are
>also high in sulfur content. Both NOx are precursors of ozone.
>Exceedances of air quality standards for ozone have occurred in recent
>years in Yosemite Valley. Moreover, diesel fuel emissions contain
>deadly carcinogens as well as dangerous small particulates, and few
>diesel engines are operated with any serious emission control systems.
>Unlike cars, which have gotten cleaner, diesel busses have not.
>
>We continue to urge that busses bringing visitors into the Valley need
>to use clean fuel technologies. Fuel cells or propane seem to be the
>most promising technologies along this line (see table 4-31). The door
>needs to be closed on the growing number of busses using dirty fuels,

why say this is valuable !!?? How?

when is this coming out?

>rather than be opened. We believe that there should be a moratorium on
>the growing number of tour and YARTS busses, and their arrivals need to
>be scheduled at appropriate intervals.
>
>And busses coming into the Valley need to be less noisy. Some of them
>now produce noise at 16 times the natural sound level (for those
>standing within 50 feet). Moreover, the noise they produce can be
>heard within nearby wilderness areas of the park (on valley cliffs and
>on the rim).
>
>Finally, such busses need to be smaller so that they fit within the
>design parameters of the existing road system. Otherwise, the growing
>number of such busses will exert constant pressures to build larger and
>larger roads, to the detriment of park values and visitor experience.
>
>(2) UNCONTROLLED GROWTH.
>
>As indicated earlier, the Plan fails to come to grips satisfactorily
>with the growth in the factors that stress the environment of Yosemite
>Valley. Limits are addressed only indirectly, with the question
>deferred for up to five years while the VERP process is pursued, with
>no conclusion being promised even then.
>
>This is particularly so with respect to growth in bus traffic. Busses
>can bring far more visitors to the Valley than can cars. Total
>visitation via car is more easily limited by congestion and limited
>parking space. But if busses displace cars, the potential number of
>visitors is far greater. They can suddenly produce crowds that
>overwhelm special places. And as their numbers increase, so also will
>the pressures for more accommodations, facilities, and infrastructure.
>While we suspect that the carrying capacity of Yosemite Valley is
>likely currently exceeded only a few days during the year, without an
>analysis and setting of limits those days could increase rapidly over
>time.
>
>Once remote parking lots are built, it will be all too easy to expand
>them. New centers of development can all too easily sprawl out around
>these lots. Not enough research or planning has been done to determine
>whether sites can safely be developed at Hazel Green or Foresta. One
>rare plant and one plant of federal concern are found at Hazel Green,
>as well as habitat for the California Spotted Owl, which is under
>consideration for inclusion in the federal endangered species list.
>Even Badger Pass is problematic because of its inadequate sewage
>system.

* What about El Portal plans?

>
>We are quite concerned with construction of a bus depot with 16 bays
>being developed in the heart of Yosemite Valley. This does not fit in
>with the goal of reduction in impacts nor of increasing the quality of
>the visitor's experience of the natural values of Yosemite. The Plan
>assumes that the number of bus bays will de facto limit the number of
>busses arriving from out of the Valley. But pressures will grow from
>tour companies and outside commercial lodge owners to increase the
>number of such bus bays. Such bays might be taken from either the
>allocation for day use auto visitors, or from habitat.
>
>Once again, we urge the National Park Service to establish a moratorium
>on granting permits for any more tour busses or YARTS busses, and to
>establish limits on the number of busses entering the Valley, as well
>as for automobiles. Under the Plan, at peak periods a bus would be
>expected to arrive at the visitor center every 1.3 minutes. Busses
>would be arriving practically in convoys.
>
>These limits would be the necessary counterparts of limits on overnight
>lodging units, camp sites, parking spots, and employee housing. All of
>these sources of pressure need to be controlled simultaneously to

>prevent pressures from transferring themselves from one point to
>another. Busses can be part of the solution, but unless their numbers
>are tightly controlled, they will also come to be the problem.
>
>Work on satellite parking facilities should not go forward until limits
>have been established on bus traffic into Yosemite Valley, and even
>then only if siting problems have been resolved (in terms of limiting
>environmental impacts and containing sprawl at the sites).
>
>(3) SOUTHSIDE DRIVE AND OTHER ROADS
>
>We remain concerned about the plan to shift traffic entirely to
>Southside Drive. Closing Northside Drive to traffic will not produce
>any habitat gain, merely seasonal respite from noise. But it will
>result in habitat loss along Southside Drive as all traffic pressures
>focus on it. The EIS informs us that the park does intend to widen it,
>with "the extension of pavement over strips of habitat alongside the
>road" [p.4.2-54]. We understand that the plan is to improve it to the
>same level as accomplished in rebuilding the El Portal road, which was
>so controversial. Moreover, if the proposed traffic check station is
>built at El Capitan crossover, then even more habitat will be lost.
>
>Moreover, we do not agree with relocating Northside Drive along the
>south side of Yosemite Lodge (closer to the river), and building a new
>bridge across Yosemite Creek. Again, this will produce a needless loss
>of habitat, with little, if any gain in the visitor experience.
>
>We do not understand how this plan advances the restoration agenda.
>Very little is gained, while a lot is lost.
>
>(4) SEGMENT D
>
>We understand that attention will not be given to the issue of Segment
>D of the El Portal Road until the Cascades Diversion Dam has been
>removed, the river bed has stabilized, and until compliance with
>environmental laws has been pursued. (We ask that Cascade Dam be
>removed in an environmentally responsible manner, with appropriate
>scientific appraisals of the best manner in which to remove the dam
>completed first.)
>
>We do want to observe that, while widening of Segment D is not
>necessary, there may be a desire by the Park Service to engage in
>roadbed stabilization, intersection redesign, sewer repair, paving, or
>other types of construction activity. In such an event, compliance with
>environmental laws should be pursued in good faith, with an appraisal
>of the potential impacts of various alternative designs helping to
>guide the Park Service to the least harmful alternative. Because of
>obligations under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, that design should be aimed at keeping
construction out
>of the bed and off the banks of that river. The EIS admits that
>stabilization materials are now in the river channel "and interfere
>with the free-flowing condition of the river" [table 4-39, p. 4,2-167].
>
>We are troubled by the ambiguities of the Plan with regard to whether
>good faith compliance will be attempted. Many comments are made that
>suggest no more than pro forma compliance and a definite intent to
>re-construct regardless of what is found. The EIS actually states that
>the non-conforming material will "remain in the river channel after the
>road is constructed" [table 4-39, p. 4.2-167]. The Park Service seems
>to assume that study, and notice of intent to obstruct a wild river's
>free-flowing condition under Section 7 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers
>Act, will meet the requirements of the Act. But we assert that the
>administering agency has a positive duty to keep obstructions out of
>the bed of such rivers. We share hopes expressed in the plan that it
>will be found feasible "to design and construct the road in a manner

✓

☆ Wish this statement were stronger

☆ Wish this were stronger

>that would avoid direct and adverse impacts on the values for which the
>river was designated" [p. 4.2-175]. We hope that deficiencies in legal
>compliance will not continue to shadow whatever additional work on this
>road may be proposed.
>
>We note that all the above concerns would be vastly reduced if the Park
>Service would recognize that Segment D does not need to be widened.
>The combination of gradients and curves that were felt to be a problem
>on Segments A, B, and C do not exist on Segment D. The problem appears
>to be one of blind insistence on uniform standards as an end in itself.
>
>
>IN CONCLUSION
>
>It strikes us that the tasks ahead ought to be tackled in a certain
>order. At the outset, priority should be given to resolution of the
>court case regarding the Merced Wild and Scenic River plan and
>developing a legally compliant River Plan since that provides the basis
>for so much else. Next, we urge that a process be initiated to
>promulgate a moratorium on issuing any more licenses for tour busses
>entering the valley, and any other busses which would create additional
>air, noise, sprawling impacts, or runoff pollution.

They certainly haven't given priority to the resolution of the court case.

>
>Then various relatively non-controversial tasks ought to be pursued:
>downsizing the level of accommodations in the Valley, continuing to
>move non-essential facilities out, and increasing the pace of
>restoration work. At the same time, efforts should be made to clean up
>the emissions of existing busses that enter the valley through
>establishing a schedule for conversion to cleaner fuels. And upgrading
>and renovating the sewage system for the Valley would seem to be
>relatively non-controversial, especially if it diverts money from more
>harmful projects.

!!??

>
>Over the next few years, further efforts should be made to set limits
>on all of the sources of stress on the valley's environment. Limits
>should be adjusted based on containing and decreasing, not increasing,
>the existing stress on the Valley's environment after an analysis on
>the capacity of the valley to withstand various stresses. We are not
>entirely clear on whether the contemplated VERP process is everything
>that is needed, but we urge use of a pragmatic process that tests
>various levels of management to see whether desired improvements ensue,
>with adjustments to get needed results.
>
>Finally, we urge that any further consideration of satellite parking
>lots be placed on hold until clean, quiet, non-intrusive alternate
>transportation is in place, operational, has secured funding, and has
>proven to be successful. And, even then, it should be considered only
>if some mechanism is in place to limit ALL vehicular traffic, including
>busses of all kinds, based on the carrying capacity analysis. And that
>is assuming problem-free sites can be found.
>
>We look forward to working toward a process of better protecting the
>very special values of Yosemite Valley and the Merced River.

kerr@cwia.com

From: George Whitmore [geowhit1954@comcast.net]
Sent: Thursday, October 27, 2005 1:36 PM
To: Bridget Kerr
Subject: Oral testimony 27 Mar 01

Oral testimony (personal remarks deleted) 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.

.....

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

.....

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 BUSSES 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 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.

.....

kerr@cwia.com

From: George Whitmore [geowhit1954@comcast.net]
Sent: Thursday, October 27, 2005 1:37 PM
To: Bridget Kerr
Subject: Blended testimony 22 Apr 03

The following is a blending of the written and oral testimony. Although not a true record of what was said in either forum, this is an accurate record of the combined testimony and is provided in this form for ease of reading. It provides the most comprehensive account of the statements made to the Subcommittee.

Testimony of

George W. Whitmore
Chairman of the Sierra Club's Yosemite Committee
before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands Committee on Resources U. S. House of Representatives

Oversight hearing on implementation of the Yosemite Valley Plan

April 22, 2003

I. INTRODUCTION.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, for having invited us to testify here in Yosemite Valley, in the very heart of the crown jewel of the entire National Park System

From the very beginning we have found some things in the Valley Plan which we like, and some things which we believe are not desirable. Being human, we tend to focus on the negative, which you will find in our written testimony. But something we need to make clear is that we believe the Plan can be improved without throwing it out and starting over. Using the present plan as a starting point, we need to move on, evaluating individual actions on their merits. We need to implement the less controversial provisions first, leaving the more questionable ones for later consideration.

II. OVERVIEW of the Valley Plan and associated problems.

A. Too much is being done too quickly.

A chaotic situation has been created wherein so much is being attempted so quickly that it seems inevitable that one project will end up conflicting with another, or simply create more problems because other things should have been done first.

As an example, we cite the Lower Yosemite Fall project. Replacement parking for the tour busses ultimately is supposed to be created behind the Village area, but that project is not even being mentioned. In the meantime the tour busses will be shunted from one temporary site to another in the Lower Fall area because their previous parking is being removed. And, continuing a long tradition, more automobile parking is being removed without any improvement in the Valley shuttle bus service to facilitate a transition to less reliance on private autos.

B. Problems with public notification and input.

Adding to the chaos, the Park Service keeps asking for public input, but it is difficult for the public to be aware of what is happening.
So it's hardly surprising that they don't have enough information to comment in a

rational manner.

The Park Service has been conducting a series of Open Houses on their planning and projects. These offer an immense amount of information and are very useful. But they have almost all been during the week and during the day, so very few people would be able to attend them even if they were aware that the event was occurring. (There will be another one on Wednesday, the day after this hearing, from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.)

The Park Service relies excessively on their web site. Many people simply are not in the habit of getting their information this way. There needs to be more use of mailings to update the public on projects, planning, and comment deadlines.

C. Potential problems because of litigation.

Another reason for slowing the pace of development in the Valley is because litigation over the Merced River Plan still has not been resolved. It is currently before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the likely outcome is not at all clear. The River Plan is supposed to provide a foundation for the Valley Plan (as directed by a District Court judge), and projects now underway might have to be placed on hold if the Circuit Court should find even one problem with the River Plan. Particularly if that one problem happens to be the failure to "address user capacity" as called for by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. That issue alone could pull the underpinnings out from much of what is in the Valley Plan.

D. Simple measures would yield large results.

Much of the development called for by the Valley Plan would not be necessary if simple steps were taken to deal with congestion. There are a few problem road intersections which have been allowed to fester for decades. Why not redesign those intersections instead of turning the whole Valley upside down? Again, inadequate or confusing directional signs has been a problem for decades. Instead of providing better signs, the Park Service points to the confused drivers going around and around and says the solution is to get rid of the drivers and their cars.

E. Day-use reservation system: simple and effective.

And the most obvious solution of all to deal with the congestion which occurs a relatively small portion of the year would be to implement a day-use reservation system with a portion of the slots being available on a first-come-first-served basis. That way those who need to be assured of getting in on a specific date would have that assurance, while those who prefer a more spontaneous approach would probably still get in. Most of the time there is simply not a problem of too many people or too many cars.

There is much anecdotal evidence that many people don't come because they think it is crowded, or they won't be able to get in, or they won't be able to drive their car in. A reservation would ensure their getting in, and would steer them away from the times that do tend to be crowded. We suspect that a reasonably implemented day-use reservation system would actually reverse the continuing decline in annual visitation, as well as improve the quality of the visitor's experience.

We hasten to point out that the Valley Plan actually moved AWAY from the concept of a day-use reservation system. The idea was implied in the 1980 General Management Plan, but that seminal beginning was deleted by amendment through the Valley Plan process. It is one of the reasons that we are less than enthusiastic about the Valley Plan.

This action of the Valley Plan was actually in contravention of the Park Service's own regulations, which direct that every unit of the National Park System address the carrying capacity issue. This requirement was brought out in the General Accounting Office's November 15, 2002 report on transportation projects in the National Park System ("National Park
Service: Opportunities to Improve the Administration of the Alternative Transportation Program").

III. OTHER TRANSPORTATION ISSUES in addition to those mentioned above.

A. South Side Drive widening and North Side Drive closure.

While it is not on the table yet, we dread the day that the Park Service starts widening South Side Drive in anticipation of closing North Side Drive. At present, South Side Drive (as well as North Side Drive) provides two lanes of one-way traffic, making for the safe and pleasant movement of movement of different types of vehicles in one direction. Faster and slower...autos, busses and bicycles...all are accommodated smoothly.

In order to move traffic as well if it were two-way, as called for in the Valley Plan, four lanes would be required. Huge numbers of trees would have to be removed, and an ugly swath of asphalt inviting high speeds would take their place. The very idea is an abomination which never should have found its way onto paper. To keep it at two lanes (one in each direction) would result in gross traffic congestion, a high accident rate, and an unpleasant visitor experience.

And all this because someone thought it would be a good idea to close North Side Drive to traffic. JUST LEAVE THINGS ALONE! This is a prime example of failure to anticipate that "restoration" of North Side Drive would inevitably result in gross destruction of natural values and quality of the visitor experience on South Side Drive.

B. Realignment of North Side Drive in vicinity of Yosemite Lodge.

Again, why can't it just be left alone? Because the Lower Fall project has already committed the Park Service to another project which doesn't make sense. The four-way problem intersection could easily have been fixed without a massive realignment of North Side Drive, or moving overnight lodging closer to the rockfall zone. The entire Lower Fall, Lodge redevelopment, and North Side Drive realignment complex of projects is an example of planning run amuck. A massive urban redevelopment project, without regard for the fact that this is a national park.

C. Segment "D" of the El Portal road (Highway 120/140 junction to Pohono Bridge).

While it is not on the table yet, and the environmental reviews have not been started, it is quite clear that the Park Service has every intention of raising this segment of road to the same standard as the newly completed section. And this is in spite of the fact that the gradients and curves that provided the rationale for the other construction do not exist on Segment "D". Although portions of the road require stabilization because of flood damage, this could be accomplished without the massive impacts to the landscape that would be required if the road were reconstructed to the same standard as that already done. Rather than a blind insistence on uniform widths just for the sake of uniformity, we ask that the road not be rebuilt except as necessary for safety.

D. YARTS.

Because there continues to be misunderstanding as to the Sierra Club's attitude toward YARTS, we wish to make it clear that we support efforts, including those by organizations such as YARTS, to address regional transportation issues which affect Yosemite provided those efforts advance the goals of the 1980 General Management Plan. Those goals include reduction of traffic congestion, reduction of overcrowding, and promotion of visitor enjoyment.

We should also add that we strongly urge that transportation systems be implemented in such a way as to make progress toward cleaner air.

E. Tour (excursion) busses.

One of the biggest deficiencies in the Valley Plan is its failure to address the ever-increasing demand for access to the Valley by tour busses. The Plan makes much of the problems which are perceived to be caused by autos, with Draconian restrictions on their use. Yet it simply ignores the potentially far worse problem which will be caused by unlimited numbers of highly polluting and noisy tour busses.

It is our understanding that the Park Service has the authority to regulate tour bus access to the Park, and could require that the busses meet specific emission standards as

a condition of entry. If the Park Service does not have that authority, it seems that enabling legislation would be appropriate. If they already have the authority, it seems that they need to be encouraged to move in that direction.

And, to the extent that tour busses are carrying day-use visitors, our comments above regarding the wisdom of a day-use reservation system would apply to tour busses also.

F. Fuel cells.

We appreciate Mr. Radanovich's interest in seeking cleaner air for Yosemite, and we support a fuel cell project provided the goal is to make progress toward cleaner air in Yosemite. Apparently the project would not necessarily be for a bus; if it is for a stationary facility, we suggest Crane Flat because the electricity supplied there now is from a diesel generator.

G. Valley shuttle busses.

We would like to see the present fleet of old and polluting diesel busses replaced with vehicles which would match former Western Regional Director John Reynolds' vision of "the cleanest busses in the world", as articulated by him before this Subcommittee on March 27, 2001.

We are not convinced that a diesel powered electric hybrid bus would meet that vision. We would like to see a comparison of the alternatives, including propane powered electric hybrid, gasoline powered electric hybrid, and straight propane powered. If emissions data shows that diesel powered hybrids would be the cleanest and otherwise suitable, we could support that. But diesels have such a bad reputation that it seems hard to believe they would prove to be the cleanest just because they are put into a hybrid application. It seems as though the others would also be cleaner in the hybrid application, still leaving diesel at a relative disadvantage. Like I said, we would like an opportunity to review the comparative data, but have been having some difficulty getting the information.

H. Expansion of the Valley Shuttle Routes.

It would seem that this is one of the less controversial actions called for in the Valley Plan, and has the potential for reducing congestion and facilitating visitor access. Yet we see no indication that the Park Service has any plans for taking it up in the foreseeable future. We believe they have indicated that they would first have to build a series of stops complete with rest rooms, so they are looking upon it as a massive undertaking.

It seems self-evident that people drive all around the Valley now, stopping and getting out of their cars, at countless places where there are no rest rooms. We see no reason why public transportation could not be provided on the same basis.

I. Day-use parking.

As alluded to above, we find it highly inappropriate for the Park Service to continue to remove day-use parking without first providing suitable alternatives to the use of the private auto. Much of the congestion which actually occurs is the result of removal of parking, which has been ongoing for at least the last twenty years. We are usually in favor of removing asphalt, but not if it is simply going to get laid down somewhere else (as called for in the Valley Plan), and not if it results in degradation of the visitor experience (as called for in the Valley Plan)

IV. CAMPGROUNDS.

We support the decision in the 2000 Yosemite Valley Plan to restore the Upper and Lower River Campground sites to natural conditions. We also support the expansion of additional camping opportunities outside Yosemite Valley as suggested by recent Park studies. In particular, we support the 1980 General Management Plan provision that there be "in kind" replacement of camping opportunities to compensate for those which are removed from Yosemite Valley.

We note that there has been a continuing long-term process of reducing camping opportunities throughout the Park. It appears to be part of the pattern of phasing out lower-cost accommodations, and putting in higher cost accommodations, which has manifested itself so clearly in the Yosemite Valley Plan. Recognizing that it is difficult to find suitable locations for new camping opportunities in the Valley, we feel there is all the more reason to make every effort to find appropriate locations as near as possible outside the Valley.

Another way of compensating for the loss of campgrounds within the Valley would be to provide adequate shuttle service into the Valley from outlying campgrounds.

V. CONCLUSION.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to testify, and would be happy to take any questions you might have.