

Interpreting Resource Management On a Self-Guiding Trail

By Dave Clark

Several years ago, our supply of trail folders for one of the self-guided trails at Craters of the Moon National Monument ran out. The brochure describing the cinder cones and lava flows of the area known as Devil's Orchard could easily have been reprinted. However, since the current guide was somewhat less than inspirational, we began to look for other ways to interpret this volcanic landscape. The decision was made to use this 1/2 mile trail to discuss resource management activities at Craters of the Moon. Changing the interpretive presentation proved to be quite a challenge. Presenting a series of resource management concepts in a logical manner while still relating the material to what the visitor saw at each stop seemed a daunting task.

Brainstorming sessions, however, soon suggested there were many different possibilities for developing site specific material. Features such as the broken surface of a lava flow were chosen as the focus of a discussion about visitor impacts on the volcanic features. Rocks heavily encrusted with lichens provided a site to present information on how air pollution was slowly invading the monument and destroying the cells of these plants. And finally, a grove of dead limber pine became the setting for a segment on how, in the 1960s, park managers cut down or chemically killed more than 5,000 trees infected with dwarf mistletoe. This was an attempt to prevent the development of grotesque growths known as witches' brooms, which managers of this time believed were "unsightly".

At other locations along the trail, the National Park Service's mission, the process of resource management, and the role visitor input plays also were discussed. At one location, the visitor is asked, "How would you keep people from walking off of the trails?" At the same time, they are provided with a variety of possible solutions that have been tried in other areas of the monument. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate the complexity of resource problems, the conflict between use and preservation, and the difficulty in finding solutions that work. All of this information will be displayed on a set of eight wayside exhibits funded with a grant from the National Park Foundation. In addition, the Craters of the Moon National History Association will be publishing a guide that provides more in-depth information about resource management issues. This guide will be different from most trail folders because it will not be used by visitors while

they are walking the trail. Instead the guide will be provided at the end of the trail. In some ways, the success of our efforts will be measured by the number of visitors whose interest in resource management is piqued enough to want additional information.

Prior to the final development of this project, the monument's staff used a mock guide and set of waysides to test the visitor's reaction to our presentation. A focus group survey resulted in some interesting comments that revealed the following:

- Visitors are preconditioned to expect a traditional interpretive presentation on a "nature trail". Visitors are much more receptive when the reasons for a new approach are explained to them.
- A small group of visitors considered the presentation of this material the ultimate in "bureaucratic propaganda." Other visitors felt the interpretive message should be even more aggressive and hard hitting. The majority of visitors were very receptive to an interpretive presentation with a resource management theme.
- Parents had no problem with the material being presented at an adult level. They were willing, and in some cases delighted, to explain the information to their children. Many parents commented that this was a subject they particularly wanted their children to better understand.



Visitors pause to read about how park managers in the 1960s tried to stamp out as "unsightly" the grotesque growths of "witches broom" (dwarf mistletoe) that grew in the park. The efforts killed more than 5,000 trees, of which this dead limber pine and its companion growths are an example.

- When the area is a magnificent experience in itself, it is difficult to entice some visitors into interacting with displays or publications.
- Interpreters need to be extremely careful when working with concepts that are well-known to them, but less familiar to the visitor. Review by different readers and experts revealed that the information can be perceived in many different ways. Constant testing of the material and its presentation provided many surprises and improved our ability to communicate complicated ideas.

We know of several other self-guided trails in the National Parks that deal with specific resource issues (the recently built trail discussing the role of fire in Yellowstone is a good example). The trail at Devil's Orchard may be the first to attempt to define the entire process of resource management. During the summer of 1993, the production of a set of permanent wayside exhibits, the construction of a barrier free trail, and the publication of a guide titled, *Resource Management: The Science of Erasing Footprints*, will make our efforts to better interpret resource management a reality.

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