

Bandelier National Monument
Los Alamos, New Mexico 87544

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November 3, 1981

Memorandum

To: Superintendent, Bandelier National Monument
Through: Resource Management Specialist, Bandelier *JDL*
From: Park Technician, Resource Management, Bandelier
Subject: Campfire Policy - Backcountry

Over the past two years, there has been a growing concern within the Resource Management Division about how to manage, and minimize, the impact of backcountry campfires. Fire rings are one of the most obvious signs of human use in the wilderness area but due to the longstanding relationship between campfires and camping, it has not been a simple matter to eliminate this impact. However, times and attitudes change and have created an atmosphere wherein campfire restrictions are increasingly necessary and acceptable.

Backcountry visitors have proven themselves receptive to various camping and hiking regulations imposed on them in the name of resource protection. We regulate party numbers, lengths of stay, overnight camping, and even fire building during high fire danger periods, with little or no dispute from visitors. Conscientious users recognize that increasing pressures on wilderness areas require concessions on their part for the quality of these areas to continue.

There are many arguments for regulating against open fires based on ecological consequences but the indisputable bottom line is that ash heaps, blackened rocks, unused firewood and unburned garbage do nothing to enhance the ecology or the aesthetics of backcountry areas.

In considering restrictions, we are in no way setting a daring precedent. The problem is being recognized and dealt with by resource managers across the country. According to a study conducted by the Intermountain Forest and Range Experiment Station in 1979, 15% of all existing and proposed wilderness areas presently prohibit open fires. According to a study conducted this summer by SCA Susan Keydel, 31% of 73 sampled wilderness areas prohibit open fires. Many more areas restrict fires in certain zones or during certain times of the year.

Based on this growing precedent and on four years experience in the Bandelier backcountry, I recommend that open fires be prohibited in three high use areas: Frijoles Canyon, Capulin Canyon, and Turkey Springs. These are areas where campfire rings are proliferating, where quality campsites are at a premium, and where it is difficult to visibly shield campsites from the trails. Once prohibited, all existing fire rings in these areas should be rehabilitated.

By prohibiting campfires in these high use areas, we will be in effect, naturally dispersing some use to other areas, particularly the mesa top zones. The mesas offer many quality campsites well away from the trails. Increased camping on the mesas will also help to relieve waste disposal pressures along the canyon watercourses.

One argument against prohibiting open fires is the problem of enforcement. However, if the primary concern is to protect the environment, this becomes an invalid point of contention. Even a compliance level of 50% of those users who would normally build fires, is better than the condition which presently exists.

I do not believe we are at a crisis point, but the problem is growing. Other areas have waited too late and have found that deterioration occurs at a much more rapid rate than recovery. Let's take a lesson from what others have learned and apply some farsighted management techniques to the campfire problem developing in the Bandelier backcountry.

E. Fred Patton

cc: Resource Management Specialist
Protection Specialist