

12/24/72

Backcountry Use Plan for Craters of the Moon National Monument

Introduction

Craters of the Moon Wilderness was established October 23, 1970. It comprises an area of ^{43,545.05}~~43,243~~ acres, approximately ⁶⁷~~67~~ square miles. This is roughly 80% of the monument's total area. ^{43,243}~~67~~

Because it is a comparatively small area, a long way from large cities and by the nature of its terrain has strong attraction for only a limited number of dedicated hikers, heavy use of the area is not expected.

However, time and the possibility of unforeseen changes could effectively nullify this prediction. This plan includes the possibility of a big increase in wilderness use.

General Resources Description

The area set aside as wilderness at Craters of the Moon lies south of the developed area. It covers 43,243 acres of the Snake River Plain and preserves about 9 miles of the Great Rift, the weak zone in the earth's crust which is the cause of the spectacular geological phenomenon known as Craters of the Moon National Monument.

Some of the literature on the monument describes it as weird and fantastic and many visitors would agree. It is an area of black cinder cones and spatter cones, lava flows, lava tubes or caves, tree molds and other manifestations of the turmoil that took place here. It is essentially a frozen landscape, the rocks stiffened in various postures which reveal the turbulence of their once molten state.

Though much of the landscape is bare rock, plants do grow in the cracks, where wind blown soil accumulates, and on the cinder cones and older lava flows, where soil is fashioned from an aggregate of weathered cinders, lava material and decayed vegetation.

The most conspicuous plant is the Limber Pine which precedes the climax community of sage brush, rabbit brush, antelope bitterbrush and grass. This diverse vegetation supports an equally diverse fauna; the largest animal is the mule deer though in the past a sub-specie of Grizzly roamed the lavas. Antelope occasionally migrate through the monument and an investigation is planned to learn whether the re-introduction of bighorn sheep is feasible.

The climate can best be described as arid and windy and these factors have a strong influence on the kind and character of the life that subsists here.

b. Volume of Backcountry Use. The use of our wilderness area is best described as very light. An increase was noticed after it was officially dedicated in 1970, but this has only brought the overnight use figure to about 50 visitors per year.

The number of people going in and out the same day is probably equal to or greater than the number staying overnight, though to date our records indicate that they are less. A registration system beginning next spring will give us a more accurate count.

A trail counter on the Great Owl Trail indicates that over 1,000 people a month enter the wilderness to see this cave and the tree molds area. This is inadvertent use of the wilderness and these people are not seeking a wilderness experience. We do not expect this use to change when the spur to Great Owl Cavern has been obliterated.

c. Kinds of Backcountry Use. There are today essentially three kinds of backcountry use at Craters of the Moon: day use, overnight backpacking and horse use. Most of the hiking groups are small, consisting usually of from two to five people. Presently, the only horseback trips are made by a local riding club each spring. There are about 20 people in the group and they go in and out the same day. During the winter of 1973 there was some cross-country skiing in the monument; all of it consisting of small parties out for part of one day.

3. Recommendations

a. Education of Wilderness Traveler. At present all trails leading into the wilderness have signs indicating that the traveler has entered the wilderness.

It is recommended that by the Spring of 1974 we have a pamphlet available for all wilderness travelers. This should contain the following:

1. A statement of a general nature explaining our country's need for wilderness.
2. A statement about the fragility of the area and the need to protect it from improper use.
3. Regulations to be followed while in the wilderness.

This same information should be permanently posted at the registration box.

The park brochure should contain a short paragraph about the wilderness and the need for wilderness areas. This will be done at the next revision, which must wait until we use our present stockpile and the 59,000 on order.

b. Trailhead Parking. The main trail leading into the wilderness has no parking area. People using this trail park their cars in two nearby places: the pullout at an interpretive sign, and the Tree Molds Parking Area.

Present plans call for the eventual elimination of all references to Great Owl Cavern. When this occurs the sign at the Tree Molds parking area will let visitors know that they are at the threshold of the wilderness, and it will be the starting place for wilderness travel. This is part of our Wayside Exhibit plan to be completed in FY 74.

c. Additional Trails. When the parking area functions as a point of departure for wilderness users it will be necessary to build a small section of trail from it to the existing trail. This is to be a primitive unpaved trail using cairns where needed. It will be constructed in FY 74.

The existing trail is an old unpaved road, which was once used by tourists and later served as a fire road for the monument. It is recommended that no improvements be made since it is more than adequate now.

d. Horse Use. Because of the limited size of the wilderness and a lack of water and forage, riders are not readily tempted to stay longer than one day and we do not anticipate horse use as a problem. Should this prognosis prove incorrect, rules governing horseback groups can be formulated. These would require that food and water for the animals be carried in, that the party camp in a designated place and that the horses be tied while there.

e. Water Use. Though there are several water holes in the wilderness, they do go dry and are not reliable as a source of water. Therefore it is recommended that all who enter the wilderness be required to carry all the water they will need. This will not only be safer, but will protect and save the water for wildlife.

f. Campsites. It is recommended that campers continue camping wherever they wish. Because of the very light use the wilderness receives, designated campsites would be an unnecessary intrusion.

If use should increase significantly, it is recommended that fires be prohibited and that primitive campsites be constructed. It is further recommended that these steps be taken in the order mentioned and not together.

The restriction on fires is anticipated for ecological reasons. Extensive areas of barren lava effectively restrict range fires and this is no problem, but heavy use of dead wood would have an adverse effect on small mammal and bird populations and would rob the landscape of soil building material.

g. Registration and Use Data: A trail counter and a register will supply us with the necessary information about wilderness use. The present requirement to obtain a campfire permit or otherwise register is also an important tool and we will welcome the new service-wide wilderness-use permits when they are printed. The trail counter was installed in August 1972 and the register will be in use this Spring.

h. Garbage. All visitors will be required to carry out their unburnable garbage. Plastic bags will be supplied for this purpose. If we can obtain them, the large Johnny Horizon litter bags will be used. Their educational message will help the cause.

i. Sanitary Facilities. With the present light use, no facilities are necessary. Only if campsites are constructed will pit toilets need to be installed.

j. Rescue Plan. A rescue plan will be formulated immediately and equipment to implement it will be purchased in FY 74.

k. Future Use - Trends and Carrying Capacity. There has been a slight increase in wilderness use since the area was formally designated in 1970, but a significant increase is not expected in the near future.

An impressive increase could occur if nearby communities should show substantial growth. It is therefore incumbent upon us to establish a carrying capacity for the wilderness.

Of the total wilderness, it is the area along the rift zone which will most attract visitors. The distance along the rift inside wilderness boundaries is approximately 9 miles. The old road, now being used as a trail, extends for a little over 3 miles. The area of heavy use will be a narrow corridor and if our criteria are the three types of carrying

capacity described by the Conservation Foundation's "Letter: a report on environmental issues", physical, ecological and psychological, our carrying capacity figure will be quite low, since all users will return over the same trail. The adjacent pahoehoe lava often has a delicate crust which crumbles underfoot and too heavy use for a long period would cause unacceptable damage to this resource. Large numbers of people moving to and fro on this narrow path would drastically lower the quality of the wilderness experience for all but those for whom the terms wilderness and crowds are not contradictory.

If we consider that most people would prefer to feel that they were in the wilderness alone, parties leaving the parking area should be restricted to some arbitrary time interval.

Leisurely travel, allowing for stops to enjoy the natural scene, would probably not exceed 2 mph for hikers. A minimum of 2 miles distance is recommended for hiking parties so the time interval should not be less than 1 hour.

It is obvious that large parties leaving at one hour intervals for most of the day would threaten the resource and dilute the quality of the wilderness experience. Some limit on numbers becomes necessary. A realistic figure can only be obtained by observation during a time of heavy use and should not be attempted at this time. The delicate nature of the resource and the openness of the terrain, which readily reveals the presence of others, should be primary considerations when the decision is made.

5. Plan of Action and Approximate Cost:

<u>Action</u>	<u>Approximate Cost</u>
Install Register Spring CY 1973	Negligible
Publish Wilderness brochure by Spring of CY 1974	\$200.00
Mention wilderness in next monument brochure revision	Cost absorbed-revision necessary anyway
Purchase necessary equipment for backcountry rescue in FY 74	\$500.00
Construct short section of trail FY 74	\$500.00

Rescue Plan for Cross Country
Skiing and Backcountry Users

Since its formal establishment in October 1970, there has been an increased interest in hiking and camping in the Craters of the Moon Wilderness.

Another development which caused an unexpected winter use of the wilderness during 1973 is the growth of cross-country skiing as a winter sport. Almost every weekend saw one or more skiing parties traveling in or adjacent to the wilderness.

This rescue plan is made in response to the increased use of our backcountry and wilderness areas.

Recommendations

1. That we purchase two pair of cross-country skis equipped with bindings and poles and emergency tips.

2. Climbing skins could be required in some rescue situations and should be purchased.

3. That a pack be equipped with the following:

For Winter

First Aid kit
Oxygen unit
2 ropes
2 jumars
Binoculars
Map
Canteen of water
Thermos (to be filled with a
hot liquid when setting out)
Climbing skins (2 sets)
Extra ski tips (2)

For Summer

First Aid kit
Oxygen unit
2 ropes
2 jumars
Binoculars
Map
Canteen of water

4. That we purchase a rescue sled for bringing victims of accidents out of the wilderness.

5. If wilderness use warrants it, a routine of weekend patrols (foot or ski) should be established to assure visitor safety and compliance with rules and regulations. Patrolling rangers should carry a walkie-talkie with them.