

Fifty years of experiential knowledge: Using oral history to understand wilderness management in Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks, USA

Alison M. Steiner, University of California, USA, alisteiner@ucdavis.edu;

Daniel R. Williams, U.S. Forest Service, USA

Introduction

Experiential knowledge is increasingly recognized as an important source of information about ecological change that can be used to monitor social-ecological systems. This presentation describes the results of a study to document the perceptions of changing conditions, use, and management of wilderness areas within Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks as perceived by long-time visitors, employees, and commercial operators. After nearly 50 years of active management by a cadre of seasonal backcountry rangers and other park staff members (e.g., trail crews, research scientists), it is important and worthwhile to attempt to collect and archive their experiential knowledge and reflections before it is lost. In particular managers with several decades of experience, who have been involved in the Sequoia and Kings Canyon wilderness program over multiple decades, can provide insights on the changing use, conditions, and effectiveness of management effort over time. Likewise, there are some in the user community including backcountry outfitters, private horse packers, and hikers who have many years of experience. The goal of study was to capture and document that experiential knowledge for both general historical purposes and to provide historical insight and context to the wilderness management planning process.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks are adjoining parks that are administered as a single unit (SEKI) located in the southern Sierra Nevada range in California. The two parks cover 351,854 hectares (865,952 acres), with 93% (327,225 hectares) designated wilderness. SEKI encompasses a wide variety of ecosystems – oak woodlands, stands of giant sequoias, mixed coniferous forests, and high alpine meadows – and include areas that range from 1,700 to over 14,500 feet (518 to 4420 meters) in elevation. The two parks are within a half-day drive of several major metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles, Reno, Las Vegas, and San Francisco. The wilderness includes one hundred miles of both the John Muir Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail making the area a popular wilderness destination. In all, SEKI contains over 700 miles of maintained trails, as well as abundant opportunities for off-trail travel. Park rangers typically staff fifteen permanent/semi-permanent ranger stations located within the wilderness between June and October, and they often return to these positions for many years or decades. In 2011, eight of the 11 wilderness rangers had been working in the backcountry for 10 or more years. Three of those eight had over 30 years of experience in SEKI.

This study collected 23 oral histories from park employees (managers/rangers), private users (stock/hikers), and commercial users (stock/non-stock) to document their experiential knowledge of wilderness management and the

changes they have witnessed to wilderness conditions and uses in SEKI. The basic approach to the interviews was to ask respondents to reflect on their earliest experiences of the wilderness and then to discuss changes they have witnessed over time with respect to the basic conditions in the wilderness, the types and patterns of use and user characteristics, and management practices. With respect the latter an attempt was made to get respondents to reflect on (1) how changes in wilderness character and conditions were influenced by ranger practices and management level decisions and (2) how key management decisions were made, how they were implemented, and what resulted from these efforts. The interviews were conducted between June and November 2010. Interviews ranged in length from one to two hours and were guided by a flexible list of questions and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Most interviewees had consistently worked or recreated within the parks between the early 1970s and the late 2000s. This extensive experience allowed them to reflect on the condition and character of SEKI wilderness prior to, as well as after, official wilderness designation. In addition, the recollections of two individuals dated as far back as the mid-1930s. Data analysis began with close readings of individual transcripts. This process generated a list of six major topics: wilderness characteristics, visitor use patterns, park field staff, education/exposure, management practices, and public relations. Interviews were then reread and coded according to these categories.

Results and conclusions

Although a variety of themes emerged from these interviews, this study focused on those themes deemed most relevant to the management of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. The topics included: (1) impacts on wilderness experience, (2) changes in visitor use patterns, (3), perceptions of park management and, (4) the evolution of wilderness ethics. In general, those interviewed for this project felt that the wilderness character within SEKI had significantly improved since the 1960s and 70s. This improvement was primarily aesthetic; informants noted a decline in trash, campsite developments, fire scars, and meadow impacts. Interviewees attributed these aesthetic improvements to the “on-the-ground” efforts of SEKI’s field staff, as well as to a more educated visitor. Most interviewees expressed appreciation for the parks’ attempts to preserve opportunities for solitude, self-reliance, and unrestricted travel. However, they also expressed concern regarding the parks’ ever-expanding regulatory system. Several stock users pointed to inconvenient restrictions as causing a decrease in both park visitation and cultural diversity. Other interviewees

wees, including two park managers, noted that a plethora of park regulations (accumulated layer by layer over the years) had fundamentally altered the wilderness experience of visitors. Interviewees also claimed that changing visitor use patterns, such as the concentration of campsites along popular trail corridors and the increased interest in adventure sports, were creating new challenges for park managers. They hoped that the parks would address these issues proactively, rather than simply “muddling through” as in the past. In addition, interviews with long-term wilderness enthusiasts demonstrate a constantly evolving ethos in

which experience and identity become inextricably linked and serve to define respondents as ‘enlightened’ wilderness users. Oral history appears to be a particularly effective tool for evaluating the efficacy of management practices over time as well a means to explore evolving practices and ethics in wilderness use. These findings also helped to corroborate and explain observed changes as documented through the Parks’ larger wilderness condition monitoring program.