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April 16, 2013

Yosemite National Park
Superintendent Don Neubacher
Attn: Merced River Plan
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite, CA 95389

Sent via e-mail to: yose_planning@nps.gov

Dear Superintendent Neubacher,

American Whitewater appreciates having the opportunity to provide comment on Yosemite National Park's Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement ("Draft Plan"). We also appreciate that you and your staff took the time to meet with us on February 26th, 2013 to discuss our interest in the plan and concerns regarding managing boating within the Park. In general, we are supportive of the Draft Plan and the thorough process that the Park has undergone to describe the use and capacities within Yosemite, and develop management actions toward the goal of maintaining specific management indicators. However, we have concerns about the management actions proposed for managing boating within the Park that we discuss below.

American Whitewater is a national 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with a mission to protect and restore America's whitewater resources and enhance the public's ability to enjoy them safely. With over 5,500 members and 100 affiliate clubs, we represent the conservation interests of tens of thousands of whitewater enthusiasts across the country. A significant portion of our membership either resides in California or frequently travels to the state to enjoy our whitewater resources and connect with the landscape through rivers. As such, we have a direct interest in the future management of the Wild and Scenic Merced River within Yosemite National Park.

While we are pleased to see that the Preferred Alternative (Alternative 5) in the Draft Plan opens more river segments to boating than is currently allowed (i.e., Segment 1 above Nevada Fall), we disagree with the continued ban on boating through the Merced Gorge and the use restrictions placed on boating on most of the remaining segments. In March, we commented on the Draft Tuolumne River Plan, and incorporate those comments by reference.

Managing Boating Use

In general, the Draft Plan separates boating uses out from all other uses in the Park, citing concerns about safety and the need to protect Park resources. As a result, the Draft Plan manages boating outside of the context of established user capacities and management indicators. Rather than take this approach, we encourage the Park to allow Park-wide management actions, such as parking limits and trailhead and overnight quotas, to determine the amount of use for boating and all other visitor activities.

For all segments, we recommend that the Park:

- Remove daily boating quotas for each segment and instead include boating uses with other overnight and trailhead quotas;
- Require the necessary safety equipment for visitors to be on the river;
- Educate boaters about sensitive riparian and ecological areas and ways they can help to protect it when they obtain their permit or sign in; and
- Provide paddlers with logistical information, including parking, put-ins and take-outs, shuttle logistics, etc...

We believe that this approach will allow recreational boating to seamlessly integrate into the other recreational opportunities in the Park. In the event that trail and river crowding does become an issue, the Park can issue permits that are consistent with overall area trailhead quotas and overnight capacities.

Segment 1: Merced River Above Nevada Fall

The Draft Plan's Preferred Alternative proposes a limit of 10 boats per day on the Merced River above Nevada Fall, stating that this limit is necessary to protect riparian habitat from trampling and bank erosion that could result from unlimited access. (Biological ORV-1).¹ This is due to the fact that that put-in and take-out locations would be undesignated. Additionally, the Draft Plan explains that the limit would not substantively change the wilderness character or experience (Recreational ORV-19).²

Day and overnight hikers are also likely to trample bank vegetation in an effort to enjoy being close to the river, however there is no proposal to limit their ability to access the bank. We suggest that all backcountry users be educated at the time they receive their permit about sensitive riparian areas and ways to protect the resource. Boaters should be subject to the limitation on overnight group size (eight people per night if they are off trail, and 15 people per night if they are on)³ and boating use should remain within established overnight wilderness zone capacities, as managed by a backcountry permit system.⁴

¹ Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan, Yosemite National Park, January 2013, p. 8-425.

² Merced Draft Plan at 8-428.

³ *Id.* at p. 6-13.

⁴ Wilderness Zone Overnight Capacities for Segment 1 include Little Yosemite Valley Zone: 150 (mostly in designated camping areas, all other zones allow for dispersed camping); Merced Lake Zone: 50; Washburn Lake Zone: 100; Mount Lyell Zone: 10; Clark Range Zone: 10; Merced Lake HSC: 42). The

Boating use in Segment 1 will likely be self-limiting. Boaters will be required to hike with their boat to put-in above Nevada Fall, reducing the number of those who will elect to make the run. Additionally, the whitewater run above Nevada Fall is technically challenging, and only experienced boaters with solid paddling skills will have a desire to boat it.

Segments 2A and 2B: Yosemite Valley

Paddling through the Yosemite Valley on the Merced River is a unique experience, as it provides one of the only ways to see the Valley in a setting that is largely devoid of man-made infrastructure. We feel strongly that providing this paddling opportunity, while maintaining the serene character that people seek when they visit Yosemite, is something that needs to be included in the Final Plan. There are a number of ways to provide this opportunity that will ensure resource protection and provide for visitor safety.

As we stated in our August 19, 2010 comments, we feel that it is appropriate to require safety equipment for those who plan on traveling the length of the Merced River via boat. Requiring personal flotation devices (PFDs), helmets, river craft designed for whitewater, and paddles will increase the likelihood that those with the necessary skills and experience will make the trip. By default, this will reduce the number of people who will be on the river and ensure the safety of those who are. Additionally, visitors who see this equipment will receive the message that additional skill and expertise is required to enjoy this section of the Merced. Just as when day hikers encounter climbers with ropes and climbing hardware and they realize that they are engaged in a different activity, the same is true for people who are interested in water play when they see paddlers with PFDs and whitewater kayaks.

Rather than focusing on use limits and permits, we recommend that the Final Plan address the logistical issues associated with boating through Yosemite Valley, and that the Park provide this information to visitors at the Park entrance, as is relevant. This is similar to the concept set forth in the Draft Plan for an “intelligent transportation system” as a means to address traffic congestion in the Valley, rather than just limiting access to the Park.

We have a number of suggestions for the types of information that paddlers would need to know in order to have a successful paddling trip through the Valley. These include:

- Location of put-in its and take-outs;
- Shuttle options (i.e. whether Park transportation can be used, whether cycling the shuttle an option, and if personal vehicles are to be used, directing visitors to the best place for parking);
- Locations for stopping along the river;

majority of the use in this segment is from Half Dome “pass through” day use, which is limited at 300 people per day. Other day use for the area is for 50 people per day. (Merced Draft Plan at p. 6-15)

- Locations of restroom facilities that are near the river;
- Locations of rapids, or any known hazards;
- Typical float times at different water levels;
- Where to obtain their permit, if needed.

Beyond setting user limits, providing this logistical information to boaters about their paddle trip will do far more to help create a positive user experience *and* provide protection for park resources.

Segment 3: Merced Gorge

The Draft Plan bans boating through the Merced Gorge due to safety concerns. Banning boating is a highly unusual management tool—both for National Parks and on Wild and Scenic Rivers across the country. Visitors interested in boating this run will be technically skilled and highly experienced. Safety on technically challenging whitewater is managed consistently across many federally managed rivers with some simple management actions. They include:

- Requiring a mandatory permit for river use;
- Requiring mandatory equipment: personal floatation device, helmet, and a boat and paddle designed specifically for river travel;
- Providing education on the conditions to be expected on the water.

Paddling prohibitions or use limits are not used to manage river safety on any other river we are aware of in the United States. The management tools listed above serve river managers well across the country, and we encourage the Park to employ them to address safety concerns in the Merced Gorge. Should user capacity be a concern, it will naturally be limited by technical challenge and seasonality of boatable flows, and boaters will be subject to the availability of parking spaces as any other visitor to the area. Providing a designated put-in will address management concerns regarding bank trampling and erosion.

Segment 4: El Portal

The Draft Plan acknowledges that boating is currently allowed in Segment 4 without restriction. This Segment currently sees a significant amount of whitewater recreation and there are no issues associated with its use. As a result, the Preferred Alternative continues to provide for unlimited boating in the reach. We support the recommendation in the Preferred Alternative to continue the existing management for this segment, and we believe that it provides a good example of how boating can occur throughout the rest of the corridor without the need for significant regulation or impact to park resources.

Segments 5 through 8: South Fork Merced

As on the mainstem Merced, we suggest that the Park manages boating on the South Fork Merced in alignment with the established overnight backcountry use limits and proposed group sizes that apply to all visitors to the Park. In the Preferred Alternative for Segment 5, this means limiting overnight groups to 15 people for on-trail hiking and 8 people for off-trail hiking, and managing overnight activity to comply with Wilderness

Zone capacities. In Segment 7, use is limited by day parking and campsite availability at Wawona Campgrounds, and will serve to limit boating use as well.

The Draft Plan states that Segment 8 is rarely visited, and impacts are conjectural.⁵ Although the primary management indicator used is encounters with other groups per day, the Draft Plan acknowledges that the primary focus of boating is beyond the boundary of the Park. Unrestricted boating has occurred in this segment for many years. Based upon our discussions with staff and in reviewing the information in the Draft Plan, there is no indication that boating use is creating any resource issues or conflicts with other users. As such, there is no need for a daily use limit. We are supportive of asking boaters to register through a self-regulated system at Wawona Campground and other access points.⁶

Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to continue to work with the Park in order to ensure that the Final Wild and Scenic Merced River Management Plan is protective of Park values while offering visitors a high quality wilderness experience, whether they chose to paddle or hike. Thank you for considering our suggestions and requests.

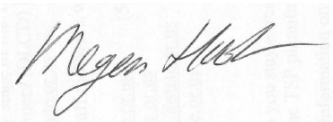
Sincerely,



Dave Steindorf
California Stewardship Director



Kevin Colburn
National Stewardship Director



Megan Hooker
Associate Stewardship Director

⁵ Merced Draft Plan, p. 6-43.

⁶ *Id.*