CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

No. 11
November 1998

P.O. Box 16480
Portal, AZ 85632

Plans for recreation management and development in the Chiricahua Mountains have suffered from inadequate knowledge of the amount of visitor use. Previous estimates were based on minimal hard data, and extrapolations of future requirements were similarly flawed. Recognizing the importance of having a reliable data base against which to judge anticipated proposals for recreation development in Cave Creek Canyon, the Chiricahua Regional Council in 1997 carried out a survey of campground usage which now furnishes a current and quantitative data base. In this Newsletter we present our findings in somewhat condensed fashion, comment on some aspects of their significance, and offer other regional newsnotes.

THE SURVEY.

Early every morning (ca. 6-7 a.m.) in 1997 from March 12 to October 12 (with only two exceptions), CRC volunteers went through each campground and recorded the following data: number of campsites occupied, which specific sites were in use, mode of overnighting (tenting, trailer, camper/van, large RV), and number of vehicles associated with a given site. Overflow camping within a campground but not associated with a particular campsite was also noted. Infrequent overnighting away from campgrounds was not included in our survey. By checking early in the morning we hoped to record occupancy before overnighters had left and before new campers had arrived. Also, this reduced the possibility of mistaking day-use picnickers for overnight campers. Sporadic surveys made before and after the detailed survey showed little campground use in other parts of the year, so we assume the survey spanned the period of most intensive use of the campgrounds. We have no reason to suppose that the usage in this period was atypical in any way, and assume that the data provide insight of broad applicability.

DESCRIPTIONS OF CAMPS

The following descriptions of the five Forest Camps on Cave Creek serve as background for the data on campground usage and analyses thereof. The camps range in elevation from 5000 to 5800 ft. None of the campsites has hookups, there is no canyon dump station for RV's and piped potable water is not always available, though the system is being upgraded.

IDLEWILD CAMPGROUND is reached by crossing a ford 0.4 miles upstream from the visitor center. The ten campsites are shaded, some located well above stream level, others close to it. Most have areas suitable for tenting, though some are less than ideal. Some have parking for larger vehicles, but park-

ing immediately adjacent to tables is not possible at all sites.

STEWART CAMPGROUND, 0.7 miles from the visitor center, has six shady campsites. Most are somewhat shielded from one-another by vegetation or topography and have moderate to large parking areas.

SUNNY FLAT CAMPGROUND is reached by a turnoff at 1.6 miles from the visitor center and a broad ford across the creek. With 12 designated sites, this is the largest campground on Cave Creek. The camp area is little elevated above the creek but sites are not right beside it. Most sites have ample space for RV's and flat areas suitable for tenting. All sites have at least some shade, though parking spots may be exposed. Several sites are grouped in a relatively open area, offering little privacy.

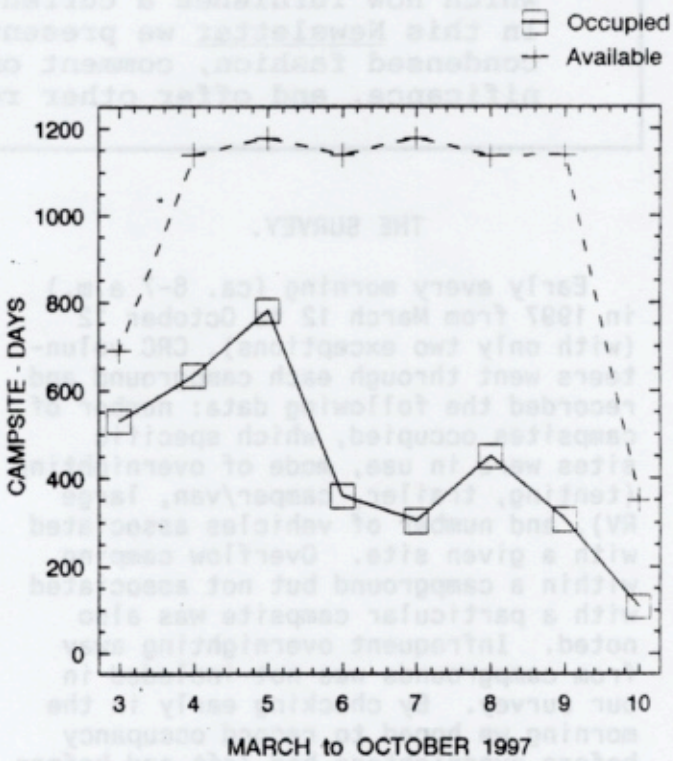
JOHN HANDS CAMPGROUND is 4.5 miles from the visitor center on a graded gravel road. A parking lot above the camp can accommodate large RV's. The camp, which has five sites, had an earlier existence as a picnic area. Neither campsites nor parking spaces are well delimited, and space for tenting varies in quality among sites. Most sites are quite close to the stream.

HERB MARTYR CAMPGROUND is 5.6 miles from the Visitor Center on the road past John Hands campground. There are five shady campsites, two located adjacent to a parking lot on a bench well above the creek, three lower down next to the creek. Those by the parking area require that gear must be carried in; cars cannot be parked close to the tables. A sharp, steep curve in the narrow road between the parking lot and the lower sites limits the use of the lower sites by large vehicles.

This camp and John Hands Camp, each with five sites, are the smallest of the five campgrounds surveyed. Herb Martyr also has the appearance of a picnic site, with no special attributes for camping such as leveled tent sites; parking areas by the lower sites are not clearly delimited. Herb Martyr Dam once provided habitat for introduced trout and was popular with sport anglers. It is the scientific type-locality for the threatened Chiricahua Leopard Frog. The dam has been filled to the brim with gravel for many years and currently supports neither trout nor, apparently, frogs. Maintenance practices of the impoundment in the past could be considered for reactivation.

SUMMARY OF USAGE

We express usage in two ways: as campsite-days and as percent of occupancy. The five campgrounds have a total of 38 designated campsites. A single day with all sites occupied would equal 38 campsite-days. Thus, with allowance for some days when campgrounds were closed to the public, there were 7954 campsite-days during the survey period.



This graph summarizes monthly campsite occupancy compared to the number of sites available. Two factors explain the low number of sites available in March: the survey did not commence until March 12, and Idlewild Camp

was closed for several days when the others were open. October site availability was low for similar reasons. From April through August between 1138 and 1178 sites were available each month, the fluctuation reflecting 30 versus 31-day months and a 4-day closing of one camp. March, April, and May were the most popular months for camping; only then did occupancy for the entire month exceed 50% of capacity. An abrupt drop in camping occurred in the hot month of June (which has no major holidays) and low usage persisted in the warm, rainy season vacation months of July and August and in the remaining months.

PERIODS OF HEAVY USE. The weekend of Palm Sunday (Mar. 22-23) had high occupancy, with 84% of available sites in use over the two days. The Easter Sunday weekend (Mar. 28-30) also saw heavy use: 89% of capacity on Friday and entirely full on Saturday and Sunday. Memorial Day weekend (May 24-26) found 91% of campsites occupied on Saturday and Sunday, but only 60% on the morning of Monday, Memorial Day. On none of these three days were all campsites in use. The 4th of July long weekend had only moderate use, with just one of the three days reaching 60% of capacity. Labor Day weekend is traditionally a heavy use period, and on Sunday, Aug. 31, the camps were filled to capacity. Over the three days occupancy averaged 80%. The last major holiday weekend in our survey period--Columbus Day (Oct. 11-13)--saw 76% of capacity in use on Sunday (we have no data for Saturday or Monday).

On just three days (1.4% of 213 days) were all campsites full. Even in the high use months of March through May there were unoccupied campsites on all but two days. The average occupancy over all 213 days was 44%.

CAMPGROUND PREFERENCE

Campers express their preference by their selection of camps. Idlewild was full 10 days, Stewart 66 days, Sunnt Flat 20 days, John Hands 17 days, and Herb Martyr 10 days. With 68% average occupancy over the 213-day period, **Stewart** was clearly the choice (refer to following graphs). Its desirable features include: ease of access (no water crossing); ample parking space adjacent to sites; shady sites close to the stream and not crowded together; level spots for tenting. The preference was not merely a matter of campground size (it is easier to fill a 6-site campground than a larger one), but persisted in periods of low campground use. It is incongruous that this most popular site is one the Forest Service has proposed closing to camping.

Sunny Flat, with double the capacity of Stewart, understandably exceeded the latter in total units occupied (1321 to 883) but fell behind in percent occupancy in all months. **Idlewild** consistently lagged behind Sunny Flat in percent occupancy and in total units occupied, though its capacity (10 vs. 12 units) is only slightly smaller. Given that the setting of Idlewild is closely similar to that of Stewart, one would expect it to resemble that camp in usage rather than the seemingly less attractive Sunny Flat. Probably the stream-crossing access to Idlewild is more inhibiting to drivers than the wider, shallower ford leading to Sunny Flat. This may be especially true for drivers of larger vehicles--RV use at Sunny Flat was more than four times that at Idlewild.

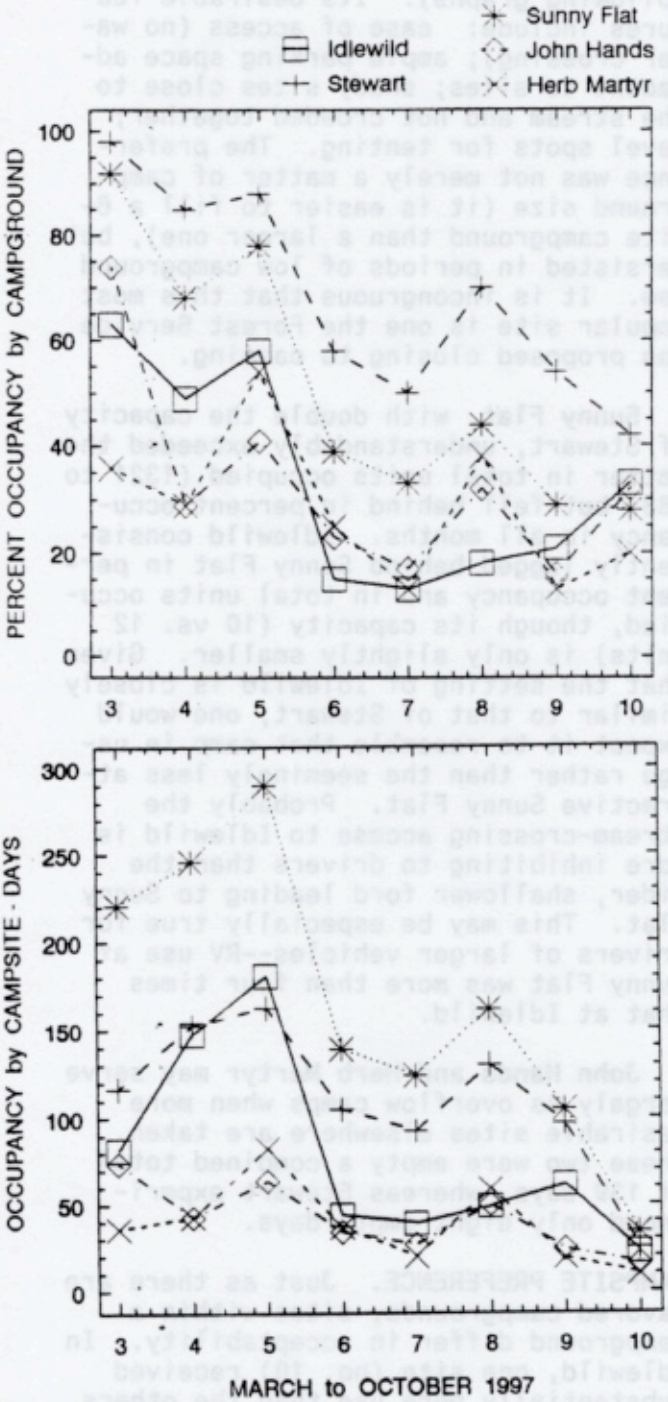
John Hands and **Herb Martyr** may serve largely as overflow camps when more desirable sites elsewhere are taken. These two were empty a combined total of 139 days, whereas Stewart experienced only eight empty days.

CAMPSITE PREFERENCE. Just as there are favored campgrounds, sites within a campground differ in acceptability. In Idlewild, one site (no. 10) received substantially more use than the others, up to almost three times the use of the least favored (no. 2). In Sunny Flat, the two least-used sites (nos. 10 and 11) are lacking in privacy.

MODES OF ACCOMMODATION

We identified four modes: 1) tents (generally accompanying vehicles not

outfitted for sleeping), 2) camping



trailers, 3) vans and pickup campers, 4) large recreational vehicles (RV's). Uses in a total of 3471 site occupancies were as follows: tents 56%, trailers 18%, campers/vans 17%, RV's 15%. (The total slightly exceeds 100% because sometimes tents were set up along with other means of accommodation.) The incidence of tent-camping exceeded that of all other modes combined. This may suggest preferences of Cave Creek campers that should be addressed in any planning for campground renovations.

NUMBERS OF VEHICLES

Most campsites are designed to accommodate one vehicle, and the average of 1.15 vehicles per site reflects this level of usage. During periods of high use, however, excessive crowding occurred. An extreme example was 16 vehicles in the nominally 5-site John Hands Camp. Instances of three or more vehicles at a single site were not always due to a shortage of vacant campsites, but probably reflected a desire of families or friends to camp in close proximity.

GROUP CAMPING

There were a few instances in which college field trip groups essentially took over a small campground.

DISCUSSION

The dominant message we get from our survey is that with all campsites in use on only three days of the year, and with many campsites available most of the time, space is more than adequate for current usage. Any proposal for adding to the number of campsites must convincingly document any projected great increase in demand that would consume the large space buffer now enjoyed. Such documentation seems unlikely.

In the past the Forest Service has proposed eliminating streamside campgrounds (e.g. the popular Stewart) and replacing them with a 40-site monstrosity upstream or a stopgap 20-site camp near the Visitor Center. These proposals now appear to be on hold, possibly entirely rejected, but continue to cloud recreation planning. We suggest that the Forest Service should concentrate on improving the quality of the existing camps.

Could the stream crossings to Idlewild and Sunny Flat be made less imposing? In view of the preponderance of

tent-camping, much could be done to improve the facilities for tenters without detriment to the environment. Campsites in other Forests often have sand/gravel tent sites with borders; why can't we? At John Hands and Herb Martyr camps, better definition of sites and parking spaces could be developed even at the expense of losing a site or two. Sunny Flat, too, would benefit from this modification.

Crowding too many cars into campsites is certainly detrimental and should be actively controlled. A general improvement of campsites might induce more dispersal of campers and help alleviate crowding. While group-camping did not appear to be much of a problem in our survey period, it has the potential for being disruptive, as was well demonstrated in Cave Creek in the past. Perhaps preregistration of group-campers and assignment to specific areas should be considered.

The following tables contain the core of our data.

CAMPSITE USE BY CAMPSITE-DAYS

CAMPGROUND	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	TOTAL
IDLEWILD	82	148	181	44	39	49	62	23	628
STEWART	117	153	163	105	93	130	97	25	883
SUNNY FLAT	221	246	290	139	124	162	105	34	1321
JOHN HANDS	74	43	64	34	27	50	24	16	332
HERB MARTYR	36	43	83	37	20	59	19	10	307
SITES USED	530	633	781	359	303	450	307	108	3471
AVAILABLE	690	1140	1178	1140	1178	1138	1140	350	7954
PERCENT USED	76.8	55.5	66.3	31.5	25.7	39.5	26.9	30.9	43.6

CAMPSITE USE BY PERCENT OF AVAILABLE SITES

	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	TOTAL
IDLEWILD	63.1	49.3	58.4	14.7	12.6	18.1	20.7	32.9	33.7
STEWART	97.5	85.0	87.6	58.3	50.0	69.9	53.9	41.7	68.0
SUNNY FLAT	92.1	68.3	78.0	38.6	33.3	43.5	29.2	28.3	51.4
JOHN HANDS	74.0	28.7	41.3	22.7	17.4	32.3	16.0	32.0	33.0
HERB MARTYR	36.0	28.7	53.5	24.7	12.9	38.1	12.7	20.0	28.3

MODE OF CAMPSITE USE

CAMPGROUND	TENTS	TRAILER	CAMPER/ VAN	RV	SITES OCCUPIED	VEHICLE NUMBER
IDLEWILD	459	57	106	44	628	729
STEWART	371	238	111	215	883	984
SUNNY FLAT	635	299	266	206	1321	1521
JOHN HANDS	255	29	55	30	332	427
HERB MARTYR	231	17	50	18	307	326
TOTALS	1951	640	588	513	3471	3987

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND THANKS

Maury and Roberta Ward were the prime movers for this survey. They supervised the field work, kept the records, and did more of the walk-throughs than any other couple or person. Others contributing to gathering data were Noel and Helen Snyder, John Dominick, Alan Craig, Barbara and Pete Miller, Marge Fagan, Carol Simon, Junella Haynes, Penny Johnston, Todd Malone, and Alden Hayes. Karen Hayes, Barbara Miller, and Roberta Ward prepared the initial data summary. R. G. Zweifel did the final data reduction.

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NEWS NOTES

ROAD PAVING. The Forest Service may be close to reaching agreement with landowners on the final easement needed before paving several more sections, totaling about 0.8 mile, of the main Cave Creek Canyon road. Two segments lie upstream from where paving ended last year, a short distance above Sunny Flat Campground. A third segment runs toward Portal about 0.2 mile from the South Fork Bridge. If the forecast of a warmer and drier than normal fall holds true, the paving could be completed this year.

At the request of property owners and others, FS engineers have attempted to design the road within the limited space between the canyon wall and the private canyon bottom land so as to preserve as many trees as possible while meeting another laudable objec-

tive: encouraging drivers to slow down and enjoy the beauties of the canyon, instead of trying to set speed records.

Paving next year will depend on the budget for the fiscal year beginning October 1, and that amount may not be known for some time. The FS's objective is to pave the road all the way to the Southwestern Research Station as quickly as funding, getting easements, and some major engineering and drainage hurdles are addressed. But, according to District Ranger Doug Hardy, no consideration is being given to paving beyond the Research Station, either along the Middle Fork or along the North Fork.

CAVE CREEK RECREATION CONCEPT PLAN. In Newsletter 10 we reported that the Final Cave Creek Recreation Concept Plan had been printed and was in the Douglas District Office awaiting mailing to everyone who commented on the draft plan. Judged by comments on the draft plan that we summarized in our August 1995 Newsletter 5, those who have been waiting patiently for a copy of the final plan will probably be relieved to hear that the plan is currently undergoing a significant revision and downsizing in the District Office.

Actions now being considered include facility improvements at Stewart, Idlewild, and Sunny Flat campgrounds, and adding a few picnic tables and nature interpretation enhancements near the Visitor Center, but *no new campgrounds*. The revised plan will be sent out for public comment, possibly as soon as November.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE PREPARING MANAGEMENT PLANS. General Management Plans are being written for both Chiricahua National Monument and Fort Bowie National Historic Site. Draft plans should be available for public review and comment by February or March 1999.

Numerous issues were identified at the beginning of the planning process. Just a few of these relating to the Monument were: Should the existing campground be converted to a picnic ground? Should a replacement or additional campground be built near the Monument entrance or elsewhere outside the Monument? Should a new visitor center and headquarters building be built near the entrance? Should the paved road to the top of the Monument be improved to accommodate RVs or left essentially as is?

A few of the planning issues relating to Fort Bowie include: Should the Apache Pass road be paved? Should the present plaster coating on the scant remnants of the Fort be left on to protect the adobe ruins until a more attractive method of adobe preservation is developed? Should more or less interpretation be provided at the site?

All those who submitted comments on the planning issues late last spring should receive draft plan copies. Others may request a copy of the draft plan for either or both areas by contacting the Monument at HCR 2, Box 6500, Willcox, AZ 85643 (520 824-3421). As usual, the promised comment period will be a meager 30 days after the plan is made available to the public.

WILD FIRES AND THE PRESCRIBED BURN PLAN. Hot, dry weather in the second half of June set the stage for lightning-caused wildfires in the Chiricahua Mountains that began on July 1. Six fires started in the Chiricahuas that afternoon: **Ida**, near Ida Peak (75 acres); **Brushy**, at the head of Brushy Canyon below Monte Vista Lookout (7 acres); **Turkey**, West Turkey Creek drainage near Mormon Ridge (1 acre); **Barfoot**, near Barfoot Park (0.25 acre); **Greenhouse**, at the head of Greenhouse Canyon (0.25 acre); **Dobson**, near Dobson Peak in the Rucker drainage (0.5 acre). Luckily, significant rain came on July 3.

Dry conditions and the high to extreme behavior of all the fires sent the FS into full suppression mode, successfully avoiding a repeat of the 1994 Rattlesnake Fire devastation. No other fires were being fought at the time by the Coronado National Forest or its cooperating agencies in the area, so air tankers, two helicopters and more than 100 personnel--both hotshot and

hand crews--were put to work. The estimated suppression cost of the six fires totaled $97,500, and ranged from $75,000 on the Ida Fire to $1000 on the Barfoot Fire.

In contrast, in terms of suppression cost and risk, was the **Long Fire**, started by lightning on July 11 near the Johnson Peak area in the John Long Canyon drainage. Monte Vista Lookout had reported receiving more than 6 inches of rain in the area since the beginning of July and more rain was expected. The fire was low, on the ground, and expected to remain along a ridge top. Furthermore, life and property were not threatened, and it appeared the fire might stop upon reaching Trail 219. For these reasons, the FS responded in a least-cost-suppression mode consisting of daily monitoring by aircraft. More rain did not arrive by July 16, however, and to prevent the fire from crossing Trail 219, a hand crew was flown to the Johnson Saddle helispot the morning of July 17. By early afternoon, sufficient rain was falling to allow withdrawal of the fire crew. The net result was a good, fuel-load reducing fire on about 130 acres, and resulted in only two openings of 1-2 acres each in the canopy.

The estimated monitoring and containment cost for the fire was about $8,000, a bargain, especially on a per acre basis, in comparison with the other six 1998 fires. The FS anticipates that low suppression costs will eventually become more typical of lightning caused-fires in the Chiricahuas, after the Johnson Peak Fire Management Plan is carried out. The Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact on this Management Plan was signed by the District Ranger on July 14, 1998.

The goal of the Johnson Peak Fire Management Plan is to reintroduce fire into the ecosystem, both through the use of prescribed burning in late fall or early winter, and by allowing lightning-caused fires to burn naturally where there is no threat to life or property, and when weather conditions at the time of the fire are appropriate. Further details on the plan and its expected benefits were described in Newsletter 10. Prescribed burning could begin late fall or early winter within a 2000 acre block in the 32,000 acre Johnson Peak Plan area.

Our thanks to Ed Encinas, Douglas District Fuel Specialist, for providing details on the 1998 fires.

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