

CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

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NEW RECREATION PLAN FOR CAVE CREEK CANYON
CHIRICAHUA MOUNTAINS

In August 1991 the Douglas District of the Coronado National Forest issued a draft document titled "The Cave Creek-Pinery Corridor Concept Plan," promoting a broad spectrum of recreation development for both sides of the Chiricahua Mountains. The inappropriate and seriously flawed management direction of this plan evoked strong public resistance, one aspect of which was the formation of the Chiricahua Regional Council (CRC) as a "watchdog" organization to monitor Forest Service (FS) and other government agency plans for the Chiricahua region. As a result of broad public comment and resistance, the Cave Creek-Pinery Corridor plan appears to have been dropped, at least in its original form.

The next effort toward increasing recreation use involving the Chiricahuas was the proposed "Islands in the Desert National Recreation Area" (March 1992). At five FS-sponsored regional public workshops the reaction of diverse elements of the public was overwhelmingly negative. That proposal, too, has been shelved.

But still the overall direction of FS management of the Coronado National Forest continues to be toward recreation development, and a new draft document involving this area is the "Cave Creek Canyon Recreation Concept Plan." In it the FS demonstrates its wishes with regard to management thinking and policy and makes it clear that the agency is still intent on recreation overdevelopment. Why do we say this? Because parts of the plan either blatantly go beyond what is known to be desirable, or have a strong potential for doing so if not carefully controlled.

Particulars of the New Plan

This new plan is restricted to the Cave Creek Drainage rather than addressing development on both east and west sides of the Chiricahuas, as did the 1991 plan, though a plan for the west side is to be available in December 1995. Important features of the plan include, but are not limited to, drastic revision of camping facilities, elaboration of the trail system within the canyon, revising access to South Fork, modifications to Visitor Center and surroundings, and revised management

of research activities.

Campgrounds Revised: The plan would eventually eliminate camping at all current developed sites in the canyon and concentrate it at one centrally located facility. Existing campgrounds would be downgraded to picnic sites and their facilities (parking, picnic tables, rest rooms) relocated outside of riparian areas. While admitting to considerable difference of opinion within its Planning Team regarding the site for a large central campground, the document nevertheless recommends constructing "Crystal Campground" for

tent campers and recreation vehicles beside the road to Herb Martyr Dam near the trail to Crystal Cave and adjacent to the property of the American Museum of Natural History's Southwestern Research Station.

This recommendation exemplifies the FS's obliviousness to values in Cave Creek. The Southwestern Research Station, one of the nation's premier facilities for biological field studies, has a forty-year history of ongoing research of national and international importance. In a "Vision Statement" requested by the FS of members of the Planning Team, the Director of SWRS noted the importance of the area between the Station and Herb Martyr Dam to field studies and recommended it be designated a "Research Natural Area."

Yet directly opposed to that recommendation, the FS proposes to dedicate some 50 acres (area estimated from a map in the Plan) of virtually undisturbed forest in that area to a 40-site campground that would focus all the canyon's camping traffic.

The CRC strongly opposes construction of the Crystal Campground both for its disruptive influence on research activities and for its takeover of undisturbed terrain.

There are real administrative advantages in concentrating camping, and the FS has recommended as an interim solution what could be a permanent one. This is reconstructing Sunny Flat campground and increasing capacity to make up for closing other sites, and possibly building a new campground adjacent to (downstream from) the Visitor Center if need can be balanced against appropriate use dictated by the area's primary values. The FS has never--at least not publicly--assessed the carrying capacity of the canyon for visitors at one time, and has published no hard data on public usage.

Eliminating camping at sites other than Sunny Flat has, as the FS

avers, some desirable features. If roads and facilities can be removed from riparian areas and relocated closer to the paved road, then some of the streamside may (perhaps with assistance) return to a more natural state. But there is a carrying capacity aspect here, too. The FS seems to feel that picnicking is less demanding on the land than camping, but a picnic site will often be occupied by many more people than a campsite, increasing the impact. Limiting the number of parking spaces for picnic sites to many fewer than the former camp sites would seem not just prudent but essential.

Trail System: The FS envisions a trail system throughout the canyon, some parts "barrier-free" (= paved), most with natural surface. Their hope is that with more and better trails, people will be encouraged to walk rather than drive. A problem here is that much of an augmented trail system would have to be close to the stream, hence potentially damaging. Foot bridges planned for several trails would be one more form of intrusion on the natural setting. Any increase in trails must be carefully planned and monitored.

South Fork: South Fork would be closed to autos except for maintenance and summer home owners, with a parking area constructed at the junction of South Fork and the main road. A barrier-free trail would replace the road, its extent not stated. Part of the trail system would be across the creek, shadier but subject to the same potential for habitat damage as the main canyon trails.

Visitor Center: Plans for the Visitor Center (apart from the possible new campground) include a variety of interpretative, educational projects, road realignment, a trail-head plaza, picnic sites, and a

