

Indian Peaks Wilderness Trip

Lake Isabelle

Trip date: 9/20/2006

Ralph Swain, USFS
R2 Wilderness Program Manager

Observations:

1). I worked the east side of the Indian Peaks Wilderness as a seasonal wilderness ranger in the late 1970's. I have visited the west side, Brainard Lake and Lake Isabelle area over 50 times in the last 30 years. My observation is that it took real foresight and vision to implement the overnight camping permit for the Indian Peaks Wilderness. I remember personally being opposed to the permit system because on the west side (Granby side) we felt we could manage use through education and better signing. However, given the growth of the front-range and the popularity of the Indian Peaks from the Boulder side, it is obvious that to protect the wilderness resource, a permit system was needed.

2). I support the Brainard Lake Management Plan and the decision to move the visitors back and have them walk further (about one mile) around the lake to access the wilderness trailhead.

3). During our parking lot discussion at Brainard Lake, I observed confusion among the participants about the visitor use numbers, entry fee and how the money was used. This needs to be better communicated to the visitors so they know exactly what is spent on developed campsite facilities at Brainard Lake and what exactly goes to protecting the wilderness resource.

Management Issues:

1). Capacity issue: Obviously, from the numbers Glen Cook shared with us, the amount of day use on peak summer weekends exceeds the Forest Plan standards for wilderness. Overnight camping is only 10% of the overall use of the Indian Peaks, but the advantages of having the wilderness zoned into quota camping areas for campers and organized groups is a positive management action that helps protect this fragile alpine ecosystem.

2). At some point, and perhaps the numbers are indicating sooner than later, the ARNF will need to deal with the large numbers of day use if they are to provide some level of solitude and a wilderness experience.

3). Wilderness Management issue: It appears as if the lack of Forest Service field presence is the number one concern. If it was not for the help and commitment of the Indian Peaks Wilderness Alliance, there would be little, if any, presence in the basin. It seems as if the Forest Service is missing an opportunity to provide better on-sight stewardship, education and public contacts by not having the proper wilderness ranger staff in the backcountry.

Possible Management Actions:

1. Increase wilderness ranger field presence. The funding could come from a more equitable use of fee revenues, a slight increase in the existing overnight permit fee or a day-use permit that funds increased field presence.
2. Continue and expand the support of the Indian Peaks Wilderness Alliance (IPWA). IPWA needs help in funding volunteer uniforms, radios and other necessary items to better assist the Boulder Ranger District manage the wilderness. We need to work with the National Forest Foundation to make available small grants to help these important wilderness volunteer organizations.
3. Foresight and Vision: It took foresight some 30 years ago to implement the Indian Peaks Wilderness overnight camping permit system. It was controversial at the time and many people did not support the Forest Service's decision. Now, years later, the concern is about increasing day use. How much is too much? Perhaps it is time to have the foresight and vision to ask the tough questions about the desired future condition of this beautiful front-range wilderness.

Next Forums:

October 4, 2006 (Wednesday) at the Denver REI flagship store, hosted by The Wilderness Society.

Nov. 15, 2006 (Wednesday) at the Mountaineering Building in Golden, hosted by the Colorado Mountain Club.

Craig Mackey, Outward Bound

9/27/2006

Indian Peaks Wilderness notes

Impressions and ruminations from our day at Brainard Lake/Indian Peaks:

With the multiple aspects of visitor use and management that we viewed on this trip, it is a tad difficult to organize my impressions and thoughts. I will attempt to organize them by categories designed more to foster thinking and discussion than as solid conclusions.

I. Overview

- 1) Site was well chosen as IPW represents a true "urban interface" forest and wilderness area – even more so than Bierstadt.
- 2) While a review of the permit system and overnight issues was high on our agenda, we ended up more focused on viewing and reviewing the impacts and ramifications of day use.
- 3) I do not feel qualified to talk much about the backcountry/backpacking/overnight use and impacts, or permit issues based on our visit.
- 4) While the time, effort and participation of the FS personnel and Anne on behalf of the IPW Alliance are greatly appreciated, I am still fuzzy on actual use numbers.

[Example: From our parking lot meeting, I noted 10% overnight use in the IPW. The trail survey in our packet indicates 10% overnight use. The trail head survey sheets in our packet indicate overnight use as a much lower percentage – granted these surveys were conducted at the Pawnee Pass trailhead in peak season.]

[Example: if you look at the bar charts in our materials:

2004: IPW visitors = 98,000

2004: Camping permits = 1500 x 3 per group [my conservative estimate] = 4,500

2004: Group overnight permits = 229 x 12 [12 is maximum number] = 2,748

would give you a number closer to 7 or 8 percent and possibly lower as my estimates are conservative.]

5) IPW/Brainard has it all in terms of management of an urban interface forest:

Fees, outside concessioners, multiple uses and users, four-season use, traffic management, dogs, etc.

II. Quick Impressions

1) Moving traffic and parking away from the lake:

- Is a good management decision.
- Will be an unpopular management decision in the beginning
- Will force many users and many in Congress etc. to ponder why the agency is making these kinds of decisions.
- Will benefit the IPW by lowering day use on popular trails and lakes.

2) We should look at the fees & concessioner issues and consider communicating, as a group, our thoughts and concerns to agency leadership and/or Congress:

- What percentage of fees are going directly to the concessioner?
- How can we get a higher percentage of parking fees going to the IPW?
- Can the IPW Alliance – as an NGO – compete for the job of concessioner?

3) The Pawnee Pass Trail did not feel like a wilderness experience.

- I was more mindful of trail condition and “improvements” at IPW than I was at Bierstadt – bridges, steps, “guard rails” to keep you on trail, etc.

4) While we did not see many, dogs and dog management are certainly concerns.

5) Like Bierstadt and Mt. Evans Wilderness, the corridor in which we hiked was fairly hammered, yet the IPW remains a beautiful, rugged place that – I am quite confident – still offers outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

6) Based on the testimony of Anne and the FS personnel, the uniformed presence appears to be key in managing an urban interface wilderness area.

7) We all need to look at how we can do a better job of reaching and educating forest and wilderness users. The Web needs to be our primary focus.

8) A statistic I would love to see is what % of overnight users are repeat or frequent users.

III. Food for thought

1) The agency and the Alliance certainly considers the backcountry permit system a success. I would assume the principle components of this success are limited use, limited impacts and more knowledgeable and compliant users in the backcountry.

2) In addition to the permit system, the agency has taken other significant steps to reduce impacts: no fires, dogs on leash, zone system.

3) Today, the issue is day use. What can/should the agency do to limit impacts before going to a quota on day use?

- No dogs or limits on # of dogs.
- Improve or harden trails in high use areas.
- Education
- Eliminate fish stocking
- Seasonal closures or trail restrictions
- Increase the uniformed presence in day use areas:
 - Increase fees – certainly an option, not what I would advocate
 - Get more fee money flowing to IPW
 - IPW Alliance as the concessioner/collector of fees

4) Overall use in the IPW has increased slightly over the last ten years and may be declining.

5) Individual camping/permits are declining.

6) Group camping/permits are increasing.

7) Based on #4, #5 and #6 and a front-page story in the Denver Post this week showing overnight camping in steep decline at destination national parks, I think we need to be careful about assumptions on how and how often people will use their wilderness areas.

8) Before we declare the IPW permit system a success – or implement a day use permit system -- I think we need to discuss and investigate the potential ramifications of such a permit system:

- Permit system combined with having to physically visit the office to obtain a permit and no Web access have the potential to severely limit your pool of users.
- Again, I would love to see a figure on the percentage of permitted, backcountry/camping users in the IPW that are repeat or regular users.
- My fear is we have created a wilderness club for a limited – and probably very satisfied – group of users.
- If we have displaced other users – almost certainly – where have they gone and how satisfied are they with their use.
- If we have indeed displaced users and we begin to implement permit systems in other easily accessed, urban-interface areas, what will be the reaction of these users/wilderness advocates if we displace them again?

9) Just as the agency has a “minimum tool” rubric for wilderness management work, the agency should consider a “minimum management” rubric for use management. In other words, management should begin with minimal intervention and progress to more restrictive measures. That is certainly not a new concept. What we may want to consider is putting the minimum management concept in writing, with limitation of use one of the last resorts:

Public education – adequate, professional national, state, local Web-based information to educate users and direct use.

User Education – Leave No Trace and knowledge of site-specific management, regulations and concerns.

Buffers

No fish stocking

Dogs on leash

No dogs

No fires

Zoning

Designated sites

Seasonal closures/restrictions

Permits

Group size restrictions

Quotas

Walt Horner,
Colorado Outdoor Training Initiative (COTI)
Indian Peaks Field Trip – Observations, Notes and Commentary

User Interface/Education

- All users that I saw seemed to be really enjoying themselves and the ones I spoke with were very open to the idea (or already aware) of the issues facing our wilderness areas. The parking areas seem like a perfect place to educate users...and weren't being taken full advantage of (yet).
- There is a perfect opportunity for user education as you enter Indian Peaks and pay the concessionaire the \$7 parking fee...and it is being missed. There is little or no signage in the area where vehicles line up to pay the fee (you could have LNT info there), and individuals should be given some informational/collateral materials when they pay the fee and also given some type of "wilderness friendly" reminder (e.g. if the attendant sees a dog in the car, say something like "please don't forget that dogs need to be leashed in the wilderness.")

Trail and Hike

- I can see why Indian Peaks doesn't feel like a wilderness area to the casual user who never travels more than a mile or two from the trailhead. A few reasons, 1) the Brainerd Lake area is very developed and has the feel of a high-use park, and 2) there is very little signage that lets the user know that they are in a location that is special.
- That being said, although I had limited opportunity for solitude during the hike, I arrived with that understanding. If I had to guess, I would say that 99% of the users there understand that this is a high use area...so they won't be disappointed to see a lot of people on the hike. If they want an experience that is true wilderness, they can decide to purchase a permit and get out in the backcountry.
- The trail to Lake Isabelle was in good condition, but once you reached the lake you could really see some significant damage. WRV has done a good job of restoring many of the social trails, but you can anticipate this being a long term process because there is such a draw to "find your own place" by the lake. It seems that additional signage might help, but begs the question of how much signage is too much signage in the wilderness.

General

- Moving the parking area back from Brainerd Lake and providing a safe and easy recreation opportunity around the lake is a fantastic idea. This "recreational buffer" will keep a large number of the users happy, increase the size the high use area and in turn lower user density in the areas closest to the entrance.
- I have been to the IPW 8-10 times in my life and never realized that the USFS had a concessionaire collecting a \$7 fee for parking. I always assumed that the fee was an entrance fee to support the wilderness and the majority of the funds went back to the district. Obviously, I have no idea about the USFS's contractual obligations with the concessionaire, but I would end this relationship asap and work with the friends of groups to staff the booth, collect a day use fee (\$7-10) and use the face time with users for educational purposes.

Walt

**Steve Smith,
The Wilderness Society
Indian Peaks Wilderness field trip notes**

Missouri Lakes

I was impressed with the Forest Service's interest in anticipating negative impacts from use and over-use, even before those impacts get too extensive. The area appears to still be in pretty good shape despite its popularity. It affords an opportunity to learn from other areas where protection, assistance to and management of visitors, and restoration have worked or not worked.

I was surprised to hear the group focusing so specifically, almost exclusively on restrictions--and penalties for violations--as the means of protecting the area from over-use and damage. Certainly, requirements and their reliable enforcement are key parts of land use management, but only parts. The ideal approach, I think, emphasizes a spirit of appreciation and respect for the healthy experience that public land recreation affords--particularly in the unique opportunity providing by wilderness, with proper care and behavior following.

Control of the number of visitors is a very difficult proposition. Increased numbers are better handled by providing and emphasizing a wider array of access points, along with information about the recovery needs of particular areas.

Indian Peaks trip:

My thoughts after this trip were similar to those from the Missouri Lakes trip. Emphasize respect, knowledge, alternative routes and destinations before pressing more severe enforcement or limits on numbers of visitors.

Companion to these concepts is the need to add more designated wilderness in all forests, but particularly in the vicinity of popular or over-used wilderness areas. Whether the wilderness designation or just the wilderness characteristics attract use, having more of it will help spread the visitors around.

As a component of effective planning, management, restoration, and

protection for existing designated wilderness, therefore, the Forest Service should increase its wilderness recommendations during the forest planning processes (revisions and amendments).

Thanks very much. See you on Wednesday.

Steve

**Anne Vickery,
Indian Peaks Wilderness Alliance**

Thanks to all of you who came to visit the Indian Peaks. We were so lucky on weather. Usually at the big Brainard sign there is a stiff wind blowing. This time, nothing! Tues. evening I had an intimate conversation with Eolus, God of the Winds. He promised no wind, and I settled for clouds and a skiff of snow. There were many interesting conversations regarding access, management techniques and education.

ACCESS - To a large degree, the Brainard Lake area and the access to the Four Lakes zone of IP has solved the problem of controlling day use. The parking gate acts as a car counter and to some degree a nose counter of those who can get into the area on busy days. This does not account for the use in other areas of IP. There are at least 5 other accesses to the wilderness. The parking gate also does not account for day vs. overnight use. It will be interesting to know if visitor numbers through the gate have been relatively consistent since the parking gate was first established. In other words, has a predictable controllable level of use been reached? When the new plan is in effect (many years down the road), the question will have to be asked again. Brainard is a good example of an extreme method - controlled parking (access) and thereby controlled use in at least part of a wilderness area. In other access areas to IP, up to 200+ cars line the roads. In the winter there can be over 200 cars along the Brainard road at the parking gate where the road is closed.

This type of access takes lots of planning and lots of money to effect and is not really possible at such trailheads as Holy Cross (Missouri Lakes, Half-Moon access to the peak) or South Colony Lakes. Limiting parking for climbing Bierstadt is going to be difficult. There are other ways to get to the peak beside the established trailhead. The Forest Service would have to consider controlled access a primary factor in budgeting in order to prevent overuse in many wilderness areas.

PERMIT SYSTEMS

Overnight The overnight permit system is working well for IP and public acceptance is increasing, but it does take time and without intensive field monitoring, there may never be 100% compliance. There are 6 places to get permits, two of which, Junco and Monarch Lakes, are not staffed regularly. There have been complaints about not being able to get to these locations at a time they are open to get permits. The District would like to go to a web-based permit system.

Designated Camp Sites - As part of the overnight permit system there are designated campsites at one lake on the east side and three lakes on the west side. These sites control the number of groups camping at each lake at one time. Again, without intensive field monitoring, there are sometimes more campers than campsites.

Zone Concept - The wilderness is divided into 11 zones into which only a certain number of overnight camping groups are allowed. This works well because the permits are the control, but there may always be a few non-complying campers. At first, there were some problems when a concessionaire managed the permit system. Now the Forest Service runs it.

Day-Use- There is some control of day use, but it is limited to permits required for large groups (8-12), either organized groups (camps, schools, clubs, etc) or family and friend groups. There can be only one large day-use group in a Zone at any given time. The Four Lakes Zone allows one large group on each of the three trails (Mitchell, Long, Audubon).. There is no control on individual day use. I think it would be very difficult to institute day-use permits for individuals. The parking gate at Brainard does act as this type of control for the Four Lakes Zone.

MAGNET AREAS - "Magnet Areas" was mentioned often in the discussion and it is a concept that the Forums should concentrate on. It was agreed that magnet areas (14ers, Brainard Lake, etc.) require special attention. But, without greatly increased funding, these areas may never have adequate controls. Parking controls in some areas may work. An overnight permit system with designated campsites could be the answer in other areas (Holy Cross, maybe South Colony Lakes). Regarding the 14ers, day use controls are difficult because there are usually several ways to access a peak. A parking fee (if possible at the site) or an overnight permit system can help limit use. On the ground monitoring is necessary for these techniques to work.

EDUCATION - Environmentally effective wilderness management and education requires on-the ground presence. Trail head information helps, but many visitors don't look at the kiosks unless they are looking for the best way to climb a 14er. On the ground presence means Forest Service personnel who can issue tickets. And of great importance, it means organized volunteer groups. Uniforms for volunteers are critical as they command respect from visitors. While volunteers can not issue tickets they can be the main educational force regarding

the "authority of the resource", Leave No Trace and specific wilderness regulations. The Indian Peaks Wilderness Alliance and the local Forest Service both believe that compliance with regulations and respectful use of the wilderness has greatly increased due to volunteer rangers who are out on the trail and talking to people. Wilderness visitors don't know that volunteers can't issue tickets. Visitors do know that the area is being monitored. Volunteer groups take care and nurturing (good training, thank-you parties), but they are the answer to a lack of Agency funds for wilderness monitoring. Areas without large populations have to be very innovative in order to develop volunteer groups - or they need more Forest Service presence. Question: Should funding for Forest Service presence be increased in areas without a source population for volunteers?
