October 15, 2021

Greetings Julie,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Blue Lakes situation that I would actually call "a crisis of overuse." I also think it is important to note for the record that those of us who have hiked the Blue Lakes Trail for over a decade, saw the degradation of natural resources 6 or more years ago.  This is not a new problem, but has risen to a situation of crisis in a wilderness area.  As you know the Subaru Leave No Trace Hot Spot Team visited Blue Lakes in 2018.  A USFS site is not chosen in the competitive Hot Spot selection if there is not a perceived problem and that was 4 years ago!

- What and where are you seeing issues in the area?

The greatest concern is probably the Lower Lake that has seen overuse - both day and overnight - for years.  Trampled vegetation, bare soils with no vegetation at all, campsites too close to the lake, too close together and too numerous, unburied (and buried) human waste and toilet paper in the campsite and in proximity to water, damage to the lake shoreline due to overuse, improper campsite practices including lack of food storage, unsightly gear, trenches, etc., & flying of drones (illegal in Wilderness) are just some of the problems witnessed.

Second is too many people on the trail such that wilderness qualities no longer exist including solitude and primitive recreation and that hallmark untrammeled qualities.  The chance of seeing wildlife has shrunken to near impossible and quiet is a rare occurrence.  As an individual who has participated in Wilderness Solitude Monitoring for the Ouray District, I can attest to the excessive numbers of people visiting the Blue Lakes Trail daily.  I know of several days of data where over 350 people were encountered in a four hour period.  I suspect with the numbers seen since COVID, visitor numbers are even larger.  Of course such overuse results in erosion. litter, user-created short-cuts, a lack of tranquility and quality wilderness experience, and more.

The parking lot is also a problematic area.  Overcrowding in the actual lot plus overflow parking on grass and vegetation not suitable for parking.  Overuse of the one restroom.

Finally, it's been several years since I have visited the upper lakes because I no longer choose to hike Blue Lakes Trail due to lack of solitude opportunities, witnessing the degradation that breaks my heart, and minimal chance of seeing wildlife which is part of why I go to the forest.  Nevertheless, I am concerned for the high alpine ecosystem with increased visitor use.  Water quality is also a grave concern both in the tundra and at the lower lake.

- Are there specific management recommendations you would like to see implemented to address those issues? If yes, what would those be?

As unpopular as it may be, closing overnight use at the lower lake and possibly the entire basin is now a necessity to protect this fragile area.  After several years of closure to camping and verification/documentation of restoration of vegetation at the lower lake, the USFS could consider permitting overnight camping in a limited number of dispersed, designated sites AND requiring that campers use wag bags and carry out their human waste.

I also suspect that the technology exists to lay a ground-based counter (or perhaps an "eye" counter) across CR 7 installed beyond the last residence to calculate the number of cars that travel the road and when the number of cars deemed reasonable for the parking lot is reached on any particular day, an electronic (solar powered?) sign relays to visitors that the parking lot is full and they must turn back.  It would only take a couple of weeks of issuing citations for non-compliance at the trailhead before visitors get the message that compliance with the restriction is in their best interest and in the interest of the natural environment.

Creating delineated parking spaces at the trailhead could provide some relief from overcrowding.

I would NOT be in favor of creating more parking places or additional toilets since my goal (and I hope the goal of the USFS) is to reduce use to prevent resource damage, minimize wildlife disturbance, and improve visitor satisfaction and experience

- The Blue Lakes are within the Mount Sneffels Wilderness. What is your definition of solitude when recreating within a wilderness area?

I am a solo backpacker with a very high standard for solitude.  I prefer to see no one, however I am not terribly disappointed if I experience 5-8 encounters within 4 miles of a trailhead in a day. If parties are larger than 5 people, the encounter is more challenging.  While camping in Wilderness I prefer sites where I see and hear no one.  I prefer wild flora and fauna as my companions in the Wilderness

- What would be an acceptable number of people you would like to encounter when in the area?

Seeing 30-40 people on a weekday or 60-70 on a weekend would be acceptable though not desirable.

- Is there resource information you are aware of that could prove useful to consider during planning (i.e., presence of species that could affect management decisions, cultural resource information, etc.)

I have ​not been to Blue Lakes since learning about culturally-modified trees from Indigenous first inhabitants​, so please consider this cultural resource.  I am also not aware if a water quality study has been initiated.  If not, such data (from all the lakes and the creek) would be invaluable even without baseline data.  If such data has been collected, I strongly recommend continuing data collection when (hopefully) overnight camping is prohibited to determine if water quality improves.​

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my opinions on a place so treasured by local though sadly appears to currently be a "sacrifice area."

Robyn Cascade

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