

Rocky Mountain National Park Backcountry/Wilderness Management Plan

Rocky Mountain National Park encompasses 265,765 acres atop the Continental Divide located roughly northwest of Denver, Colorado, more than 90 percent of which is managed as wilderness. (Several bills have been introduced in Congress, but the area has yet to be formally designated as wilderness. Nevertheless, NPS policies and rules require the lands to be managed to the same strict standards as if they were designed wilderness.) The park contains countless alpine peaks and is a sought-after destination for climbers, hikers and other backcountry visitors. Annual visitation exceeded 3 million visitors. Despite this high level of visitation, Rocky Mountain National Park did not seek to limit visitation in their most recently adopted Backcountry/Wilderness Management Plan to ensure all visitors experience a uniform level of solitude. Rather, they understood that visitation is not uniform on all days of the year. Solitude can be found in the park on virtually every day, but you may have to go off the beaten path to find it. Rather than impose harsh visitation limits to establish a mandated level of solitude, Rocky Mountain National Park allows visitors to adjust their schedules and goals to find the level of activity and solitude they feel most appropriate.

The following text is taken verbatim from page 2-15 of the adopted Backcountry/Wilderness Management Plan

“2.1.3.1 Solitude

“Within the definition of Wilderness in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act it states, ‘An area of wilderness... has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation;...’

“It might be hard to believe that outstanding opportunities for solitude would be possible with visitation exceeding 3 million a year since 1994. However, many visitors never leave the paved roads and developed areas. National trends do indicate increasing backcountry/wilderness day use and overnight use in the Park has seen a slow, but steady increase. Fortunately, use is highly dependent on things such as season of year, day of week, time of day, weather, and access. Thus, experiencing solitude is possible anywhere in the Park depending on the circumstances.

“Less solitude exists where high concentrations of use occur in popular areas (e.g., Bear Lake, Longs Peak, Lulu City) or within a few miles of a trailhead, generally Management Class 4 areas. Due to access and management actions (e.g., no trails, few facilities) the opportunity is greater