

Perceived and Actual Use in Wilderness Areas

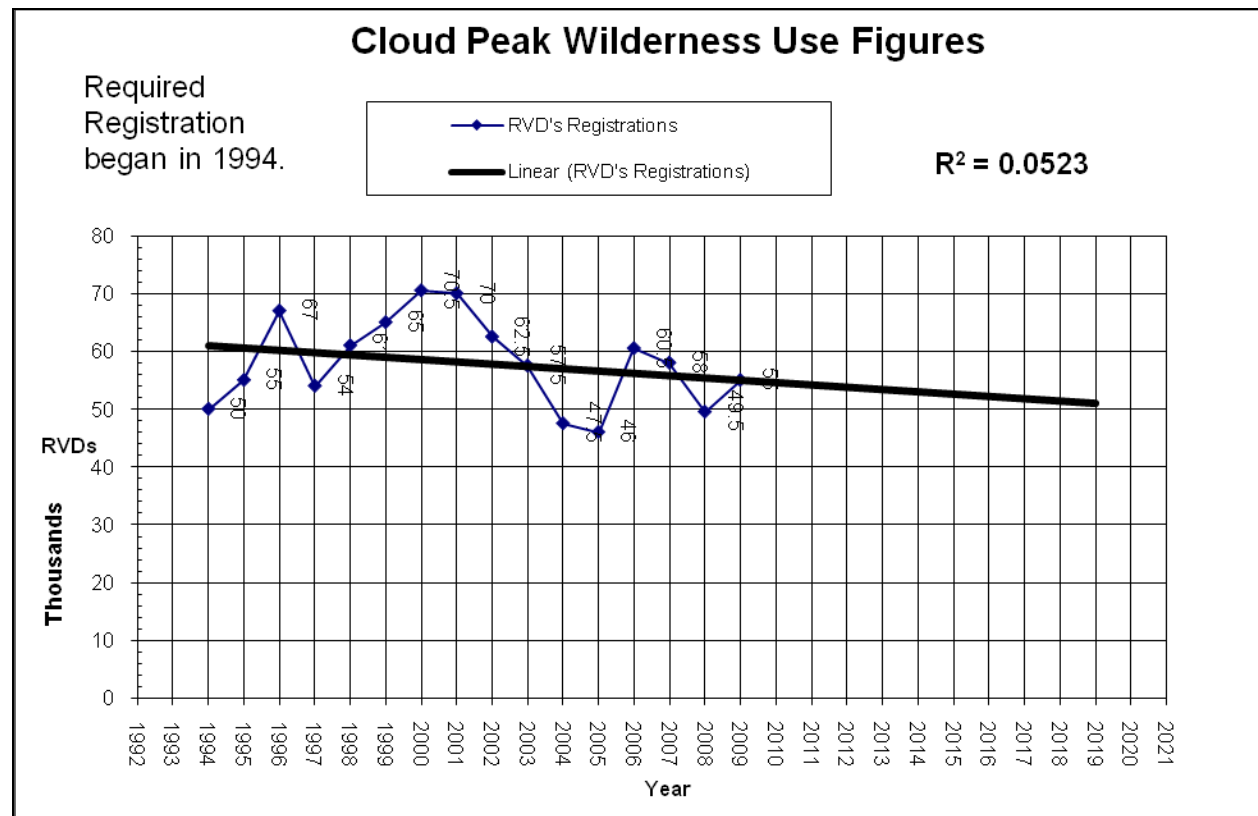
Study data collected by The Wyoming Wilderness Association 2/15/2010.

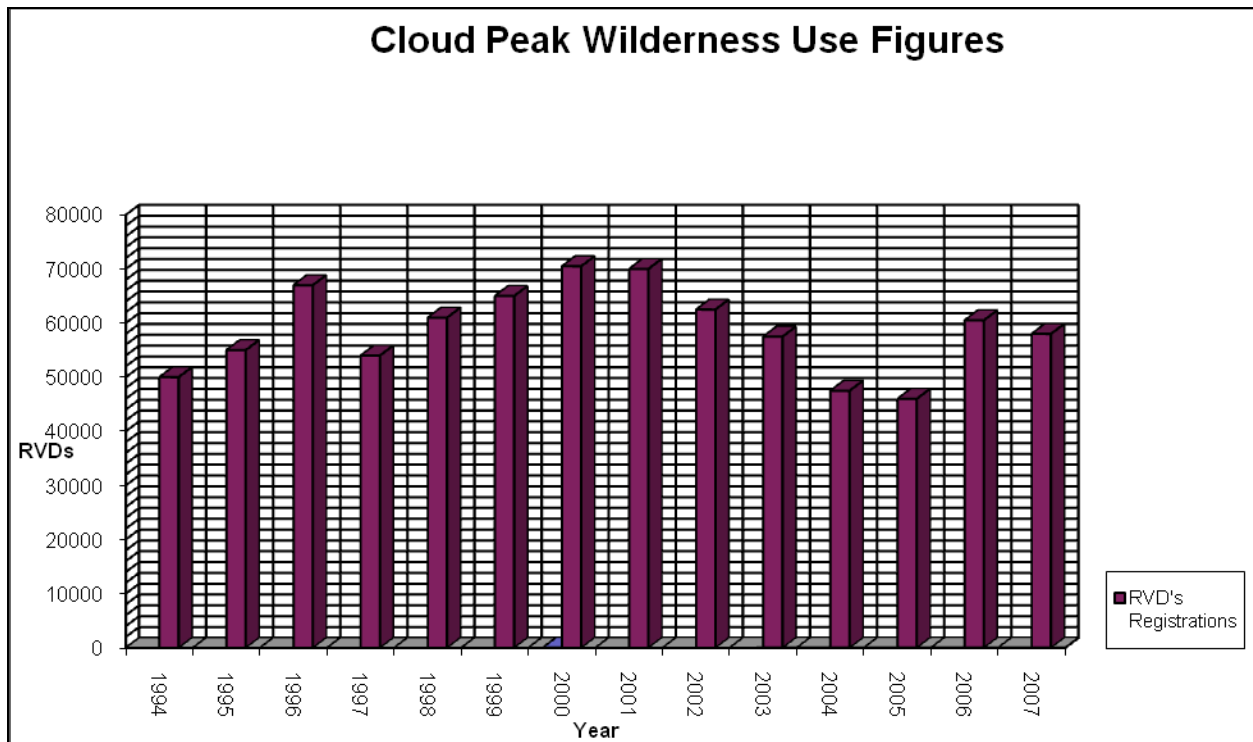
Executive Summary:

It is an often-heard belief that wilderness designation of public lands not previously classified as wilderness leads to overuse by recreationists. In the debate surrounding wilderness designation of the Rock Creek recommended wilderness in the Bighorn National Forest, there is concern that wilderness designation will cause such harm. The high use of certain portions of the Cloud Peak Wilderness (CPW) is sometimes used as evidence to support this claim. To address these concerns, the Wyoming Wilderness Association has consulted Forest Service officials specializing in wilderness areas and conducted research on the effects of wilderness designation on an area's recreational usage. A combination of anecdotal evidence from many combined years of Forest Service expertise and statistical evidence, have led us to conclude that wilderness designation of Rock Creek will not cause a significant increase in recreational usage or significant resource damage.

Wilderness Designation: Will it cause a spike in use in an area?

Self-registration for visits to the CPW did not begin until 1994, 10 years after wilderness designation. There are 15 years of data for CPW visitation, and although visitation numbers fluctuate, the trend over the past 15 years shows a slight decline in the average number of users. ⁱ





The two graphs (above) from the Bighorn National Forest Service depict the decline in registered visitor use in the Cloud Peak Wilderness area since registration began. The first chart is a line graph showing the actual (blue line) historic wilderness use numbers, with the linear (black line) predicts future wilderness use numbers. Based on current statistical wilderness-user registration numbers, the future number of Cloud Peak Wilderness users is predicted to continue to decline.

The second graph shows the overall recreation visitor days (RVD's) of the Cloud Peak Wilderness, on a year-by-year basis from 1994 to 2007. A gradual increase in registered recreation visitor days (determined based upon the number of visitors and the duration of their visit), occurred from 1994-2000, but from 2001-2005, there was a sustainable decline in recreation visitor days. The 2006-2007 data shows higher RVD's but substantially lower registration numbers than the recorded-registration use in 2000.

The conclusion drawn from this data is that registered visitor use in the Cloud Peak Wilderness is generally declining and is predicted to continue declining over the next decade.

Wilderness Use Study, Rattlesnake Wilderness, Missoula, MT:

After speaking to Craig Cope, Wilderness Coordinator for the Bighorn National Forest, Ralph Swain, Region 2 Wilderness Program Manager, and David Cole, prominent Research Geographer with the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, one study found tracked visitor use before and after wilderness designation of the Rattlesnake Wilderness near Missoula, MT.

The study states that although it is a common belief that wilderness designation of an area leads to increased recreational use, there are few use statistics to support that claim. However, reliable use statistics are not often available for an area prior to designation. What evidence does exist

suggests that the “designation effect” is not as pronounced as many believe and may be the result of factors ranging beyond the designation itself.

The Rattlesnake National Recreation Area and Wilderness (RNRAW) outside of Missoula, the subject of the first year-long study of use patterns occurred in 1977, prior to public discussion about wilderness designation. The same study design was used four years later, in 1981, following wilderness designation. In 1977, an estimated 6,700 visits were made to the area, while an estimated 5,100 visits were made in 1981, the year following formal wilderness designation of RNRW.ⁱⁱ Recreational use did not increase with wilderness designation; in fact, use declined.

Cole believes that this study is relevant to Rock Creek for several reasons.ⁱⁱⁱ Access to both the Rattlesnake Wilderness and Rock Creek recommended wilderness is indirect: there are no paved roads or large parking lots butted up against either area. Additionally, both areas are fairly close to town and do not encompass high-alpine peaks and lakes that define many wilderness areas. Both areas are recreational areas used mostly by local people who know the area.

High Use of Wilderness Areas: Management & Wilderness Standards

High use of wilderness is most pronounced near metropolitan areas, although some areas in the CPW have experienced long term impacts due to ease of access (such as the West Tensleep corridor access area). Since the prohibition of campfires above 9,200 feet in the CPW, wilderness rangers are noting decreased visitor impact. High use in wilderness areas near metropolitan areas, and also in the CPW, is likely due to easy access. Rock Creek does not feature this type of easy access. To reach Rock Creek, a person must drive several miles on primitive roads/ATV trails, or hike about 1 to 1.5 miles through the Bud Love Wildlife Habitat Management Area or the HF Bar Ranch. Additionally, as Craig Cope, Bighorn National Forest Wilderness Director, points out, Rock Creek is much lower in elevation and is more resilient to visitor impacts due to a longer growing season.^{iv}

In order to meet wilderness standards, the Forest Service generally prefers to use indirect management actions, such as leaving primitive roads, rather than implementing a permit system, to limit use of an area. For example, in designated wilderness areas, it is more appropriate to try to keep the number of visitors at a level that the natural resource can handle by not improving the primitive access routes into areas such as Rock Creek.^v

It is also important to note that high use is not *only* occurring in designated wilderness areas in the Bighorn National Forest. Outside of the CPW, high use is occurring on Powder River Road, and at Sourdough, Elgin Park, Hunter, Battlepark, and Ten Sleep Canyon. Because Rock Creek does not feature many of the wilderness traits that draw visitors, such as high-elevation lakes for fishing and peaks for climbing, the Forest Service does not consider Rock Creek at threat from future overuse. According to Ralph Swain, the FS Rocky Mountain Regional Wilderness Program Manager, wilderness areas that receive the highest use, and the resulting access pressures, are usually centered around high-profile areas, such as alpine peaks and popular fishing lakes.^{vi} In the Cloud Peak Wilderness, this phenomenon is illustrated by the vast difference in usage between the Cloud Peak/Bomber Mountain areas, along with the corridors directly accessing these features, and the backcountry areas and access corridors away from these popular peaks. While Rock Creek contains outstanding

scenic views and unique recreation opportunities, it does not contain the type of high-profile features that typically attract most wilderness visitors.^{vii}

Although human enjoyment and recreation in wilderness is an important component of our nation's wilderness areas, it is important to note that wilderness is multi-purpose, and that there are other important reasons for wilderness designation of Rock Creek. Craig Cope states that a major reason Rock Creek is recommended for wilderness is because it is an unique ecosystem which will protect important plant and animal populations.^{viii} The high-quality elk security habitat in Rock Creek creates a vital link for elk migrating between the CPW and the Bud Love. The uniqueness of this highly varied ecosystem is a primary reason Rock Creek should become designated as wilderness.

Conclusion:

One major step in assuring dispersal of use lies in public education and awareness. WWA has been, and will continue, taking every opportunity to educate the public about minimum impact camping techniques (Leave No Trace) as well as all the viable access points into Rock Creek. Since we value this area so much, we are eager to inform people about all the accesses to the area: from Penrose Trail via Willow Park, from the HF Bar up the South Fork of Rock Creek, up North Sayles Creek from the Bud Love, and the four points on the south side of the area from 4-wheel drive roads 396 and 388, leading to Triangle Park, Keno Creek, and the South Fork of Rock Creek.

WWA realizes that overuse of an area can be detrimental, and we acknowledge the public's desire to keep Rock Creek out of the spotlight. Our view is that while it may receive some initial attention and publicity if designated (it will be Wyoming's first Wilderness designation in 26 years, after all), it will not be overwhelmed with use to the point that the resource will be degraded and the wild qualities of the area will be compromised.

Also, looking at the long-term vision for Rock Creek, WWA believes that pursuing this designation right now while the area remains wild and pristine is worth the minor spotlight associated with that. If this area is not permanently protected, a future spotlight may illuminate the possibilities for timber, mineral development, ATV use, or road building, which will permanently compromise the uniquely primitive habitat, traditional uses, and recreation opportunities that Rock Creek provides. In other words, drawing a little attention to it now to preserve it as it is in perpetuity far outweighs the attention that may arise in the future from development and motorized access pressures which would permanently alter this primitive landscape.

WWA concludes that an increase in use of Rock Creek following wilderness designation is not likely. Based on the physical features present in the area, data from CPW usage over the past 15 years, and comparable data from the Rattlesnake Wilderness, we find no evidence to suggest a significant increase in Rock Creek's recreational use.

References:

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- Cope, Craig C. Wilderness, Recreation, Special Uses, U.S. Forest Service Powder River Ranger District. Buffalo, WY. 307-684-4632. ccope@fs.fed.gov.
- McCool, Stephen F. “Does Wilderness Designation Lead to Increased Recreational Use?” 1985. *Journal of Forestry*. Vol 83.1 (39-41).
- Swain, Ralph. Region 2 Wilderness Program Manager, Denver, CO, 303-275-5058. rswain@fs.fed.us.

ⁱ Cope, Craig C. Wilderness, Recreation, Special Uses, U.S. Forest Service Powder River Ranger District. February 10, 2010. Email Correspondence.

ⁱⁱ McCool, Stephen F. “Does Wilderness Designation Lead to Increased Recreational Use?” 1985. *Journal of Forestry*. Vol 83.1 (39-41).

ⁱⁱⁱ Cole, David. Research Geographer, Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Missoula, MT. February 10, 2010. Phone Correspondence.

^{iv} Cope, Craig C. Wilderness, Recreation, Special Uses, U.S. Forest Service Powder River Ranger District. February 10, 2010. Email Correspondence.

^v Cope, Craig C. Wilderness, Recreation, Special Uses, U.S. Forest Service Powder River Ranger District. February 10, 2010. Email Correspondence.

^{vi} Swain, Ralph, Region 2 Wilderness Program Manager. Denver, CO. December 2007. Response to Stakeholder’s Concerns, WWA.

^{vii} Swain, Ralph, Region 2 Wilderness Program Manager. Denver, CO. December 2007. Response to Stakeholder’s Concerns, WWA.

^{viii} Swain, Ralph, Region 2 Wilderness Program Manager. Denver, CO. December 2007. Response to Stakeholder’s Concerns, WWA.

PRODUCED BY
KENDRA KALLEVIG CHILDERS AND SARA DOMEK
WYOMING WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION
PO BOX 6588
SHERIDAN, WY 82801
307 672-2751
kendra@wildwyo.org sara@wildwyo.org
www.wildwyo.org