

Backcountry Use

RESOURCE BRIEF

Importance

About 95% of Yellowstone is considered “backcountry”—land and waters away from roads and boardwalks that remain undeveloped except for 37 patrol cabins, five fire lookouts, and several hundred miles of trails. Backcountry visitors can gain a better understanding of and appreciation for the ecological processes that operate on a large scale to make Yellowstone what it is. Although less than 10% of Yellowstone visitors venture into the backcountry, they encounter the most pristine parts of the park and its most unhabituated wildlife in circumstances where rules are difficult to enforce; backcountry use can therefore have a disproportionate impact on the park’s resources.



Trends

Similar to trends at other western parks, overnight backcountry use in Yellowstone peaked in 1977 at more than 55,000 “people use nights” (the total number of nights spent in the backcountry) per year. Since 1990, people use nights have fluctuated between 34,000 and 46,000 with an overall downward trend (Fig. 1). Although most of Yellowstone’s backcountry visitors do not spend the night there, little is known about day use because permits are not required. Backcountry use is sometimes affected by the need to close trails or campsites because of wildland fire or the presence of bears, cougars, or denning wolves. The number of outfitters authorized to conduct backcountry trips has remained relatively constant during the last decade, but the percentage of backcountry users that travel with an outfit-

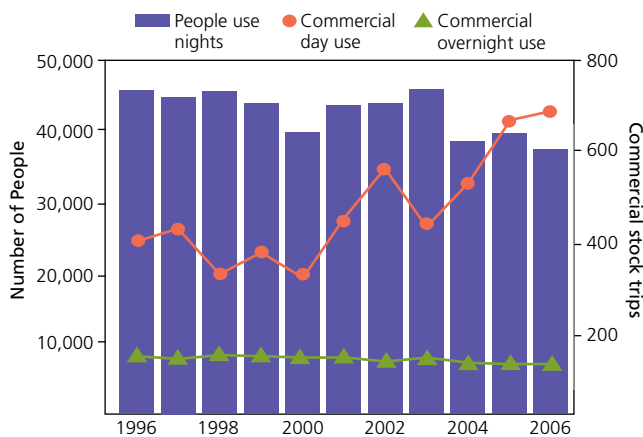


Figure 1. Trend in overnight backcountry use compared to number of day and overnight commercial stock trips, 1995–2006.

ter rather than independently has increased. The number of commercial trips with saddle or pack animals has also grown. In 2006, outfitters led a total of 799 stock trips; 690 were day trips accompanied by an average of 8 animals (Fig. 1).

Discussion

Yellowstone staff promote the Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics program. To reduce the impact of backcountry camping and conflicts with bears, camping is allowed only at designated campsites except during the winter. In addition to indicating their expected itinerary on a permit, overnight users are required to watch a video on backcountry regulations and safety. Outfitters and their guides must attend an annual training session. The use of stock is of concern partly because of its role in spreading non-native plant species. Hay cannot be taken into the backcountry and off-trail day rides are subject to restrictions.

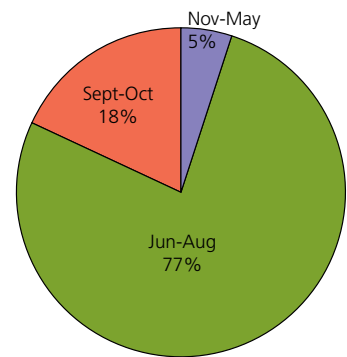


Figure 2. 2006 backcountry use by season.

Slough Creek and Shoshone Lake are the most popular areas in the park for overnight use; those 27 sites are usually fully occupied during the peak season. All sites are equipped with a pole for hanging food and other attractants out of bears’ reach. The sites have varying restrictions on campfires, group size, stock, boating access, and length of stay. The use of non-motorized boats on the channel between Lewis and Shoshone lakes is the only boating permitted on park rivers.