

Are bear-proof food storage canisters being used effectively on the Lost Coast Trail?

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Introduction

The King Range National Conservation Area, managed by the BLM, stretches for 35 miles along the northern coast of California. The popular Lost Coast Trail (LCT) hugs this rugged and dramatic coastline, attracting thousands of day-hikers and backpackers each summer. As overnight recreational use of the LCT has increased, so have encounters with black bears entering campsites in search of food.

As one part of a larger visitor study, we investigated 1) the extent to which overnight visitors used bear-proof food storage canisters; 2) why visitors did not use a canister; 3) how frequently bears visited campsites and how frequently bears obtained food; 4) whether visitors supported the required use of bear-proof food storage canisters; and 5) whether visitors supported the installation of bear-proof food storage lockers along the LCT. We also examined some group and trip characteristics associated with the variables listed above.

Methods

A graduate student contacted LCT users on a stratified random sampling basis from May 24 to August 12, 2003. Contacted visitors were asked to provide a name and address where a detailed questionnaire was mailed to them after their trip. Up to four individuals per group were asked to participate. A reminder postcard, and if necessary a follow-up questionnaire, was mailed to each participant. We collected 393 useable names and addresses. Of the 283 completed surveys received (a 72% response rate), 199 were from overnight campers, which comprises the sample for this analysis.

Results

Nearly 84% of overnight visitors reported using bear-proof food storage canisters. Of these, 70% rented the canister(s); 27% owned the canister(s), and 3% both owned and rented canisters. Eighteen visitors (9% of our sample) said they did not know they were required to use a bear-proof canister; this was also the most common reason given for not using one (13 visitors), followed by not having/owning one (5), not wanting to carry the extra weight (3), and canisters being too expensive (3). Nine percent (9%) of our sample also incorrectly identified hanging as a correct method of food storage along the LCT. Fourteen groups reported that a bear visited their campsite; 13 of those groups used a canister. Nevertheless, 3 groups using a canister reported that a bear still obtained food. These visitors indicated that despite using a canister, some food was inadvertently left out of the canister, or there was too much food and/or trash to fit into the canister.

Although only 26% of visitors reported reading the Leave No Trace Outdoor Skills and Ethics pamphlet provided by the BLM, visitors who did read it were more likely than expected to use a canister than those who did not read it (chi-square=6.3). First-time visitors to the LCT were also more likely than expected to use a canister than were return visitors (chi-square=17.7). Primary information source used by visitors in trip planning influenced their use of canisters (chi-square=39.4). All 37 visitors who reported the BLM as their primary source of trip planning information used a canister; those who reported friends or relatives as their primary information source were less likely than expected to use a canister. Miles traveled to visit the LCT also influenced use of canisters (chi-square=58.8); visitors living within 100 miles of the LCT were less likely than expected to use a canister, while those living more than 100 miles away were more likely to use a canister.

Support for the required use of canisters was strong—85% of visitors indicated they would somewhat (20.5%) or strongly (64.5%) support the required use of canisters. Support for the installation of bear-proof food storage lockers at popular backcountry campsites was mixed: 49% of visitors were in favor, 32% were opposed, and 19% were neutral.