

Martin, Steven and Carolyn Widner. 1998. Final Research Report on the 1997 Lost Coast Trail Visitor Study. Report submitted to the Bureau of Land Management, King Range National Conservation Area.

Summary

Lost Coast Trail visitors tend to be experienced backcountry visitors in general, yet most are first-time visitors to the Lost Coast Trail, and most of the rest have visited only once or twice. It is likely that much of these visitors' previous backcountry experience has come in environments that are unlike the Lost Coast Trail, since there are few coastal backcountry or wilderness areas left in this country. Visitors with previous backcountry experience should be easier to educate about minimum impact practices, but extra effort will need to be made to instruct them about practices that are appropriate for coastal areas with which they are likely unfamiliar, as well as to break them of habits that may be appropriate for more typical backcountry areas but inappropriate for a coastal oceanfront environment (*e.g.* human waste disposal).

Solitude is a highly desired outcome sought by Lost Coast Trail visitors, and is the one type of experience that visitors rated the importance of higher than they rated their ability to obtain it. However, many of the steps that managers might consider taking to preserve opportunities for solitude could well interfere with another aspect of the Lost Coast Trail experience highly valued by visitors--autonomy and personal freedom. Reading the open-ended comments that visitors made in response to several questions in the survey, it is clear that visitors cherish the autonomy and opportunity for freedom from undue regulation on their behavior that is available on the Lost Coast Trail. This suggests that managers will have to carefully weigh the benefits of restricting use to preserve opportunities for solitude against the costs that such restrictions may have relative to the freedom and autonomy of visitors.

Respondents also showed a surprising degree of attachment to the area, especially considering that a majority of visitors were visiting for the first time. The item garnering the largest percentage of respondents was "This place says a lot about who I am." This suggests that people identify so closely with the area that the area becomes important to them in terms of self-identity. When people express such a high degree of attachment to an area they also tend to oppose changes in the area. Managers will have to move slowly in implementing management changes in an area with such a highly attached constituency.

Not surprisingly, the most common activity reported was hiking. However, wildlife viewing also showed up as an activity in which fully 95% of all respondents participate in--43% as the primary reason for their trip. Sixty nine percent (69%) of visitors participate in nature study, 66% in tidepool exploration, and 50% in "collecting." These are activities that lend themselves well to interpretation, especially since only one out of five people who participate in tidepool exploration (for example) said that it was a major reason for their trip. People who engage in activities such as wildlife viewing, collecting, tidepool exploration, and nature study, but who don't list that activity as the major reason for their trip, represent a segment of visitors who 1) may not know a whole lot about that activity; 2) apparently are interested enough in the activity to participate, and therefore may be interested in learning more; and 3) since they may not know a lot about the activity but are still engaging in it may represent the potential for causing resource damage by not engaging in the activity in an environmentally sound manner. For example, 53% of respondents said they participated in tidepool exploration but that it was not a major reason for the trip. As casual participants in the activity, these visitors may not know how to go about tidepool exploration in a manner that minimizes their impact on the resources. Likewise with wildlife viewing--52% of visitors say they did it but that it wasn't a major reason for the trip. Are these visitors, simply through ignorance, disturbing the very wildlife

they seek to observe? We feel certain that the vast majority of visitors would not want to cause disturbance or resource damage, but as casual participants may be doing so unwittingly. Efforts to interpret wildlife, tidepool ecosystems, and so on can include an educational component that informs visitors of the proper etiquette for engaging in these activities. There is a large segment of visitors who are primed for such information due to their expressed interest in these activities, and who have also expressed an interest in information on the natural history and features of the area. This information could be presented in a publication (see next paragraph), and/or in a separate interpretive brochure or series of brochures.

Regarding information use and preferences, both first-time visitors and experienced visitors commented that road and trail maps and directions need to be improved--made more clear, specific, and detailed. The two types of information most desired by both experienced and first-time visitors are information on specific trail conditions and descriptions, and information on natural history and features of the area. The next two most desired types of information are directions to trailheads, and weather conditions. Both groups indicated that after friends/relatives and personal experience, maps and the BLM were the next two most often used and most preferred sources of information. Perhaps the BLM can produce a more detailed guide to the Lost Coast Trail, and include specific information on trail conditions, directions to the trailheads, and weather conditions, as well as interpretive information on the natural and cultural history and features of the area, guidelines for low impact camping practices, and hiker shuttle services. Such a publication could be sold at a modest price to recover publication costs.

It is sometimes helpful to compare the perceptions of experienced visitors with those of first-time visitors in order to assess trends in conditions. We compared these two groups of visitors on selected questions and found the following. Experienced visitors are more likely (than first-timers) to say that they saw too many surfers and too many OHVs. This suggests one of two things (or a combination of these two things): that the number of surfers and OHVs is increasing, and/or that the visitor population is changing and visitors who are sensitive to crowding from surfers or OHVs are no longer visiting the area as much as before. Similarly, experienced visitors were more likely than first-timers to complain that litter and human waste were problems. Again, this suggests that litter and human waste may be more of a problem now than in the past (or that first-time visitors are less sensitized to litter and human waste).

It can also sometimes be helpful to compare the perceptions of local and non-local users on selected issues. We compared these two groups on the question of the need to limit use, strategies for limiting use, and willingness to pay to use the area. Locals were defined as residents of Mendocino and Humboldt counties. We found no differences between these groups on the need to limit use to the area, or on the need to limit group size. Only 27 to 30% of both groups felt there was currently a need to limit use, while only 18 to 23% felt that use limits should never be considered for the area now or at any time in the future. Half of both groups felt that use limits were not needed now but should be imposed in the future if and when overuse occurs. Of those in both groups who felt a group size limit was needed, a majority of both groups felt that a limit of 6 to 10 people was preferred.

Differences between the two groups (locals and non-locals) on support for or opposition to specific use limit strategies were significant in two cases, and marginally significant in two more. The most significant differences between locals and non-locals were 1) locals were much more likely (53% to 32%) to strongly oppose a permit system based on a drawing or lottery; and 2) non-locals were much more likely (34% to 17%) to strongly support a permit system based on a reservation system. Marginally significant differences between the groups were 1) locals were much more likely (51% to 35%) to strongly oppose charging a flat rate user fee; and 2) locals were also generally less supportive and more opposed than non-locals to charging a higher fee at busier times. This difference also

showed up in the question on willingness to pay--locals were less likely to indicate a willingness to pay to use the area than were non-locals, although interestingly a majority of both groups did indicate that they would be willing to pay to use the area, and there was no difference in the average amount per person per day that locals and non-locals said they were willing to pay. Finally, and not surprisingly, we found that if a use permit system were implemented, locals would be more likely than non-locals to visit the area even if they failed to obtain a permit. In conclusion, differences between locals and non-locals on use limit issues and willingness to pay are not very pronounced, with the largest difference being that locals are less likely to support fees in general and more likely to oppose fees as a method for limiting use.

Conflict was felt by about half of all users to the area, with conflict due to perceived resource impacts receiving the highest percentage of visitors reporting this to be a problem. Of the 43% of visitors that reported this aspect of conflict to be a problem, 38% of them indicated that hikers and backpackers were the primary user group responsible for the impacts. This is not surprising since the highest percentage of users to the Lost Coast are hikers and backpackers. However, it is surprising that for the two remaining index measures of conflict, the behavior of others, and crowding, the user group most blamed for these types of conflict were OHV users. It is surprising because OHV groups were the least encountered of any of the user group. The implication for managers is that although OHV use on the Lost Coast Trail is low, the resulting impact for visitors is great. In other words, although visitors had relatively few encounters with OHVs, those encounters had a disproportionately negative effect on visitors. Given the relatively light use of the area by OHVs, and the disproportionate amount of conflict this use causes, the BLM should carefully consider the appropriateness of continued OHV use of Black Sands Beach.

On the issue of limiting use along the Lost Coast Trail, most visitors agreed that controls were not needed now, but should be implemented in the future if overuse occurs. Open-ended comments from visitors indicated that the two primary indicators of overuse for visitors were trash and damage to the resource. The most frequent indicator was trash, and many visitors indicated that they would assess damage to the resource in terms of too much trash in the area. This perception of trash as resource damage is very different from an ecological perspective that views impacts to soil, vegetation, and water as primary indicators of resource damage, and trash as more of a sociological problem. In addition, if visitors are indicating that they assess overuse by the amount of trash on the trail, then strategies for limiting use may not be the solution to the problem of "crowding." When asked what they think should be done to limit use if the need arises, most visitors suggest that providing information regarding peak use times and allowing visitors to spread themselves out more is preferable to limiting access. One implication for management is that visitors to the Lost Coast Trail who highly value freedom from rules and regulations, and who may perceive trash as more of an indicator of overuse than simply numbers of visitors, might better be managed through light-handed techniques that focus on the old "pack-it-in-pack-it-out" rule, and not so much on the actual limitation of visitors to the area. However, if actual numbers of people would need to be limited, visitors indicated that they would prefer either the first-come first-served method or the reservation system over paying fees or limiting group sizes.

Visitors were generally highly satisfied with the management of the area, indicating that most issues were not a problem. Keeping with the above discussion, the issue that was reported as the biggest problem was litter. Since visitors are much less likely to litter an area that is clean to start with, and more likely to litter an area that is already littered, an early season clean-up of the area by backcountry personnel, followed by a concerted and continuing effort to promote a pack-it-in pack-it-out ethic is probably the best way to approach this problem. An annual clean-up day that involves locals and tackles the areas closest to the trailheads may also give people a sense of stewardship or ownership of the resource, which in turn often results in a user population that takes better care of that

resource. Poorly marked trails, and a lack of information (about the Lost Coast area, trails, and periods of heavy use) were the two other problems receiving the highest percentages of visitors indicating that it was a major or moderate problem. Providing better information, perhaps in the form of improved trailhead boards, brochures, or a more detailed guide, could help to alleviate this problem.

Other information that should be included in a publication, brochure, or trailhead contact station is information concerning low-impact camping practices specific to an ocean front area. As indicated above most visitors to the area are experienced in backcountry camping practices but have little or no site-specific experience. The result is a visitor population that knows little about the correct low-impact camping practices for a backcountry ocean front area.