

Limits of Acceptable Change: Cohutta LAC Summary

SUMMARY OF LAC PROCESS COMPLETED FOR COHUTTA WILDERNESS ON THE CHATTAHOOCHEE NATIONAL FOREST IN GEORGIA

Introduction

This document summarizes the planning effort used and the future management conditions desired for a new approach to management of recreation use in the Cohutta Wilderness.

In September 2000, managers of the Cohutta Wilderness reviewed wilderness recreation use and the attendant environmental conditions resulting from that use and determined that a new approach to management was indicated. It was decided by area managers to utilize the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) process in development of a management plan to halt and reverse the environmental conditions observed and to prevent further resource damage from the unlimited recreation use that was occurring. This document describes the process used and the recommendations arising from this process.

The Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) planning process is a nine-step process beginning with identification of issues, concerns and opportunities and ending with monitoring and evaluation. Reference General Technical Report INT-176. The process demands a citizen-based Task Force as a major component of the process input information. The results of meetings with the Cohutta Wilderness citizen-based Task Force Team during each of these nine steps are described in the remainder of this document. A project file of this process has been maintained in the Cohutta Ranger District office and is available for inspection.

The project with scoping letters being sent to 400 individuals, agencies, and organizations, both local and from distant metropolitan areas, e.g. Atlanta, GA and Chattanooga, TN. These individuals, recreation-oriented clubs, Scout and church groups, and governmental agencies were all known to have an interest in the Cohutta Wilderness and might be affected by management changes on this area. Additionally, articles describing the proposed project were sent to eight local area newspapers for publication. Recipients of this information were invited to attend any one, or more, of three meetings conducted by the District in December 2000. Furthermore, respondents were asked to send their issues and concerns to the District office prior to the scheduled meetings. At the three public meetings, attended by a total of 139 people, the purpose and need of the project and the LAC process were explained and all persons wishing to participate further were invited to become part of the Task Force.

Following the public meetings additional comments were received and 49 people indicated their desire to be on the Task Force. The first meeting of the Task Force was held in March 2001 with 35 people attending. The volunteer citizen-based task force was first charged with developing a desired future condition for the Wilderness. During their additional ten meetings the Task Force was asked to establish a table of standards and guidelines for the desired future conditions and to propose management actions to meet the standards and guidelines. They were also asked to define and choose between various alternatives for management and to present their recommendations for management to area managers.

Step 01. Area Concerns and Issues.

Overuse, Limit numbers of people, limit group sizes, limit access, define use areas, what numbers of people are acceptable, have use restrictions, have user fees.

What are the effects of people on plants and animals (wildlife), preserve native species, impacts of recreation use on environment.

Concerns were raised about air quality, water quality and aquatic species.

Step 02. Opportunity Classes.

Three Opportunity Classes were defined by the Task Force. They are briefly described below.

Opportunity Class I: This opportunity class exists throughout the Wilderness out of sight and sound (300-500 feet) from entry portals, designated trails, perimeter boundary roads, named rivers, designated campsites and major destination attractions, e.g. Jacks River Falls and Bray Fields. The area in this class is characterized as an unmodified natural environment and is, essentially, without trails. Ecological processes operate unrestrained by human actions. This class provides the highest quality natural experience that can be found in this wilderness.

Opportunity Class II: The area is characterized as a predominately unmodified natural, primitive environment where ecological processes act unimpaired by human actions. Exceptions will occur on the developed trail system and for several yards on each side of them where campsites exist. Resource damage off trail and away from campsites recovers annually. This opportunity class will show evidence of past and present human use in wilderness. Designated, constructed and minimally marked hiking and equestrian trails that do not, ordinarily, receive a lot of traffic, e.g., Rough Ridge Trail, Tearbitches Trail and East Cowpen Trail along with other trails designated on the Cohutta

Wilderness map as with light or moderate use are examples. Occasional campsites will be seen along these trails.

Opportunity Class III: This area is characterized as an essentially unmodified natural environment where ecological processes operate freely. However, some sites in this area have been substantially affected by the actions of past and present users. Impacts include loss of vegetation and soil movement along travel routes and at campsites and scenic attractions. These impacts persist from year to year. This opportunity class includes entry portals and associated trailheads, land adjacent to the perimeter boundary roads, high to high-moderate use designated trails, river corridors and their floodplains and scenic attractions and high-density camping areas near the attractions. Trails in this class are constructed and maintained to wilderness standards, receive a large amount of traffic and are minimally marked, e.g. Beech Bottom Trail, Chestnut Lead Trail, Hickory Creek Trail, Jacks River Trail, Panther Creek Falls Trail and Conasauga River Trail. Trails appear as natural features, but show evidence of extensive human use. Many campsites show soil and vegetation damage due to heavy recreation use and may be closed by management for needed rehabilitation.

Step 03. Indicators.

Indicators determined and agreed to by the Task Force are shown on the Table of Indicators, Standards and Guidelines in Step 05.

Step 04. Inventory of Existing Conditions.

Inventory data was presented for campsite conditions, hiking and equestrian trails, wildlife, fisheries, water quality, air quality. A general overview of forest health was also given.

Step 05. Table of Indicators, Standards and Guidelines (See separate handout)

Step 06. Alternative Allocations of Opportunity Classes.

Six alternatives were considered for management of Opportunity Classes in the Cohutta Wilderness. Three alternatives, Alternative A, no action, Alternative B, management of three Opportunity Classes, I, II and III and Alternative F, in which in a portion of OC III is designated as an alternative area allocation favoring ecological conditions over recreation conditions is embedded were carried forward for effects analysis.

Alternative A: No Action Alternative. Under this alternative there would be no major changes in current management of the Cohutta Wilderness. The Wilderness would not be allocated to Opportunity Classes providing differing visitor experiences, nor would there be any defined restrictions on visitor use for the Wilderness. The general effects of this management alternative would be to extend the current conditions of unregulated visitor numbers, visitor camping and meeting minimal requirements of enforcement of visitor behavior.

Alternative B: The Cohutta Wilderness would be managed as three opportunity classes i.e., I, II and III. Under this alternative the wilderness would be defined with respect to visitor opportunities. These "opportunities" would provide a range of experiences from the most primitive and challenging, Opportunity Class I, to the least primitive, least challenging and most socially (solitude and group sizes) intrusive, Opportunity Class III. An intermediate Opportunity Class, OC II, would be limited to the major hiking and equestrian trail system and would, essentially, connect OC I and OC III.

Alternative C: The Cohutta Wilderness would consist of three Opportunity Classes, I, II and III, plus an Opportunity Class, IV for the Benton MacKaye Trail. There was no consensus by the Task Force to pursue this proposed alternative.

Alternative D: The Cohutta Wilderness would be managed as a single opportunity class, either Opportunity Class I or II or III. This alternative would not provide a range of opportunity classes to meet the needs and expectations of the large variety of visitors to the area. The limitations imposed by this type of wilderness would decrease wilderness visitation for many visitors from adjacent urban areas and thus lessen their opportunity to learn more about wilderness values. For these reasons this alternative was not carried forward.

Alternative E: The Cohutta Wilderness would be managed as a combination of Opportunity Classes I and II, I and III, or II and III. This alternative does not provide for transitions between various wilderness opportunities for solitude or for recreational experiences. For these reasons this alternative was not carried forward.

Alternative F: The Cohutta Wilderness would be managed as three distinct Opportunity Classes, I, II and III. In addition, the Task Force determined there should be an alternative allocation within Opportunity Class III. (This alternative is similar to Alternative B above with the exception of the establishment of an embedded, smaller, opportunity subclass in OC III favoring management in an ecological direction). This alternative allocation subdivision of OC III is defined as OC IIIA. See detailed description in Step 08 below.

Step 07. Identification of Management Actions Needed*

*For Alternative A management direction would continue per present direction without need for additional actions. The management actions proposed below are suggested for both Alternatives B and F if either is to be implemented to meet the desired future conditions stated in their respective Opportunity Class descriptions.

Education:

- Construct an official FS website to include a listing of all rules, regulations and guidelines including details for campfires, equestrian usage, bear proof storage containers or food containment systems.
- Provide information about group size limits, Leave-No-Trace (LNT) principles, and pertinent information necessary prior to peak season use. Have information available by printout from website to include camping, hiking, horse use, canoe use, permit requirements, designated camping areas, no camping areas. Describe cautions to and responsibilities of users. Describe and display the purpose(s) of Wilderness.
- Develop local educational school programs, to include Wilderness information and values, instilling wilderness pride and stewardship concepts. Impact Monster programs to schools should be implemented.
- Train and provide volunteers to offer education programs,
- Give talks to Scout troops, church groups, expand school programs to areas other than Murray county, provide wilderness orientation classes before and/or during peak season usage.
- Interpretive displays at appropriate FS Ranger District offices should emphasize LNT principles rather than “marketing” wilderness. Similar displays could be placed at major recreation stores, e.g. REI, or The Bargain Barn, smaller displays at local hunter-fisher outlet stores.
- Improve trailhead signage, improve signage on access roads to promote wilderness ethics, publish wilderness related educational information in local (Forest-wide) newspapers.
- Add seasonal rangers to provide visitors with “teaching moments” and develop a volunteer teaching cadre from various user groups.
- There should be a “blitz” over the first year of implementation of the S&Gs that were developed by the citizen-based Task Force. Also, through the media, develop partnerships, especially the willing and/or wealthy ones, especially invite wilderness advocate groups to become partne

Enforcement:

- Allocate funding for additional Forest Protection Officers (FPOs) and Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs). Large -scale watershed or wilderness funds should be earmarked for this objective.
- Enforce existing rules and regulations.
- Develop Supervisor’s Orders to meet recommended LAC S&Gs.
- Encourage interagency cooperation in enforcement of existing rules and regulations.
- More enforcement personnel during seasonal increases in visitor use e.g., summer weekends, major holidays.

Rehabilitation and Restoration:

- General: Use Student Conservation Association and Americorp groups for rehabilitation projects. Contact user groups(Scout groups, hikers, campers, hunters, equestrians) to assist in trail and campsite maintenance and rehabilitation.
Highest rehabilitation priorities should be in the area of streamside protection, second highest campsites and third highest, trails. Rehabilitate water crossings as needed.
- Parking lots: Reduce size, relocate away from trailheads, delineate spaces, enforce no parking outside lots. Establish a sliding scale of parking fees determined by proximity to more popular trails.
- Trails: Leave downed trees (except where might cause further resource damage), relocate trails from stream beds, locate stream crossings at 90 degree angles, harden stream crossings with native rock. Improve or relocate degraded trails. Close trails that cannot support heavy hiker or equestrian traffic. Close trails to horse traffic Dec 15 – Mar 15.
- Campsites: Use fire grates rather than rock rings, establish hitching posts and rails, fuel stoves only at non-designated sites, close degraded sites. Restore vegetation through plantings of native species, including grasses and seedlings in rehabilitation areas.
- Others: Draft a plan for free, non-restrictive permits.
Implement a permit plan per discretion of management. A mandatory permit for every user has several advantages, e.g. visitor count, educational opportunity, basis for enforcement. Permits required year round (365/7/24). Charge a fee for permits.

- Garner more support from wilderness advocate/user groups. New horse camp at Starr Mtn TN can relieve use in CW. Encourage new horse camp at Sylco with trail leading to CW horse trail. No new horse trails in CW. Partners to develop new horse camp at Sumac Creek Trail, or expand existing Cottonwood Horse Camp.

Step 08. Selection of Preferred Alternative

Alternative F was selected as the preferred alternative for future management of the Cohutta Wilderness. Alternative F is defined as Opportunity Class III (See Step 02 above) with a subclass, OC IIIA, an alternative allocation favoring ecological management over recreation management as described below.

Opportunity Class IIIA: The area is, essentially, an unmodified wilderness setting where natural forces operate freely. This alternative allocation area within OC III has as its primary emphasis the preservation of the natural environment in the midst of high visitor pressure to a major scenic attraction, Jacks River Falls. OC IIIA is a component of OC III and is defined, collectively, as the Jacks River Trail and the Beech Bottom Trail and a corridor 100 yards either side of these two trails. The area begins where the Jacks River Trail crosses Jacks River east of the waterfall and continues to the Jacks River Trail crossing of the river west of the waterfall. Along the Beech Bottom Trail this area is defined as the Beech Bottom Trail and a corridor 100 yards either side of the Trail from the Wilderness boundary south, including the entirety of Beech Bottom, to its intersection with the Jacks River Trail. Human modification of this area is the hiking trail passing through the area and a few "cold-weather" seasonal campsites at Beech Bottom.

Step 09. Monitoring and Evaluation.

Step 09 is the responsibility of Cohutta Wilderness managers and their supervisors. Task Force members have made several suggestions in Step 07 to assist the monitoring process. An excellent monitoring and evaluation program will serve to document change in the directions of further degradation or improvement in existing conditions. It will further serve to test the effectiveness of the recommended standards and guidelines as described in this document.

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