

The Daily Register online

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Miffed at the Forest Service

Wednesday morning I took a look at the Web site of the Shawnee National Forest. I check it every so often just to see if there is anything new and interesting going on and there was.

The Forest Service has recently released the report on the results of its 2007 trail work. The Trails Designation Project was — as most far-reaching projects involving our public forests are — very controversial when it was implemented in 2006. Most people agreed the trails used by hikers and equestrians were in need of some kind of maintenance. But a lot of people disagreed that horse riders should be restricted to certain trails rather than being able to ride anywhere as hikers could walk anywhere. Others believed use of gravel, turnpike trail construction, signage and highlines for riders to tie up their horses were in opposition to the idea of wilderness. Wilderness is not supposed to have permanent works of man.

Groups disagreed on the number of miles of trails that should be designated.

Many believed restricting group sizes to 10 in the Garden of the Gods, Bay Creek and Lusk Creek wilderness areas to provide opportunities for solitude was absurd. Some of my friends support the group size limit. I still don't. If a group of 50 people is intent on walking through the woods together, I would rather run into the group and let them pass than contend with five separate groups of 10. Also, I should mention, I love my solitude in the woods. But if I want to be able to step a few feet off the trail to relieve myself in privacy, I won't be doing it in Lusk Creek during riding season, groups of 10 rules or no.

I don't say that just because my buddy John O'Dell got in trouble in regards to the 10-person group limit. I don't say it just because this new rule knocked out a few good hikes the River to River Trail Society had been leading for years, a few of which included Forest Service personnel, none of whom saw fit to mention the plan to implement the rule, nor excused themselves from the group to better allow for the solitude of other forest users. Maybe that's unfair to say, and maybe not. Sour grapes aside, life is generally more convenient when we follow the law whether we agree with it or not, as I have learned with 1/5 of my yearly income going to court costs and court-ordered behavior modification courses, but that has no bearing on my current concerns about the thing I found on the Forest Service Web site Wednesday morning.

I wrote back in 2006 that I was in favor of the Trails Designation Project. It seemed the best answer to fix many of the eroded sections of trail. I've changed my mind on that opinion.

My primary opposition to the Trails Designation Project is that when questioned about funding for the trail work, the agency was less than honest. Little did I expect after numerous interviews with Forest Service staff and the various interest groups the agency had in mind charging user fees for parking at trailheads and fees per horse entering the trails. Nobody ever mentioned this possibility until earlier this year and the trail designation project is into its third season.

By the way, the comment period on the proposal to charge user fees for Garden of the

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Gods day use area, Bell Smith Springs, Pounds Hollow and others ends June 30. Information about the proposal is at the website www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/shawnee/

When I learned of this fee proposal, my first emotion was mistrust. I had written several lengthy stories on the project and had recently written about the renovation of the Garden of the Gods recreation area where the flagstone trail was repaired, new vault toilets were installed and the water pumps were replaced. That's great work that happened. Then the agency used these same improvements to justify a user fee to pay for maintenance. I felt like I had been duped, used to sell the Forest Service's good deeds without being given the whole story.

Could it be that had the Forest Service mentioned the user fee proposal in relation to the Trails Designation Project and the Garden of the Gods renovation project the public would have howled in protest instead of offering the agency pats on the back? Could it be the fees were the goal all along, but the Forest Service first had to prove it was capable of making improvements for recreation and had to use the media to spread the word, without revealing the full agenda?

When I finally realized what was happening I wrote columns in vehement opposition to the fee proposal in an effort to correct my unwitting complicity in what I perceive was the Forest Service's plan.

Then Wednesday morning that mistrust became disbelief and anger when I read the report on the trail work done in 2007. The game playing suddenly became personal.

On Page 16 of the report are these words, "Monitoring telephone and e-mail comments received from users resulted in a majority of positive comments regarding trail improvements."

Then on the next page is this quote: "Good job on filling in the eroded creek bank" (Bowed Tree stream-crossing). (Brian DeNeal, staff writer for the Harrisburg Daily Register)

There should have been a comma followed by the word "but."

I remember the conversation. I believe I was doing an update on the work of the trails project and I was asked for my opinion on the Bowed Tree Crossing work. I said I was proud the eroded creek bank was stabilized, but then I said I was not glad to see the River to River Trail relocated to use the Bowed Tree Crossing because it was a difficult place for hikers to cross compared to the crossing used for at least 10 years. The traditional crossing was at a place where even in fairly high water a person could get across without wetting the feet, but at Bowed Tree the creek would be virtually impassable when the water was up.

A hiker should expect such hardship when in wilderness, except when the relocation creates a problem where there was no problem before. When tons of rock is moved in to stabilize the creek bank and allow for teams of horses to cross without hastening erosion, it can be irritating for a hiker seeing that enormous amount of permanent mark-of-man wilderness construction work and who still has to remove his boots to cross.

But my main gripe I relayed was east of Bowed Tree Crossing to Owl Bluff, also known as High Point.

The trail up to Owl Bluff was not a main route and for good reason. It is steep, eroded and hazardous for hikers and horses both. The relocated stream crossing directed all traffic up this dangerous hill. When I was last in that area, the trail was strewn with small boulders exposed by erosion. Last fall the dirt still there was powdered clay just waiting for the first big rain to wash away down into Lusk Creek.

The latest trail report does indicate some people complained about this trail section and that a reroute of the trail section is planned for this spring or summer. I would be interested in knowing the trail condition today.

All that aside, my name and my comment is being used by the federal government in a federal report as an indication that I endorse the project, which I do not. I endorse parts of the project, especially the parts about stabilizing eroded stream banks which could and should have been done without any messing with trails, but I reject the Bowed Tree stream-crossing and I reject the charging of user fees to fund any of this trail work.

If horse traffic is causing the damage, then the number of horses allowed into Lusk Creek should be limited, which has happened to some degree in the closure of the area to equestrians during the winter months of soil instability. The issue should not be used as a tool to "enhance customer satisfaction" as the Forest Service termed the project in one document handed out at a meeting on the user fees.

In the next section of the report the Forest Service claims two "Daily Register/Daily Journal" stories were positive regarding the trail project. One was coverage of the Bridger-Teton mule team gravel hauling work that I wrote. But the coverage was just that, coverage of what was happening and was not intended as any endorsement nor rejection of the project. The other story was a submitted item, published as it was written from the Trail Conservancy District, Illinois Trail Riders and the Horsemen's Council of Illinois working with the Forest Service to improve the Hitching-Post Trailhead north of Herod. Of course this item will be positive as it was written by one of the members involved in the work.

It seems a little misleading to be using these newspaper stories as evidence the Forest Service has gained support on its work from the community, which seems to be the intention.

I will be curious to see if the 2008 Trails Monitoring Report mentions the numerous letters to the editor opposed to the 10-person group limit that have been published since the John O'Dell controversy.

My guess is mention of those letters and the concerns I've mentioned here will not be in the report.

I'll give the Forest Service something they can mention, though. The trail crews are very friendly and hard workers. They are accomplishing a lot. Now, if the Forest Service could only figure out how to pay for their hard work without double taxing everybody who uses trails, they might have my endorsement again.

n DeNeal is a staff writer for the Daily Register and Daily Journal.

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