



Make Red Rock fees fit use; fines fit abuse

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One size apparently does not fit all.

That's the message from U.S. Magistrate Judge Mark E. Aspey of Flagstaff, who sided earlier this month with Sedona hiker Jim Smith's challenge to the Red Rocks Pass.

Smith had parked by the side of the road and entered the national forest without using an improved trailhead or parking lot, although he was using the marked Dry Creek Trail.

He was cited for not having a \$5-a-day access pass, which is required for hiking in about 160,000 acres of "high-impact recreation areas" near Sedona. The pass system raises \$800,000 a year, which is used for things like trash removal, signs, restrooms and road maintenance.

Aspey said that although the Forest Service could legally require passes and collect fees in areas with improvements, the agency couldn't require someone to have a pass just to visit an unimproved trailhead, or a wilderness.

Critics of the Red Rock Pass contend it is double taxation and that day uses of national forests should not be subject a separate fee.

But with millions of visitors a year to Red Rock country, the Forest Service says the costs of visitor impacts are too great to be covered by its general operating budget. Pass funds make up about a third of the Red Rock Ranger District's budget, and in a recent year here is what they paid for:

- 22,296 pounds of trash removed
- 52 dump sites cleaned up
- 164 fire rings removed
- 35 social trails closed or rehabilitated
- 19 abandoned vehicles removed
- 66 interpretive (educational) programs produced
- 675 miles and 691 hours of backcountry patrol
- 12 damaged recreation areas rehabilitated
- Monitoring and protection of Honaki and Palatki ruins
- 144 signs repaired or replaced
- 16 illegal campfires extinguished
- 42 miles of trail maintenance

That's an impressive list, but it also raises the question: Why is such illegal and harmful behavior tolerated? If visitors were better educated about proper forest etiquette and then held accountable with higher fines for conduct like littering and vandalism, much of the fees assessed to general users would be unnecessary.

Aspey wasn't ruling out all fees. But he was seeming to say that visitors who wouldn't plausibly be coming into contact with improvements, much less using them, shouldn't be asked to pay for the use -- and potential misuse -- by others.

Giving visitors a fee-free choice would seem like a good starting principle, although even wilderness contains trail signs that have to be maintained and some fallen trees and washouts to trails that must be addressed.

It's also true that local visitors are less likely to abuse their surroundings -- they live here, after all. And if an alternative to payment is needed, locals are more likely to be available to volunteer for forest jobs, the better to work off their fees if they so choose.

Another alternative to a one-size-fits-all fee is the annual pass, which is \$20 and appeals to locals who visit the Red Rocks frequently. To simplify the fee system, we'd recommend that the annual pass apply to the privately managed attractions such as West Fork and Grasshopper Point, which now charge fees not covered by the Red Rock Pass.

Rather than have forest rangers go after violators of the pass system, we'd much rather they go after litterers and midnight dumpers. A corps of volunteers could be used for expanded trail and campsite patrols that would take names and photos and turn them over to rangers. If out-of-town visitors are ever to be held truly accountable for their actions, it needs to come through direct penalties for their actions, not just a \$5 fee that many see as buying them the right to abuse one of this region's most outstanding natural areas.