

Head for hills without buying an Adventure Pass: Editorial

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It's been more than two years since the United States Ninth Circuit Court ruled the United States Forest Service's absurd, desperate "Adventure Pass" illegal, but the rangers here wouldn't listen.

Somehow misunderstanding the fact that it's a federal court with federal jurisdiction, the bureaucracy in the Angeles, San Bernardino, Los Padres and Cleveland national forests pretended that the ruling, which happened to be in Arizona, didn't apply to their mountains, and continued to charge Americans for the privilege of, for instance, parking for a minute by the side of the road on a scenic highway.

They continued to bully and scare those who wanted to simply get out of town for a few hours by insisting that the pieces of paper motorists were supposed to put on their dashboards were "required" for anyone who wanted to take a hike.

The major problem is that this was nuts, and unenforceable, as many who simply practiced civil disobedience on the issue found out. If you got a "ticket," you didn't have to pay it, and no one did anything about that. But a policy by federal agents that encourages scofflawism by otherwise law-abiding people is a very dangerous precedent to set.

The minor problem is that would-be hikers had to go to a store to buy these pieces of paper promising access to adventure. If you're driving into a pay-to-use state park, at least there's a ranger in a booth primed to relieve you of 15 bucks. No such luck for those who would abide by the straight and narrow on the passes.

But now, the very same hikers who went to Arizona's Mt. Lemmon without forking over any money sued here just to drive home the point. If the USFS wouldn't pay attention to a previous judge's ruling — "Everyone is entitled to enter national forests without paying a cent" — because he wrote those words in Arizona, maybe it would pay attention to a California judge.

Last week the hikers won the lawsuit. Instead of finally acknowledging defeat, the Forest Service says it is "studying" the ruling, and that the Adventure Pass is only on hold. But clearly it's dead and gone. Head for the hills, hikers.

We have railed against, and belittled the implementation of, the Adventure Pass so many times over the 17 years it pretended to be in place that the Forest Service must imagine we don't care for its workers or its work. But the reverse is true. We revere what our rangers do for the wild areas of California and the rest of the nation. We do think our tax dollars should pay for their needs, and we understand there have been big cutbacks. We also understand that important local nonprofits that aid the Forest Service, such as the San Gabriel Mountains Trailbuilders, made money by selling the passes that they used for supplies for their excellent work.

And that charitable model is precisely what the USFS should head toward to replace the more than a million dollars annually that the Angeles and San Bernardino forests got from Adventure Pass fees. Hikers aren't unappreciative thugs. Most would gladly contribute voluntarily to the upkeep of trails and facilities. Southern California is filled with nonprofit experts happy to advise the rangers on charitable foundations. A trailhead volunteer asking for donations would be welcomed now that the strongarm tactics are behind us.

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