Hikers Help Axe Forest Adventure Pass

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By Santa Barbara View’s Outdoor Editor, John McKinney

Three cheers to four hikers who went to court when they were fined for not paying fees while visiting Coronado National Forest near Tucson, Arizona in 2008.

As a result of their action, the National Forest’s monumentally unpopular Adventure Pass program might have suffered a mortal blow when the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled recently that recreational fees cannot be charged to forest visitors who aren’t using amenities.

“Everyone is entitled to enter national forests without paying a cent,” wrote Judge Robert W. Gettleman in the case of Adams vs. U.S. Forest Service, which was brought by the hikers in 2008. “We conclude that the [Recreation Enhancement Act] unambiguously prohibits the Forest Service from charging fees … for recreational visitors who park a car, then camp at undeveloped sites, picnic along roads or trailsides, or hike through the area without using the facilities and services.”

Forest Service officials, who have supported the Adventure Pass since the late 1990s, as well as related revenue generation programs that have collected fees from hikers, are reported to be reviewing the court decision.

Longtime opponents, including lawyers and leaders in the hiking community, believe that the court’s decision is so strongly stated that the Forest Service is unlikely to ask for a reconsideration or that the Supreme Court would take up the case.