



Categorical Exclusion Approval

Project: Implement Wilderness Backpacking and Overnight Use Permit System Program

PEPC #: 103882

Introduction

This memorandum with attachments, and the information in the project record, documents and completes the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review and requirements for implementing the Wilderness Backpacking and Overnight Use Permit System.

Program Description

See Attachment A

CE Citation

This project is Categorically Excluded (CE) from further NEPA analysis in accordance with DO-12, Section 3.3:

C.5. Installation of signs, displays, kiosks, etc.

D.3. Minor changes in programs and regulations pertaining to visitor activities.

D.5. Designation of trailside camping zones with no or minimal improvements.

Additional supporting information for this determination is in the following attachments and administrative record:

- Attachment A: Wilderness Backpacking and Overnight Use Permit System
 - Project Information; Background; Purpose, Need, and Program Goals; Proposed Actions; Applicable Law and Policy; Impact Assessment
- Attachment B: Proposed Superintendent Compendium Language 36 CFR 1.5 and 1.7
- Attachment C: Proposed Backcountry Permit to be Issued for Backcountry Overnight Use – Example
- Attachment D: Response to Comments

CE Justification

This permit system is necessary to address backcountry/wilderness visitor and resource impacts. The permit system will improve resource protection by providing educational resources and backcountry wilderness restrictions.

Final Agency Decision

Based on my review of the environmental impact analysis, public comment, and all information in the administrative record, I am approving for implementation the project described in Attachment A, including mitigations attached therein.

CE Approval and Decision to Implement

I find that the action fits within the categorical exclusion above. Therefore, I am categorically excluding the described project from further NEPA analysis. No extraordinary circumstances apply.

Superintendent: _____ **Date:** _____
Jane Rodger, Acting Superintendent
Joshua Tree National Park

Attachment A

Purpose and Need; Program Description;
Impact Assessment; Mitigations

ATTACHMENT A

PROJECT INFORMATION

Park Name:..... Joshua Tree National Park
Project Title:..... Wilderness Backpacking Permit System
PEPC Number:..... 103882
Project Location (County/State): San Bernardino/Riverside Counties, CA
Administrative Record Location:..... Joshua Tree National Park Headquarters

BACKGROUND

Opportunities of solitude are identified as important desired condition, especially in the Wilderness Zoneⁱs. A consistent uptick in visitation and in turn wilderness backpacking poses a threat to wilderness character and existing solitude conditions.

The implementation of this permit would serve to better protect park resources through mandatory educational components. Education and improved access to better quality permit trip planning information may also promote visitor safety. Should the Superintendent of JOTR approve this permit system, an amendment to JOTR's Compendium would describe the associated changes to park regulations.

The 2020 NPS Preliminary Project Planning Report "Overnight Use and Trail Management"ⁱⁱⁱ examined overnight use, trail use, trailhead and parking lot congestion, and related visitor experience challenges and management solutions. The report identified challenges in managing Wilderness/Backcountry use, specifically that visitors are unaware of backcountry policies and ethics (i.e., Leave No Trace) and set up camp in sensitive areas leading to resource damage or impacting solitary and primitive recreation experiences. The report recommended several recommendations:

- More consistent and regular backcountry ranger shifts for increased NPS presence in the backcountry
- Education for new visitors about JOTR's designated wilderness
- Clearly marked wilderness boundaries in the park along trails and routes
- More signage and information regarding the park's 1-mile-from-roads policy for backcountry camping

Improving education through the backpacking permit system is a necessary means of mitigating resource damage and personal safety concerns that arise from unconfined wilderness backpacking.

PURPOSE, NEED, and GOALS

PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is to address backcountry/wilderness visitor and resource impact concerns by implementing a Backpacking Permit System and identifying designated campsites at high use, high impact locations.

The purpose of establishing a new backpacking permit system for overnight use within JOTR is to improve resource protection by providing educational resources and backcountry wilderness restrictions.

NEED FOR PERMIT SYSTEM

Increase in Backcountry Wilderness Use

Starting in 2013, JTNP has nearly tripled in visitation, and backcountry use has increased by 116%. The increase in backcountry use has come from both overflow car campers and backpackers. Using JTNP Visitor Use Statistics (IRMA¹) Figure 1 shows an increase of 17,583 backpackers between November 2010 and November 2019.

Use of JOTR backcountry trails has changed from occasional backpackers to a combination of backpackers and underprepared visitors in search of a place to camp for the night when drive-in campgrounds are full. Increased demand for campground sites has resulted in the area one quarter to one mile out from overnight parking lots becoming heavily used with potential impacts to wilderness, natural, and cultural resources and general lack of compliance with park regulations and closures to protect resources and visitor experience.

While wilderness areas remain vast and expansive at JOTR, concentrated use in areas like the Boy Scout Trail may adversely affect the wilderness solitude visitor use experience.

Proper Backcountry Visitation Requires Better Planning

JTNP finds that underprepared backcountry visitors tend to ignore regulations. Users ignoring regulations can cause resource impacts and safety issues.

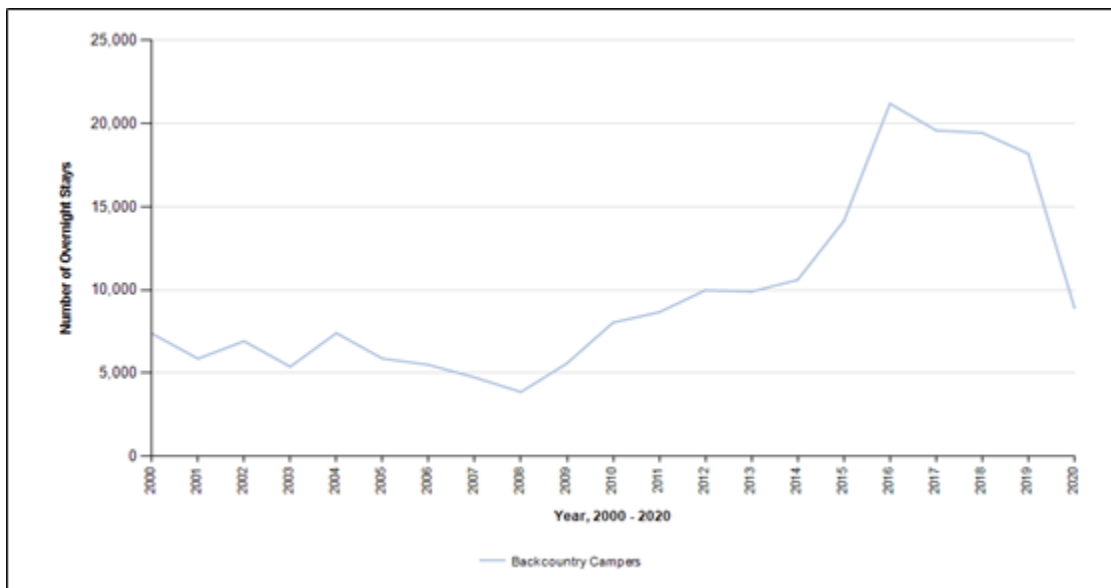
Registration tags from backcountry trailheads show most underprepared campers depart from the northern terminus of Boy Scout (Keys West), Juniper Flats, and Twin Tanks, staying one night with an average party size of two. Park staff has observed the increased occurrence of improperly outfitted visitors utilizing the backcountry as a form of backup plan in response to full formal campgrounds. Behaviors cited by park staff often include visitors dragging wheeled coolers into the backcountry and setting up camps with large footprint tents which are better equipped for formal campgrounds with hardened surfaces.

¹ Integrated Resource Management Application (IRMA). National Park Service application that tracks visitor use statistics.

These events cause backcountry impacts to vegetation and unnecessary creation of social trails.

The existing permit system does not provide adequate education for backcountry users on the proper use of the backcountry. The proposed permit system requires permittees to view an educational video and authenticate they have reviewed the information. Through the recreation.gov process, a required video will be included in the "check out" process when a visitor is making their reservation. The visitor does not need to visit a specific location to watch the video. The visitor watches the video on his/her/their personal device. The "Need to Know" section highlights the rules and regulations visitors are required to follow. The "Need to Know" is located in the overview page, the confirmation page, and the confirmation email.

FIGURE 1. IRMA DATA DISPLAYING OVERNIGHT STAYS BY YEAR



Note: Dip in overnight stays attributed to recreational use impacts of COVID 19.

Outdated Backcountry Use Regulations

The current regulations do not provide adequate information to backcountry users, nor do they provide a system in which we can track backcountry use to protect resources and aid in search and rescue.

Inadequate Information. In what is attributed to lack of awareness, backpackers generally do not know if they are camping within an acceptable location. The existing Superintendent's Compendium requires backpackers hike out one mile and camp 500-ft off a trail, and due to a lack of information and signage, backpackers find it difficult to know whether they are camping at an acceptable site. Currently there are no mile markers on the trails and many campers are unable to recognize where they're allowed to camp overnight along the trails. To start to address this issue, placement of signs along the

popular Boy Scout would provide mile markers and directional signage to designated campsites. In addition, at our trailheads information would be provided regarding backcountry campsite selection (500 ft. off trail, on hardened soil surfaces, etc.), Leave No Trace principals (Pack out trash, cat hole use for human waste, etc.) and reinforce no campfire rules. In total, approximately 51 signs are going to be installed along Boy Scout Trail. Backcountry Trailhead (Boards) signs would be changed starting in 2024, but a temporary sticker is being planned to place over current regulations to outline the new changes.

Updated maps will be made available on [Wilderness Backpacking - Joshua Tree National Park \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#) to help backcountry overnight users better discern acceptable campsites. The park will evaluate other trails for inclusion of similar signage.

Visitor Use Data. The existing program does not collect sufficient data related to the amount, location, or duration of backcountry overnight visitor use. Additional itinerary data is necessary to identify popular camping zones originating from specific backcountry trailhead locations. This data can then be used to inform and target future management actions and funding proposals. Having additional visitor itinerary data could provide information for controlling heavily used backcountry resources.

Resource Protection

Monitoring backcountry overnight use indicates users sometimes select campsites that contain sensitive botanical and wildlife resource, and sometimes camp within rock structures that have sensitive cultural resources.

Resource damage that occurs in backcountry areas is often related to improper campsite setup. An improper campsite setup can damage sensitive plant species or impact important wildlife habitat. Visitors have also been known to camp within rock structures that have sensitive cultural resources.

Criteria for selection of backcountry campsites would be made widely known on our website, at trailheads, and on the backcountry permits. Designated backcountry campsites would be identified for Boy Scout Trail, and would be considered in other areas based on area analysis of use and conditions. JTNP most popular backcountry hiking areas include Pine City, Twin Tanks, and Juniper Flats.

Threat of Wildfire

Illegal campfires have become more common in park wilderness areas. Fires outside of developed campgrounds pose one of the greatest threats to long term survival of Joshua trees and unique desert habitat. Building fire rings moves rocks from their native location, inadvertently impacting cultural resources.

The threat of wildfire events is identified as the most pressing issue related to wilderness backpacking at JTNP. Illegal campfire rings have been consistently observed in

backcountry areas and presents a risk for triggering a large-scale wildfire (Figure 3). The devastating toll of the Dome Fire in Mojave National Preserve accounted for the death of as many as 1.3 million Joshua trees (25% of the Preserve's forest). It has been reported in past studies that there is an 83% mortality rate for Joshua trees within the burn area of a major wildfire. Cultural and wildlife resources can also be significantly impacted from wildfires. Educating backcountry users on the risk of wildfire and emphasizing the restriction on building fires in wilderness areas would help mitigate wildfire risk. This no campfire restriction would be emphasized throughout the permitting process to emphasize its importance.

While the Dome Fire was started by unfortunate natural causes (lightning), it remains a cautionary tale of the impacts that one wildfire event could have on JOTR resources. Park management should take every action possible to ensure that preventative measures related to wildfire genesis from anthropogenic factors are implemented and enforced. By requiring an educational component to the permitting process, visitors will be made aware of existing fire regulations, risks, and safety measures to help reduce the likelihood of a visitor created fire.

FIGURE 2. EXAMPLES OF ILLEGAL CAMPFIRE RINGS



Visitor Safety

The current system of managing overnight backcountry use does little in the way of providing visitors with an education on the hazards of wilderness backpacking in the desert. Summer use has increased dramatically in recent years, raising concerns by park Emergency Medical Services and rescue staff.

Visitor safety is a top priority at JOTR, and safe visits lead directly to better experiences at the park. The current system of managing overnight backcountry use does little in the way of providing visitors with an education on the hazards of wilderness backpacking in the desert. Depending on the time of year, backpacking at JOTR presents different challenges and risk factors. The new permit system would require visitors to select zones that outline their itinerary. It encourages visitors to use the additional comment feature in the rec.gov process to describe their camping plans and trail itinerary. Visitors are still allowed to travel off trail but at their own risk. A Search and Rescue (SAR) addition is on

the permit highlighting what SAR is willing to do. Alerts can also be provided to recreation.gov users if there is going to be adverse weather and deter visitors not to backpack in the summer months. An itinerary would improve search and rescue efforts for backpackers who may be distressed and do not return according to their itinerary.

PROGRAM GOALS

Goals represent the overarching vision for the program. This program will implement a series of processes and actions to establish a backcountry overnight permit program to meet the following goals:

- Improve the visitor experience and protect cultural, natural, and wilderness resources that visitors come here to enjoy.
- Collect visitor use statistics from the recreation.gov system to inform future park planning and decision making.
- Improved public education resulting in increased visitor safety and improved sustainable use of backcountry resources

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Permit Program Overview

Described below are the actions being proposed to implement a Backcountry Overnight Use Permit System. The actions are categorized as follows:

1. Permit System - Information for Applicants applicant to:
2. JTNP proposed actions necessary to implement and monitor the Backcountry Permit System program
3. Future Actions

1. Permit System – Applicant

Where is a Permit Needed:

Backcountry Permit:

JTNP is proposing to establish a permit requirement for overnight wilderness backpacking on lands under the administrative jurisdiction of JTNP National Park in San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, CA. JTNP has proposed zones for backcountry overnight use (see Figure 3). An example of what content would be on the permit, see permit example found in Attachment C.

Camping. Camping is allowed as shown in Figure 3. Backcountry permit holders using the Boy Scout Trail would be required to stay in designated campsites.

Camping in areas other than Boy Scout Trail would be at large using criteria below.

Boy Scout Trail:

Designated Campsites (See Figure 4).

All Other Backcountry
Areas/Trails:

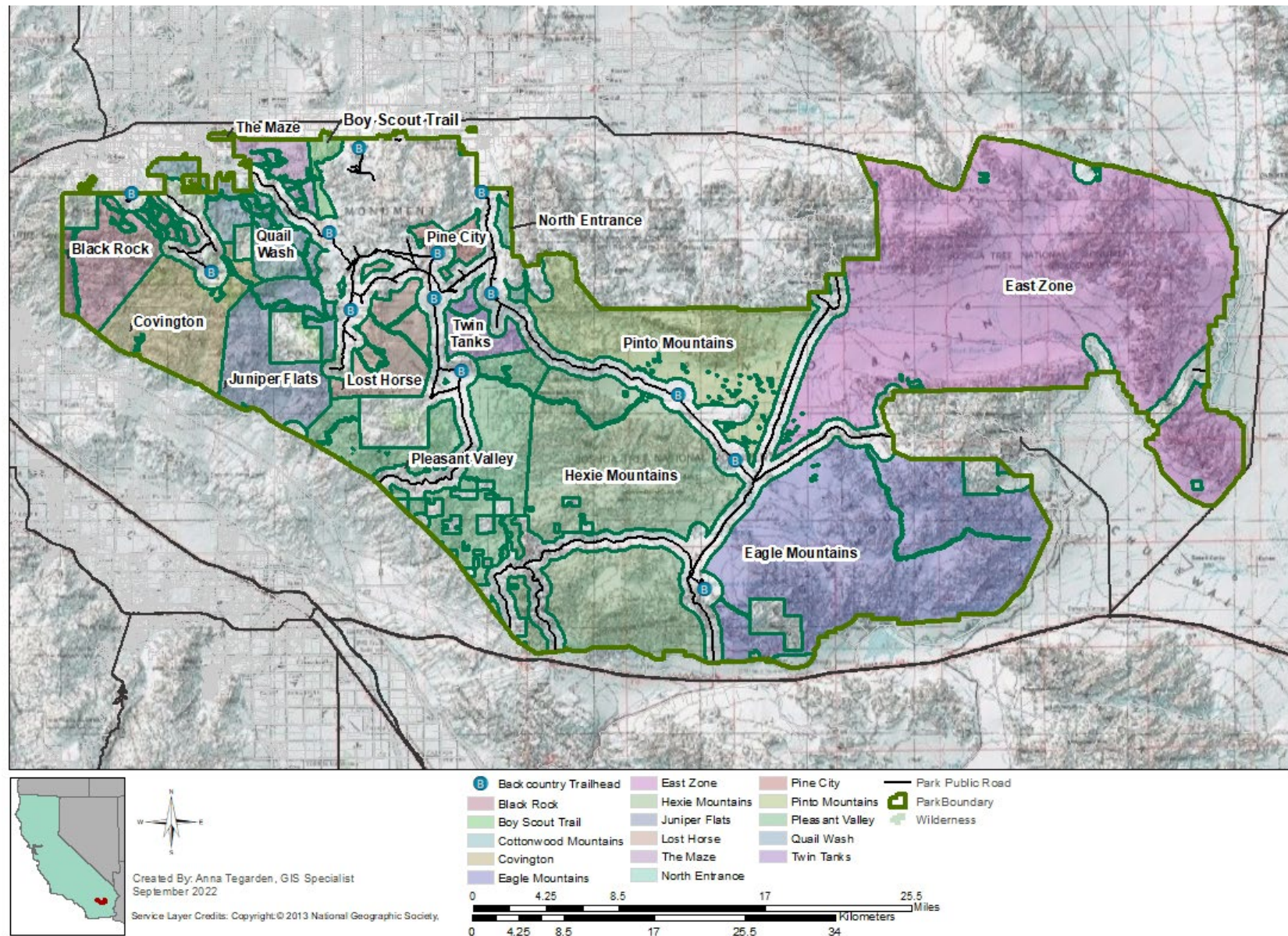
At Large (See During Trip Requirements for campsite selection criteria) See Figure 3.

Parking. Backcountry trips would be initiated from one of 13 backcountry overnight use parking lots and backcountry trailheads areas as listed below (See Map).

Table 1. Backcountry Parking Areas (Backcountry Trailheads)

Name and Location	Number of Backcountry Parking Spots
Black Rock	15
Cottonwood Spring	20
Upper Covington	6
Geo Tour Road	5
Indian Cove (Boy Scout)	12
Juniper Flats	8
Key West (Boy Scout)	20
North Entrance	20
Pine City	10
Pleasant Valley	4
Porcupine Wash	6
Turkey Flats	9
Twin Tanks	10

FIGURE 3. BACKCOUNTRY CAMPING ZONES (13)



How to Obtain

a Permit:

There are three ways to obtain a permit: 1) Online through Recreation.gov; 2) By Phone calling recreation.gov office; and 3) In person at Joshua Tree Headquarters Office.

The basic application process includes:

- Watch the required video on No Trace backcountry camping at JTNP
- Review the zoning map and describe your itinerary in the permit application
- During check-out select an entry/exit point where you will park your vehicle (i.e. name of the Backcountry Trailhead) and a campsite if staying along the Boy Scout Trail
- Once you confirm your trip through Recreation.gov, you will receive a confirmation email with your trip details. Based on staff availability, you may receive a follow-up phone call following completion of your reservation on Recreation.gov Selecting a backcountry campsite (Boy Scout Trail only).

Specific information is as follows:

Recreation.gov

Permits can be obtained by booking Recreation.gov, 6 months in advance, up to the same day of a trip (subject to availability).

Phoneline

Permits can be obtained over the phone by calling:

Recreation.gov Reservation Lines:

Toll Free: (877) 444-6777

International: (606) 515-6777

TTD: (877) 833-6777

In Person

Same day and future permits can be obtained in person at:

Joshua Tree National Park Headquarters Building
Permit Office
74485 National Park Drive
Twentynine Palms, CA 92277

Permits can be obtained at this location November through April between the hours of 8:00 am to 12:00 pm, Wednesday through Sunday. These dates and hours are subject to change based on use patterns.

- Permits cannot be obtained by calling or emailing park staff.

- Same-day, or future permits can be issued at this office. Please note, obtaining a permit from the permit office, park rangers would be using the same rec.gov permit system available to online users.
- Same day permits are issued subject to availability. Quantity of same day reservations is limited (see description of Same Day Permits below).

Cost

The cost of the permit would be a flat rate of \$6 per permit and only a credit or debit card is accepted. Cash will not be accepted. A single permit would allow for a range in group size of 1 to 12 visitors.

**Backcountry
Education
Video:**

As part of the application process users would be required to view and acknowledge they have read and reviewed JTNP's backcountry education information and a backpacking educational video. The No Trace education video is intended to influence positive visitor actions that result in protection of cultural sites, wildlife, vegetation, soils, and tribal values.

**Pre and During
Trip
Considerations:**

Check-In. Permittees are encouraged, but not required, to check-in at the Twenty-Nine Palms headquarters permit office before departing for their trip.

Campsite Selection

Boy Scout Trail (BST). BST has established site specific campsites (See Figure 5).

All other Backcountry Overnight Zones. All backcountry overnight permit holders selecting campsites in zones identified on Figure 3 would select a site using the following criteria:

Required Criteria (Compendium Enforced)

- Already impacted site or hardened surface
- One mile or more distance from roads
- Outside of day use designated areas

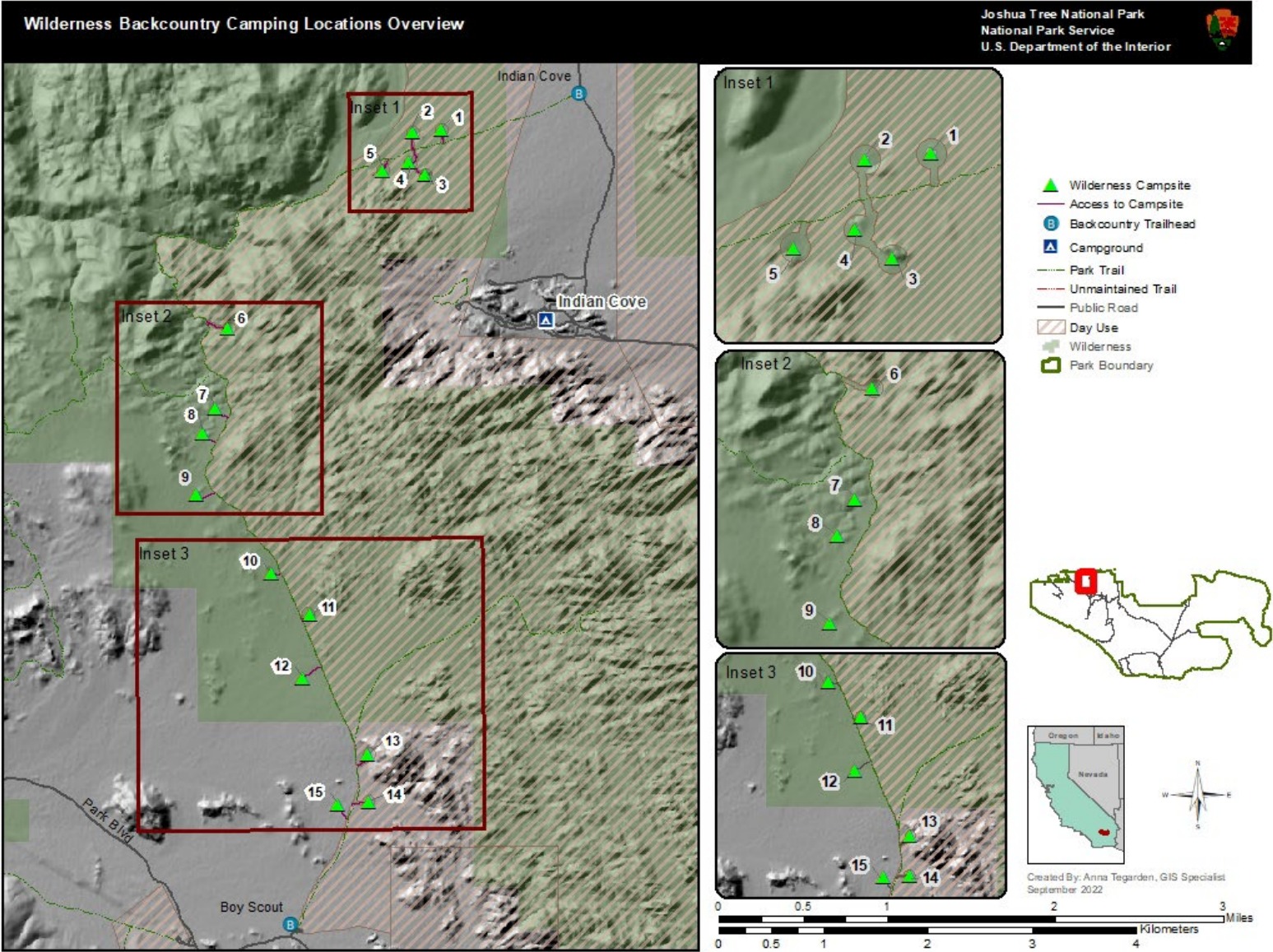
Campsite Considerations for Safety and Resource Protection

- Out of view from the trail/road
- Avoid rock shelters and overhangs
- Avoid washes, base of a cliff with exfoliating rock above
- Avoid high flow areas with no escape route

**Same Day
Permits:**

Same day reservations would be available online through recreation.gov or in person at the permit office located at Park Headquarters. All reservations, regardless of in person at the permit office or online at another location, will be made through recreation.gov. Camping zones and Boy Scout Trail designated sites are subject to limited availability for same day reservations.

FIGURE 4. CAMPSITE DESIGNATIONS FOR BOY SCOUT TRAIL



2. Implementation and Monitoring Actions

The following actions would need to be performed by JTNP to prepare and operate a permit program

- Boy Scout Trail Designated Camping Infrastructure
 - In total, 51 signs would be installed along the Boy Scout Trail, including:
 - Install wayfinding signage at intersection of main trail and spur trail to each designated camping sites
 - Install one orientation and regulatory sign at each designated campsite
 - Complete minimal spur trail improvements, generally trimming annual grasses for easy campsite wayfinding and to reduce social trailing
- Conduct patrols to check permits and monitor permit compliance
- Post Instruction Signage at all thirteen backcountry trailhead parking lots
- Launch online permit system that includes a required educational program and tools for users to conduct trip planning and assist with navigation to Boy Scout Trail designated campsites.
-

3. Future Actions

Campsites may be designated in other Backcountry Overnight Zones as visitor use and sensitive resource data become available. The decision to add designated sites will also be informed by lessons learned from the designation of sites in the Boy Scout Trail Zone. Any future designation of campsites is subject to environmental (NEPA) and cultural resource (NHPA Section 106) compliance as well as a Minimum Requirements Analysis under the Wilderness Act of 1964. By using established criteria for selecting campsites, it is expected these actions would not cause significant impacts and would not trigger any extraordinary circumstances that would require an Environmental Assessment. It is expected environmental compliance could be completed using the Categorical Exclusion 3.3.D.5 (Designation of trailside camping zones with no or minimal improvements).

The criteria for designating future campsites is as follows:

- Use already impacted site or hardened surface
- Preferably use an existing social trail to campsite from established trail
- Avoid sensitive resources (cultural sites, water sources, springs)
 - Use known GIS data, work with park subject matter experts
- Conduct archeological surveys to avoid impacts to cultural resources and avoid rock shelters and overhangs
- Avoid new damage to biological soil crusts, plants, and wildlife habitat
- Consider Joshua tree refugia and fire risk; designated sites may have higher probability of having an illegal fire

Although subject to change, the following areas would be next to assess the need to create designated campsites for the benefit of sensitive resources and the visitor experience

- Pine City

- California Riding and Hiking trail Segment south of Twin Tanks.

Backcountry campsites require the installation wayfinding signage to designated camping sites and a sign at each designating campsite.

APPLICABLE LAW AND POLICY

The NPS regulations allow superintendents to implement public use limits to protect park resources, equitably allocate use of areas, protect public health and safety, and avoid conflicts among user groups. Public use limits may be adopted following a written determinations and publication of the use limitation in the park's Compendium. In addition, under CFR Section 1.6, Permits, The National Park Service may adopt a permit system to implement a public use limit enacted under 36 CFR Section 1.5.

This proposed interim use limit is consistent with NPS Management Policies, which allow the issuance of permits for activities requiring some degree of management control to protect resources. This action is not of a nature, magnitude, or duration such that it would result in a significant alteration of the public use patterns of the park. The proposed permit program is not highly controversial.

The proposed change to the Superintendent's Compendium (36 CFR 1.7.b.) can be found in Attachment B. The compendium is available at <https://www.nps.gov/jotr/learn/management/superintendents-compendium.htm>

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Baseline (Existing) Conditions

Overnight backpacking is currently occurring at JTNP with a non-fee permit. The current permit operates under a self-registration system, where visitors wishing to use the backcountry fill out a physical permit onsite at a backcountry registration trailhead of their choice. There exist no use quotas aside from group size limits and parkwide overnight stay allowances. There is no required education component to receiving a permit. There exists no requirement to leave a detailed itinerary for park use.

Under current management as established in the Superintendent's Compendium, wilderness camping is allowed with a non-fee, self-registration system and can be obtained at one of thirteen backcountry trailheads or at a park visitor center during normal hours of operation (36 CFR Sec. 1.6 2.10a). Under 36 CFR Sec. 2.10, overnight stays at JOTR are limited to 30 days within a calendar year. Between October 1 and May 31, the limit is 14 days. Parking for overnight wilderness use is restricted to backcountry registration trailheads. Backcountry/wilderness camping must occur at least one mile from legally open roads and at least 500 feet from designated trails and water sources. Finally, group sizes are limited to 12 people in wilderness and 24 in the backcountry transition zone. Large groups may subdivide to meet group size limits by camping 1 mile apart.

Change in Public Use Conditions if Overnight Wilderness Backpacking Permitting is Implemented:

The new permit system would require registration be completed prior to a backpacker's trip. Visitors would pay a \$6 permit fee to register for overnight backcountry use through recreation.gov. Additionally, a mandatory education component (watching a short video) would be included in the permitting process. Visitors would also be required to include a brief itinerary and check-in before beginning backcountry trip. Table 2 shows a summary of the proposed changes in comparison to the existing permit system.

Table 2. Existing wilderness backpacking requirements versus proposed permit changes.

	Fee	Advanced Registration	Check- in Process	Itinerary	Education Component	Enforcement
Existing	\$0	None	None	Not Required	None	Difficult to Enforce
Proposed	\$6	Yes, Via Recreation.gov	Yes, In- person or phone	Required via permit application thru Recreation .gov	Required Education Video and Acknowledgement that you reviewed the material	More monitoring, better enforcement

Environmental Screening Form

Resource	Potential for Impact	Potential Issues & Impacts
Air Air Quality	None	Campfires are not allowed in the backcountry. No air quality impacts are expected with the proposed action.
Biological Nonnative or Exotic Species	Potential	Issue: Backcountry users are a vector for spread of non-native species. Clearing vegetation can cause soil disturbance. Impact: The permit system will not cause an increase in backcountry users; however, creating designated campsites could over time have more concentrated use and increase the likelihood that non-native species can get established in these areas. Creating designated campsites requires clearing of vegetation to campsites as well as clearing of vegetation at the campsite itself causing soil disturbance in these areas. Soil disturbance creates conditions conducive for establishment of ruderal invasive species.

Biological Species of Special Concern or Their Habitat <i>T&E Species</i>	None	The park's natural resource staff have been part of identifying campsite locations, these campsite locations have been located outside of T&E habitat.
Biological Vegetation <i>Undisturbed vegetation communities</i>	Potential	Issue: Clearing of vegetation for spur trails leading to campsites and clearing of campsites. Vegetation impacts of using same campsites over time Impact: Although the permit program is not expected to increase the amount of backcountry camping, in areas where campsites are not designated, backcountry users may inadvertently select areas where there are undisturbed vegetation communities, and these may get trampled. Creating designated campsites requires clearing of vegetation to campsites as well as clearing of vegetation at the campsite would cause loss of vegetation habitat. These areas would be periodically cleared (maintenance) of vegetation to maintain spur trail access to campsites resulting in permanent loss of vegetation habitat.
Biological Wildlife and/or Wildlife Habitat including terrestrial and aquatic species <i>Wildlife Habitat</i>	None	Impact: Campsites have been located in areas outside of prime wildlife habitat and unique wildlife habitat types. Creating designated campsites requires clearing of vegetation to campsites as well as clearing of vegetation at the campsite itself causing loss of wildlife habitat in these areas.
Cultural Archeological Resources <i>Archeological Resources</i>	None	Impact: Within the larger proposed Area of Potential Effect (APE), some archeological resources are present. However, activities are only being approved in locations where there are no identified cultural resources of any kind.
Cultural Cultural Landscapes <i>Cultural Landscapes</i>	None	Impact: The Keys Ranch cultural landscape is nearby but is not overlapped by any proposed campsite location.
Cultural Ethnographic Resources	None	Archeological specialists from the park surveyed all the proposed campsites, campsite locations have been located away from ethnographic resources.
Cultural Museum Collections	None	The action will have no effect on museum collections.
Cultural Prehistoric/historic structures	None	Cultural resource staff were part of the Team to designate campsite locations, campsite locations are not located close or nearby prehistoric/historic structures.
Geological Geologic Features	None	The proposed action would have no effect on geologic features.
Geological Geologic Processes	None	The proposed action would have no effect on geologic processes.

Lightscares Lightscares	None	The implementation of the proposed action is not expected to increase backcountry overnight use, although campers do use artificial light at night, this use is not expected to be more than before the program would be implemented. The proposed action would have no effect on lightscares.
Other Human Health and Safety <i>Visitor Safety</i>	Potential	Issue: Visitor Safety Impact: The proposed permit system would require the permittee to provide an itinerary for their trip. The NPS will be monitoring backcountry trailheads and parking lots and would notice if a party has not returned according to their itinerary. The itinerary would give our search and rescue team an indication where to find the backcountry hikers. Positive effect.
Paleontological Paleontological Resources	None	Campsites were surveyed prior to designation; no paleontological resources were located in designated campground sites.
Socioeconomic Land Use <i>Income</i>	Potential	Issue: Permit Fees Impact: The fee associated with obtaining a permit is not considered cost prohibitive and would not be a deterrent for people wanting to do a backcountry overnight trip at JTNP.
Socioeconomic Socioeconomic	None	
Soundscapes Soundscapes	None	The implementation of the proposed action is not expected to increase backcountry overnight use, although campers would be introducing sound in a natural environment, this human generated sound is not expected to be more than before the program would be implemented. The proposed action would have no effect on introducing more sound (pre-project) into the natural environment.
Viewsheds Impacts to open space and views	None	The proposed actions would not have an impact on open space or views.
Viewsheds Viewsheds	None	The proposed actions would not have an impact on viewsheds.
Visitor Use and Experience Recreation Resources <i>Visitation</i>	Potential	Issue: Visitation Impact: The permit system is not expected to increase backcountry visitation.
Visitor Use and Experience Visitor Use and Experience <i>Visitor Experience</i>	Potential	Issue: The proposed permit system imposes additional requirements on the visitor.
Water Floodplains	None	Impact: Campsite locations have been located outside of floodplains.

Water Water Quality or Quantity	None	Water availability in the backcountry is scarce and backcountry users are expected to bring their own water. The permit has provisions for human waste disposal meant to reduce impacts on water quality and other potential effects.
Wilderness Wilderness <i>Solitude/Primitive</i>	Potential	Issue: Wilderness Solitude Impact: With the collection of additional information with the permit program, JTNP can better understand where backcountry visitation is popular. Should any area get too crowded, permits available can be reduced. This would preserve wilderness solitude. NPS wilderness policy guidance will be followed and completed prior to decision to implement the program. Additional wilderness analysis includes preparation of “necessary and appropriate” analysis for commercial use of wilderness, and Minimum Requirements Analysis.

Mitigations

- If concealed archeological resources are encountered during project activities, all necessary steps will be taken to protect them and to notify the Park Cultural Resources Manager or Archeologist.
- Collect baseline conditions and implement routine campsite monitoring of Boy Scout Trail designated campsites. Conduct annual monitoring (increase if needed) to assess changes to: 1) campsite polygon size change; 2) illegal activity (campfires, graffiti, vandalism to signage); 3) food and human waste; 4) compliance with policy and regulations (LNT, Supt compendium); and 5) establishment of invasive or ruderal species.
- Permit use data is reviewed annually for trends and to ensure recommended changes meet goals and objectives.

Response to Comments

Public Comment on this proposal was initiated on August 18, 2021, for a 30-day and public review and comment period. Notification of the start of public scoping was done by notifying the public using a news release, park planning newsletter sent to approximately 861 people, social media (tweet was sent with links to newsletter and Public PEPC comment site) and posted on JTNP website <https://www.nps.gov/jotr/getinvolved/planning-news-stay-informed-newsletters.htm>.

JTNP received comments from 28 individuals in response to our public comment outreach. The agency Response to Comments can be found in Attachment D.

ⁱ Joshua Tree National Park foundation documents and 2000 Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan

ⁱⁱ Joshua Tree National Park Preliminary Overnight Use and Trails Project Planning Report 2021

Attachment B

Draft Proposed Compendium Language

Draft

**Joshua Tree National Park
Determination of Public Access, Restriction, or Condition**

Affected Area/Topic Common Name: Wilderness Backpacking Regulations

Location of Affected Area: Entire park

Nature of Action/Restriction/Closure: Amend backcountry camping regulations to reduce resource impacts and make it easier to comply with the permit system.

Level of Scope of Closure/Restriction:

Proposed Regulatory Language (36 CFR section/wording):

36 CFR §2.10 – CAMPING and FOOD STORAGE

(15) Backcountry/wilderness camping must be at least 1 mile from any backcountry trailhead, at least ½ mile from any road, at least 200 feet from any trail, and out of sight of any road or trail.

(16) Group size limit for day and overnight use is 12 people in all areas. Larger groups must obtain a special use permit. Large groups that are subdivided to meet group size limits must camp at least one mile apart in the backcountry and hike at least 10 minutes apart.

Definitions:

“Road” is defined as any open public road, any open service road, or any inholding road, as delineated in the NPS GIS data.

“Trail” includes both maintained trails and unmaintained trail corridors as delineated in the NPS GIS data.

Justification:

These changes are proposed by the Wilderness Backpacking Permit Committee in order to facilitate the new permit system. For the new system to be valid and enforceable, we want it to be reasonable for backpackers to comply with the regulations without damaging park resources.

Under current regulations, it is not possible to legally camp within the first 6-8 miles of the North Entrance along the CRHT, it is highly difficult to legally camp in the Black Rock area, and it is illegal to camp along the CRHT in the Covington Flats area. The amended regulations will allow visitors to use these areas in a low impact manner.

This regulation is designed to not allow abuse of the backcountry permit system by non-backpackers. Users must still park at a backcountry board, have a permit issued through Rec.gov or an NPS ranger, and must hike a mile from a backcountry board and half a mile from a road.

The compendium language requiring users to camp 500 feet from water sources would be removed because all extant water sources are within designated Day Use Areas.

Soil compaction and impacts to plants and soil crusts are increased as users hike further across country. Therefore, we propose reducing the current requirement that users camp more than 500 feet from trail to require users to be at least 200 feet from trail and out of sight of the trail. We believe this will reduce unintended impacts. This is similar to what many other NPS units and National Forests require.

Current regulations allow users to camp with groups of 13-24 people as long as they are outside wilderness. However, the area in compliance with the current regulations (including being more than 1 mile from roads) is extremely small and impractical for use by any group, therefore groups of 13-24 are already effectively not allowed in all but a few selected slivers of land. It is exceedingly unlikely that any such group would be camping in compliance with the regulations outside wilderness, and it would be inconsistent with wilderness character to allow such a group to camp within wilderness. Therefore, we propose simplifying the regulations to only allow groups of 12 or fewer to camp in all areas.

Proposed by: Wilderness Backpacking Permit Committee

Proposal Implementation Date: Oct 2022, in conjunction with the new wilderness backpacking permit system.

Method of Public Notification:

Reviewed By: _____
Chief Ranger

Date: _____

DETERMINATION: Approved

Not Approved

Superintendent: _____

Date: _____

Attachment C

Proposed Backcountry Permit to be Issued for
Overnight Use - Example

PERMIT INFORMATION

Order Summary:

PAYMENT INFORMATION

Permit Holder Permit Date Vehicle Information

Mailing Address

Destination Zone

Entry Point

Date

Exit Point

Date

Number of Nights

Group Size

Itinerary/Additional Vehicle Information

Activity Type _____

Campsite #(s) and/or Zone(s)

It is your responsibility to have this permit in possession during stay in required permit areas.

Need to Know

- ☐ I will pack out trash, toilet paper, and leave the area as it was found.
- ☐ To prevent catastrophic fire, no campfires are allowed in the backcountry.
- ☐ I/We may use a camp stove to prepare meals and/or carry pre-cooked meals.
- ☐ I understand that we must hike on trails, rock expanses, or in washes.
- ☐ Excrement must be packed out or buried in "cat holes" six to eight inches deep and at least 200 feet away from trails and water resources. It is preferred that all excrement be packed out. As an alternative, it can be buried in "cat holes."
- ☐ Food and Water Caches are allowed up to 14 days and must be tagged with my permit information and packed in a hard sided animal-resistant container.
- ☐ I have viewed and understand the Leave No Trace videos from the permit application process.
- ☐ I understand that Natural and Cultural Resources must be left where found.
- ☐ I understand it is suggested to carry a map, compass, and first-aid kit.
- ☐ I understand cell phone service is unavailable in most areas. It is recommend to let a friend/family member know of my travel plan and carry a satellite communication device.
- ☐ I will have a printed copy or image of my permit accessible for inspection by a park representative.

Regulations

36 CFR §2.10 – CAMPING and FOOD STORAGE

- A permit is required for backcountry/wilderness camping. It is a self-registration system and can be obtained at Recreation.gov or at a park visitor center during normal hours of operation.
- Group size limit for day and overnight use is 12 people. Larger groups must obtain a special use permit.
- Camping within the park is limited to 30 days within a calendar year. Between October 1 and May 31, the camping limit within the park is 14 days, in any combination of visits or consecutive nights. These limits apply to all overnight visits, including backcountry stays, campground stays, or any other overnight activity.
- Parking within the park for overnight backcountry/wilderness use is restricted to backcountry parking lots.
- Backcountry/wilderness camping must take place, one mile from backcountry parking, at least a half mile from legally open roads and at least 200 feet from designated trails.
- Fires are not allowed in backcountry and wilderness areas.
- To protect wildlife from pets and pets from wildlife, pets are not allowed on backpacking trails.
- Service animals are not subject to the park's pet policies and, when accompanying an individual with a disability, they are allowed wherever visitors are allowed.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

This permit is non-transferrable.

A permit is required to access Joshua Tree National Park's wilderness for overnight use. 36 CFR §2.10(a)

Attachment D

Agency Response to Public Comment



Response to Comments

Introduction

Public Comment on this proposal was initiated on August 18, 2021, for a 30-day and public review and comment period. Notification of the start of public scoping was done by notifying the public using a news release, park planning newsletter sent to approximately 861 people, social media (tweet was sent with links to newsletter and Public PEPC comment site), and posted on JTNP website <https://www.nps.gov/jotr/getinvolved/planning-news-stay-informed-newsletters.htm>.

JTNP received comments from 28 individuals in response to our public comment outreach. A summary of the comments JTNP received is as follows:

Substantive vs Non-Substantive Comments

Substantive comments are those that:

- Question, with reasonable basis, the accuracy of the information.
- Question, with reasonable basis, the adequacy of the information.
- Present reasonable alternatives other than those presented, or cause changes or revisions in the proposal.

Comments that merely support or oppose this proposal were considered non-substantive comments but have been noted by park management as providing a general sense of how the public is perceiving the proposal. Most of the commenters noted support for the project, taking the stance that the permit system will help prepare backpackers prepare for overnight use in Joshua Tree and would help protect natural and cultural resources. Generally, those that opposed the permit system believed the project would not be implemented smoothly, enforcement would be lacking to maintain the new permit system, the communication about the new permit process is unclear (ambiguous), and they are opposed to paying another fee.

For substantive comments, a summary of the scoping comments and JTNP response to comments are provided below.

Designated Campsites

Comments that express concern regarding designated campsites, specifically designated campsites:

- should not be designated in less popular areas;
- diminishes the wilderness experience to be forced into a designated site;

- would cause unintended consequences such as habituating animals to the more frequent presence of humans being in the same spot;
- and concentrating use would cause human waste management issues.

Response: The park will continue to exercise restraint in establishing designated campsites in wilderness, restricting such designations to areas where sensitive resources and intensive use indicates concentrated use is preferable to widespread impacts. The park is implementing designated camping in the Boy Scout Trail Zone based on impacts to native vegetation, cultural resources, and wilderness character. The Pine City and Twin Tanks zones require additional analysis for resource impacts. At large camping appears to remain acceptable at the ten remaining backcountry zones. Attachment A (pg. 11) further elaborates on the consideration for future designated campsites. The establishment of designated campsites would be done with consideration to visitor use and natural resource impacts. The park does not intend on designating campsites in less used areas unless there are unacceptable resource impacts associated with at large camping.

Visitors who stay overnight in the park's backcountry generally have a satisfactory wilderness experience and infrequently encounter other visitors when in remote areas of the park. When staying overnight on the more popular Boy Scout Trail, encountering other overnight visitors would be more common, but the dispersed placement of the campsites is such that you would not be in view of other campsites except for those that are designed to be close to one another for larger groups. For those visitors who don't want to be in a designated campsites there are many backcountry places in the park where campsites would not be designated.

The Park is concerned as well with wildlife becoming habituated to human presence in these backcountry campsites. The park will actively encourage visitors to provide feedback on their backcountry stay and should visitors comment on issues related to wildlife nuisance at a given campsite, the park would investigate and take appropriate management action, including up to decommissioning the campsite.

In considering concentrated overnight visitor use in designated campsites this use could be frequent (campsites in constant use) or episodic use (campsites being used infrequently). The park anticipates the frequently used campsites would be those that are closest to backcountry trailheads. Because the proposal includes more active and frequent monitoring by NPS, should NPS monitors see visitor use impacts in any of the campsites, such as proliferation of catholes, the NPS can close campsites and give these areas a rest from use, or other management action. Visitor use at JTNP does have seasons where overnight use is light or infrequent, these seasons also allow for campsite areas to recover. The park also encourages visitors to provide feedback on their backcountry stay and should visitors comment on issues related to a designated campsite, the park would investigate and take appropriate management action.

Park Operations / Visitor Burden

A comment was expressed that the proposal would cause additional and maybe unnecessary workload to park staff and undue burden to visitors. (Substantive)

Response: The park is proposing these actions to increase public awareness, stewardship and increase personal accountability resulting in better protection of park resources. Although the implementation of this proposal will create additional workload for park staff, the effort of park staff to implement the plan would benefit park resources, our primary responsibility.

Also, the system will allow the park to monitor use patterns than the current self-permitting system. This increases the personal accountability of wilderness users and enhances the park's ability to reach old and new audiences updating them on new concerns and to create new stewards for the National Parks.

We recognize that the new permit program would cause additional effort on the part of our backcountry visitors; however, we believe educating our visitors on the proper use of our backcountry is beneficial both to the visitor, and to the protection of park resources. We believe we have crafted a permit program that is a reasonable ask for our visitors.

Permit Area, Maps, and Questions

Comments or questions regarding the permit area, suggested map correction, or have general questions regarding the proposed action area as follows:

I have backpacked numerous times in the vicinity of Scorpius Arch and the Coxcomb Mountains (outside of the Day Use area). The map shown in Figure 3 does not appear to cover this area. There is no backcountry board out there, and no trails other than an old, closed road. Will the proposed Backcountry Permit Program apply to this area in far-eastern JOTR? [Representative Quote]

Response: Map will be updated to reflect the East Zone and parking areas. Permits will be required in the eastern zone of the park. Some parking areas in the far-easter zone may not be on NPS land, in which case, parking would be at your own risk. Permittee is responsible for ensuring that they park in allowable areas. Users will be strongly cautioned about the access and dangers to this area.

In the rec.gov system it is intended to make known entry/exit point outside the park. If the permit holder uses the comment feature in rec.gov to relate their itinerary and where parking, the park will have record of this user.

The included map is incomplete, as it does not depict the full extent of the proposed "East Zone" and the "Eagle Mountains" zone. It also does not show the locations of the proposed backcountry parking lots, making it difficult to determine how many parking spaces may be available for which zones. [Representative Quote]

Response: Map has been updated to reflect the East Zone and the "Eagle Mountains" zone and parking areas. Some parking areas in these zones may not be on NPS land, in which case, parking would be at your own risk. Permittee is responsible for ensuring that they park in allowable areas.

I note on the map of campsites on the BST, that a number of them are located within the current day use area. Will there be new boundaries created for that day use area? I am well aware of the illegal hardened campsites that currently exist in the day use area and am not opposed to such a minimal change, but it could add to the confusion for visitors. [Representative Quote]

Response: Yes, and the new map will be updated and provided in the Decision documentation.

There is a misspelling at the very bottom of the proposed backcountry wilderness permit form (Attachment C). [

Response: Thanks! This will be corrected on the final form.

On the Backcountry Wilderness Permit (Appendix C) in the "Need to Know" section there is the statement, "I understand that we must hike on trails, rock expanses, or in washes", are you suggesting that cross-country travel will no longer be allowed anywhere in the park? Furthermore, this statement could confuse some visitors since it kinda contradicts the requirement that backpackers camp a certain distance OFF the trail. [Representative Quote]

Response: No, we are not suggesting that cross-country hiking is no longer allowed. This decision has not changed hiking restrictions in the park, the compendium language remains unchanged regarding where hiking is allowed (see Superintendent Compendium III.b.). Should an area require visitor use hiking restrictions, these restrictions would be posted in the Superintendent Compendium. The park will amend the language in the permit to make sure it does not confuse hikers on where they can hike.

Permit Fees

Comments expressing concern regarding the permit fee; including comments such as:

- Fees are excessive and will make this activity unaffordable.
- Entry fee and Backcountry Permit Fee is excessive
- Fees will encourage unpermitted backcountry use.
- It is a regressive tax.
- The permit fee is reasonable and there should be additional fee for each person.
- Use of Rec.gov for permit fees blocks free access to public lands.

Response: The park made a conscious effort to keep the fee cost low as not to inhibit visitors from doing this activity. Although the park charges an entry fee, this permit fee is necessary to address specific issues regarding backcountry overnight use (See Attachment A, Need for Permit System pg. 2).

The fee for the permitting system covers only the cost to use the Rec.gov contractor's reservation system. The park did explore creating a reservation system but concluded using Recreation.Gov reservation system was required and would be less expensive than trying to create our own fee system just for Joshua Tree.

The park is implementing the permit fee pursuant to Federal Land Recreation Act (16 U.S.C. 6801-6814; P.L. 108-447, Division J, Title VIII). In using this authority, JTNP must collect fees fairly and equitably, and believes the permit fee is nominal and is a flat fee allowing up to 12 visitors per permit for multiple days. The park feels this nominal fee will not inhibit visitors from conducting this activity or cause visitors to illegally camp to avoid paying the fee. Any future changes to the fee amount would be publicly noticed for review and comment.

Permit Management and Enforcement

Concerns regarding whether a permit system is sufficient to educate the unprepared visitor and whether the enforcement outlined in the proposal is adequate to meet objectives.

Response: The park is very optimistic that the education requirements will adequately prepare visitors to JTNP backcountry overnight stays. Resource damage occurs often from unprepared visitors who do not have a full understanding of the role of Leave No Trace protocols. We understand that some visitors may not adequately review essential information provided by the park and enter the backcountry without being prepared. However, should these visitors need assistance while in the backcountry, because visitors will be required to provide itinerary information as part of the permit process, the park would have better knowledge on where these visitors are located.

Enforcement is an important part of the permit program. Enforcement will lead to better compliance and less resource impacts. Three positions have been proposed to assist in patrol and patrol planning with a dedicated office at JTNP's park headquarters in Twenty-Nine Palms. Although this program will involve hiring additional positions, the park has needed additional backcountry patrol staff since the BC Management Plan was approved back in 2000.

These positions will have a dedicated permit office located in Twentynine Palms California. One position will staff a permit desk to communicate with permittees, provide over the counter permit sales and issuance, call permit holders to review rules and regulations to increase education and stewardship, and educate users on leave no trace etiquette and review regulations. Two positions are proposed to patrol the wilderness areas. Fee Compliance patrols can also be performed by recreation fee clerks and technicians. Law Enforcement will use Superintendent's compendium and applicable Code of Federal Regulations to enforce rules and regulations.

Permit Process / Pick-Up

Comments that express concerns about the process for obtaining permits and the check-in requirements, including:

- **Permit Pick-Up**
 - In-person is an inconvenience to visitors due to Office hours
- **Check-In Requirements**
 - Waiting for check-in at Visitors Center can cause delays in obtaining permit if the VC is busy
- **Education Requirements** In person pick-up is inconvenient

Response: As proposed, the entire permit process can be done using the recreation.gov reservation system. As such, a permit holder does not have to visit JTNP permit office. The use of Recreation.gov is a very common platform for national park visitors and JTNP's goal is to keep refining the process to make obtaining a permit as user friendly as possible. JTNP will be looking for feedback of the permit system as it is launched to make improvements.

Also, for check-in, a permit holder does not have to check-in at JTNP HQ permit office. Permittees are encouraged, but not required, to check-in at the Twenty-Nine Palms headquarters permit office before departing for their trip. JTNP permit staff may contact permit holders ahead of their planned trip to confirm essential information, to provide additional education information, and to answer any questions.

The education requirements would be able to be fulfilled using the on-line recreation.gov permit process. As part of the application process users would be required to view and acknowledge they have read and reviewed JTNP's backcountry education information and a backpacking educational video. The No Trace education video is intended to influence positive visitor actions that result in protection of cultural sites, wildlife, vegetation, soils, and tribal values.

Purpose and Need

Comments that express the purpose of the proposed permit program or why it is necessary. (Substantive)

Response: Attachment A (Purpose and Need) provides a thorough explanation of the why JTNP needs to implement a backcountry permit program. Included in this section are goals the JTNP wants to achieve in implementing the backcountry permit program.

A goal of the proposed permit system is to increase public awareness, stewardship and increase personal accountability. The system will retain records so use patterns, both positive and negative can be better tracked than through the current self-permitting process. This increases the personal accountability of wilderness users and enhances the park's ability to reach old and new audiences updating them on new concerns and to create new stewards for the National Parks. The fee for the permitting system covers only the cost to use the contractor's system.

Suggested Actions

Comments that suggest additional actions that would help meet the purpose and need of the project. (Substantive)

Walk-in permits free used to be free, and there were a number of walk-in permits set aside from the reservation system. Walk-in permits should remain available 'day of' to users who may not have internet access, and they should be free.

Response: All permits, including walk-in hikers, need to be made thru Recreation.gov reservation platform. If the permittee does not have access to internet access, there is a phone option, and an option for in-person permit issuance at JTNP HQ Office in Twenty-Nine Palms.

I don't think the policy of accepting only credit/debit cards for payment of the permit fee is fair. Not everyone has a credit or debit card. Why can't these folks pay in cash if they obtain their permit in person? After all, cash is the only official legal tender in the US. [Move to "Suggestions" from Permit Fees]

Response: The park is cash-free, we don't have the ability to take cash for permits. Permittee will need to have a debit or credit card to obtain a permit. Having cash on the premise is an additional personal and private property risk. Reduction in cash transactions creates a safer environment. Alternate payment methods will be available (Check/money order).

Consider continuously loop-running a video that addresses all of the Park's issues inside the visitor center.

Response: A No Trace video will be available as part of the recreation.gov permit application process.

Instead, the middle ground is simple: A slow roll-out, breaking the process apart into constituent parts, using a scalpel rather than an ax. 1. Implement the advanced registration, check-in process, itinerary, and educational requirements (but do not charge a fee). 2. Let enforcement be at the ranger's discretion to use either a soft-hand, or harder approach. But they may now have the weight of enforcement - - all backcountry backpackers must have a permit, period. Actually, issue the fines. Take a long-tail view towards education. I think you'll find word will spread quickly and free permits will be effective. 3. Evaluate actual effectiveness. 4. If required, only *later* implement a permit fee.

Response: Thank you for your suggestions on how to implement the backcountry permit program. Unfortunately, the park must pay for use of the recreation.gov reservation system and the park is only charging the user the cost of this reservation fee.

As suggested, NPS law enforcement do have the option of educating visitors rather than imposing fines

I will miss the flexibility of going spontaneously with the new reservation system. With the growth of visitors to Joshua tree I guess something needs to be done. If there is more flexibility available with same day camping - please consider that option or keep backcountry backpacking as is.

Response: Same day reservations would be available online through recreation.gov or in person at the permit office located at Park Headquarters. All reservations, regardless of in person at the permit office or online at another location, will be made through recreation.gov. Camping zones and Boy Scout Trail designated sites are subject to limited availability for same day reservations.

As an intermediate step, perhaps a less restrictive permit system where a video is watched which would allow the user to camp in the backcountry for a certain length of time (the season or quarter or year) would be less burdensome for the visitors.

Response: For each permit application on Rec.gov, the permittee must select that they have read the material and education video.

Request that some form of water cache boxes be staged for use while hiking CRHT. Have had animals damage water bottles in the past. Some sort of box to store water containers and a compartment to leave empty bottles. Post a sign that says stage a bottle, take an empty bottle or more with you.

Response: Thank you for the cache box suggestion, this is a good suggestion. Since water caching is already allowed, no change to this program is part of this proposal. However, installation of these devices will be considered as a future project.

Reconsider the use of Natural and Cultural Resources language on the permit - this is Park Service jargon. Be explicit: I understand I should not remove anything from its current place, including natural items and historic or prehistoric artifacts.

Response: Good suggestion. Permit language will be changed.

Make it easier to report sightings of abuse of the park: damage, pets, noise, trash, etc. I saw a couple take their toy poodle on a trail. I told them that it was not allowed as they were passing a sign that said such. They just ignored me and kept going. I was on my way out of the park, so I informed the employee at the exit booth.

Response: The park is interested in receiving feedback on the experience of our backcountry user. Visitors can always submit comment cards in any visitor center to express complaints or gratitude. Visitors will also receive a rec.gov email that prompts visitor to provide feedback on the rec.gov system and their experience in the park. Rec.gov is provided the feedback, but we can see what visitors write about their experience. The feedback can be viewed by everyone on the rec.gov JTNP permit page.

I don't like the quote: "To prevent catastrophic fire, no campfires are allowed in the backcountry." First of all, this makes me think some foolhardy person will say, No problem, I'll just keep it under control, and it won't be catastrophic, not thinking of all the other impacts fire and wood collection has on a desert landscape. Secondly, it does not ask personal responsibility like the other checkboxes (I will XYZ). Consider, "I will not have a campfire in the backcountry because I understand fires can be catastrophic and wood collection has significant impacts on this delicate environment." [Representative Quote]

Response: Good Suggestion. The park will consider rewording literature as it addresses resource protection issues as well as fire prohibition language to avoid unintended consequences.

I agree that designated campsites should be established along the Boy Scout Trail due to its popularity. I feel like the couple of proposed campsites before the trail branches off to Willow Hole are too close to the trailhead and should be eliminated even though they are (barely) beyond the 1-mile limit.

Response: Comment noted.

By concentrating use, you will also be concentrating habituation opportunities for ravens, kangaroo rats, etc. Consider including a hang line, food boxes, or some other sort of infrastructure to make it easy for visitors to store food safely away from critters. You also do not mention food storage at all in your need-to-know section.

Response: The park will consider the use of food storage lockers, hanglines, or another appropriate tools that meet minimum tool requirements but also prevent the concentration of rodents suggested in your note.

The Park is concerned as well with wildlife becoming habituated to human presence in these backcountry campsites. The park will actively encourage visitors to provide feedback on their backcountry stay and should visitors comment on issues related to wildlife nuisance at a given campsite, the park would investigate and take appropriate management action, including up to decommissioning the campsite.

Visitor Use Resource Impacts

Concerns that the proposed actions would have impacts on park resources, including resource impacts caused by overflow campers. Concern that underprepared backcountry users would slowly degrade the solitude and magic of JTNP backcountry.

Response: With the implementation of the permit system, the park is trying to reduce or eliminate the underprepared visitor. A visitor who cannot find a camping spot would have the option to obtain a same-day permit; however, this same visitor would need to acquire a permit, watch an education No Trace video, and acknowledge they understand the rules of backcountry use. This is substantial change from the existing

permit system in place. Also, if overflow campers choose to camp without a permit, they would be much more likely to encounter a NPS ranger and be subject to an educational warning or a fine. By implementing a permit system and conducting persistent enforcement, JTNP believes that backcountry resource impacts can be reduced over time.

The park does not anticipate the number of backcountry users to increase because of the implementation of the permit system. As such, a backcountry visitor would still be as likely to find solitude in JTNP backcountry as before the permit system.

JTNP wants visitors to have equal opportunity access to the wilderness. This reservation system allows those who plan-ahead and a limited number of spontaneous user's access to permits. Using this system will allow us some access to underprepared campers allowing educational opportunities with the goal of increasing stewardship among wilderness users.

Visitor Use and Experience

Comments that express concern that the proposal is not adequate, too restrictive, would implement a quota system, hamper visitor access, doesn't address visitor use capacity or campground capacity, or would somehow affect visitor use or experience.

Response: Based on the issues the park needed to address regarding overnight backcountry use, the park began the permit program planning process by identifying goals the proposal would have to meet to be successful. These goals are: 1) Improve the visitor experience and protect cultural, natural, and wilderness resources that visitors come here to enjoy; 2) Collect visitor use statistics from the recreation.gov system to inform future park planning and decision making; and 3) Improved public education resulting in increased visitor safety and improved sustainable use of backcountry resources. The park felt the more onerous the program the less compliance from park visitors. The park developed the proposal to be simple, affordable, enforceable, and implementable. The park will monitor the implementation of the program and adjust, if necessary, to get the greatest compliance.

Quota. The permit program is not a round-a-bout way to implement a quota system on backcountry overnight use. The park felt that the current system did not provide adequate information on backcountry use and felt the itinerary requirement would provide more use information to make management changes should monitoring show that compliance is insufficient, or use is causing unacceptable impacts. +

Boy Scout camp site designations are an attempt to protect sensitive areas along the trail, concentrating use away from those areas that are either ecologically or culturally sensitive. If additional sensitive areas are identified in the park, the park may impose similar campsite designations. The number of overnight use permits would be limited to the number of campsite designations. There is no current plan to place user limits anywhere else in the park. The park is exploring making additional areas open for backcountry camping – current rules based on proximity to day use areas, roads, and trails make it impossible for visitors to legally camp in these otherwise appropriate areas. The permit system will help the park collect data on usage so management can make more informed decisions about use limits in the future. Realtime data will also assist in scheduling back country patrols which will assist in assessment of overnight use.

Visitor Use Capacity. This permit program does not address Visitor Use Capacity. Although the park has experienced significant increase in visitor use over the last decade, the park's backcountry overnight use has increased but not at the same trajectory as the park's overall visitation nor has it maintained a steady increase (See Figure 1). The park has specific issues (see Purpose & Need) the program needed to address, but limiting visitor backcountry use, at this time, is not one of the goals of the program. Collecting better

visitor use information on backcountry overnight stays will give the park additional information on use for future management actions, restricting backcountry overnight use is not part of this decision.

Campground Capacity. In the purpose and need (pg. 2) we discuss full campgrounds as one of the reasons why we encounter unprepared backcountry overnight visitors. Visitors who come to the park during the busy season without a campground reservation often find themselves without an option to stay overnight in the park so some opt for camping in the JTNP's backcountry. This program does not address campground capacity, but the park is aware of the nexus between the two. Expanding or adding campgrounds can be complex management action that could have unintended consequences or impacts and would only consider these actions upon considerable deliberation. The park does encourage the local jurisdictions surrounding the park to increase camping availability as to provide visitors an option to stay close to the park when they cannot stay in the park.

Visitor Use Experience. The overall visitor use experience for backcountry use is not expected to be affected negatively. Although there will be more effort to obtain a permit for backcountry overnight stays, and the need to stay in designated campsites in the busier backcountry use areas, the experience once you enter JTNP's backcountry is not expected to be affected. We anticipate our backcountry visitors will enjoy their experience as they have in the past before the permit program.

Waste Management

Comments that express concerns regarding the waste management impacts for frequently used designated campsites.

Response: The park will consider the issue of human waste disposal and the additional of either a carryout policy or the use of appropriate backcountry toilets that meet the minimum tool requirement. The wag back recommendation is very good and one the park will continue to consider. For the first phase of this project, an attempt to limit changes to regulations was a priority. Future phases will consider additional regulations changes and human waste management.

Because the proposal includes more active and frequent monitoring by NPS, should NPS monitors see visitor use impacts in any of the campsites, such as proliferation of catholes, the NPS can temporarily or permanently close campsites and give these areas a rest from use, or other management action such as backcountry latrines. Visitor use at JTNP does have seasons where overnight use is light or infrequent, these seasons also allow for campsites areas to recover. The park also encourages visitors to provide feedback on their backcountry stay by submitting comment cards in any visitor center to express complaints or gratitude. Visitors will also receive a rec.gov email that prompts visitor to provide feedback on the rec.gov system and their experience in the park. Rec.gov is provided the feedback, but we can see what visitors write about their experience. The feedback can be viewed by everyone on the rec.gov JTNP permit page. Should visitors comment on issues related to a designated campsite, the park would investigate and take appropriate management action.