

Aug. 1, 2021

US Forest Service

Re: South Fork Day Use Area

We have been part of the Portal Community for 20 years. We have been on the board of Friends of Cave Creek Canyon for 7 years, I [Mike] managed the Visitor information Center, and also been the primary liaison between FOCCC and the Forest Service.

In 2019 it was my [Mike's] proposal to the board of FOCCC that, after their approval, was then proposed to the Forest Service: the replacement of the South Fork day use facilities, with a number of improvements. This FOCCC proposal to the FS is what started the project moving forward.

FOCCC also then raised sufficient funds for most of the cost of the project. We were later told that our funds were not necessary.

We were not consulted during the entire NEPA process about facets of the Project or our advice or that of other experts in the community. In stead the plan that was presented includes contradictions, inaccuracies, and has greatly upset the Portal community. The Draft and Final EA are very similar to plans presented by the Forest Service 30 years ago.

The gate closure makes little sense and there is no evidence to support it.

- The Plan calls for it to be closed for 3-4 months so as to not disturb the Owl Pac during nesting season. However, according to Helen Snyder, one of the foremost owl experts in the US, these owls nest in canyon far above the proposed plan area and would not be disturbed.
- These owls come down to Cave Creek in the summer, bringing their young to feed at NIGHT. The South Fork Project is a DAY use area. The owls will not be disturbed.
- There are Mexican Spotted Owl PACs in South Fork, as there are elsewhere in this range. There has been no documentation produced that visitation has affected these owls. The owls have nested here for decades, even when visitation **via vehicle** was **noticeably** higher.
- This road is a wonderful area to observe the Elegant Trogons who are not disturbed by people or cars. In fact, there were no Trogons there until the road was put in decades ago.
- Closing the road is discriminatory against all people with mobility issues. Even if the road surface is improved, it is impossible to go ½ mile uphill from the gate to the bridge in a wheelchair or using a walker. I tried it.
- Cars are far less disruptive to wildlife than people walking on the road talking, gesturing, imitating owl calls. Numerous nature photography articles recommend staying in a car and using it as a blind great enhances the photograph of wildlife.

This Day Use will NOT increase the visitation in South Fork – it will actually decrease the visitation. The gate closure will have a large impact because of the many people that can't or won't hike the extra distance to the trail head. Also, the design only allows for parking of 9 cars with some additional parking along the road before the Day Use Site. However, during the proposed 3-4 month closure there are many days with a great deal more vehicles at one time at the trailhead. I have seen up to 22 on numerous occasions and have had reports of up to 31.

The Visitor Information Center has half of its total annual visitation in the 3 mons of March-May. The South Fork area would logically then also get half of its visitation then also. In that case there would not be sufficient parking to handle the visitors.

Mike & Cecil Williams

