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Organization:

Title:

Comments: A Question of Access

A comment upon the following:

The scoping letter dated May 3, 2024, states "To maintain the natural resources and cultural characteristics of the newly acquired property, the White River National Forest intends to improve recreation access[hellip]"

The US Forest Service's (USFS) plan to turn the Sweetwater Lake property over to the Colorado State Parks to develop and maintain will not result in improved recreation nor improved access.

Addressing access, I will emphasize the amount of land to be accessed; how the proposed plan will change who is accessing the area; how access for disabled individuals will be impacted; and how all of this will change the culture and experience of the lake recreation. Having the land given to the USFS improved access slightly. Having the land run by the Colorado State Park Service will bring larger numbers and different people to a diminished experience while denying access to some who formerly enjoyed recreation on the property. Overall, having CPW develop and manage the property will be a net loss to the public.

Amount of Land

To say that "increased access" is a goal begs the question, "Who didn't have access previously?" First, let's examine the amount of property available to the public for recreation: Half the lake shore has always been public. That means the public had access to the entire lake surface itself. In addition, there was a public parking area for equestrian use in the middle of the "private" side. Anyone could park and hike up to the top of the big rock on the private side without paying any fees. Now, the entrance to that rock overlook has been closed by USFS, reducing access.

Additionally, the previously "private" dock was open to the public to launch boats for free. The "private" restaurant was always open to the public to eat. So, only about ? of the lakeshore was ever actually unavailable.

But of that ?, the public was always welcome to use the inlet side for free for fishing or even launching a small craft such as a kayak or canoe, especially if no one was in the camping site there. Today, the Forest Service has closed the inlet approach due to wetland concerns. So, the USFS has reduced access to about ? or more of the

lake shore,

That leaves about ? of the shoreline that used to be private that can now be accessed by the public. It is interesting that this equals the amount of reduced access by the USFS. Certainly not a significant change. The advertising surrounding a new state-managed park might inform new people about the lake, but there is barely more land open to those people than is open to them now and earlier.

Visitor Population

Secondly, let's survey who has access - both in the past and in the proposed future. The past use of the property was by locals, townspeople, tourists from Vail and Aspen, long time users from the front range and beyond. The USFS operated a small, primitive campground, and the resort had a few more campsites. So, the campers who came to Sweetwater Lake preferred small, peaceful, and primitive camping, or this was all they could afford. The suggested site operation by CPW includes RV campgrounds with hookups. This brings in a different clientele who can afford buying, hauling, and operating RV campers; who don't mind the noise they bring; and whose footprint on the land is much heavier. The previous campers will not return to the lake utilized this way. So, access is changed, (and in favor of those with more money), but not improved.

The lake was often visited by multi generations, as parents and grandparents brought their children to enjoy the same unchanged area that they had enjoyed as children. For lodging, these intergenerational groups rented what used to be 1920's to 1960's vacation homes, long before VRBO! These houses had several bedrooms and bathrooms with linens, full kitchens, furnished living rooms, no WiFi, and quiet surroundings. Definitely not fancy, it always felt like stepping back into yesteryear. These homes were run by a small resort business that kept them furnished, cleaned, and functioning. Now, the prospective plan includes tearing down these historic houses instead of renovating (leaving a few to view for "historic interpretation") and building new "dry cabins". Few of the grandparents who entertained their grandbabies before the wood burning fireplace in the historic houses will be hiking from the new "shed with a bed" to use the communal restrooms in the middle of the night! Nor will they be able to share their homemade bread in the kitchen nor play group board games on the dining room table at night. Grandma won't be found showering in the communal shower house nor sleeping in a sleeping bag in a shared room! So, once again, the modifications to the site will bring changes to the patronage. Not everyone likes to camp, and the new dry cabins are just camping in a log tent. These will attract a new group, while excluding folks who have used the property in the past, especially cutting out seniors.

In the past, many residents of Eagle and Garfield counties used Sweetwater Lake. These same people had experience with Sylvan Lake. Before Sylvan Lake became a State Park, locals went up there for a spontaneous weekend of free camping close to home. It was truly a beautiful, peaceful lake that lived up to its name. Now, with the fee system associated with the state park, the increased traffic, the online reservation program, and the heavy use, the locals avoid that lake. In their minds, becoming a state park has "ruined" the experience for them. Once again, switching the culture of the groups using the lake has only changed the access, not improved it.

Special Needs Visitors

While the site could use some disabled ingress such as handicapped restrooms, ramps, and fishing docks, this is within the ability of the USFS to facilitate without CPW assistance.

Under the proposed plan, the current concessionaire, AJ Brink Outfitters, will not be able to continue their horse operation within the new park. Now they operate with four pastures. In order to keep their horses in top condition, the animals need room to exercise a lot. These horses are expected to carry pack loads into the Wilderness for week long trips. The USFS has already narrowed the months that the outfitter is allowed to have horses in the pastures. The park plan would bring the pastures used by the outfitter from four down to one and maybe half of another. The herd would be expected to spend their days and nights standing in a corral with weed-free hay tossed over the fence to them. This more expensive diet and less exercise guarantees diminished conditions of the horses to the point that the outfitters would no longer be able to sustain their business and would definitely close down.

How would closing the current outfitter's horse operation affect access? Less people would be able to access the Flat Tops Wilderness without the daily horse rides and overnight pack trips. However, besides the daily rides, opportunities would be curtailed for many special needs groups. The current outfitter has delivered horseback services at the lake to:

Small Champions, a program out of Vail for disabled children in Eagle County.

Mountain Developmental out of both Glenwood Springs and Vail, for developmentally delayed adults.

Round Up River Ranch, a summer camp for children with significant illnesses (liver and kidney transplants, acquired immune diseases, heart disease, blood disorders, brain tumors, etc.). They began their horse program at Sweetwater Lake with Brink Outfitters who now have the specialized equipment and training needed by this group.

Valley View Hospital Rehabilitation program, from Glenwood Springs, for teenagers
in drug rehab.

Operation Equine, a national group out of Boulder, has brought separate programs for male and female Disabled

Veterans to the lake.

Epic Cancer Camp, a Denver program for adult cancer survivors.

The USFS plan with CPW to develop and manage the Sweetwater Property has already stripped the small business of its lodging and food service capabilities. Now the prospective changes will destroy the horse operation, too. This, in turn, will affect many visitors, especially the more vulnerable.

Diminished Recreation Experiences.

Lastly, let's examine the types of experiences historically enjoyed by visitors to Sweetwater Lake and how these might be impacted.

Previously there was a restaurant that mixed locals with tourists in a relaxed, homey, welcoming and historical environment. It had a limited but full service menu. It offered a chance for natural group social interactions, along with watching wildlife, overlooking the lake. It served locally sourced and culturally significant freshly cooked dishes such as bison, trout, and homemade pie. The new park proposes a food service counter that is both less personal and offers less healthy foods. It is in a different location and will not be conducive to friendly, intimate sit-down meals.

Formerly, rowboats and canoes were the main emphasis of boating. The proposed park caters to more hand launched watercraft such as Stand-Up-Paddleboards and kayaks. This limits the ages and physical abilities of the users, meaning less young children and seniors will participate.

Fishing was a leading use of the lake. Many a visitor had his grandfather teach her how to fish on this quiet lake. Now, fishing will be reduced with increased watercraft numbers.

Visible western stables and horses were part of the daily experience at Sweetwater for over 100 years! The proffered park moves the horse operation from the central area and out of view. Part of the scenery and culture of the lake property was watching robust, lively horses prancing and grazing in the pastures. Under the proposed park, less active horses will be crowded in corrals, eating hay, luckily out of sight!

For many years, the small, primitive campground, offering 7 adequate sites, was tucked away at the south end of

the lake. With the new park, RV camping of 20 or more sites with electric hookups will be centralized. Besides changing the clients, this will affect the view and noise level for all the visitors.

Instead of an interesting variety of historic multi-bedroom wet cabins with fireplaces and kitchens, the lodging becomes mostly small, one room, lookalike dry cabins.

Small events such as reunions, club meetings, and anniversary parties have graced most summer weekends at Sweetwater Lake. The local high school track team would have their annual team dinner there. County Commissioners would meet in the restaurant. An occasional small wedding or milestone birthday gathering took place in the volleyball field overlooking the lake. Now these types of events will be limited, and, if catering is allowed, it will cost more for a caterer to drive all the way.

The lake has seen regular use by school field trips, 4-H clubs, scout troops, and locals having business or social meetings. If more people are invited, but entrance is limited, will the school, club, and civic use be as available?

There has been a definite historical feel to the experience at Sweetwater Lake, often described as "stepping back in time". Now it will seem like any other established state campground, albeit with several identical log-sided cabins. The entire culture of the area will be altered.

The welcoming and well-loved resort company, AJ Brink Outfitters, has been an integral part of the Sweetwater lake experience for three decades. With the new plan design, this small business will be closed down.

Even now we enjoy spontaneous and free use. CPW recommends advanced reservations and possible day use fees.

The culture of Sweetwater Lake has been freedom from the developed world to connect with nature and western heritage. Now, we envision it just becoming part of the developed world with electrical hookups and cement pads. Additionally, the natural environment is compromised due to 4 to 10 times the previous human impact!

In conclusion, creating a state parklike experience will increase visitor numbers due to the associated development and advertising, but it will not increase the acreage that the public could already use. At the same time, it will shift the clientele using the lake to those with more money and better internet for online reservations, and force the wonderful historic use into actual history! Additionally, the experience that the new visitors will get will be much diminished from what the former visitors enjoyed so much. This submitted plan reduces access for the locals, the nearby townsfolk, and those across the country who have enjoyed the lake under different

circumstances - peacefulness, wildlife viewing, free and impromptu use, and a great dinner in the restaurant!
What was previously available at Sweetwater Lake is significantly better than what is suggested in the USFS
proposed action!

Janet Rivera, author

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(they have cattle permits in

Sweetwater area)