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First name: Janet

Last name: Rivera

Organization:

Title:

Comments: What We Want

In a recent communication, a Forest Service (USFS) Representative asked us to write about, "whatever it is you'd like to see[hellip]" at Sweetwater Lake. What we would like to see is what we had there previously returned to us. What we had there before the sale and transfer of the land is what all those locals, county residents, state residents, and national and international visitors were hoping for when they donated so much money so quickly to the Save the Lake campaign. What we had before was a unique experience, not the same state park encounter one could find at 42 other parks around Colorado. It felt like stepping into the past with traditional western culture and the familiarity of deep history.

Size

The previous footprint of current buildings, campgrounds, pastures, etc. is the future footprint we propose. This size was a sustainable level of visitation, as it stayed at this size for 30 years. While we would like to welcome new visitors to this wonderful lake, we don't want them all at once! This is the size that allowed bald eagles to nest beginning in 2006 (when they took over the osprey's nest!), that allows deer to have their young, and that allows the river otter to frolic on the bank. This was the ideal use level that encouraged the humans, the wildlife, and the unique plant communities to thrive.

The average daily visitation in the past was between 35 and 60 people, depending upon what records you review. While occasionally, the numbers went up, it wasn't usual. The USFS suggests that the new state park would have a daily average of 250. This is 4 to 7 times bigger! This is way too many people for that fragile environment. We understand that the Colorado Park Service (CPW) needs a minimum visitation in order to break even. This is one reason we don't think a state park is the best use of this property. We adore this lake and so many visitors would overrun the region and love it to death!

Restaurant

We want Sweetwater Lake to include a restaurant. The beloved, former restaurant was the heart of the Sweetwater experience. Most of the visitors who came to the lake frequented the restaurant - sometimes for a meal, sometimes for dessert, and sometimes just to talk. The restaurant only seated about 30 people inside with another 20 on the deck. While it turned over several times a day, it was rarely full. Finding a restaurant 21 miles from the nearest town was a jewel. The homemade menu was limited yet delicious. The cost was reasonable. It was open to the public. This was a central point for wildlife viewing with spotting scopes and bird feeders on the

deck. It was also the history center with photos, memorabilia, and scrapbooks detailing the area's past from homesteads to outlaws to Denver celebrities.

We really desire this restaurant experience, whether the previous restaurant is remodeled or a new one is constructed. We do not want a lunch counter with deli sandwiches. We do not want food trucks. We want the enjoyable experience of sitting down in a small restaurant with friendly staff, open 3 meals a day, 7 days a week, 6 months of the year. If the restaurant must be moved, we suggest across the road where a previous lodge was located.

In addition, this restaurant served meals for staff, packed food for overnight trail rides, and occasionally catered small events like anniversary parties or team dinners. It served as the focal point with a small convenience store - ice, bait, candy, firewood, ice cream, sweatshirts, sodas, etc. It offered free water and bathrooms. It would be nice for some ADA bathrooms to be added.

Moreover, the restaurant was the information center for lodging, camping, riding, hiking trailheads, parking, boat and dock use. It contained the office for the resort managers who took reservations for horseback riding, lodging, and events by phone and Internet. It was also the safety center with First Aid kits and an Emergency Response kit. All the resort staff was trained in First Aid. For safety, this office had landline phones, Internet, and a cell phone booster service. This round-the-clock presence by the concessionaire staff offered additional safety. All of this we would be in favor of seeing at Sweetwater Lake once again.

Cabins

Participation in staying in a historic house with a wood burning fireplace, kitchen, bathrooms, no wifi, and a multi-generational family playing together is part of the experience we would like to revisit at Sweetwater Lake. We do not agree that these old vacation homes are beyond repair. We feel that remodeling the houses built in the 1920's to 1950's is preferable and cheaper than building new "cookie cutter" cabins. If one or two of the present houses needs to be torn down, we prefer it be replaced with a similar "wet" structure with the same number of bedrooms, located in the same general area. We are not in favor of "dry" cabins, even with log siding. These are just camping spots ("shed with a bed") that do not give an equal experience to the one we found so pleasurable. Keep the number of lodging spots the same. The "motel" area can be renovated for staff housing. We are fond of staying in these historic homes, playing games at the table with our grandparents and kids, and sleeping in comfortable beds with bathrooms nearby.

Camping

We want the Sweetwater Lake area to continue to offer camping. We prefer that this camping be primitive -

absolutely no hookups. The only thing that we agree could be added to the vault toilet amenity is a pump for water. We don't want to see shower houses, nor RV pads. Building these kinds of amenities only attracts more use than the area can sustain. We would keep the campground where it is, or move it to near the old USFS cabin. This area has been historically disturbed and would make nice camping spots. The total number of primitive-only campsites should not exceed 12.

We don't mind small RV's or pull behind trailers (17 feet or less) as long as they dry dock and have no generators. The old campground allowed a pickup with a shell on the back or a family VW bus. We do not want to require hike-in camping! We do want the camping spots spread out enough to give the feeling of privacy in nature.

We emphatically desire the pastures to stay as such. These pastures have been there for over 100 years! The Keep Ditch was established in 1915. Besides the scenic attraction, once pastures have been in place for so long, they have become an integral part of the ecosystem. They feed elk and deer year round. They have attracted insects and birds who use that kind of habitat. Changing the use of pastures to campgrounds now, after 100 years, would have a huge negative impact on the wildlife.

Equestrian Camping

One of the things that made Sweetwater unique, and that we would like to see continued, is equestrian camping (without generators). We understand that these rigs need to be larger due to hauling horses. However, this is a historic use, and subsequently, we want it to stay. Too many points of access for horses in White River National Forest have been closed. Since this use has always been popular, we would like to offer it. Space for six or seven rigs is sufficient and can be located near the barn. Up to a dozen horse pens (used by campers and those staying in cabins) can be located nearby with water troughs.

The equestrian camping could stay where it is - by the parking triangle - or moved to an area of its own below the barn. It needs a pull-through configuration. A water pump and an outhouse can be added. This location gives good access to all the riding trails.

Events

We hope for small events to be sanctioned. These could be limited in size, and limited to only one per week so as not to have much impact on the area or the experience. Porta Potties could be brought in. Events might use the volleyball field by the motel or the nursery pasture or the lodge. They may include live music or speakers. Events might use boats, horses, lodging, camping, and the restaurant, or on-site catering. We have enjoyed the following type of events in the past: reunions, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, weddings, business

meetings, church gatherings, community meetings, town or county government meetings, clubs, school district, Vail rec district, Fire District, Girl and Boy Scouts, 4H clubs, and lots more.

Day Use

We prefer to start with no day use fees. This isn't fair to limit use to those with better financial means. We feel that as long as we keep the amenities in line with what was there previously, we won't need a reservation or fee system for day use.

We would like to see a day use picnic area where the former USFS campground was located, but ONLY if this means moving the campground to the area by the old USFS cabin and NOT to the pastures. The parking area should not need to be increased.

Boating

In our vision, boats can be rented and the boat house location kept where it is. 10 row boats or canoes could be available for rent. The boat house would store life jackets, oars, and repair materials. Keep the dock where it is. There used to be a second dock over by the USFS campground. We would like to see this one rebuilt for fishermen. In addition, it is fine for visitors to bring their own small fishing boats as they have always done.

Fishing

We are partial to fishing and expect it to continue to be offered in the lake. Most fishing is done by boat, but adding a dock or two for shore fishing and ADA access would be acceptable. This is safer than having people creating their own paths below the cliffs or cutting their own trails through the willows.

Hiking

We are attached to hiking in this area! Many people hiked to the overlook, up the big rock on the east side, or to the Indian Caves. We hope to see these trails maintained and the Indian Caves to reopen to tourists. All current trailheads into White River National Forest should be maintained without user fees.

Barn for Horseback Rides

We delight in the horses. They are much enjoyed by visitors, even those who are not riding. They don't need to be removed from the central area as just the sight of the horses gives that feeling of western culture. We would like to see one hour rides and pony rides in the immediate area, with 2-hour, half-day, and full-day rides offered into other parts of the forest. We'd need enough horses for 25 people and 5 wranglers per day, and up to 40 during hunting season. In addition, offer overnight pack trips for 2 to 7 days with 2 to 12 guests and 3 to 5 wranglers. Private users can also bring their own horses to ride into the forest.

We would rather the barn stay where it is, but enlarged and repaired so all equine equipment can be located there. The nearest cabin can become housing for the wranglers or a new bunkhouse could be constructed, and an office for the horse business.

The horse operation includes the irrigated pastures, ditches, corrals, hitching posts, and the barn. All of which are essential, but could use some upgrades, esp. the ditches and headgate. The hay meadows are used for grazing and exercising horses, necessary for healthy, working stock. These fields must be maintained with consistent irrigation. For safety, a telephone should be located in the barn. We would consider the addition of an improved parking area, an accessible bathroom, and a water pump for guests.

The triangular parking area must be maintained for truck turnaround and parking.

CPW Involvement

We are not opposed to State Park involvement, but we do not see how this finite area can sustain park employees if we keep it as small as we all prefer with extremely limited new amenities. It seems to make a lot more sense for the USFS to just give the former concessionaires a new permit to continue to operate as previously.

If CPW takes over management, one employee house (perhaps with seasonal housing downstairs) and one maintenance building could be built on Dead Horse Flats across from the barn. While USFS seems worried about penstemon, in reality the penstemon is all over the area, not just in Dead Horse Flats. This area has seen heavy human use over the years, and would be the best place for minor development.

A 20 year contract with CPW seems excessive. We feel a 5 to 7 year permit is better, so all can see just how this

new partnership idea would really work. We are also very worried that in 10 to 15 years, CPW would decide to expand their footprint. We would like some guarantee that the size would remain the same through their contract period.

In addition, we would rather have Sweetwater given a name besides "state park". Just the name alone will bring in more visitors than the site can maintain. Without the amenities like a beach, RV park, and bike trails, some visitors expecting the routine state park experience would be disappointed. Instead, we could call it "Sweetwater Conservation Area" or "Sweetwater Historic Complex". We would like for the area to keep its unique, western culture and historical nature and not become similar to a state park.

Conclusions

What we would love to see near Sweetwater Lake is the same unique type of uses that were there before the sale of the property and subsequent ownership by the USFS. While we believe this can be best offered by the previous concessionaire, we are not opposed to state management IF the numbers are kept small (and not increased in the future); any state housing is limited to the Dead Horse Flats area; it is not referred to as a state park; and the previous concessionaire is allowed to run a restaurant, cabin rental, and horse business. I have delighted in recreating at Sweetwater Lake for the past 40 years, bringing out of town family and guests to this unique, old fashioned experience. That is what we would like to see here!

Janet Rivera

Katie Hood

Bill and Louisa Sepmeier

Dan & Casie Ward

Brent and Shirley Luark

Scott and Carol Vasina

Jan and Bill Martin

Bill Bohannon

Lynn Brown