

the trail. On April 15, 2002, the park closed the Cactus Forest Trail to bicycle use and initiated an Environmental Assessment and the special regulation process. In addition, the park will be addressing the bicycle use issue in a comprehensive way through the new GMP process that began in September 2002. The new GMP is scheduled to be complete in approximately 2–3 years. Apart from this proposed rule, in the meantime, bicycles are allowed to use paved and unpaved roads in the park pursuant to 36 CFR 4.30(a).

History of Bicycle Use

In the early 1990's the NPS was in the process of preparing a trails management plan for the Cactus Forest section of the park. During the planning process, public scoping revealed that some members of the local community and the visiting public were interested in mountain bike trails in the park. Based on this information, the NPS analyzed the appropriateness of establishing mountain bike trails. As noted above, the park opened that portion of the trail inside the Cactus Forest Loop Road to mountain bike use for a one-year trial period. The park monitored the trail for resource and social impacts by implementing a monitoring plan that included sixteen photo-points along the trail. Park staff monitored these locations on a monthly basis.

The park recorded approximately 1,200 bicyclists, or nearly 50% of all trail users, on the trail between May 1, 1992 and June 30, 1993. There were no major incidents or accidents during the trial period. At the end of the one-year period, the park concluded that monitoring data revealed little measurable resource impact caused by bicycle use and the decision was made to keep the Cactus Forest Trail inside the loop road open to bicycle use. The park continued to monitor the trail for resource damage at the designated monitoring points, performed patrols, and engaged in informal contact with visitors using the trail. Continued use of that trail by bicyclists had been authorized by the Superintendent's Compendium since that time. Until bicycle use was prohibited in April 2002, the trail continued to be a popular trail for mountain biking. Much of the trail follows an old two-track road that was allowed to revegetate and become a trail. About half the use of the trail is by hikers and equestrians.

Impacts

Soils: Reinstating mountain bike use would likely result in added visitation on the trail. This type of use would

impact soils differently than hiking and equestrian use. Some monitoring points show that soil erosion and loss has been exacerbated by the "cupping" of the cross-section of the trail that is caused by repeated use in the center of the trail. At times, multiple uses occurring on the trail have resulted in beneficial impacts by redistributing soils across the trail. Soils may be distributed from the center of the trail to the sides by cyclists, and then loosened and redistributed in the center of the trail by horses and hikers. Park staff would continue to maintain the trail depending on available staffing and funding levels. With proper trail repair and maintenance, the overall effect of added visitation on soils would be of minor intensity.

Vegetation: Mountain bike use would contribute to a greater amount of disturbance of vegetation from riders dismounting from their bikes onto the side of the trail to yield to another trail user or to push their bike uphill. Vegetation that is affected is typically located in steeper slopes or where the trail curves and is lost through repeated trampling. Impacts from the added use would be of minor intensity. Trail repair and rehabilitation may offset some of the impacts associated with trailside vegetation loss. Trailside re-vegetation efforts could help to restore the natural scene, as well as contribute to a more defined trail path.

Wildlife: Wildlife would be frightened or displaced by the presence of visitors. However, given the higher speeds that mountain bicycles may reach on the trail, there may be a greater tendency for cyclists to encounter and frighten wildlife. There may also be a greater tendency for mountain bikers to run over smaller vertebrates such as snakes on the trail. These factors, along with an anticipated increase in the amount of use on the trail are expected to result in more individual wildlife species being frightened and displaced from the immediate area. Overall, the impacts of this use on wildlife would be of minor intensity.

Archeological resources: Reinstating bicycle use on the Cactus Forest Trail would not have any additional impacts on archeological resources or historic structures. As with any increase in visitation, however, there is a greater possibility that cultural resources could be discovered and/or damaged. Bicycle use off the trail would not be permitted and it is anticipated that visitors would remain on the trail; therefore, impacts to archeological resources and historic structures would be negligible.

Visitor conflicts: Bicyclists would view the opportunity for an off-road experience in the park as beneficial.

However, some hikers and equestrians would feel as though their ability to experience park resources along the trail is diminished if they see mountain bike use as incompatible with their desired experience. Some hikers and equestrians may choose to use the trail less or avoid the trail completely. However, the multi-use orientation of the trail would be likely to have no more than minor impacts on a hiker or equestrian's ability to experience the park. This is because a number and variety of other trails in the Cactus Forest area are open to hiking and equestrian use only.

Visitor safety: There would be a greater potential for visitor accidents under this proposed rule in comparison to no bicycle use. Mountain bikes traveling at higher speeds could inadvertently collide with other recreationists, regardless of their mode of travel. Horses may be frightened by bicyclists and their response may result in a number of unsafe situations. Given the past record of incidents on this trail, however, reinstating mountain bike use would not be considered an unsafe use if recreationists continued to abide by the recommended trail etiquette/rules. Overall impacts to visitor safety would be negligible to minor in intensity.

Threatened species: According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's October 2001 list of listed, proposed and candidate species for the area, there are seven species of concern, including four federally listed species (Mexican spotted owl, cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl, lesser long-nosed bat, Gila topminnow), one delisted species (American peregrine falcon), and two species proposed for listing (Chiricahua leopard frog, Goodding Onion) that are known to or might occur in the Rincon Mountain District where the Cactus Forest Trail is located.

The Goodding onion has not been recorded in the Rincon Mountains. The Cactus Forest Trail is in the same watershed as a drainage that could potentially be used to restock Gila topminnow. However, the Cactus Forest Trail is well below and disjunct from that drainage, and activities on the Cactus Forest Trail would have no impact on that drainage or affect its potential to reintroduce this fish. Despite surveys throughout the Rincon Mountains by Saguaro and other NPS biological staff, Chiricahua leopard frogs have never been recorded in Saguaro National Park. Furthermore, the proposed action will not affect potential habitat for this frog, which requires surface water above 3,000' elevation.

The Cactus Forest Trail is located over a mile from the known Lesser long-