

Sierra Packing and Wilderness Policy

By Norman B. Livermore, Jr.

You can roam the whole world over and probably not find a more unusual business than that of Sierra packing. Its uniqueness is due in large part to its almost complete lack of change in the last generation, whereas change and mechanization has been the byword in the turbulent outside world. This refreshing sameness in packing has been due to its being an integral part of the High Sierra wilderness, of which the very essence is complete lack of change. The Sierra packer is solely dependent upon a wilderness area.

It should first of all be noted that the term "packer" is widely used but that there are actually two quite separate classes of packer. First is the ordinary packer who works for a pack outfit, who should perhaps more accurately be described as a guide. He typically is a cowhand who likes to spend his summers hazing mules in the mountains. In this work he is employed by a man in the second category, the pack-train operator.

These owners or operators are the business unit of Sierra packing and it is they whose living is wholly dependent upon the Sierra wilderness.

Operating in the High Sierra region today, there are about 60 pack outfits, ranging in size from the smaller outfits with 20 to 30 head of stock to the larger ones with 150 or more. The operators of these outfits use over 3,000 head of horses and mules, operating from approximately twenty different regions on both sides of the Sierra between Sonora and Walker passes.

The packing business in California has gone through three major phases. In the gold-rush days there were the early commercial pack outfits, operating to mines where roads had not yet been built. Most famous of these packers to my knowledge was the redoubtable Daniel Dancer from Downieville. He is reported to have run several hundred head of pack stock in and that thriving mining center before there was a road in. Everything from pianos to bathtubs was packed in on stout Sierra mules.

After the early mining camp days there was a long period of comparative inactivity. During this time the High Sierra was seldom visited and then only by sheepmen or cattlemen. I have had old-timers tell me that during this period they traveled as long as sixty days in the back country and would scarcely see a soul.

Sierra pack outfits as we know them today seem to have grown gradually with the increased use of the automobile. The first real spurt in the business came just after World War I. The Sierra was still comparatively unexplored then, and in a day when things did not move quite so fast as they do now, trips in general seem to have been of longer duration.

In the past twenty years or so, there has been very little over-all change in packing, though there have of course been numerous changes in the ownership and operation of the various outfits.

At present, approximately two thirds of the outfits and stock are based on the east side of the Sierra, distributed from the Bridgeport region on the north to the Monache deer-hunting area on the south. The other third are distributed on the Sierra's west side, from Yosemite to Kernville. Over 75 percent of these outfits

belong to the High Sierra Packers' Association. This organization has been instrumental in helping improve packers' methods and equipment, in cooperating with Forest and Park Services in matters of mutual interest, and in helping packers through an organization to do all they can to preserve the High Sierra wilderness areas.

It is of considerable importance to analyze what wilderness problems, both present and future, are of particular concern to packers, and therefore should be of equal concern to present and future wilderness administrators.

First and most constant of threats is the possibility of new road construction such as now faces the San Geronimo area. Several years ago this threat seemed to be more acute in the High Sierra area than it is at present, but the danger is nevertheless persistent. With the large population growth in the San Joaquin Valley, increasing pressure for more roads is bound to occur, and there are several danger spots packers are constantly watching.

Another increasingly difficult problem is that of obtaining feed for saddle and pack animals. From the packer's point of view, this is not entirely the problem of the diminishing wilderness area feed, which on the whole has been well regulated by public officials, but is also the difficulty of obtaining sufficient feed in the foothill areas for winter grazing. Owing to the comparatively seasonal nature of their business, practically no packers have been able to afford the investment required to supply them with year-round feed. In present days of high prices and competition with cattlemen, this is even more critical than it has been in the past. For proper wilderness use, the time may already be upon us when the total number of pack stock operating into given High Sierra wilderness districts should be limited arbitrarily. This would have the double advantage of limiting overuse in certain Sierra wilderness areas and at the same time might ease somewhat the increasing costliness of winter foothill feed.

Another serious problem not generally recognized by Sierra Club members is the acute curtailment of deer-hunting territory that resulted from the establishment of Kings Canyon National Park. This eliminated a substantial volume of the business of several packers operating in that area and has, in my opinion and that of many others, concentrated hunting too great an extent in areas just outside of park boundaries.

Another problem that is of increasing concern to packers is that of dirty camps in the high country. In the summer of 1946 the High Sierra Packers' Association, in cooperation with the Sierra Club, inaugurated a program for camp cleanup in certain areas, and it is hoped such a program will continue.

A less imminent threat but one that is nevertheless worrisome to many packers is the increased prevalence of backpacking parties who do not use stock. While this is perhaps a misapprehension on the part of these packers, their concern can nevertheless be understood, since they derive no income with which to maintain their business from strictly backpacking parties.

Also less imminent, but a cloud on the horizon that steadily is loom larger, is the threat of air traffic. Although it appears unlikely that conventional airplanes can ever land and take off successfully in the rugged High Sierra terrain, this is not true of helicopters. They are already being manufactured with service ceiling up to 11,000 feet, and it seems to be a but matter of time before their altitude performance is increased and their cost decreased. In the absence of preventative wilderness administration policy the coming of the helicopter would of course be the death knell of all Sierra packing.

While packers have many other problems, these are the major ones that will come up for discussion between packers and wilderness area administrators. I do not contend that Sierra packing should be an end in itself rather than a means to an end of sound wilderness use for the public benefit; nevertheless, I do feel that by the very nature of their business packers are inextricably interwoven with the future of the Sierra wilderness area. Anything that can be done consistent with sound wilderness use that will help packers to maintain their business should result in mutual benefit to both packers and wilderness.

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