

NPS Comments on Cooper Lake Draft 2003 Study Plans for Recreation and Visual Resources and Recreational Whitewater Potential

Although the comments on the Recreational Whitewater Potential (RWP) study plan are not due until 1/31, we are commenting on both it and the Recreation and Visual Resources (RVR) study plan now because the two are linked: the whitewater study will rely in part on the recreational user survey described in the RVR study plan.

Questions and Comments on Proposed Surveys and Data Analysis

Boating

While the RWP study plan states that “public interest in whitewater boating . . . will be evaluated as part of the RVR user survey,” none of the proposed RVR on-site user surveys are likely to yield much information about boating (as opposed to angling) in the project area. They will primarily be administered to snowmachiners (winter survey), tourists and salmon anglers (Cooper Creek campground summer survey) and hunters (fall survey).

Without a survey that better targets existing and potential boating use, we are not likely to see boating *per se* mentioned in answers to questions 14, 15, 26, or 27 on the draft questionnaire. Instead, the survey results will be heavily weighted towards existing high use recreational activities. Unless a way can be found to survey likely boaters, it should be made clear that the RVR study will not cover this form of recreation.

Since flows in the upper Kenai River are affected by project operation, especially during low flow periods, it would be useful to add a survey of boaters using the Cooper Landing launch and/or Jim’s Landing take-out to help determine interest in and demand for boating on this portion of the river, including winter boating.

Which specific user groups will be interviewed under Task II.D ? Will individuals who do not belong to organized groups be included? In the high challenge kayaking community in particular, few users belong to such groups. NPS would appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed user group list.

Camping

We suggest that you add questions about the adequacy of camping facilities at the Cooper Lake launch and Cooper Creek campground, not just site availability. While there are no actual facilities at Cooper Lake, there is evidence of overnight camping there. Provision of established campsites and sanitation, if demand exists, could enhance the recreational experience. Such information will also be useful if CEA develops a recreational management plan for the reservoir pursuant to relicensing.

Trend Analysis

Given that the proposed RVR survey methodology relies on cluster sampling rather than random

user counts, how will survey data be integrated with AVSP and NVUM data to identify trends?

Expert Opinion for Whitewater Boating Potential

CEA is proposing that a single researcher, Mr. Josh Hedberg, survey the creek and provide his expert opinion of its whitewater kayaking potential. Relying on one person's opinion makes the choice of expert very important. While Mr. Hedberg has past experience on hydro projects and has paddled some of AK's more challenging rivers, he does not appear to have much experience kayaking on streams with as low a volume and high a gradient as Cooper Creek. Of the rivers listed in his bio, only Willow Creek and Moose Creek come close to the kind of experience Cooper Creek likely offers.

There are a handful of elite kayakers in southcentral Alaska who seek out experiences like Cooper Creek – experiences made possible by evolving kayak designs, with ever-smaller boats. NPS has contacted some of these individuals and is in the process of trying to determine whether any of them has already descended Cooper Creek. Whether or not the creek has yet been boated, we would like to suggest substituting one or more of these kayakers for Mr. Hedberg, because we believe that their views will be more relevant to the issue of the creek's whitewater potential. Creek boating in headwater areas is a relatively new form of kayaking, but one that is growing in popularity. We should be sure that we are getting the best possible information in order to accurately assess the recreational potential of the creek.