Final discussion

Topic: What next?

The backcountry work group has been the center of decision-making for backcountry management issues over the past few years. Should this work group continue in its same capacity? What could they do differently?

The first meeting started about 4 years ago as a combination of ranger operations, science center staff, interpretative, and trails maintenance. It was charged with facilitation of planning efforts, SOP’s, compliance issues (e.g., related to signage). The signage inventory has been updated, entered into a GIS, with information regarding the sign language, appearance, and condition.

The connections between upper management and rest of backcountry staff are unclear? Do they support backcountry operations? What are their values regarding the backcountry? What issues do they believe in? Developing lines of communication with upper management is an area of concern.

Upper management has other priorities. This week they are dealing with transportation funding issues for the west rim drive, overflights, tribal relations, to name a few. It’s not that they do not care about backcountry, but they are allowing the staff to work out details, while they take care of their responsibilities for managing the park. They are often working external relationships beyond the park, and rely on the park staff to work out details for internal park operations. The park staff should seize this opportunity to move forward, and develop their visions and implementation strategies for the backcountry.

The backcountry work group should recognize themselves as the center of backcountry decision-making. They have power to influence backcountry operations in immediate and collaborative ways. Their effectiveness at decision-making could be improved if they had more direct communications with upper management. There needs to be a “point person” that mediates between various divisions (including upper management). Need to be a person in charge to coordinate activities and schedules.

Let’s resurrect the GIS backcountry data (referred to by Steve Metz yesterday), and we need someone to be in charge of data and coordinate its use. The park needs to acknowledge the good work that has already been done on developing a model that brings together several otherwise independent pockets of data.

The archeological team will be inventorying all sites on trails this year.

All divisions in the park that have backcountry responsibilities are overworked. The ranger staff are already burdened with public safety, monitoring, and other duties. The trails crew and maintenance staff is also over-tasked. Cole’s team (and others in the science center) also have their hands filled. It’s hard for divisions to balance out all their responsibilities and still have leftover time to devote to the backcountry.
We need to prioritize staff responsibility for backcountry duties. Many of us currently have too many tasks, and backcountry is often the tasks that get the lowest priority. How can we identify a few people whose responsibilities formally prioritize backcountry? The work group needs to “raise their bar.” The meetings have been sporadic and infrequent recently. There’s always another priority or crisis that precludes regular meetings and collaborative efforts.

What is the scope of the backcountry plan? Recreational visitor use is important, but isn’t a resource protection plan larger than just visitor use?

If there was shared scheduling, then it could lead to better coordination and collaboration. Like the “ranger blitz” concept.

We need to have another workshop next year at this time to have an update on our achievements. It should be another discussion about activities, research, and vision for the backcountry operations of Grand Canyon.