Appendix F—Tongass Wilderness Solitude Monitoring Protocol

Solitude is an immaterial but significant component of a satisfying wilderness experience for the visiting public. Solitude is defined by Webster's dictionary as, "the state of being or living alone; lonely seclusion; remoteness from habitations, as of a place; a lonely, infrequent place." The forest service is directed by two different documents to consider solitude: element 5 of the 10-Year Wilderness Stewardship Challenge indicates that the wilderness needs adequate direction, monitoring, and management in order to protect opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, and section 4 of the Wilderness Act of 1964 identifies the need to manage wilderness for opportunities for solitude, or primitive and unconfined recreation. Solitude needs to be defined and monitored in order to be protected. This appendix will attempt to define solitude and suggest how solitude monitoring can be standardized and implemented on a forest wide level in order to preserve and develop the quality of solitude offered by forest lands.

Many questions are raised when considering solitude monitoring:

What is needed to inventory solitude? Where will this information will be housed, and in what format? Once gathered, how will this information be used for the evaluation of trends over time?

Utilizing Field Time

Every field trip can be considered an opportunity for solitude monitoring. Valuable, new information on solitude in the field can be collected by any field going personnel such as those in hydrology, wildlife, fisheries, heritage, air quality, law enforcement, botany, cabins and trails, special use permits, and recreation monitoring. With countless field trips scheduled every year that scatter so many employees throughout remote field locations, the possibility of collecting information on the state of solitude is enormous. In order to do this, however, the infrastructure to support such an undertaking needs to be developed and implemented.

Some ranger districts are developing social encounter monitoring and sound monitoring as a way to define and preserve a sense of solitude. During the summer of 2007, David Cole from the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute worked with several wilderness rangers on the Tongass to discuss methods for gathering information in the field regarding solitude. This resulted in the development of a field encounter monitoring form, similar to ones used previously in Misty Fiords. Information on the form includes the type of vessel encountered, the distance, and number of people in the group. Sound monitoring is also an essential component of solitude monitoring. Early this spring, an employee from KMRD went to a sound monitoring training offered by the National Park Service. Sound monitoring will be incorporated into the 2008 field season in Misty Fiords as a result of this training.

Since wilderness areas of the Tongass National Forest vary in size, geography, and amount and type of visitor use, methods for defining and protecting solitude will vary for each wilderness area. By becoming more efficient in how we collect data, we might reduce our administrative presence in the field which may increase the opportunities for solitude for others.

Storage and Organization of New Information

How this information will be stored and be made available for the long term has not been decided. The Wilderness INFRA Module has a tool where contacts at campsites or on trails can be recorded. However, since most encounters occur along shorelines and not at specific campsite or trail locations, these tools may not work. Another idea is to expand the Outfitter / Guide Database to include social encounter monitoring information.

While the use of forms will be a step forward, it is important to note the current limitations of this data. At this time, there has been no stratification of the wilderness area to identify areas where one might expect opportunities of solitude. Because of this, it is likely that some of this year's information will simply reinforce information that is already known, i.e. measurements taken along known travel routes or flyways provides little new information about solitude as it is already known that a low likelihood exists. Since there is not systematic method or statistical analysis tied to these measurements, there should be no expectation that this information can be an extrapolated or interpreted beyond the immediate observations. Subjective field observations could however lead to recommendations of where a more objective analysis might be needed.

The actual relevance of the collection of information related to encounters or sounds may be better understood as this information is reviewed in conjunction with other sets of data. Reviewing these observations with other existing information should help create a better understanding of the present conditions and how to design future information gathering efforts.

Utilizing Previously Recorded Information

It is important not to overlook previously recorded information as a way to gain a sense of the state of solitude in the forest. The Tongass Outfitter / Guide Database, INFRA's campsite inventory database, the cabin reservation system, documentation of administrative use, and review of published schedules such as cruise lines and floatplane companies are all potential sources of information on solitude.

The O/G database houses information of all outfitter/guide use as reported annually by the actual use reports required by their special use authorization. This is currently one of the best sources of information describing the commercial uses within a wilderness area.

INFRA may reflect improved conditions on the ground stemming from education by the Leave-No-Trace Program. However, observations at known campsites are still relevant in helping to understand where use occurs and whether or not there are impacts beyond the loss of solitude.

The National Recreation Reservation System hosts the campsite inventory database which includes information of the number of users, where they come from (from zip codes), and the season of use is all available through mining this database. For documentation of administrative use – in some wilderness areas, the only administrative use that may occur may be from the wilderness rangers. However, in some places there is an extensive amount of administrative use. This use should be documented as to the extent, type, and amount of use that took place. Records from local dispatch offices can contribute to what is known for this use.

By review of published schedules it is possible to get a better idea of how wilderness areas on the Tongass are affected by cruise ships or air carriers. The sounds from water and air based traffic have an effect on the feeling of solitude in a wilderness area. Following schedules will be helpful in establishing trends.

Mapping

Areas within each wilderness with a likelihood of opportunities for solitude could be mapped. This mapping can draw on previously existing sources of information including ROS class, public use facilities and structures (tent platforms, isolated cabins), administrative facilities (FS and other agencies), community uses (Page 3-576 of forest plan amendment FEIS), O/G use (type, timing, and extend from O/G database), and locations of private in-holdings. On the Tongass, people make extensive use of the shorelines or of lakes. As not all shoreline or lakes are accessible, an effort will be needed to map areas of known use (type and amount).

Forest Plan

To address the WSC requires that a protocol for solitude monitoring be in place, and a baseline be established. If it is determined that the Forest Plan does not adequately allow for such a protocol, then the Forest Plan would need amendment. If there is concern of a local nature, the District Ranger would address it. The work of solitude monitoring could offer a way to improve future scores for the WSC.

If the review of the appeals to the Forest Plan finds no issues related to the protection of solitude, a review of the forest plan direction can go forward by the Forest Wilderness Staff. After completion of a review, a finding for whether or not there is adequate direction for the management of opportunities for solitude within the wilderness areas for the Tongass National Forest can be made. A finding for adequate direction would be documented by signature by the Forest Supervisor.

Solitude monitoring reports should be included in the year-end report for the Forest Plan. A full snapshot of trends might be summarized by each wilderness on a five-year cycle. It may be preferable to seek reports from a few wilderness areas each year on a cycle of rotation. This has the benefit of allowing districts time to prepare for solitude monitoring.