

Changing Campsite Conditions in the Spanish Peaks, 1972-2004

David Cole

In 1972, Sid Frissell located all the campsites around a number of the subalpine lakes in the Spanish Peaks portion of what is now the Lee Metcalf Wilderness, Montana. He also assigned each of these campsites a condition class to characterize how impacted it was. At 10 of the lakes that Frissell visited, we repeated this assessment in 1988 and again in 2004. The 10 lakes that were revisited are Lower, Middle and Upper Jerome Rock Lakes, Upper Falls Creek Lake, Lake Solitude, Mirror Lake, Lower and Upper Spanish Lakes, “Champagne” Lake (the unnamed lake 1 km north of Lower Spanish Lake) and Lava Lake.

The condition classes that Frissell used are as follows:

- 1 – Ground vegetation flattened but not permanently injured. Minimal physical change except for possibly a simple rock fireplace.
- 2 – Ground vegetation worn away around fireplace or center of activity
- 3 – Ground vegetation lost on most of the site, but humus and litter still present in all but a few areas
- 4 – Bare mineral soil obvious. Tree roots exposed on the surface.
- 5—Soil erosion obvious. Trees reduced in vigor and dead.

In subsequent assessments, classes 4 and 5 have been combined because there are very few cases of class 5 impact and the criteria for that class are difficult to assess.

1972 Conditions

In 1972, Frissell found 46 campsites around these lakes (Table 1). The lakes with the most campsites were Lake Solitude, with 8 campsites, and Lower Spanish Lake, with 7 campsites. Campsites were relatively equally distributed across the four condition classes, although class 2 sites were most abundant (Table 2). Highly impacted (class 4) campsites were located at Lower Spanish Lake (3 class 4 sites), Lava Lake (3 class 4 sites), “Champagne” Lake (2 class 4 sites), Upper Spanish Lake (1 class 4 site), Mirror Lake (1 class 4 site), and Lake Solitude (1 class 4 site).

Table 1. Number of campsites at each lake, 1972, 1988 and 2004.

Lake	1972	1988	2004
Lower Jerome Rock	5	9	10
Middle Jerome Rock	2	3	3
Upper Jerome Rock	4	8	9
Upper Falls Creek	2	7	5
Solitude	8	8	4
Lower Spanish	7	23	23
Upper Spanish	4	11	9
“Champagne”	2	2	3
Mirror	6	6	9
Lava	6	12	10
All Lakes	46	89	85

Table 2. Number of campsites by condition class at all 10 lakes, 1972, 1988 and 2004.

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	All Sites
1972	11	16	8	11	46
1988	44	12	7	26	89
2004	31	15	18	21	85

Changes Between 1972 and 1988

Between 1972 and 1988, the number of campsites at these 10 lakes increased from 46 to 89 (Table 1). The proliferation of new campsites was most pronounced at Lower Spanish Lake. Number of campsites did not increase much at Middle Jerome Rock Lake, Lake Solitude, “Champagne” Lake, or Mirror Lake. Of the sites that existed in 1972, 15 got better, 15 got worse and 16 stayed the same. As a caveat to this statement, 7 of the sites that “stayed the same” were class 4 sites. Since class 4 sites cannot experience an increase in condition class, these sites could have deteriorated despite no increase in condition class. Of the 15 sites that got better, 8 disappeared. Forty-seven new campsites were present in 1988 (that did not exist in 1972). Of these, 22 were class 1, 13 were class 2, 7 were class 3 and 5 were class 4.

Due to the development of numerous new lightly-impacted campsites, about 50% of all campsites in 1988 were class 1 sites (Table 2). The number of highly-impacted class 4 sites increased from 11 in 1972 to 26 in 1988. The most profound increase in highly-impacted sites occurred at Lower Jerome Rock Lake which had seven class 4 sites in 1988, despite having none in 1972.

Changes Between 1988 and 2004

Between 1988 and 2004, the number of campsites at these 10 lakes declined slightly from 89 to 85 (Tables 1 and 2). At Lake Solitude, there were fewer campsites in 2004 than there had been in 1972. At all other lakes, however, campsite density remains somewhat to much higher in 2004 than it was in 1972. Of the sites that existed in 1988, 32 got better, 9 got worse and 48 stayed the same. As noted earlier, the 20 campsites that were class 4 sites in both 1988 and 2004 could have deteriorated despite being assigned to the class “stayed the same”. Of the 32 sites that got better, 24 disappeared. Despite a net decrease in number of sites, 20 new campsites were present in 2004 (that did not exist in 1988). Of these, 12 were class 1, 7 were class 2, and 1 was class 3.

The number of highly impacted (class 4) campsites decreased from 26 in 1988 to 21 in 2004 (Table 2). Five sites that were class 4 in 1988 improved to class 3 in 2004 and one site improved to class 2. One class 2 site in 1988 deteriorated to class 4 in 2004.

Conclusions and Implications

The trend of pronounced deterioration in campsite impact that occurred in the 16 years between 1972 and 1988 has not continued in the subsequent 16 years. Since 1988 both the number and condition of campsites have been relatively stable. While it is good news that conditions are no longer deteriorating, the bad news is that conditions have stabilized

at a level of impact much greater than is necessary for the area. Many individual campsites have levels of impact that exceed those that could exist if visitors would practice Leave No Trace. The impacts associated with stock-holding (particularly trees with exposed roots) are severe on many sites. In addition, there are many more campsites than is necessary to accommodate the relatively modest amount of use that occurs around these lakes. The most extreme example is Lower Spanish Lake with 23 individual campsites, 16 of which have lost most of their vegetation cover (class 3 and 4).