

# Whychus Creek Trail system suffering user abuse

By Craig F. Eisenbeis  
Correspondent

I was disheartened to learn from Gary Guttormsen that various portions of the relatively new Whychus Creek Trail system are already suffering from user abuse. Guttormsen is the trails coordinator for the Sisters Trails Alliance (STA) and spends a great deal of his time volunteering to help keep the local trail systems in top shape. Foremost among his concerns were horrendous amounts of trailside dog poop and outright vandalism.

So, in order to assess the situation first-hand, I agreed to meet with him at the parking lot for the Whychus Creek Overlook. The first thing I noticed was that, even in the middle of the week, both this parking area and the one at the north end of the Whychus Creek Trail system were completely full.

Getting out of our vehicles, Guttormsen immediately began to explain. "This trail has become real popular with the dog-walkers," he said, as we approached the trail kiosk. Then, he suddenly exclaimed, "Look! There you go ... right there!" Sure enough, there it was, an enormous pile of dog poop right in the middle of the immaculately maintained fine gravel trail, a trail frequented by handicapped and blind trail users.

"They even leave poop bags on the trail," he said,

"and apparently expect the trail-poop fairies to pick it up." He looked a little farther down the trail, shook his head in exasperation and said, "It never fails, there's one right up there." Sure enough, there it was, neatly bagged but discarded along the trail.

He even recounted how he encountered a woman tying a poop bag to a tree branch. He commented to her, "I hope you're just putting it there so you can pick it up on your way back..."

"Oh, no," she responded. "It's biodegradable."

As we continued on down the trail, he muttered something about how stupid people can be, then added, "It's getting to be a major, major problem."

In addition to failing to take responsibility for their animals, dog-owners fail to realize that — in this climate — dog excrement can become almost mummified and persist for months. With the overlook taking on the unplanned role of a dog-walking park, the stuff is piling up at an alarming rate. The result is both unsightly and unsanitary.

This was my fifth visit to some portion of this trail system in just the last two months. It is common to see a few other people; but on this occasion — and we only covered a couple of miles — we saw a total of 21 trail users... and 11 dogs.

One of the people we

encountered on the trail was the now-retired Forest Service ecologist, Maret Pajutee, who was largely responsible for the development of this unique trail system at the outskirts of Sisters. She and her husband, Rod Bonacker, were enjoying the sunny day with a walk along Whychus Creek. Not surprisingly, the conversation quickly turned to the reason for our outing that day.

Pajutee acknowledged that the Whychus Trail system was experiencing heavy use, and she expressed her appreciation for the volunteer work performed by Guttormsen and the STA. "We're so lucky we have the Sisters Trails Alliance here," she said. "We knew the Forest Service didn't have the resources and would have to rely on community help."

The bottom line, though, is that the STA can't do it alone; and the public must share the responsibility. "If it doesn't improve," Guttormsen reluctantly said, "I suppose that the Forest Service might have to prohibit dogs altogether. We're starting to get lots of complaints."

But dog poop wasn't the only thing on his mind. We bade Pajutee and Bonacker farewell and continued upstream for something else Guttormsen wanted to show me. "Here's one," he said, "...and another." Within the space of just a few hundred yards he pointed out dozens of hack marks on the trailside trees.



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Gary Guttormsen, Trails Coordinator for the Sisters Trails Alliance, documents the growing accumulation of dog excrement at the Whychus Overlook Trail.

It appeared that someone had walked along the trail swinging a machete at the trees as they passed. "This is so senseless," he said. "People don't realize that the bark of a tree is like our skin; it keeps diseases and insects out."

In another instance that defies reason, STA volunteers had spent considerable effort trying to restore and rehabilitate an eroded and damaged slope at the creek's edge. Logs, rocks, and vegetation were carefully placed to mitigate damage and promote regeneration. After the project was completed, someone came along and threw and rolled the rocks and logs into

the stream. STA's hard work had been destroyed in a few moments of foolishness.

Vandalism in National Forests is a federal crime. Anyone who witnesses such vandalism to forest sites or trees, or has any information about it, is urged to contact the Forest Service or the STA.

This trail system is a unique and special asset to Sisters Country, but it requires that everyone help take responsibility for the preservation of resources and sites like these. Guttormsen and his fellow volunteers should not have their work go for naught or be relegated to having to take on the role of trail-poop fairies.



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Dozens of trees were vandalized along the Whychus Creek Trail.

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