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Marion Lake graces the foreground of the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness Area, one of several Oregon wildernesses threatened by hordes of summer backpackers. A pre-registration system may be imposed by the forest service to prevent campers from misusing wilderness.

# Abuse defiles pristine wilderness

By **STEVE KNIGHT**  
 Of the Emerald

"The idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs more defenders," writes natur-

alist and high priest of preservation Edward Abbey.

But in Oregon, many wilderness defenders are destroying the pristine areas they once fought to save.

Jefferson Park in the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness, an area of postcard scenery, is becoming a sad example.

With Mt. Jefferson looming in the background, high meadows explode in an array of colorful wildflowers and open into a series of sparkling blue alpine lakes.

But fair-weather summer weekends bring trouble. Herds of backpackers, day hikers and fishermen overrun the area. What once were trails into the park now are 12-inch ruts crisscrossing the meadow. Vegetation around the lakes has been obliterated by campfires and trampling.

"People go to some areas and dull their hatchets on young

trees. It's unbelievable." Solitude is almost nonexistent.

Ron Rothschadl, recreational staff officer for the Willamette National Forest, says too many people are overtaxing Jefferson Park's recreational capacity.

High elevation and volcanic soils make this area "very susceptible to environmental degradation," he says.

Rothschadl says Jefferson Park is just one example of many areas in Oregon's wilderness system suffering from overuse. He cites easy accessibility and a constant yearly rise in the number of wilderness users as the two main reasons for the problem.

Mt. Jefferson and the Three Sisters wilderness areas are the most overcrowded, Rothschadl says. He advises people seeking solitude in the two areas to avoid high elevation campsites with "splendid vistas," any lake "larger than a pothole" and destinations farther than five miles from a trailhead.

Rothschadl says the forest service plans to reseed some areas and restrict the use of others. However, if the problem of overuse continues, a pre-entry permit system — similar to one used in California — may be implemented.

The pre-registration system can impose restrictions on where backpackers camp, he says.

Without being too specific,

Rothschadl recommends some general areas for backpackers who want to avoid crowds.

- The southern region of the Three Sisters.

- Diamond Peak Wilderness south of the the Sisters. Rothschadl says the small number of backpackers who hike this wilderness avoid the area until late August because of mosquitoes.

- Chucksney Mountain near Cougar Reservoir on the McKenzie Highway. This area of approximately 6,000 acres is not a congressionally designated wilderness but an "undeveloped roadless recreational area." Unlike a true wilderness, the forest service allows cross-country motorcyclists on the trails.

- Middle Santiam northeast of Sweet Home. This "de facto" wilderness offers hikes through rare, low-elevation, old-growth forests, Rothschadl says.

- Kalmiopsis Wilderness near Medford. Rothschadl terms this area "tough country" and a "little more challenging." He says the Kalmiopsis has less water and scenic vistas than the Three Sisters.

However, Rothschadl says even in crowded wilderness areas a backpacker can find solitude with a compass, topographical map and the willingness to hike off the main trails.

For more information on wilderness areas, call 687-6523.

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