

Them Mules

By Tennison

Photos by Western Mule Magazine

Coming out of a meeting Wednesday, August 13th at the Grand Canyon, the National Park Service is making plans to close the historic Bright Angel Trail to the famous Grand Canyon Mules.

The plan is to rework the South Kaibab Trail and allow mule traffic to enter the Canyon there. As soon as work on the Kaibab Trail is completed mules will no longer be allowed on the Bright Angel Trail.

All of this is due to hikers wanting a trail they can hike on that is "Well Maintained". The reason the Bright Angel trail is there at all and has always been highly maintained is because of none other than the mules themselves. The National Park Service has heard this "Squeaky Wheel" (the hikers) and we know the squeaky wheel gets the grease. The mules will be forced to take dudes down a trail that is much steeper, and will cause many mules to have to retire before their time and the South Kaibab Trail is more treacherous, no place for the dudes that ride the Grand Canyon Mules.

There is plenty of history that goes with the Bright Angel Trail. Let me give you a quick review.

The Bright Angel Trail was originally built as a mining access trail for pack mules in 1891 by Ralph and Niles Cameron. They gave up on mining and turned to tourist rides into the Canyon in the later part of the 1890's. Tourists riding mules into the Grand Canyon has been going on every since.

The Camerons held a private deed to the trail. In 1919 the National Park Service took control of the canyon and immediately began trying to wrestle control of the Bright Angel Trail from the Camerons. The National Park Service finally succeeded when they built the Kaibab Trail in 1928. This put the Cameron's trail, the Bright Angel Trail out of business and Cameron became a "willing seller" to the National Park Service.

The Fred Harvey Company got the lease to run the mule rides down into the canyon by way of the Bright Angel Trail and out of the canyon by way of the Kaibab Trail. The Fred Harvey Company is today called Xanterra, who runs the mule rides.

The south Kaibab Trail is the trail the packers have used over the years supplying Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the canyon. The south Kaibab Trail is where rookie mules learned to negotiate the canyon trails packing in supplies and packing out anything that needed to come to the top. Not all mules passed the test, there have been rookie mules that have fallen to their death on the Kaibab Trail or have caused another mule to go over the side. When the mules have learned to negotiate the Kaibab Trail, then and then only were they considered for a dude mule. The reason the Kaibab Trail was used for coming out of the canyon by the dude mules instead of going down that way was because it was believed that the Kaibab Trail was too steep and treacherous for anyone but the best of riders. From what I've seen, the majority of folks who are going down on the mules to experience the Grand Canyon, (an experience like none other) are anything but experienced riders.

I've had the pleasure of sitting with Ross Knox (long time packer for the Grand Canyon) and listening to the stories and experiences he had over the years. I believe Ross Knox would be the first to mention the Kaibab Trail ain't for no dude.

Anyone I've talked with over the years who has had anything to do with the mule operations at the Grand Canyon have always felt the Kaibab Trail was too treacherous to be suitable for in-experienced riders to ride down. I don't know it but I'll bet my best hat that opinion hasn't changed.

Little does the tax payer know there are currently over 400 miles of inner canyon trails available to the hikers that livestock are not permitted on. Now the hikers want the Bright Angel Trail. Originally all trails in the Grand Canyon were stock trails. Today only the Bright Angel and the Kaibab Trails are allowed stock. Stock has been kicked off of the other trails one by one over the decades. We have allowed it. It's time to speak-up.

Some years back Western Mule Magazine heard they were fixing to shut down outside stock to the Bright Angel and Kaibab Trails. When we brought it to your attention Western Mule Magazine readers made the calls and wrote the letters to get that action stopped. Don't you think for a minute letters and phone calls won't cause another meeting. Please don't lead yourself to believe the next person will and you don't need to, it's important that you do make the contacts and express your opinion.

It needs to start with your Congressman, but don't stop there, we need to go straight to the top, to the Department of the Interior and to the National Park Service. We have provided you with phone numbers and addresses. The squeaky wheel does get the grease. We mule owners and those who believe that such a tradition as mules in the Grand Canyon, on the Bright Angel Trail should not cease, need to let it be known that the mules need to stay on the Bright Angel Trail.

Don't let some preppie with a backpack, that has no concern for the rich history, the tradition, no loyalty to the icons of the Grand Canyon, THE MULES, have the last word. These hikers are merely offended by mule poop.
We don't only need to squeak...WE NEED TO ROAR!

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CONTACT YOUR CONGRESSMAN!

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Editor
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Dear Editor:

This is in response to a recent article in your publication titled "Them Mules", written by Tension, regarding mule use within Grand Canyon National Park. The article erroneously states that "the National Park Service is making plans to close the historic Bright Angel Trail to the famous Grand Canyon mules."

The National Park Service is currently considering a major reconstruction project on the South Kaibab Trail that would significantly improve the condition of that trail for both hikers and mule users alike. The project is expected to take anywhere from two to four years. While this project is underway mule use would temporarily be diverted to the Bright Angel Trail. Once work was completed, mule use on the South Kaibab Trail would then resume.

A similar project would then be considered for the Bright Angel Trail if funding is available. Likewise, if this project is approved, mule use would temporarily be diverted to the South Kaibab Trail until completion of the project.

The National Park Service will soon undertake a revision of the Grand Canyon National Park's Backcountry Management Plan. This plan will cover park resources in the inner canyon as well as visitor experience and use. Future trail use, including mule and stock use, will be addressed in this plan. During this planning process, the National Park Service, under the direction of the National Environmental Policy Act, will encourage public participation. Members of the public that are interested in participating in this effort can ask to be added to the Backcountry Management Plan mailing list by calling Kirstin Heins, Resources Planning Leader at 928-638-7734 or by sending an email with their request to Kirstin_Heins@nps.gov.

Being involved in the revision of the Backcountry Management Plan, and any planning effort undertaken by the National Park Service, is the best way for the public to obtain accurate information. It also gives the public an opportunity to shape how visitor experience and use will be managed while protecting park resources.

We appreciate your interest and the interest of your readers in Grand Canyon National Park.

Sincerely,
Steve Martin
Superintendent

Continued work on Grand Canyon closure alert.

Thurs. 10/9/08

Called NPS/back country office at the Grand Canyon and talked with Shawna. She said her e-mail said that the big wigs were to meet next week to determine course of action and possible schedule. She thought that the S Kaibab would only be closed for approx 2 years for repairs instead of the 3 or 4 first mentioned. I told her I would call again next week and find out what happened at the meeting.

Received a message from Diane (NPS/back country office) No talk of removing livestock, just regular maintenance.

I had e-mailed Randy Kirkbride and asked him to call me. He called this morning. He is very concerned about the mule ride and private livestock closure on the Bright Angel Trail. He forwarded e-mails that he and others had written to the park service and replies from Super/Steve Martin GCNP saying that this was a false report.

I e-mailed Western Mule magazine and they forwarded the article, which I have attached. I then called Ben Tennison, the editor, and we had a long discussion. Ben told me he had a confidential informant. He cannot release the name now, but might be able to in several days after the person talks with his lawyer. He would then be interviewed by Terry Wagner of Western Mule Magazine. Ben stands by his source as most reliable. His source says that the S. Kaibab will be closed for 2 plus years for repairs and then Bright Angel will close for 9 to 12 months for repairs. After the repairs are completed the Bright Angel Trail will be closed permanently to livestock travel.

In conclusion, there is a lot finger pointing, denials and several conflicting stories that Gayle and I have received from the Park Service and others. We will continue to follow this drama until the truth comes out.

Just talked with Ben Tennison to clarify a few things and he had just gotten an e-mail from Steve Martin, Superintendent Grand Canyon Park Service. I have attached the e-mail. Maybe all our questions have been answered for the time being. I believe that all members of BCHA should be on the mailing list for the Back Country Management Plan. I know I will sign up immediately.

Jim Higgs, National Director BCHA