



A mule train heads down South Kaibab Trail, delivering supplies to Phantom Ranch. With the implementation of the Stock Use Plan, daily trips to the canyon floor have dropped 75 percent.

# Mules of the Grand Canyon

A new Stock Use Plan highlights the challenges of battling for equestrian trail access on public lands.

By RYAN T. BELL

**I**N 2009, NEWS BROKE that mule access in Grand Canyon National Park was up for review. A knock-down, drag-out battle ensued that lasted the better part of two years. When the dust settled, lamentably, mules had been relegated off the very trails their predecessors had helped construct a century earlier. The verdict came down on January 5, 2011, when the National Park Service announced a new Stock Use Plan. In language that brought to mind a used-car salesman peddling a lemon, the NPS stated that mule access would continue at “historically high levels,” albeit on different trails than before.

It’s worth noting that most mule riders in the Grand Canyon are customers of one of the park’s two concessionaires—Xanterra, located on the south rim, and Canyon Trail Rides on the north rim. They outfit a combined 15,000 riders every year. Surprisingly few private stock users access the park,

making what appeared to be a case of disappearing public trails really a battle over commercial outfitting in Grand Canyon National Park.

The most controversial changes occurred on the south rim, where Xanterra previously offered two mule ride programs: a round-trip day ride to the

bottom of the canyon, and an overnight trip to Phantom Ranch, which is also located on the canyon floor. The vision of mules navigating the carved-out switchbacks of the Grand Canyon wall was as symbolic of America’s national parks as rock climbers summiting Half Dome in Yosemite, or Old Faithful geyser spouting off in Yellowstone.

The 2011 Stock Use Plan reduced the number of daily mule rides to the bottom of the Grand Canyon by 75 percent. The day-ride program was banned altogether from inner-canyon trail use, and relegated to a snoozer trail above the canyon rim. The new Abyss Overlook Ride is a clever piece of marketing spin. The out-and-back route travels through the trees, with occasional views of the canyon. Hitching posts at the turnaround point allow riders to tie up their mules and walk to a scenic overlook. If the old ride to the bottom of the canyon was the whole enchilada, the Abyss Overlook Ride is a soft-boiled egg.

On tripadvisor.com, a popular travel website, public response to the ride has been negative.

“Abyss Overlook Ride—for kids,” one reviewer wrote.

# Hands-On Horseman

"They eliminated the part of the trip that would've made it worthwhile," another commented.

Considering the impact the new Stock Use Plan has on commercial business, it was surprising that Grand Canyon stock concessionaires maintained radio silence during the two-year planning process. Some speculate that because concession permits are open to review at any time, companies are wary of taking a bold stance that might anger park officials. If that's the case, then there is a misbalance of power in the national parks concession system that needs to be looked at.

Xanterra was fortunate that mule proponents went to battle on its behalf. The contingent included current and former Grand Canyon mule wranglers, concerned citizens—hikers and horsemen alike—a dedicated journalist who wrote extensively on the topic for *Western Mule Magazine*, and the national office of Backcountry Horsemen of America. In the end, the mules' interests did not win out. It's a painful battle to have lost, but the damage isn't permanent because the plan will come up for review again in the future, some 15 years from now.

Lest the struggle have been in vain, it's worth employing hindsight to glean wisdom that will help wherever equestrian access on public land is next threatened.

## Lesson #1

### Ears to the ground

Mule proponents had their finger on the pulse of Grand Canyon National Park's goings-on to see trouble coming back in 2009. They raised a warning flag to draw attention to the cause. Equestrians everywhere should follow their example and get to know their local land managers, including those from the Bureau of Land Management, National Forest, State Parks, and more. Early intervention is the best way to head trouble off at the pass.

## Lesson #2

### Sit at the table

Public policy meetings are like a game of musical chairs, and the first to arrive gets a seat at the table, while everyone else is left standing. In the Grand Canyon decision, it's unfortunate that the end result didn't go the mules' way. But who

knows how the Stock Use Plan would have looked had mule proponents not been at the meetings at all.

## Lesson #3

### Present a unified front

When Backcountry Horsemen of America entered the Grand Canyon foray, mule proponents were glad to have the might of a national organization on their side. They were surprised, however, when BCHA limited its comments to only advocate private stock use in the park. Given the paltry number of private stock users visiting the Grand Canyon every year, it was a bizarre show of false solidarity. In future battles, stakeholders should have a clear understanding on where each other stands.

## Lesson #4

### Ignite a grassfire grassroots campaign

Websites like Facebook and Twitter should be an equestrian trail advocate's best friend. The websites instantly disseminate information and action alerts, generate new followers and raise awareness about a given cause. Surprisingly, few equine advocacy groups make use of these services. Equestrians are slow to embrace change, but social media technology is one boat they can't afford to miss.

## Lesson #5

### Track your dollars and cents

Fighting fire with fire is a sound battle strategy. Equestrian detractors often use economics to make a case against equine access. Their argument usually revolves around trail maintenance and infrastructure costs. Often, it's a flawed argument. Equestrians represent an economic infusion wherever they travel, and they donate invaluable time and money toward trail maintenance and public outreach programs. When you ride or volunteer, keep track of your time and money spent so the information is available if a financial counterargument ever needs to be made in your area. 🐾

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