

YOSEMITE ON THE PRECIPICE CONTROVERSIAL PLAN SEEKS TO STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN NATIONAL PARK'S AWESOME BEAUTY AND THOSE WHO WANT TO ENJOY IT

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, Calif. -- Hanging 1,000 feet in an ocean of vertical granite called El Capitan, the only thing I felt certain I would find was solitude. Here, where ``big wall" climbing was born, it should be easy to get away from it all. Above the collapsible cot hung from the cliff where I made my bed for the night were walls of overhanging rock and a ceiling of stars.

Then the car alarm on the road a half-mile below punctured the tranquillity. I looked down to a chain of headlights backed up along the length of the Yosemite Valley. In a few hours, it would be the Fourth of July, and solitude would be harder to find in Yosemite National Park in the Sierra Nevada, even on its most massive walls.

For climbers, El Capitan, a 3,400-foot-tall monolith rising in the middle of the Yosemite Valley, is one of the world's greatest challenges. It also provides an unparalleled overview of the challenges faced by one of the crown jewels of the national park system.

In the coming years, park managers hope to reclaim some of Yosemite's lost natural beauty, reduce traffic congestion and crowding, and increase visitors' understanding and enjoyment of the park.

It took the National Park Service 20 years to create the Yosemite Valley Plan, which was completed in late 2000. It will take at least 15 years and \$441 million to implement this plan, which would transform the way visitors experience Yosemite -- how they travel

in the park, where they sleep and shop, and what sights they see. All the changes are designed to relieve the congestion and help preserve the natural habitat.

Critics condemn it, however, calling it a thinly disguised plot to further develop and commercialize the park.

From my perch on a wall of El Capitan, I can see that in transforming Yosemite, the National Park Service is literally between a rock and a hard place. The Yosemite Valley makes up about 5 percent of Yosemite National Park but draws the majority of the park's 3.5 million visitors each year. Inside the valley, the park service provides roads, primitive campsites, a five-star hotel, interpretive centers, amphitheaters, movie screens, galleries, shuttle buses and dozens of dining, lodging and shopping options. And don't forget the waterfalls, mountains and wildlife that were already here -- all in a mile-wide valley walled by 1,000-foot cliffs, with the Merced River flowing down the middle.

Abreast Of Nature

My climbing partner, Dave Fasulo of Essex, feeds rope to me as I make the slow, vertical crawl along a 70-foot-long granite roof system that gracefully curves up to the "nipple," the tip of a huge flake of granite. From the ground, the formation resembles a 100-foot-tall breast. A tramful of sightseers stops on the road below. We can hear the tour guide through the loudspeaker point out the tiny dots moving up the wall and realize he is describing us. For a moment, it seems more like Disneyland than mountaineering.

The architects of the Valley Plan hope to give park visitors a more nature-based experience. Managers plan to let the park manage itself, to some degree, by letting natural processes in Yosemite run unfettered. The Merced River gave them a head start toward that goal in 1997 with a New Year's Day torrent that flooded the valley and washed away much of the riverside development. Yosemite was essentially closed for three months as workers cleaned up the mess and repaired facilities.

Now park managers plan to remove much of the development that

remains in the flood plain -- including many campsites and some of the Yosemite Lodge's motel units -- and restore the natural riverside habitat.

Other aspects of the plan would get tourists out of their cars and get their cars out of the valley. Overnight visitors would still drive to their rooms or campsites. Day visitors would have 550 parking spaces in Yosemite Village, and on the busiest days, shuttle bus service would be expanded. New bike and pedestrian paths would lead to the ancient waterfalls and spires, as well as to new visitor centers and interpretive programs. Rustic tents, cabins and lodges would take the place of more modern and posh accommodations.

It's hard to imagine less-posh accommodations than the "portaledge" where Dave and I are spending our nights. I quit listening to the tour guide on the tram below when a piece of my gear rips loose. For a few seconds, I am airborne, 1,200 feet above the boulder field where we started climbing three days ago. The rope catches my fall after 20 feet. I pull myself up the rope to my highpoint and hammer a piton into the crack in the granite roof before the reality of what happened can catch up with me. Disneyland doesn't have any rides like this.

It will take me nearly three hours to inch my way past the nipple, placing my own gear or clipping into pieces left behind by other teams. It's faster to use the gear that's already there, but hanging on rusty, tattered wires and ragged nylon cords frays my nerves. At the nipple, the flake is sharp enough to cut a rope, and Dave repeatedly reminds me to pull my gear out as I pass it and to pad the edge with duct tape. I'll fall a lot farther than 20 feet if I blow it after I pull the gear, but not as far as Dave would if the giant blade sliced the rope while he was hanging from it. At the top of the breast, I anchor the rope, catch my breath, then start hauling the 200-pound bag of food, water and gear that we are dragging with us up the cliff.

Two Sides To Valley Plan

Implementing the Yosemite Valley Plan has proved to be a mountainous challenge.

The day before starting our climb, we stopped by an open house in Yosemite Village that detailed the Valley Plan's latest projects and proposals, one of the many ways the park service has sought public comment on the plan. Inside, rangers described a score of projects.

Outside, however, the Friends of Yosemite have protested the valley plan and the admission hike -- from \$5 to \$20 per car -- that is helping to finance it. This summer, they have taken aim at the restoration of Lower Yosemite Falls, one of the park's most popular attractions. The park service began renovations in June, includes replacing the falls parking lot with a picnic area and turning the "one-way" path into a loop trail.

The Friends of Yosemite say the "overblown and destructive" Lower Yosemite Falls project is masquerading as restoration.

The valley plan, says Greg Adair, director of the group, would increase the asphalted surface area of Yosemite, further degrade the air quality with diesel shuttle buses, widen about half of the valley's roads and add new roads. Outside the park, new parking lots, park offices and staff housing would be built in environmentally sensitive areas and endangered-species habitat.

Overall, says Joyce Eden of Friends, the plan contributes more toward overdeveloping and commercializing the park than protecting it. By raising the price of admission to finance it, the park service has put Yosemite outside the reach of visitors with modest means.

While the additional funding raised through the increased price does stay in the park, Yosemite park ranger Deb Schweizer points out that \$10 million of the Lower Yosemite Falls' \$12 million price tag was provided by the Yosemite Fund, a nonprofit entity that supports park projects.

As the difference between the Friends of Yosemite and the Yosemite Fund highlights, navigating the various Yosemite-loving environmental groups and their stands on the Yosemite Valley Plan is as difficult as bushwacking to the base of Half Dome in the dark. The Yosemite Fund supports the Valley Plan; the Friends of

Yosemite oppose it. The Wilderness Society is behind it; the Sierra Club opposed the draft plan but is cautiously supportive of the final version. The Sierra Yosemite Visitor Bureau is adamantly against it, and the list goes on.

Already, environmentalists and user groups have stopped the park service's planned redevelopments in historic Camp 4, prevented construction of new motels inside the park and the development of a parking lot outside the park. Other protests are planned, and lawsuits are pending.

Back On The Precipice

The sun is setting when I grab the lip of the roof and pull myself back into the horizontal world atop El Capitan, where a friend has hiked all day to congratulate us with warm beer and slaps on the back.

Sitting on the edge of the cliff in the gloom, I can still see the headlights snaking past the development in the valley, which will certainly look a bit different in the years to come.

But beyond the lights, darkness spreads unbroken to the horizon across woods, mountain faces and waterfalls that, regardless of what the Yosemite Valley Plan brings, will be little changed by anything but nature.