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Volunteers battle piles of trash at popular recreation area

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer
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Lee Davis and his son Sean, 11, clean up trash around Fiorito Lakes Wednesday, March 16, 2011. (Brian Myrick)
Brian Myrick

Longtime outdoorsman Gordon Blossom was on the bank of one of the Fiorito Lakes Tuesday morning fishing for trout and loving every minute of it.

It was peaceful with few people around the popular fishing hole along Interstate 82, about four miles southwest of Ellensburg.

Blossom, 94, acknowledged he doesn't often go fishing at the lakes during the summer months, the height of use, when the state-owned lakes are crowded, literally, to the gills.

Blossom, of Thorp, on Tuesday was with his son, Rodney, 56, and each caught a trout. Blossom said the lakeside area looked pretty good, obviously, before the coming onslaught of visitors and campers in the warm-weather season.

"This morning we had fish and pancakes, how about that?," Blossom said enthusiastically Wednesday. "It was great."

Not great and not pretty is what happens to the lakeside area starting in May and lasting through September.

"On weekends, say from Memorial Day on, it's packed, almost wall to wall around the lakes," said Lee Davis, president of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club.

In those busy times, all it takes is one visitor to leave trash mounded next to one of the small lakeside shelters, and others get the idea and leave their trash, too.

Soon there are mounds of garbage. With state funds strapped, there are no trash receptacles or garbage pick up.

The club for several years has agreed to keep the site tidy through an "adopt-an-access" program with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The club wants to find ways to address the trash and the overcrowding so the site remains a pleasant one for generations to come. That may entail new restrictions.

Violation

Davis wants people and their families to have an enjoyable experience close to the natural environment, but a few people are bringing their bad habits with them.

The small lakes, overseen by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, have steadily grown in popularity because free, overnight camping is allowed for a maximum of 72 hours.

All that's required is a fishing license and-or a state vehicle access permit.

Couple that with easy access near a major state freeway, lakes stocked with trout and parking. With no garbage disposal facilities or refuse services and no running water, the result on packed weekends is piles of trash.

The most Davis and his wife, Leta, and son, Sean, and other club volunteers have picked up around the lakes at one time is about 300 pounds of trash.

A minority of those visitors are leaving their garbage and, sometimes, much more, a violation of the rule that people pack out trash, Davis said.

"It's mostly food and beverage containers, but we've also hauled bed mattresses, air mattresses, broken metal barbecues, screens and screen doors from big RVs," Davis said. "Almost any type of camping or fishing-related equipment you can think of."

Something has to change, said Davis.

The club has pledged to the state fish and wildlife agency to keep the site clean, but the situation is becoming overwhelming in the summer.

"It's only a small percentage of people who are hurting the habitat and the outdoor experience for everyone else," Davis explained. "But when you have that many people using this great place, that small percentage ends up being a lot of people."

The club is undertaking an online survey at the club's website - www.kittitasfieldandstream.org - on what should be considered to deal with the situation.

The results will be compiled sometime after the end of March and given to state fish and wildlife officials for their consideration.

Davis said names and e-mail addresses will be kept private, but people who respond will be sent copies of the results and asked if they would help in making the changes.

Ideas

The main options are to make Fiorito Lakes a non-camping area, meaning no overnight camping, or have the state charge a fee for overnight camping.

Davis, 51, said over the years more large, RV campers have come to the lakes. Instead of parking perpendicular to the lake, many park parallel along the shoreline, further reducing public access to fishing.

Davis said he was raised in Ohio and brought up to be respectful of the outdoors and the natural environment.

He wants to pass on the joys of fishing and the responsibilities of caring for the environment to his 11-year-old son, and to the public.

"Having mounds of garbage is not conducive to that quiet, peaceful experience in the outdoors," Davis said. "It also hurts the wildlife habitat, making it less able to support wildlife."

"It's frustrating, and we want to do something about it."

Blossom, a former county road engineer, has lived in Kittitas County 41 years and said he doesn't understand why people would dump their garbage.

"They're spoiling it for everyone else," Blossom said. "My preference is that they take their garbage with them, and obey the rules.

"It makes me wonder what their backyard looks like, the people who just leave their garbage at the lake."

Input sought on future of Fiorito Lakes

What should be done about trashing and overcrowding at Fiorito? The Kittitas County Field and Stream Club and local fish and wildlife officials are interested in your opinion.

Go to the Kittitas County Field and Stream website - www.kittitasfieldandstream.org/ - to take a survey on preferred options to address the garbage and overcrowding at Fiorito Lakes.

The survey asks people to decide if Fiorito Lakes should be a non-camping area, or whether a fee should be charged for overnight camping.

The website poses other questions:

How do we get a handle on the issue? Should RVs park farther away from the shore and not parallel with it? Should all overnight camping be restricted or a designated camping area be created? What about charging a fee and using the revenue to monitor the campground?

Big crowds at the lakes

On one, recent major summer holiday weekend, Lee Davis counted more than 64 RVs, truck campers, tents and other camping sites being used around the two Fiorito Lakes.

There's a north Fiorito Lake of about 39 acres and a south lake at 24 acres, separated by a thin strip of land.

Davis, president of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, said there also were more than 119 other vehicles around the lakes that weekend.

"Access to the shoreline by someone just there for the day was almost nonexistent," Davis said.

