People walk along the Black Pool boardwalk near the shore of Yellowstone Lake in October 2003.

Park Service wants to divvy up profits from key discoveries

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The National Park Service is still hoping to share potential profits that may arise from scientific research in national parks. That's the conclusion spelled out last week in a draft environmental impact statement.

The issue has been on the back burner for several years, ever since a federal court ordered the Park Service in 1999 to write the EIS. That order resulted from a 1998 lawsuit filed by environmental groups and those with ethical concerns.

Bioprospecting has the potential for huge profits, if companies find plants or microbes that lead to chemical, medical or industrial processes.

In one case, a Swiss pharmaceutical company used enzymes from a microbe living in a Yellowstone National Park hot spring to help decode DNA strands. The company made hundreds of millions of dollars, but the Park Service got nothing.

In 1997, the Park Service entered into an agreement with a California company called Diversa. The deal called for Diversa to pay the Park Service an undisclosed royalty for any profits it would make based on its research in the park.

The Alliance for the Wild Rockies feared such deals would give the Park Service an incentive to allow more collections of samples.

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Bioprospecting

Bioprospecting is the search for useful biological materials, such as living things, for use in scientific research. The organic compounds can be integral in pharmaceutical, biotechnology and agricultural discoveries.
In addition, the Edmonds Institute, of Edmonds, Wash., argued that the deal raised fundamental ethical questions about patenting life forms.

Those groups and others sued, and in 1999 a judge ruled the Park Service must write an EIS spelling out risks and benefits of sharing the wealth.

A draft of that document is now complete.

It lists a “preferred alternative” of continuing to seek profit-sharing agreements with private and public institutions. Disclosure of the terms of the agreements would be optional. Some details could be withheld if any of the parties demonstrate that information is proprietary.

Any profits would be put back into Park Service science programs, the EIS says.

Selling organisms gathered in the park would remain illegal, but companies or institutions, such as universities, already have the freedom to profit from knowledge gained from the study of those organisms.

Permits to collect organisms would undergo separate review before any consideration of a financial agreement, the EIS says. Scores of researchers already work in the park under research permits. Those working in hot springs typically collect only small vials of water containing microbes.

If profitable processes are obtained under the current system, no money comes back to the parks.

Check the Web at http://parkplanning.nps.gov to see the EIS. Select “Washington Office” and then click on “Benefits Sharing” to see the document.

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