

Aesthetic Quality and Public Acceptance of Land Management



“Natural Environments for Urban Populations”

A research work unit of the USDA Forest Service North Central Research Station

1033 University Place, Suite 360
Evanston, IL
60201-3172

847-866-9311

For more information, contact
Herb Schroeder
(x15)



Land management practices are only feasible if members of the public, including visitors and nearby residents, are willing to accept the outcomes. Acceptance of management outcomes may depend on many factors, including perceptions of aesthetic quality and knowledge of the ecological benefits resulting from management. Research about public reactions to the landscape conditions created by managing and restoring ecosystems can be useful to forest managers in developing socially acceptable and sustainable forestry practices. The results of this research can help land managers determine what practices are most likely to produce public acceptance or objections, and whether information and education efforts can increase the public acceptability of management outcomes.



We are working with scientists at the University of Arizona and Penn State University to find out how educational messages about ecology affect people's evaluations of the scenic beauty and acceptability of managed ecosystems in the Midwest. Researchers showed photographs of ecosystems in southern Missouri, ranging from relatively open savanna to dense woodland, to groups of people who rated either the perceived aesthetic quality of the scenes or the acceptability of the management practices that produced the scenes. They tested the effects of educational materials by presenting a verbal and pictorial "ecological education" message to some of the raters before showing the scenes. The message emphasized the history and ecological benefits of either savanna ecosystems (emphasizing the importance of "openness and open areas") or woodland ecosystems (emphasizing the importance of "protective cover and maintaining tree density"). For comparison, other raters received only general information about environmental and ecological management on public lands in the Midwest.

The raters consistently evaluated scenes with high perceived aesthetic quality as representing more acceptable environmental management practices than scenes with low aesthetic quality. **The education materials, which had been designed to foster different preferences for open sites (savanna) versus dense sites (woodland) in different groups of raters, proved to have only a small effect on the groups' ratings.** Educational messages did appear to change ratings of acceptability in the intended direction for a few of the raters, but had no discernable effect on ratings of aesthetic quality. The raters most likely to respond to educational messages appeared to be those with pro-environmental attitudes.

These results suggest that presenting educational information about the ecological benefits of management practices may have limited usefulness in garnering public acceptance of ecological restoration policies. Possible future studies may extend this research to additional ecosystem types, groups of public raters, photo presentation methods, and types of educational materials.