

THE FOREST SERVICE'S RECREATION AGENDA: COMMENTS ON THE ROLES OF RESEARCH AND STATE AND PRIVATE FORESTRY IN THE NORTHEAST

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Abstract: The Recreation Agenda is a major document being developed to guide recreation policy within the USDA Forest Service. During the first half of 2000, the Forest Service is holding public involvement sessions on the Agenda, a fluid document which is not yet in final form. One such session held at the Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium included 26 participants who focused on the role of states, nongovernment organizations, and research. Session participants clearly saw the need for increased collaborative planning that crosses agency boundaries. They also identified major roles for partnerships and for market research.

Introduction

Over the past four years, USDA Forest Service Chief Michael Dombeck has established a Natural Resource Agenda that includes four critical program areas: watershed health and restoration, sustainable forest ecosystem management, forest roads, and recreation. The Recreation Agenda (USDA For. Serv. 2000) was released in 1999 as a part of the Natural Resource Agenda. It represents a major effort to guide outdoor recreation policy for the Forest Service and is currently undergoing public review and comment. Consequently, it is a document that is not yet in final form; readers are referred to the most recent version, which is available online at www.fs.fed.us.

As part of the public comment process, the Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium (NERR) held a 1-1/2 hour session on April 5, 2000, that was attended by 26 people representing states, nongovernment organizations (NGO's), the National Forest System, and the recreation research community. As comment on the National Forest System's role in fulfilling the Agenda's objectives had been obtained previously, the NERR session focused on the role of states, NGO's, and research. Copies of the current version of the Recreation Agenda were available to all participants; two notekeepers recorded all pertinent comments.

In this paper we present the results of this session, beginning with a brief review of the Agenda. This is followed by a general summary of the comments as recorded by the notekeepers and supplemented by the impressions of the moderator. While we have attempted to be faithful to the spirit of the session, we have condensed

the comments to capture their essence and combined them under general headings.

The Recreation Agenda

This section on the Recreation Agenda is a condensed version of the material available online. Again, readers are encouraged to view the complete document on the Forest Service website.

The USDA Forest Service is the nation's largest supplier of outdoor recreation, offering diverse recreation opportunities on national forests and grasslands. These opportunities range from wilderness to developed recreation sites on the "urban" national forests (those within a one-hour drive from a metropolitan area). In the lower 48 states, the Agency manages 63% of the wilderness system and a much larger percentage of backcountry opportunities. Within the national forests and grasslands, there are 4,268 miles of wild and scenic rivers, 399 wilderness areas, 133,087 miles of trails, 383,000 miles of roads, 277,000 heritage sites, 4,300 campgrounds, and 31 national recreation scenic areas and monuments (USDA For. Serv. 2000).

As on other public lands, the trend in Forest Service management is away from product extraction and toward aesthetic and ecological management. This direction is supported by the fact that the national forests and grasslands currently contribute \$134 billion to the nation's annual gross domestic product, the bulk of which originates from the recreation opportunities that these resources supply (USDA For. Serv. 2000). However, the lands themselves are beset by problems. The demand for outdoor recreation is burgeoning as Americans are demanding more and varied opportunities of increasing variety, some of which conflict with others. At the same time, the supporting infrastructure is deteriorating: current estimates place the level of deferred maintenance at \$812 million. Growing demand coupled with deteriorating infrastructure cast doubt about the ability of the agency to sustain increasingly scarce quality recreation opportunities over the long run. Consequently, Chief Dombeck established the Recreation Agenda as a major guide to outdoor recreation policy within the Agency. The Agenda itself is aimed at meeting demand while providing high-quality experiences within ecological and social limits. These limits include resource impacts, impacts on other visitors, and the capacity limits of the infrastructure.

The Recreation Agenda has four major goals. First, it seeks to protect ecosystems to guarantee that special settings are conserved. Protecting long-term productivity and landscape integrity is crucial to the supply of outdoor recreation. Consequently, we must protect and restore natural character. To accomplish this the Forest Service must identify key attributes of the natural, social, and built environments essential for both ecological sustainability and recreation opportunity. The Agency must invest in facilities, showcase nationally designated areas, and ensure visitor safety and security by reducing criminal activity and fostering rule compliance. New facilities will be needed that can withstand long-term use and vandalism. Access to

recreation opportunities must be ensured by protecting critical access points in rapidly developing areas by working with local governments and private landowners, and by ensuring universal accessibility. Finally, we need to ensure availability of services to all Americans by incorporating social science and marketing research.

A second major goal is to increase service satisfaction and education. Achieving this goal will require developing partnerships for quality service delivery. The Forest Service needs to conduct marketing research to facilitate cooperation with state and local providers and match opportunities to people. Innovative partnerships can improve conservation education and interpretation, thereby enhancing recreation experiences.

A third goal is to build community connections to expand available resources. Strengthening community connections is vital to ecosystem management. Community collaboration needs to be institutionalized through policy and incentives, and partners are needed to promote community sustainability. Planning must be conducted collaboratively, across boundaries with stakeholders deeply involved in all processes. Also, there are numerous issues on the urban national forests--those within an hour's drive from a metropolitan area--that must be addressed.

The Agenda's fourth goal is to improve relationships. Partnerships and intergovernmental cooperation are essential to recreation management. The Forest Service needs to strengthen business partnerships to find innovative ways to accomplish tasks, and must review professional business practices. The Agency needs to work with community organizations and nongovernmental organizations to train and manage volunteers, and it must promote intergovernmental cooperation and work with tribal governments.

These four major goals have led the Forest Service to develop a six-point action plan for recreation:

1. We must conduct market research to help us know our customers. We need to understand public values, expectations, and conflicts, and use this information to design facilities.
2. We must invest in special places valued by people, repairing ecological damage and reducing deferred maintenance.
3. We must reduce deferred maintenance to ensure long-term financial sustainability. Potential techniques include expanding the Fee Demonstration Program and use of cost-share challenge grants with all sectors.
4. We must develop partnerships for conservation education and interpretive services.
5. We need to develop business opportunities and service for underserved and low-income people.
6. We must ensure accessibility by identifying and maintaining critical rights-of-way, by fostering stakeholder coalitions to manage the forest transportation system, and by implementing Americans with Disabilities Act plans in special areas targeted for funding.

Response to the Agenda

As noted above, the NERR session was attended by 26 people, most of whom offered opinions. The following comments by NERR session participants have been condensed and organized to capture their essence.

Several general questions were raised about the Recreation Agenda as a whole. One concern was why the Forest Service wants to be involved with collaborative activities in general. A second question concerned understanding the nature of the Agency's interest in expanding outward toward communities. Both of these questions demonstrated a lack of familiarity with and understanding of the purposes of the Agenda: Why is it not sufficient for the Forest Service to be concerned about the management and planning of its own lands? Why is there a need to be concerned about other agencies and jurisdictions? Concern also was expressed that we should not identify recreation as the new "commodity" to replace timber. Recreation may not be a satisfactory goal if viewed as a commodity; rather, we should emphasize stewardship and the protection of special places. Finally, one participant believed that the Agenda was overly conservative--too "comfortable"-- and lacked bold initiatives to deal with issues of stewardship and deferred maintenance.

Specific concerns dealt with both Forest Service/state relationships and the role of research in recreation planning and management. Forest Service/state relationships are of particular concern in the metropolitan Northeast where state natural resource agencies are major suppliers of outdoor recreation. There was general agreement that the national forests within Region 9 are special because public land is scarce in the East and these forests play a crucial role in conserving recreation opportunities not provided elsewhere. However, given the scarcity of federal public lands, states, counties, and municipalities also occupy critical positions in the recreation service delivery system. These complex relationships present a major challenge to integrated recreation planning. There is wide recognition that planning efforts require coordination to be successful, and that partnerships and collaboration are essential for both state and federal agencies. Unfortunately, coordination is difficult. At the state level, many agencies have no tie to the State Forester, and hence no tie to the State and Private Forestry branch of the Forest Service. In New York State, for example, four separate agencies deliver outdoor recreation services: the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the Adirondack Park Agency, and the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. Of these, only the DEC has ties to the State Forester.

One potential alternative for planning coordination is to reactivate the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Planning (SCORP) process. Originally established under the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, SCORP now is administered by the National Park Service. However, the program has been largely inactive in recent years due to lack of funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Partnerships also need attention; partnerships with publics are required to improve agency credibility. One possibility is to use the "adopt a highway" approach to maintain recreation facilities. Facilities need to be monitored and receive at least some maintenance. This kind of collaboration can be enhanced by "benchmarking" and sharing information on "best management practices." Unfortunately, session participants also noted a downside to this kind of partnership: While an "adopt a trail" or beach approach can help foster ownership, this kind of "ownership" could become too strong and work against management goals. Partnerships also can be costly to administer, requiring scarce resources that might better be spent on the lands themselves. Finally, the emphasis on "business practices" may not appeal to many NGO's who may see them as promoting competition rather than cooperation.

Planning must have strong ties to research as well. Local forest levels have specific research questions that need to be addressed. However, broader, potentially more fruitful areas of research also were discussed. One topical area identified for emphasis was market research: What do people want? How do users compare to nonusers? What are the needs of specific groups such as minorities or older Americans?

A second area for research concerned the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). We need to rethink the ROS classes for eastern forests, where greater differentiation at the urban portion of the scale may be necessary. Moreover, we need to develop productivity standards for sites and facilities within each class to help prioritize sites and facilities for maintenance. Decision-support systems are needed to tie this information to the planning process.

Finally, we need to be concerned about the economics of forest recreation. We must develop additional tools such as conjoint analysis to understand the tradeoffs people are willing to make, and decision-support programs to facilitate analysis of alternative actions. And we need to examine the role of public forest lands in enhancing regional economies. For example, can trails or other facilities be located closer to communities to enhance economic impacts?

Clearly, there was general consensus that forest planning needs to be closely tied to research and that additional concept development is needed in the East, where public forests are scarcer and hence more critical in fulfilling the recreation needs of the population.

Conclusion

The Forest Service's Recreation Agenda provided fertile ground for discussion among the 26 participants in the NERR session. There was general agreement that planning efforts would require coordination across state and federal boundaries, but this could prove difficult given the multiplicity of agencies involved. Unfortunately, there was little discussion of mechanisms to achieve this. The group also expressed strong support for establishing partnerships

while noting that such partnerships must be managed carefully to avoid conflicts. There was a clear consensus for research involvement in the planning process. Among the high priority research topics identified were market research with respect to minorities and older Americans, rethinking the ROS for eastern forests, and developing decision-support systems for recreation.

Literature Cited

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2000. The Recreation Agenda. Online: www.fs.fed.us/recreation/recstrategy/RecStratV70.shtml.