

A POSSIBLE RAILROAD ORIENTED SCENARIO IN POTOMAC RIVER BASIN PLANNING¹

George H. Siehl²

A trend may develop in which railroads become lifelines between rural and urban populations. For instance, the railroad along the Potomac River presently serves commuters from Washington's western suburbs. The railroad could be used to reclaim surface mined areas in the upper portion of the Potomac. These same lines can also open western Maryland as a recreation resource to Washington, D.C., residents. Multiple use of railroads is a trend recreationists would find beneficial.

My remarks are directed to one possible future for recreation in the Potomac River Basin, a future which would see the expanded use of the existing railroad system through the basin. The scenario is an extension of a report done for the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs in 1979. A version of the report has been reproduced by the Congressional Research Service with permission of the Committee under the title Outdoor Recreation Consideration in River Basin Planning and Management. Copies are available upon request.

The purposes of the report were listed as:

1. To identify and review some of the new river relevant resource management and environmental programs that have been authorized since the early 1960's;
2. To show some of the changed public perceptions of river and other natural resource management approaches;
3. To discuss pertinent shifts in public sentiment toward the issues of economic growth and the role of government;
4. To anticipate the possible changes which may follow from the above considerations with regard to outdoor recreation and landscape preservation; and

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²Analyst in Environmental Policy, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.

5. To apply these considerations to a single river basin, the Potomac, and speculate on how these considerations, and perceptions might be incorporated in planning for the future of that basin.

It is to the last of these purposes that this paper is addressed.

TOMORROW'S POTOMAC

Tomorrow's Potomac--and Tomorrow's America--are not likely to be based upon recreation; neither is it likely, one hopes, that issues such as war and peace, energy supplies, or interpersonal relations will worsen to the point where life is reduced to a stark, continual struggle for survival. Recreation is not the most important matter before our elected leaders, but it is important enough to deserve consideration when issues of greater import are being decided. Within this framework, what are the prospects for recreation in the Potomac River Basin?

First, the Potomac Basin Planners could make use of any of the new approaches to resource management which have been developed elsewhere by the federal, state, or local governments or by the private sector. To the extent that these off-the-shelf approaches are not compatible with the specific circumstances of the Potomac River Basin, they can be adapted to specific needs and situations in the Potomac region.

Additionally, the abundant intellectual resources of the Potomac Basin could supply new approaches to managing the man-land interaction. These new approaches might best be directed to forging programs which deal with environmental

problems while providing recreational benefits, and to developing an energy/transportation system which allows for continuation of a broad range of recreational outlets. While these two concepts do not exhaust the possible new approaches to affording recreational opportunities in the Potomac River Basin, their implementation could do much to ensure that outdoor recreation options could be increased as needed.

Mined Land Reclamation

As an example of the kind of environmental problem which might be solved so as to provide recreational benefits as a byproduct, there is the matter of surface mining of coal in the upper portion of the Potomac Basin.

The mountainous reaches of the upper basin are generally under forest cover or in some kind of agricultural use. In this condition they provide economic returns through the harvesting of timber or agricultural products; wildlife habitat is undisturbed; a variety of recreational activities is possible; and any off-site environmental damage is minimal.

When surface mining takes place, the timber must be harvested on a one-time basis before mining begins, and the coal is recovered. These would be the economic benefits of mining. Negative factors involved in surface mining include elimination of the recreation potential; loss of wildlife habitat; and, in many cases, the beginning of serious off-site environmental damage such as siltation.

In the post mining phase, if there is no reclamation, the situation results in no economic costs to restore the contour and vegetation of the site, but places the land in condition to be used for other purposes and eliminates off-site environmental damage.

Imaginative programs for reclaiming surface mined mountainous areas could include use of the mined area by the coal cars which now return there empty.

Similarly, sludge from water treatment plants could be brought in to facilitate the process of revegetating the landscape or upgrading the soil for agricultural use.

While these actions would help to solve several environmental problems, recreation could benefit through use of the area for appropriate outdoor activities. Off-road vehicles could use a part of the area and the reclamation plan could lead to development of an area suitably contoured for downhill skiing. Restoration of vegetative cover which could provide food and shelter for wildlife could increase hunting opportunities. Creation of lakes or ponds on the previously mined lands could pro-

vide water-based recreational opportunities. In some cases, where chemistry of the water would permit, fishing might be possible as one of the recreational uses.

Experience elsewhere has shown each of these elements to be possible.^{3/} An all-out effort by private and public sectors working together might be able to try all of these programs and make them work in the region. There are, however, technical and temperamental obstacles to making such a comprehensive effort succeed.

Rails as Trails

A transportation program which could have multiple benefits accruing to the public and private sectors of the basin economy would be the development of recreation oriented railroad service to western Maryland.

The rail lines are in place and Amtrak passenger trains now travel the route passing through a number of small communities which are close to outdoor recreation centers. These include Maryland's Deep Creek Lake (which is in the Ohio Basin drainage, but this can be overlooked for purpose of discussion), Blackwater Falls and Canaan Valley State Parks in West Virginia, and a number of points on the Potomac River much used by hikers, campers, fishermen, and boaters. The Amtrak passenger trains make only a limited number of station stops along this route, and the schedule does not closely match what would be ideal for recreational users. This Amtrak route (Washington, D.C., to Cincinnati, Ohio) is one that the Department of Transportation had proposed to eliminate, but the route is to operate for about a year pending further evaluation.

Components of the program would include:

1. Use of existing or added railroad passenger trains to provide access to upper basin communities for outdoor recreationists;
2. Development of these communities to provide needed services and/or accommodations to the visitors;
3. Development of transportation systems to move visitors from the communities to specialized recreation areas;

^{3/} For instance, see the section on reclamation in U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. The Issues Related to Surface Mining: A Summary Review, with Selected Readings. (Committee Print) Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1971. 255 p.

4. Expansion or creation of specialized outdoor recreation areas, as needed.

In the case of downhill skiing, for instance, the program might work, as follows, during an assessment period. Skiers would leave the Washington area on a rescheduled Amtrak train at about 6:00 p.m. on Friday evening, reaching Oakland, Maryland, at about 11:00 p.m. They would be transported to their lodgings in vehicles provided by the lodge or motel at which they were to stay. (This transport could be something as simple as a contractor-owned school bus or, if the program justified it, a more elaborate motor coach.) Destinations could be the Wisp ski area near Deep Creek Lake in Maryland, or the previously mentioned Canaan Valley, West Virginia. Snowshoe ski area in West Virginia would be another possibility, although its distance from Oakland would make for a rather late arrival on the schedule being considered. Following a weekend of skiing, the process would be reversed, and the recreationists would be returned to the Washington area Sunday evening.

Should the program prove successful, it could possibly lead to development of a new downhill ski area in the vicinity of Cumberland, Maryland, if the mountainous terrain and snow cover there prove suitable. Much of this land is in private ownership, providing an opportunity for further involving the private sector in increasing recreational opportunities.

The benefits to be derived from this program would include expanded and more accessible recreational opportunities (many young people living in the urban area are interested in such activities, but do not own an automobile). Also, there would be expanded employment opportunities in essentially rural areas.

The rail recreational access program would function equally well in summer. In Norway, for instance, it is a common sight on the trains which cross the mountains between Oslo and Bergen to see a group of hikers step from the train, their packs upon their backs, and set off on foot for hostels or campgrounds. There would appear to be no reason why a similar situation would not prevail in the Potomac Basin. In fact, the recent popularity of biking might be accommodated through this system, as well.

Apart from Amtrak, another source of railroad rolling stock which might become available within the Potomac Basin in the next several years is the equipment used for commuter traffic into Washington, D.C., on weekdays. The state of Maryland, which provides financial support for this rail commuter service through its Department of Transportation, has recently arranged to purchase additional equipment to expand the system. Some 22 cars to be acquired will be refurbished and placed in operation,

probably not before the end of 1980 or early 1981. Once operational, however, the state might be interested in allowing them to be used, perhaps on a lease basis, for the recreational access program on weekends. In this way, a portion of the costs of acquiring the cars might be offset, and the recreational access program would be more flexible. It would be necessary to limit use of the cars in such a way that maintenance, which is done on weekends, could be performed in a timely fashion.^{4/} Other recreational train potentials: hiking, bicycling, resort living, fishing, trips, boating, C & O Canal towns, historical towns.

Whether or not these ideas come to play a part in shaping Tomorrow's Potomac, the larger concern is how that future is to be shaped. That it will be different seems certain; the means of making it so are uncertain.

^{4/} Telephone conversation Sept. 5, 1979, with J. H. Griffin, Manager of Passenger Operations, Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company.