

STAKEHOLDERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE USDA FOREST SERVICE AT THE SPRUCE KNOB-SENECA ROCKS NATIONAL RECREATION AREA, WEST VIRGINIA

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Abstract.—The Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area (NRA) is developing a collaborative management plan. To develop a public involvement strategy, it is necessary to assess the social conditions in the area. The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship local stakeholders in the NRA have with the USDA Forest Service (USFS) with regard to the collaborative management process. Study participants (N = 12) were selected based on their knowledge about and interest in the NRA, including those dependent on the economic benefits and amenities of the area. Study participants were asked to describe and rate the relationship that currently exists between stakeholders and the USFS. Stakeholders were primarily focused on future economic development, and generally rated their current relationship with the USFS as positive. The current relationship between stakeholders and NRA management was found to be suitable for a collaborative management approach to NRA planning.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area (NRA) was established in 1965 and is located in the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia. The original recreation plan was revised during the forest planning process in 1986. Since then, many social and economic changes have taken place in the local communities, making the previous plans out-of-date (Stancil 2005). Managers are interested in developing a collaborative planning process to revise the existing plan.

When the NRA was initially developed, the impression among local residents was that any property used for the NRA would be purchased only from willing sellers. The final legislation creating the NRA, however, authorized the use of eminent domain as a method of land acquisition. Furthermore, from the local residents' perspective, the initial planning process for the NRA favored "outsiders" and ignored local input. These and other NRA development issues created an atmosphere of mistrust that is only recently beginning to resolve itself (Stancil 2005, Thompson 2006).

The purpose of this study was to assess the current relationships between stakeholders and management, and the temporal and historical context of management issues associated with the NRA to help managers successfully develop conflict management strategies that build trust during the planning process.

2.0 METHOD

A snowball sampling method was used to identify potentially interested residents in the NRA area. Study participants were selected based on their knowledge about and interest in the NRA, and dependence on the direct economic benefits and amenities of the area. The sample included current and former USDA Forest Service employees, local business owners who gained direct economic benefits from the NRA, and local elected officials on the city and county levels. Twelve semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with NRA stakeholders in 2005. Each interview was tape-recorded and later transcribed; each interview lasted about an hour.

Study participants were asked to describe the relationship between stakeholders and the USFS. They were also asked to rate how the USFS values a collaborative approach to management on a scale of 1 (not collaborative) to 10 (collaborative) for the following attributes of collaboration: representation, access to management, information sharing, and encouraging citizen participation.

A qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts was performed using a combination of QDA Miner content analysis software and manual coding. Although other topics were discussed in the interviews, this study focused on the historical aspects of both the region and the stakeholders' relationships with NRA management. A raw count of word frequency in the transcriptions was conducted using QDA Miner. Initial examination of these frequencies was used to determine categories for content analysis. Based on the categories, data were analyzed and coded manually for content regarding history. The three initial categories were Past, Present, and Future. The Past category was then further broken down into two subcategories: Distant Past (10 Years or More) and Recent Past (9 Years or Fewer). Each of these categories was examined, and common issues and concerns were identified. Rather than examine specific word occurrences, responses were examined in context. Every time there was a change in discussion topic within the responses, it was determined whether that response corresponded with the Past, Present, or Future category. Past responses were further broken down into the two subcategories referenced above.

From the interview transcripts, 297 issues were determined to be temporally related. These data were then analyzed to determine the percentage of time respondents were focusing on different time periods as they related to the NRA.

Further, quantitative analysis was performed on the scores stakeholders gave to the various attributes of a collaborative management approach (representation, access to management, information sharing, and encouraging citizen participation). These scores were correlated with the scores respondents gave to their perception of how the USFS values a collaborative management approach.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Qualitative Analysis

Current and former USFS employees were excluded from this portion of the analysis. Issues (N = 297) coded in the text (N = 9) were most frequently presented in

Table 1.—Temporal references made by interviewees (N = 297)

Interviewee	Temporal References			
	Past	Present	Future	Total
1	5	5	15	25
2	7	12	19	38
3	3	6	8	17
4	5	23	23	51
5	4	13	10	27
6	8	10	9	27
7	13	9	16	38
8	13	16	15	44
9	10	10	10	30
Total	68	104	125	297
Overall percentage of references	22.9	35	42.1	100

a present or future context. Interviewees mentioned the past 68 times (22.9%) out of the 297 times that specific time periods were mentioned in their interviews. Interviewees who had resided in or recreated in the NRA for more extended periods of time were more likely to mention the past. In contrast, interviewees mentioned the present 104 times (35%) and the future 125 times (42.1%). The number of references to the past varied among interviewees from a low of five responses out of 51 temporal references or 9.8 percent (Respondent 4) to a high of 13 responses out of 38 temporal references or 34.2 percent (Respondent 7).

When the Past category was divided into the categories Distant Past (10 Years or More) and Recent Past (9 Years or Fewer), a minority of responses (38.2%) were found to refer to the Distant Past; 61.8 percent of responses referred to the Recent Past. While two respondents did not refer to any events occurring more than nine years ago, one respondent referred to the Distant Past in twelve out of thirteen references to the past. Removing the outlier (Respondent 7) brought the percentage of references to the Distant Past to 25.4 percent. In the context of temporal references overall, 8.8 percent of those references related to the Distant Past. Adjusted for the outlier, however, that proportion decreases to 4.9 percent.

In the Distant Past category, the majority of references were to cultural history and heritage, ranging from a local Native American legend to generational landholding and

Table 2.—References to the past by time period (n = 68)

Interviewee	Distant Past (10 Years or More)	Recent Past (9 Years or Fewer)	Total
1	1	4	5
2	2	5	7
3	0	3	3
4	0	5	5
5	1	3	4
6	1	7	8
7	12	1	13
8	6	7	13
9	3	7	10
Total	26	42	68
Percentage of References to Past	38.2	61.8	100

local agricultural traditions. Additional comments were made regarding the history of climbing at Seneca Rocks, natural disasters, and regional stakeholders' approaches to providing private facilities in and near the NRA.

In the Recent Past category, respondents largely discussed the development of relationships with USFS representatives in the recent past. Most respondents expressed positive or improving relationships between stakeholders and the USFS. Other issues mentioned frequently in this category included increased visitation in some areas of the NRA and the accompanying impacts on those areas; the perceived lack of marketing of the NRA by county, state, and USFS officials; and the difficulty of getting local residents to volunteer in and around the NRA.

The most common topics mentioned by respondents were present and future economic development; the majority of responses in both the Present and Future categories were related to increased tourism, regional development, the Corridor H highway project and its predicted impact on tourism, and other commerce-related issues. Respondents were predominantly in favor of tourism development. It should be noted, however, that these results are representative only of those individuals who participated in this study; further research is necessary to determine whether this attitude is shared by other members of the NRA gateway communities.

3.2 Quantitative Analysis

3.2.1 Relationships Between Respondents and USFS Management

Respondents (N = 12) were asked to rate their relationship with USFS management as good, fair, or poor. The majority (83.3%) of respondents rated their relationship with the USFS as Good, and 16.7 percent of respondents rated their relationship with the USFS as Fair. No respondents rated their relationship with the USFS as Poor.

3.2.2 Attributes of Collaborative Management

In this portion of the analysis, current and former USFS employees were excluded. The remaining respondents (N = 9) were asked to rate how the USFS values a collaborative approach to management on a scale of 1 (not collaborative) to 10 (collaborative). They were then asked to rate the USFS for the following attributes of collaboration: representation, access to management, information sharing, and encouraging citizen participation.

The mean rating for how respondents thought the USFS valued collaboration overall was 7.39. The highest rating of the different attributes of collaboration was with Information Sharing ($\bar{x} = 7.33$) and the lowest ratings were for Encouraging Citizen Participation and Collaborative Decision Making (both $\bar{x} = 6.56$). Access to Management received a mean rating of 7.22, and Representation received a mean rating of 6.78.

When examined for correlation with the Overall rating of how much the USFS valued collaboration, all five attributes of collaboration were strongly correlated with respondents' overall ratings ($p < .05$).

Table 3.—Correlations of collaborative attributes and overall collaboration (N = 9)

Collaborative attributes	Pearson r	p
Representation	.684	.042
Information Sharing	.744	.022
Participation	.836	.005
Collaborative decision making	.883	.002
Access	.769	.016

4.0 DISCUSSION

Stakeholders generally have a positive view of their current relationships with the USFS; 83.3 percent of respondents rated their relationship with the USFS as Good and none rated their relationship as Poor. When asked how the USFS values a collaborative approach on a scale of 1 (not collaborative) - 10 (collaborative), respondents rated the USFS, on average, 7.39.

In addition, all five attributes of collaboration (Information Sharing, Access to Management, Representation, Encouraging Citizen Participation and Collaborative Decision Making) were found to be important to stakeholders with regard to the overall collaborative process. To build trust and a collaborative environment, all of these attributes must be present during the planning process. Stakeholders feel that the USFS is doing a good job with information sharing, but encouraging citizen participation and collaborative decision-making could improve.

Stakeholders are looking to the present and future regarding issues and concerns with the NRA. Stakeholders frequently mentioned the changing demographics of NRA visitors (see also Siniscalchi et al. 2004); the need to maintain the unique natural, cultural, and historical qualities of the NRA; and increased regional development, particularly the pending development of Corridor H, a highway that is expected to increase accessibility to the NRA from the Washington, D.C.-metro area. Various approaches to dealing with issues and concerns that stakeholders expressed in these interviews were addressed by West Virginia University in a series of white papers presented to NRA management in the spring of 2006.

When stakeholders focused on the past, their focus was not related to previous political issues between stakeholders and the USFS; rather, they tended to focus on the cultural history of the area and personal experiences recreating on the NRA. While the future development of the NRA and the surrounding areas is important, it is equally important to preserve the local cultural traditions and character of the area in order to

maintain the qualities that make the area unique. That the interviewees are looking to the future without much thought about the past (with the singular exception of Respondent 7) indicates the need for an effort to record and preserve the cultural history of the residents in and near the NRA to preserve the area's unique character. NRA management is already moving in this direction with recent efforts to involve the local community in developing a heritage garden and presenting interpretive programming at the Sites Homestead, a homestead from the mid-1800s located at Seneca Rocks.

In conclusion, the time is ripe for a collaborative planning process at the Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area. Stakeholders are focused on future development in and around the NRA, and have a positive view of local USFS management. Managers could improve their encouragement of citizen participation and collaborative decision-making, but overall have developed a relationship with stakeholders that supports a collaborative planning process. We recommend that social relations with stakeholders be treated as an indicator to be monitored to ensure that good relations continue. Future research should include gateway community members who do not benefit directly from the presence of the NRA, as well as community members whose relationships with the USFS have not been historically positive.

5.0 CITATIONS

- Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area.** Unpublished Master's thesis, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.
- Siniscalchi, J.; DeCarlo, K.; Pierskalla, C.; Selin, S. 2004. **Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area Study: Identifying Visitor Characteristics, Needs, and Preferences.**
- Thompson, K.A. 2006. **Historical preservation at the Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area.** White paper presented to the USDA Forest Service.