



Recreation and Managed Forestlands

A position of the Society of American Foresters

Originally adopted on February 10, 2021. This position statement will expire in 2026, unless, after subsequent review, it is further extended by the SAF Board of Directors.

Purpose

To acknowledge the important relationship between actively managed forestlands and recreation.

Scope

Actively managed forestlands and all types of recreational activities on those lands.

Position

Forests provide a setting for many recreation-based social, economic, and environmental benefits in the United States. The Society of American Foresters (SAF) recognizes recreation as an important use that should be considered integral to forest management decisions. SAF supports programs and policies that educate and support land users and managers in balancing the costs and benefits of recreation on actively managed forests. Often this can be done through collaboration with recreational user groups, ensuring their interests are considered in forest objectives and management strategies.

Issue

Recreation and forest management complement each other and provide needed connections and partnerships that promote long-term benefits to forests and users. Both need sufficient long-term funding for access, maintenance of roads, infrastructure, and trails, as well as avoidance of and mitigation of negative impacts. This funding can be shared where the uses/infrastructure intersect. When forest managers and users do not recognize or understand the critical relationship

between actively managed forestlands and recreation, beneficial opportunities are lost and conflicts needlessly arise.

Background

Outdoor recreation is a primary way that most people in the US connect with natural resources. Both public and private forestlands provide recreation opportunities. Each year, there are more than 640 million recreation visits to federal lands: more than 150 million to the National Forest System (USDA Forest Service 2019). Privately-owned lands available for outdoor recreation include family forestlands, as well as those owned by forest industries, and non-profit and cooperative organizations. More than 43 percent of family forest landowners state that recreation is a reason for owning forestland (Butler et al. 2016). Further, more than half allow extended family and friends to recreate on their property, while many forest industry landowners provide free or leased recreation access. As the American population continues to grow, the demand for outdoor recreation will likewise increase.

Trends in Outdoor Recreation

American participation in nature-based outdoor recreation is on the rise, driven by several types of activities, with *nature viewing* being the highest ranked activity (Riddle 2019). The most common reason a person chooses to recreate outdoors is to improve their physical, psychological, and/or spiritual wellbeing (USDA Forest Service 2019). Recreation also influences national, state, and local economies. As outdoor recreation spending ripples through the US economy, roughly \$427 billion are reflected in the nation's gross domestic product, sustaining 7.6 million full- and part-time jobs (Outdoor Industry Association 2017).

Recreational growth influences forestland objectives as land managers seek to find an appropriate balance between forest management practices and recreational demand. A growing interest for new and different recreational trails, an increased need to manage wildlife populations through hunting and hunter access, and the necessity to manage for healthy, productive forests requires creative and innovative silvicultural prescriptions that result in desired future conditions for the forest, wildlife, and people.

Balancing Cost and Benefits

Recreational use of forestlands provides many social benefits, including promoting peoples' connections to the land and opportunities for land managers to educate the public on the benefits of proactive management. Conversely, managers gain insights from recreational users on their interests and needs. These interactions may have multiple benefits to the land manager but can involve costs as well.

When allowing recreational use within a forest, negative impacts are inevitable, but land-use planning strategies can mitigate and reduce unwanted impacts (Cole et al. 1990). Land managers need to consider how to balance the many benefits of recreational use with its impacts and costs while also meeting their forest management objectives. Financial costs associated with recreation can stem from enforcement, human-caused wildfires, and the need to maintain facilities, signs, parking areas, roads, campgrounds, and trails. Land managers can create partnerships with conservation non-governmental organizations to assist with funding, maintenance, education, and enforcement demands or require a recreational access fee to offset those costs.

For example, land managers can partner with conservation organizations such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, or The National Wild Turkey Federation to fund certain management objectives for forests and riparian areas, such as aspen enhancement, thinning, prescribed fire, stream rehabilitation, beaver dam analogs, and implementing best management practices on neglected road systems. These types of treatments provide overlap in achieving non-profit objectives like habitat improvement or protection for fish and game species while also attaining forest and riparian management needs. An example of a recreational access fee is the Mirror Lake Highway Recreational Corridor in Utah, where user passes are required with payment of a small fee. The fees collected are kept at the National Forest and used to offset costs associated with high-use recreation in the forest.

Designing forest management strategies to include recreational use empowers land managers to be more proactive and effective when trying to mitigate environmental costs or risks, such as invasive species control, resource damage, wildfire, and human-wildlife conflicts. For example, trails management can incorporate invasive species education programs such as PlayCleanGo.org or partner with a Cooperative Weed Management Area already available within the region (Midwest Invasive Plant Network 2011). The program can provide the resources needed to educate recreational users and forest logging contractors about the importance of managing invasive species. Recreational user groups can also be engaged to provide volunteer labor for monitoring and controlling invasive plants, trails maintenance, and other mutually beneficial tasks. Additionally, federal and/or state agencies can better utilize existing firefighting crews, when not fighting fires, to complete labor-intensive tasks such as maintaining and building new trails and creating or maintaining fuel breaks/defensible spaces around recreational facilities.

Educational Outreach

Most Americans participate in outdoor recreation in one way or another, which provides land managers a diverse set of opportunities to educate people about sustainable forest management practices. Land managers can disseminate educational information using informational signs, maps, brochures, websites, field days, workshops, and social media. For instance, by highlighting management objectives and plans, managers can increase recreationists' awareness,

create buy-in, and teach users about appropriate activities. As an example of this, managers could explain that an area is being managed for a certain wildlife or tree species before harvest activities start. This can help users understand, when it is time to harvest, why the harvesting activities are occurring and what the beneficial outcomes of the harvest may be. Post-harvest, land managers can display signs, maps, and information related to management activities and recreation opportunities.

Technology is an important tool that can be used to educate users. It plays an increasingly significant role in how Americans interact with forests during their visits. Technology allows land managers to engage with the public even when they are not physically present, and can provide access, transportation, comfort, safety, communication, and information to the user, which results in greater use, different expectations, and changes in public policy (Ewert and Sibthorp 2014). Verbal communication is not as readily sought out; rather, information that can easily be found online at any time of day is becoming the norm. Technology allows for consistent messaging to a broad array of public users, especially when land managers and recreational groups partner together to educate users on policies and recreational user ethics. Clear, concise, factual, and current information is critical when using technology to educate.

References

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