

Connecting People with America's Great Outdoors
A Framework for Sustainable Recreation



United States Forest Service, USDA

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Connecting People with America's Great Outdoors: A Framework for Sustainable Recreation

"Renewing Body and Spirit, Inspiring Passion for the Land"

"Perhaps the rebuilding of the body and spirit is the greatest service derivable from our forests, for what worth are material things if we lose the character and quality of people that are the soul of America."

Arthur Carhart

The National Forests and Grasslands provide the greatest diversity of outdoor recreation opportunities in the world, connecting people with nature in an unmatched variety of settings, activities and traditional beliefs. People hike, bike, ride horses, and drive off-highway vehicles. They picnic, camp, hunt, fish, enjoy recreational shooting and navigate waterways. They view wildlife and scenery, and explore historic places. They glide through powder at world class alpine resorts and challenge themselves on primitive cross-country ski or snowmobile routes.

Outdoor recreation is fun -- and so much more. It provides physical challenge, requires development of life-long skills, provokes interest and inquiry, and inspires wonder, respect and awe of the natural world. Recreation thereby contributes greatly to the physical, mental, and spiritual health of individuals, bonds family and friends, instills pride in their heritage, and provides economic benefits to communities, regions, and the nation. Indeed, outdoor recreation has become an essential part of American culture.

Outdoor recreation activities occur in many places across the American landscape, outside of the National Forest System. They take place in neighborhoods, undeveloped woodlots and streams, city parks, county open spaces, state lands, Indian Country and a vast array of federal lands. For many, unstructured play in such places is their introduction to the natural world, a beginning point for engaging in a healthy outdoor lifestyle.

In the same way, participation in recreational activities is the way that most Americans come to know their National Forests and Grasslands, making it an important portal for understanding their meaning, history, and relevance, and that of public lands as a whole.

A History of Innovation and Growth

In 1919, the Forest Service employed its first recreation professional, Arthur Carhart, a landscape architect. He was a true pioneer, contributing greatly to the development of the concepts or idea of wilderness and developing the first planned recreation facility through a partnership with the City of Pueblo, Colorado.

Since that time, Forest Service employees, guided by recreation professionals and researchers, have continued to advance the science and practice of outdoor recreation and land management with such innovations as the Scenery Management System, the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, the National Forest Scenic Byway system, and the Limits of Acceptable Change management system.

Recently, the agency has developed more refined business practices to promote accountability and the optimal use of operations funding, capital investment, and partners' contributions. These have included Infra, Meaningful Measures, the National Visitor Use Monitoring system, and Recreation Facility Analysis. Additionally, the Built Environment Image Guide, accessibility guides, and new travel management regulations have been developed to improve the quality of settings and the range of opportunities for all Americans, and to respond to the threat of unmanaged recreation.

The last 90 years have prepared us well to respond to the challenges of today and the future ... but only if we continue the tradition of adapting, changing, and innovating. The coming decade leading to the centennial of Arthur Carhart's employment gives us an opportunity to build on that legacy as a foundation for the next century of excellence in Forest Service recreation management. We must now begin with a strong sense of urgency and a single minded determination to embrace the needed changes to achieve our mission.

Recreation Challenges Today

The **benefits** to American society that outdoor recreation provides **are needed more today than ever** before:

- America spends \$2 trillion dollars on crisis medical health care. Overweight, obesity, and physical inactivity are major risk factors for chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. ***Physical activity is an integral part of a healthy lifestyle, and outdoor recreation is the natural solution – a disease prevention solution – and part of the nation's existing wellness infrastructure.***
- The economic base of many communities is shifting as industries consolidate and relocate, and service and experience businesses rely on outdoor recreation for their customers and as quality of life attractions for employees.
- Population growth and land development demand more environmental services from a decreasing and fragmented land base, yet people become less familiar with, and respectful of, natural landscapes and historic sites every year.
- The increasingly urbanized and technology focused American population, including children, is losing touch with the contributions of public lands to the basic resources that affect their lives. Americans sense of place and national identity can be enhanced by experiencing historic sites and landscapes that represent the abundant natural and cultural heritage of the nation.

At the same time, there are **unprecedented challenges** to providing quality recreation:

- Demographic shifts and lifestyle changes have greatly affected demand for recreation on National Forests and Grasslands. With 80% of our population living in cities, our country is the most urban it has ever been. For many, the only exposure to the natural environment is what they see on television and computer screens. Others find our existing recreation facilities and programs not in line with their cultural traditions.
- Growth of retiree communities and other population shifts have created population centers close to many public lands. This has resulted in many of our forests being

enjoyed as regional and municipal parks adding additional strain on visitor facilities, services, and natural settings.

- The condition of our recreation and heritage assets has steadily diminished, resulting in a ballooning backlog of maintenance needs for recreation facilities, trails, and roads.
- Unmanaged recreation has contributed to degraded recreation settings, damaged heritage sites, unacceptable resource impacts, and conflicts between users.
- National economic conditions and mounting financial demands underscore the inadequacy of traditional funding sources to meet growing needs, yet user fees and private sector involvement to deliver services remain controversial to some.

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## **A Framework for Sustainable Recreation**

The growing challenge of sustaining outdoor recreation opportunities requires a clear national vision and a bold strategy to meet the environmental, social, and economic needs of present and future generations. We can no longer manage as we have in the past. Any course we choose cannot depend solely on appropriated funding to meet our constituents' needs.

The strategy presented below will help us unite diverse interests, create and strengthen partnerships, focus scarce resources on mission-driven priorities, connect recreation benefits to communities, provide for changing urban populations, and most importantly, sustain and expand the benefits to America that quality recreation opportunities provide.

**The USDA Forest Service Mission:** *“To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.”*

The agency mission, one of sustainability, provides the foundation for the Recreation, Heritage, and Volunteer programs.

### **Our Vision ... “Renewing Body and Spirit, Inspiring Passion for the Land”**

*We provide recreation on treasured lands that brings health and vitality to individuals and communities and showcases our country’s natural abundance. Recreation on the National Forests and Grasslands invokes feelings of connection to the natural world and inspires responsibility to care for it.*

### **Guiding Principles for our mission and vision:**

- **Connecting people with their natural and cultural heritage** is a vital thread in the fabric of society. It contributes to the American identity and reminds people of the resources that sustain life – water, soil, food, and fiber. Moreover, **recreation is the portal** for understanding and caring for natural resources and public lands. It provides opportunities and motivation to advance from fun and attraction, through awareness, education and understanding, to a role of citizen stewardship – one of “giving back” and supporting sustained management of natural resources.

- **Recreational activity in the great outdoors promotes healthy lifestyles.** Combined with good nutrition, it contributes to improved physical, mental, and spiritual health, and a shift away from treating illness toward creating wellness.
- **Sustainability underlies all program decisions.** In order to sustain the benefits of outdoor recreation for present and future generations, the recreation program must address and work toward a sustainable balance among the three spheres of environmental, social, and economic conditions.
- **Community engagement is essential** for creating a sustainable recreation program. Our role is to serve as planners, facilitators, conveners, and collaborators, tapping the enormous energy and creativity of people in communities that care for and benefit from public lands, including both the private and public sectors.
- **National Forests and Grasslands are part of a larger landscape** that includes: other public lands; open spaces at the local, state, and federal level; tribal lands; working farms and ranches, and; towns and cities. Respecting and cultivating the relationships across all lands and communities is necessary to strengthen the health and vitality of each.
- **The Recreation program is integrated into the larger agency mission.** By working together with other program areas to integrate program goals and service delivery, we maximize our contribution by connecting programs, people, and landscapes. .

## Our Goals

Building on the foundation of the Mission, Vision, and Guiding Principles, we will strive to:

- **Provide** a diverse range of quality natural and cultural resource based recreation opportunities in partnership with people and communities.
- **Protect** the natural, cultural, and scenic environment for present and future generations to enjoy.
- **Partner** with public and private recreation benefit providers that together we meet public needs and expectations.
- **Perform** and plan by implementing systems and processes to ensure: effective decisions, sound investments, and accountability; collaborative approaches to integrated solutions across the landscape; and enhanced professionalism of our workforce.

## Our Areas of Focus

***“The vast possibilities of our great future will become realities only if we make ourselves responsible for that future.” Gifford Pinchot***

By **focusing on the three spheres that frame sustainability** - environmental, social, and economic – the recreation program can significantly contribute to the agency’s overall mission. **In the most profound sense, we will not achieve the agency’s mission without sustainable recreation and tourism.** The following ten focus areas comprise high leverage actions that will help us achieve sustainable recreation programs on every national forest and grassland by 2019, the centennial of managed recreation in the Forest Service.

## **I. Restore and Adapt Recreation Settings**

- Through integrated research, analysis, planning, and quality design, we will restore the condition and function of our recreation facilities and settings, expanding and adapting them to reflect the diversity of cultures, abilities, family structure, and activities in our ever-changing society.
- Recreation settings that have been impacted by declining ecosystem health, wildfire, and inappropriate use will be restored to improve the quality of outdoor experiences. Unmanaged recreation will be resolved through a planned and properly designed network of roads, trails, and facilities, combined with educated citizen stewardship and partnerships, as well as field presence to provide quality recreation experiences while reducing the impacts of visitor use on the landscape.
- Focused acquisition of rights-of-way and conservation easements will enhance access to recreation settings while protecting the scenery and sense of place that make each recreation setting special.

## **II. Implement “Green” Operations**

- The recreation and tourism program will reduce its environmental footprint and serve as a model for our visitors and other providers by incorporating sustainable travel industry best practices; “green technology” for facility and trail construction; and environmental management systems in all aspects of our operations.
- We will interpret the connection between our agency mission and our green operations, as well as citizens’ roles in sustainability.
- We will share knowledge, skills, and best management practices among a broad network of practitioners, educators, and partners.

## **III. Enhance Communities**

We will develop and implement, a place-based recreation planning model using collaborative processes to work with communities and other outdoor recreation and tourism providers within our regional destination areas.

- Together with our communities and stakeholders, we will develop a common vision and define potential roles to sustain the economic and quality of life benefits of recreation and tourism assets within these destinations.
- Included will be shared infrastructure development, delivery of information, and provision of recreation services that addresses connections of urban areas and rural communities to the scenic attractions, historic places, and recreation opportunities of the National Forests and Grasslands.
- Community and state parks, other federal and tribal lands, and local open space lands will be evaluated for connections with National Forest System lands as well as for their own contributions, existing and potential, for meeting the outdoor recreation and tourism demands for the area.

Along with the communities and stakeholders, we will jointly identify economic development and investment options to carry out the common vision.

#### **IV. Invest in Special Places**

The National Forest System designations include: 6 National Monuments, 19 National Recreation Areas, 11 National Scenic Areas, 6 National Scenic and Historic Trails, Grey Towers National Historic Site, and 22 National Historic Landmarks. These areas were designated by Congress to recognize their unique natural, scenic, or cultural resources and their outstanding opportunities for outdoor recreation.

- We will make strategic investments and leverage existing and future external partnerships for additional resources and funding to help sustain and feature these high value treasured landscapes and sites.
- We will showcase these special places in multiple media (including our national reservation service) by emphasizing their recreational, educational, and tourism benefits to demonstrate premier natural resource based tourism and recreation management.
- We will evaluate other areas within the National Forest System that have outstanding recreational, scenic, historic, or other values of high attractiveness for designation and management as special areas.

#### **V. Forge Strategic Partnerships**

Strategic partnerships are vital to providing sustainable recreation experiences.

- We will cultivate coalitions of recreation interest groups that will help provide recreational experiences, service activities, and environmental education for youth and adults that promote fitness, appreciation of nature and history, and citizen stewardship.
- We will seek opportunities to expand the demographic diversity of our recreation visitors by strengthening relationships with new partners and non-traditional users.
- We will streamline our partnership processes and increase our capacity to engage and support partners. These actions will contribute to the long term sustainability and relevance to society of natural and cultural landscapes.

#### **VI. Promote Citizen Stewardship**

With over 173.4 million visitors to National Forests and Grasslands each year and an additional 300 million driving through, recreation provides an exceptional conduit not just for connecting people to nature – but for enhancing their understanding of their natural and cultural environment and catalyzing their participation in caring for it.

- We will cultivate the energy, enthusiasm, and skills of private and nonprofit sector partners and volunteers to provide services and connect people to the land.

We will inspire passion for the land and develop a lifelong commitment to caring for it through interpretive services programs and exhibits, conservation education, and outdoor ethics programs that strive to make personal connections to our resources resulting in stewardship.

#### **VII. Know Our Visitors, Community Stakeholders, and Other Recreation Providers**

Increased recreation use and interest in history and the natural world demand that managers know their current and potential visitors to anticipate demand, foresee impacts, and take proactive management actions that create inviting recreation environments that instill respect for natural and cultural resources. To effectively position our recreation program within our market destination areas, we will need to utilize market research, visitor use information from a variety of sources, and continuous engagement of community stakeholders and regional recreation providers.

- We will continuously adapt our visitor use monitoring system and work closely with Research and Development to stay current with demographic shifts, changing values and demands, data sources, new technologies, and management tools.
- We will continuously seek to improve our community participation and collaboration skills using the latest research to build long lasting partnerships and working relationships to move together toward sustainable conditions.

### **VIII. Provide the Right Information**

Today, people expect credible, accurate, and effective information in seconds.

- We will invest in consolidating and improving our external recreation information systems with an emphasis on quality, consistency, accessibility and convenience.
- We will improve our capacity to use emerging social media technology to better connect with diverse users and cultures.
- An internal recreation managers' web toolbox will be developed and maintained as a first level resource for policy and process guidance. This toolbox will be designed for the employee to get current and specific information about all recreation programs to assist in day-to-day work.

### **IX. Develop a Sustainable Financial Foundation**

The Recreation program cannot deliver sustainable environmental, social, and economic conditions if it is not built upon a sustainable financial foundation. It is unlikely that appropriated funds will ever meet the total program need for providing excellent recreation opportunities while protecting the land. Program delivery will be balanced on a base of appropriated funds through expanded capacity by utilizing user fees, volunteers, private providers, and partners in the nonprofit sector.

- We will develop a holistic program analysis model to evaluate our infrastructure investments and program costs. Those costs will be considered alongside available resources such as appropriations, fee revenue, partnerships, volunteers, and other service provider options to seek a sustainable and integrated base for the program.
- Proposed new development investments and program improvements will be evaluated along with the capacity to sustain existing ones. The gap between program needs and available resources will be identified along with options for closing the gap.
- We will seek opportunities for further integration of programs, databases, processes, and funding with other associated resource staff areas such as: Heritage; Wilderness

and Wild & Scenic Rivers; Watershed, Fish, & Wildlife; Engineering; Conservation Education; and information management; among others.

## **X. Develop Our Workforce**

Our current organization, both in numbers and in expertise, is not well positioned to address this strategy. Capacity to respond to numerous partnership opportunities is limited, and field presence is minimal.

- In addition to the need to replenish, train, and develop the existing array of skills in our workforce, employee skills are needed to engage in collaborative planning processes with communities as well as to better build and administer partnerships and business relationships.
- We will recruit, retain, train, and develop needed skills and leverage our talented employees across the organization, transcending program and geographic boundaries.
- Our workforce will better represent the populations we serve.

## **Conclusion**

Despite changes in population and fluctuations in visitor patterns, it is obvious that outdoor recreation on the National Forests and Grasslands is a traditional part of the American way of life, and will remain so in the years ahead. There are numerous challenges to providing quality recreation experiences and tourism opportunities while protecting the land. But, through the strength of our partnerships and increased performance of all our employees and systems, we can meet these challenges of a sustainable future for the benefit of American society. The actions spelled out here will move us toward that meaningful goal, so please join us in:

***“Renewing Body & Spirit, Inspiring Passion for the Land”***