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WORKSHOP #4

RATIONING RIVER RECREATION USE
by George H. Stankey

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WORKSHOP #4

RATIONING RIVER RECREATION USE

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The rationing of access to recreational resources is a recent phenomenon, a result of steadily increasing use pressures, coupled with dwindling supplies. Rationing is generally seen as a means of controlling resource impacts and loss in recreational quality. But rationing what traditionally has been a "free" resource--even a right to some--has been controversial and difficult. Questions of how, when, and where to ration resources plague managers, and their best answers have been often criticized as arbitrary and capricious. In some cases, the courts have been approached for redress to real or imagined shortcomings.

The paper of Sam Warren outlines the rationing system that managers on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho have adopted. In brief, the system uses a lottery for distributing "places" and these are distributed among commercial outfitters and private river runners. Applications are accepted from users with three choices of dates permitted. A lottery is held in February and successful candidates are notified by mail. A maximum of seven launches per day is allowed. Parties who arrive at the river without a permit (either because they are unaware they need one or because they simply hope to "beat" the system) can obtain permission to launch their craft provided the limit of seven launches per day has not been exceeded. Warren notes that while 150 private permit applications had to be turned down in 1976, commercial allocation quotas were not filled. Thus, the issuance of permits to "drop-ins" can prevent underutilization of the river resource. However, the system has been criticized by commercial and private river runners alike, a fact evidenced by Warren's estimate of the threat of one lawsuit per month directed at the rationing program.

The rationing program on the Middle Fork is founded upon three fundamental assumptions: (1) the USDA Forest Service will seek to maintain a healthy outfitting industry; (2) the permit system should give all persons a fair and equitable chance to run the river; and (3) the system used must be within the budget and personnel limitations of the agency.

Some criticism during discussion was directed at these assumptions. Forest Service support of the outfitting industry was seen by some as unnecessary at best and as discriminatory to the interests of private river runners at worst. Although it was not made explicit during discussion, the Forest Service's support of this commercial interprise appears to have its roots in broad Federal statutes supporting rural development and local economies. Although the extent of Forest Service support and the specific types of economic activity involved might be debated, the general assumption the agency has taken with regard to the outfitting industry appears to be legitimate and proper.

Much discussion centered on the specific mechanisms that might be employed to ration use. Concerns with equity and fairness were expressed by many participants. However, there seemed to be considerable confusion over the issue of rationing as opposed to the issue of allocation of use permits. Rationing, which was the focus of this session, centers on the mechanisms through which opportunities to use the river system are distributed to users. Allocation concerns the relative proportion of the available openings given to different clientele groups; e.g., commercial outfitters versus private river runners. The distinction between these issues is important. Rationing is a complex problem, but the choice of mechanisms is an issue

that is substantially within the prerogative of the manager. Management experience, research data, and good judgment can be used to improve the delivery of services to people. Allocation, on the other hand, is an issue that deals with the normative question of "who should get what" and, as such, is an inherently political issue, largely outside solution by managers and scientists.

With specific regard to rationing, several important points were raised. First, there is a range of rationing mechanisms that managers might consider. For example, solutions suggested by participants included entrance fees, lotteries (the present Middle Fork rationing program is a lottery), and user licenses.[1]

Second, it was recognized that any rationing system has shortcomings and can be "beat"! As mentioned above, people who arrive on the Middle Fork without a permit can still obtain one by waiting until the daily launch limit of seven crafts is not reached. While this is a safeguard against underutilization, and can help accomodate visitors who are legitimately unaware of the rationing program, it also opens an avenue to people who do not want to deal with the system. One participant suggested private river runners have a greater opportunity to "beat" the system because commercial river runners must operate under a special-use permit issued by the USDA Forest Service and are therefore more closely regulated. However, Sam Warren pointed out that outfitters can affect demand for their services through advertising.

Third, several participants stressed the importance of providing a range of options for users, both in the kinds of recreational experiences that rivers provide and in the regulatory measures used by managers. Al Wagar of the USDA Forest Service made an especially important point: it is imperative that our management programs be conceived within the framework of a *system* of opportunities. Where our horizons are restricted to an area-by-area perspective, decisions as to what kinds of experiences are to be provided and what management techniques are to be used can quickly become tangled in a web of concerns about appropriateness, equity, and utility.

Finally, participants recognized that rationing, defined as the direct control of use through regulatory measures, is only one of the management techniques available to managers. Other sessions of the symposium dealt with these measures, but in general, discussants agreed that many nonregulatory measures exist that should be considered for controlling impacts on rivers before direct regulation is instituted. In Michigan, for example, managers have utilized design features to control impacts. Camping sites have been kept away from river banks, access to rivers has been controlled to prevent random entry, and litter control measures have been instituted. However, it was clear that some of these measures are simply not feasible on all rivers. On the St. Croix River, for instance, most of the access points along the 252 miles of the river are not under control of the managing agency. Where possible, nevertheless, participants agreed that management should institute only those measures necessary to achieve the desired end, rather than automatically implementing rationing.

The third fundamental assumption underlying the rationing system--that it must be within the budget and personnel limitations of the agency--is a real world constraint that is frequently forgotten in a world increasingly tied to computers, sophisticated programming, and related electronic wizardry. While such tools and techniques do offer great promise in grappling with difficult resource management problems, we need also remember that many programs and policies are implemented at field levels where, as Sam Warren noted, the manager feels lucky to have a telephone and desk calculator.

One important by-product of the rationing program on the Middle Fork has been the development of accurate, up-to-date management information. Estimates

[1]*Two other generic rationing systems, queuing (first-come, first-served) and reservations (a variant of queuing, with future rights to openings assigned to people by pre-registration) drew little discussion. However, the assignment of permits to drop-ins when daily launch limits have not been reached on the Middle Fork represents, in essence, a queuing approach to rationing.*

of use--how much, what kinds, when, and where--notoriously bad in many of our dispersed recreation settings such as wilderness, have been greatly improved by the permit system. In addition, because the USDA Forest Service issues all permits to river runners, private and commercial, there has been an excellent opportunity for informational contacts with visitors concerning river management policies. This two-way interaction between manager and user all too often is missing in many of our recreation areas and probably helps contribute to the misperceptions of each group about the other. Important management objectives can be often achieved by obtaining public understanding, thereby reducing or even eliminating the need for more direct restrictions. For example, Warren noted that when the rationing program was first begun, visitors were issued litterbags which were then checked by rangers after completion of the trip to determine compliance with pack-it-in, pack-it-out regulations. This check on visitor behavior has now been dropped because litter clean-up has become the norm among river users.

What of the future? Both Warren as well as most symposium participants see increases in use on the horizon. The explosion of use on America's rivers has truly been staggering, as several papers in the proceedings graphically attest. The growth in use is almost certainly more than just a fad; it is unlikely we will ever again see the level of use on the country's rivers that prevailed a decade ago. At the same time, it seems important that we obtain as accurate a grasp on the growth phenomenon as possible. For example, it is a common assumption that official designation (e.g., establishment as a Wild River) is, in a sense, a "kiss of death" because it makes the area a target for "trophy" collectors. This is certainly a plausible notion; naming an area officially probably does promote recognition. However, it could also simply reflect the greater attention that managers must now give to the area in question and the often-cited spectacular increases in use might be largely a result of the belated recognition of use conditions that have prevailed for some time. Separating conventional wisdom from fact is an important responsibility of managers, researchers, and users alike, as we attempt to place scarce management dollars and skills in the most deserving places.

Participants questioned the future role of the commercial outfitters on the Middle Fork. In the opening remark of the question period, Joe Hoffman of the University of Idaho proposed de-regulation of the commercial outfitting industry. The USDA Forest Service would retain control over the total number of users permitted on the river and would set safety standards with which outfitters would need to comply. Visitors obtaining permits would be free to choose running the river on their own or with an outfitter. In this way, Hoffman argued, market place mechanisms would lead to the proper number of outfitters on the river. His argument was countered in later discussion, however, by an individual who argued that deregulation would not necessarily lead to the survival of the "best" outfitters. Success, it was argued, would be largely a function of capitalization, and large, well-funded outfitters would enjoy an advantage over smaller entrepreneurs. Thus, outfitters specializing in unique styles of river running that appeal to only a minority of visitors would probably be forced out of business.

Conditions on the Middle Fork will almost certainly change in the future. Warren agreed that political pressures might eventually force shifts in the allocation of permits between private and commercial sectors. The notion of "percentage of disappointment" raised by Rod Nash of the University of California at Santa Barbara represents a plausible alternative for re-establishing the allocation ratio. Given the problems of "no-shows", for whatever reason, Warren estimated that 80 percent of capacity will probably be the maximum level of utilization to ever occur. As noted earlier, demand from private runners exceeded their allocated capacity while commercial users have underutilized theirs. Revisions of the private-commercial allocation should be sensitive to this relation as it provides a logical basis for reassignment of the ratios. However, a very real future possibility is the exclusion issuance of individual permits, dropping the commercial-type trip altogether. Constant monitoring and reassessment of policies and programs seems absolutely necessary if the USDA Forest Service is to avoid being caught in the position of managing the river with a set of assumptions and mechanisms that are simply out of touch with changing realities of use.

RATIONING--AN OVERALL ASSESSMENT

As the discussion above suggests, many specific ideas and general impressions surfaced at the session. Summarizing them all into some cohesive and logical fashion is difficult, but it seems to me that several issues warrant specific recognition.

First, rationing seems to have fair public support as a legitimate management action. Much of the debate over its use centers on how it is applied, where, and so forth, but most users appear to agree that rationing is an appropriate action to protect river resources and recreational experiences.

However, my second impression is that misuse of rationing might jeopardize its use as a management tool. A range of visitor management actions needs to be considered--from subtle, light-handed techniques such as providing information to people about alternative opportunities to more restrictive actions such as regulation of access. In choosing what measure is appropriate in any given sitiation, the lowest level of regulation necessary to achieve area management objectives should be instituted--the principle of minimum regulation. In other words, if visitor impacts can be held within acceptable limits simply by providing information to users, it would be inappropriate to use any more restrictive measure, such as rationing.

One can even visualize this type of variability within the rationing measures themselves. For example, there was considerable discussion about the idea of regulating use by the issuance of licenses--rationing by merit. Such a measure would require users to pass some kind of test (e.g., demonstration of knowledge, skill, or both). One implication of such a measure is that by raising visitor skills, thereby reducing per capita impact, the need for absolute restrictions on total visitor numbers could probably be postponed. In effect, improving visitor behavior could raise an area's carrying capacity.

This leads me to a third observation. I am struck by the lack of clear management objectives for rivers to help guide management actions. One participant noted that the perception of what kind of experience rivers produce differs between managers and users. Moreover, there were varying notions about what benefits rivers, even those within the Wild and Scenic Rivers System, should provide. However, the general concerns about solitude and naturalness suggest that many hold a wilderness-bias with regard to what kinds of experiences rivers should yield.

The lack of clear objectives means these personal biases as to what river experiences should be provided can be substituted for more formal specifications of goals. From this, it is an easy step to assuming that *any* increases in use or *any* increase in resource impact constitutes a loss of quality that can be counteracted only by the relative drastic action of directly rationing use. Such a step is unwarranted and creates an undesirable set of conditions for managers and users alike.

Rivers, like any recreational resource system, can and should provide a satisfaction for people seeking a variety of experiences--from those dependent on intense social interaction to those that rely upon isolation for their fulfillment. This can only be achieved, as Al Wagar suggested, by considering rivers within the context of a *system of opportunities* rather than simply on a river-by-river basis. By managing on a regional basis, with the system of rivers specifically managed to yield a package of diverse experiences, many of the concerns about equity can be more easily addressed.

We also need to consider visitor management and rationing from a regional perspective. With a broad range of opportunities, represented by a system of areas with differing management objectives, a range of visitor management techniques will be necessary and appropriate. Thus, users will have a broad range of choices--not only of opportunities suited to their particular tastes but also of the level and nature of managerial control. This diversity seems absolutely necessary if we are to meet our responsibility as professional resource managers to the American people.

One of the major concerns about rationing is that some people will always find themselves discriminated against by the system. My fourth observation is simply this: any rationing system discriminates against certain people; in fact, it is this discriminatory feature

that makes rationing work. If it didn't, what good would a rationing program do? The relevant question is not how to prevent rationing from being discriminatory, but rather, how to spread those discriminatory costs across the spectrum of users?

Again, a system of areas can help us spread these costs. The objective should be to make sure that when rationing becomes necessary, the specific techniques utilized (e.g., lotteries, merit, fees) should vary among areas so that users are able to make choices that allow them to accommodate the rationing costs in the best way. For example, reservations discriminate by favoring those able, willing, or both to plan for the future; fees discriminate on the basis of who is able or willing to pay the monetary costs, etc. Each system favors certain groups and discriminates against others. By providing a system of areas where rationing mechanisms vary, the effect should be to minimize aggregate equity costs.

Finally, I was struck by the virtual absence of any discussion about river carrying capacity. Rationing implies that some finite number of openings has been reached and because of excess demand for those openings, some mechanism for distribution has to be implemented. Thus, rationing hinges on the integrity of the carrying capacity calculations.

Although carrying capacity was not discussed in this session, it is clear that rationing decisions will be challenged increasingly in the future, and these challenges will be often tied to the carrying capacity estimations made by managers. Carrying capacity is ultimately a judgmental issue and managers, researchers, and citizens alike all have important roles to play. Managers define the various constraints they must consider and are charged with making the final judgments as to what constitutes acceptable consequences in light of these constraints. Researchers must supply clear measures of the consequences and implications of alternative use conditions so managers can make decisions based on reasonably accurate estimates. Citizens have the responsibility to make their views and values known as well as to make judgments about the trade-offs they are willing to make. Only through open dialogue among these three groups can the complex issues of rationing, carrying capacity, and river management be adequately resolved.