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INFLUENCE OF CAMPSITE RESTORATION ON VISITORS



Keywords: campsite restoration, manager perceptions, visitor experiences, visitor perceptions

Background & Management Issues:

Wilderness recreation management strives to provide quality wilderness experiences while avoiding ecological impacts. Unfortunately, these objectives frequently conflict, and managers must choose between regulatory and manipulative types of controls to maintain the integrity of the wilderness. Campsites are often obviously impacted areas that may affect visitor experiences. Indeed, research shows that visitors notice the bare ground where vegetation has been destroyed and find the impact more offensive the deeper into the wilderness that campsite is. In addition, the number of campsites in an area may be perceived negatively. Recent studies have shown that wilderness visitors prefer manipulative

Project Objectives:

To assess visitor perceptions of the impacts of resource use, the use of management actions to address impacts, and wilderness managers.

To measure the perceptions of wilderness managers toward restoration.

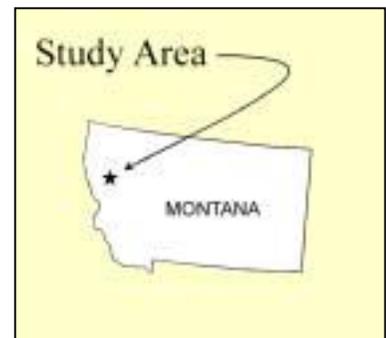
strategies, such as restoration, to increased restrictions and regulations. Little information is

available about how wilderness visitors' experiences are influenced by observing ongoing management actions, however. Visitor and manager perceptions need to be examined to evaluate how impacted campsites and restoration actions affect the quality of current and future visitor experiences and to help predict public support for restoration.

Project Description: The Mission Mountain Wilderness (MMW) is a well used and intensively managed area in west-central Montana. Visitors were surveyed as they exited the wilderness at one of four trailheads. Individuals with long-term familiarity and interest in the wilderness and its management were invited to participate in a focus group. On-site interviews were used to supplement exit surveys. An additional focus group was developed from interested wilderness restoration volunteers. To determine managers' perceptions about visitor experiences in relation to management actions, questionnaires were sent to 48 managers in all nine regions of the U.S. Forest Service.

Results: Visitors to the MMW were mostly day-use visitors from surrounding areas. More than half of the visitors surveyed noticed the number of trails and the loss of vegetation at campsites. Although

the majority of visitors noticing impacts were bothered by the damage, visitors generally expected to see what they experienced. Visitors felt that restored campsites would greatly increase the quality of future visits, however. Indeed, visitors who observed restoration activities felt it positively influenced their experience and their opinions of managers. In contrast, visitor opinions of managers declined when little was being done to restore noticeably damaged sites. These perceptions were strongly influenced by the length of time visitors had been coming to the MMW; first-time visitors were surprised by restoration and their experience tended to be less positively affected, on average, than long-time visitors. Interestingly, overnight users perceived campsite restoration activities more negatively than



day users but were aware that restoration would improve future experiences.

Visitors that volunteered for wilderness restoration activities were usually strongly attached to a particular place and believed restoration should be considered before use restrictions. Moreover, volunteers were concerned about public involvement in wilderness planning and the education efforts being made to reduce impacts.

Managers believed that although physical signs of restoration reduced the quality of visitor experiences, restoration positively influenced visitors' opinions of management. Nevertheless, managers felt that restoration was only slightly effective in improving the quality of the wilderness environment. Most felt that management plans should include use restrictions and education programs in addition to restoration.

Management Implications:

- ❖ Visitors support restoration activities, do not like to see heavily impacted sites, and hold managers responsible for maintaining the natural state of the wilderness.
- ❖ Restoration activities enhance, rather than detract, from visitor experiences, and they improve the perceptions visitors have of resource managers.
- ❖ To address heavily impacted campsites, management experts recommend (1) developing a well-defined restoration plan that includes inventory, a visitor-use study, and public participation; (2) implementing some restrictions on number of visitors, group size, types of use, campfires, and overnight camping; and (3) educating visitors before they enter the wilderness.

Publications / Products:

- ❖ Flood, Joseph P. 2001. The effectiveness of wilderness restoration: perceptions of visitors and managers. St. Paul, MN; University of Minnesota. 205 p. Dissertation.
- ❖ Flood, Joseph P.; McAvoy, Leo H. 2000. The influence of wilderness restoration programs on visitor experience and visitor opinions of managers. *In*: Cole, David N.; McCool, Stephen F.; Borrie, William T.; O'Loughlin, Jennifer, comps. *Wilderness Science in a Time of Change Conference—Vol. 5: Wilderness Ecosystems, Threats, and Management*; 1999 May 23-27; Missoula, MT. Proc. RMRS-P-15-VOL-5. Ogden, UT: Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station: 193-198. **Leopold Publication Number 398.** [Read it here!](#)



For additional information...

Leo McAvoy, Principal Investigator
phone: 612-625-5887
email: mcavo001@umn.edu

Alan E. Watson, Leopold Institute Investigator
phone: 406-542-4190
email: awatson@fs.fed.us