

RECREATION: THE MULTIPLE USE FOR

CENTRAL HARDWOOD FORESTS^{1/}

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Abstract.--An argument is presented that outdoor recreation, not timber, should be the prominent multiple use of central hardwood forests. Per capita consumption for recreation continues to increase, while per capita consumption of timber products continues to decrease. Future shifts in population structure and product technology will tilt even more the balance toward outdoor recreation. And, the public appears more and more favorable toward paying for outdoor recreation. It is argued that a public fee program on many of our national forests is capable of generating more revenue than timber products from these lands.

Keywords: outdoor recreation, recreation, demand, public fees, resource allocation

INTRODUCTION

This paper is meant to be provocative--to foster thought concerning the expanding role of outdoor recreation in wildland areas. Its message will stimulate some of you, disturb others, and hopefully, even make a few of you down-right mad. The fact that timber consumption is on the decline while non-timber resources, notably recreation, are on the rise, is not a pleasant thought for many of us. My thesis, that we should be promoting recreation resources management, thereby shifting the relative degree of emphasis on timber in the central hardwoods region, is even more of a disturbing thought. It even disturbs me to write some of the things I will propose, for I am not sure I believe in all of them. Nevertheless, they offer food for thought and perhaps--perhaps a vision of what future society has in mind for the central hardwood forests.

DEMAND FOR RECREATION

Outdoor recreation is a vital part of the lifestyle of most Americans. Over three-fourths of the U.S. population regularly participate in some form of outdoor recreation, and they spend about \$250 billion per year in its pursuit (Cordell and Hendee 1982). Forests and their

associated waters are the focus of much of this participation.

The public's demand for outdoor recreation is not a recent phenomenon, and it is not a fad that will go away in the near future. Use figures from the 1920's to the present indicate a continuous increase (except during the World War II years) in visitations to our national forests and national parks (fig. 1). Future projections call for a continuing trend in non-timber uses of our forests (Duerr 1986). While the public seems to be consuming more and more recreation, they are consuming fewer timber products (fig. 2). Per capita consumption for timber products has shown a steady decline since the turn of the century (Duerr 1986). Shifts in our population structure (i.e. more senior citizens) and life styles (multiple housing units) will place even less per capita demand on timber related products. Forests, and forestry of the future, will be more a producer of social-cultural products and less of biological products. Shifts in social-cultural values will continue to emphasize the amenity values of forests. Changing social needs will also place more pressure on policy-makers to incorporate amenity values in existing resource based legislation. Much of the major natural resource legislation since 1960 (i.e. NFMA, RPA, Wilderness Act) has been fundamentally initiated so as to accommodate non-commodity interests.

Much of the demand for outdoor recreation has occurred on the national forests. In fact, the national forests are the largest supplier of recreation visitation on federal lands. In 1964,

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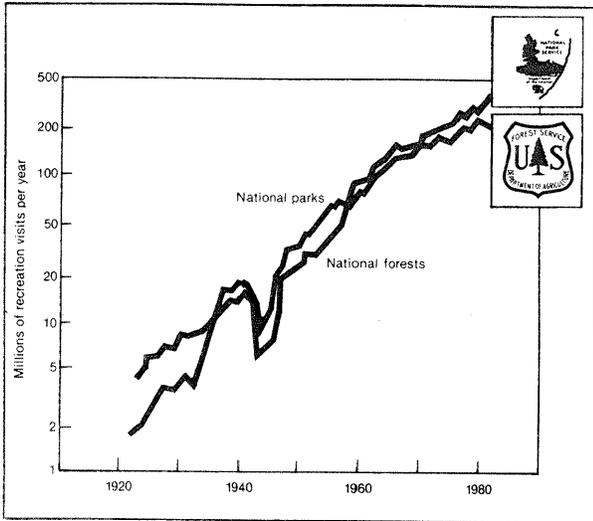


Figure 1. Recreation visits per year to U.S. national forests and national parks, 1924-1982 (Source: Marion Clawson. 1984 Outdoor recreation: 25 years of history; 25 years of projection. Virginia Tech, Blacksburg.)

134 million visitor days of recreational use was recorded on national forests; in 1981 the figure was 235 million (Cordell and Hendee 1982). The 235 million visitor days of use in 1981 constitute 43.4 percent of all outdoor recreation occurring on federal lands. So, the national forests are already in the recreation business in a big way.

RECREATION: A SOCIAL PROBLEM

If outdoor recreation is to become a major multiple use of the central hardwood region, who is going to pay for it? Traditionally, recreation has been treated as a "public good," a social product of our forests, and has been offered free to the public. Special use and entrance fees are collected in some developed areas. But in general, recreation is not treated as a commodity like timber. As a consequence, recreation on the national forests generates very few dollars as compared to timber. Using 1980 as a base year, the federal treasury received \$730 million from national forest timber revenues, by far the most valuable renewable commodity resource. By contrast, recreation provided \$18 million to the treasury (Clawson 1983). Now you know why timber has been, and is, the dominant multiple use on the national forests.

Because recreation "does not pay its way," it is often the first resource budget to be cut during difficult economic times. Recreation management budgets under the Reagan

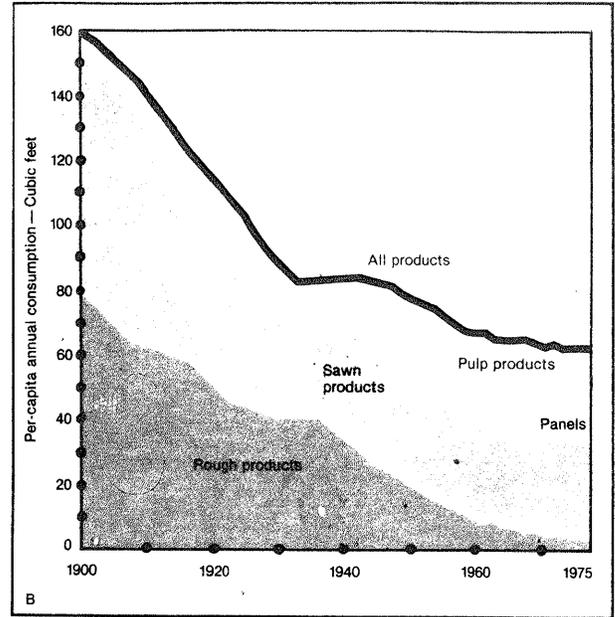


Figure 2. Annual consumption (per capita) of wood products in the United States, 1900-1975: 13-year moving averages, round-wood equivalent. (Source: federal government historical series.)

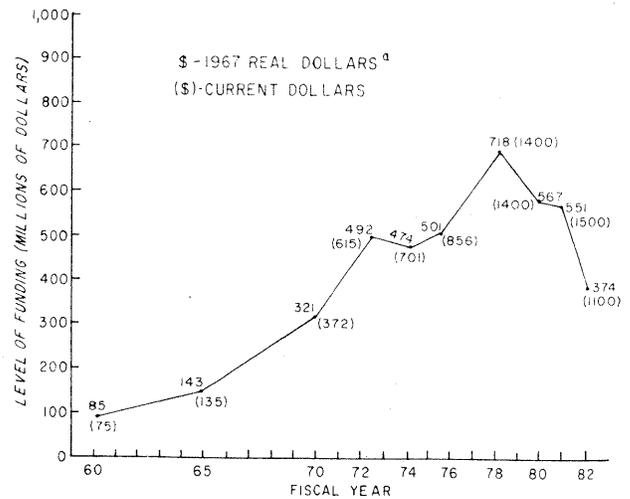


Figure 3. Estimated federal outlays for recreation resources planning, acquisition and management in 1967 real dollars, 1960-1982 (selected years). Source: Cordell and Hendee 1982.

Administration have been, and will be, cut so severely that the outdoor recreation system is essentially headed for "bankruptcy." For example, real dollar appropriations for federal recreation management grew from about \$85 million in 1960 to \$718 million in 1978, but fell to only \$374 million in 1982 (fig. 3). Interpretive services have been eliminated on many forests, developed facilities are just plain wearing out, and backcountry trails and campsites continue to deeply erode and compact. General signs of neglect are obvious everywhere.

RECREATION: A RESOURCE COMMODITY

If outdoor recreation is to become a priority resource in some forest regions, a source of revenue is needed to fund its development. A new philosophy will need to be developed where outdoor recreation is considered a resource commodity instead of a free social good. It is proposed that outdoor recreation be considered a commodity good of economic value to recreationists, and other user groups of recreational lands. We need to charge increased and new fees for recreational services and products, the same as done for timber, minerals, and range.

Many believe that in the market place, in a dollar and cents bidding game, that recreation would lose out to the other traditional commodity uses of public lands. Other commodity uses would have more value, and in time we would have fewer developed recreation areas, fewer wilderness and park areas, fewer backcountry rangers and interpreters, and unfortunately, even more volunteers. Outdoor recreation just can not generate revenue like timber on our national forests.

Timber vs Recreation Revenue

As stated earlier, national forest timber revenues returned \$730 million to the national treasury in 1980, while recreation returned only \$18 million. However, the 1980 outdoor recreation participation on national forests was 234 million visitor days. By charging \$3.00 per visitor day of use, and assuming that use would not decrease, outdoor recreation would generate \$702 million. This is just under what timber revenues generated. At \$4.00 per visitor day, recreation would bring in \$936 million, 287 million dollars more than timber.

But, you say wait-a-minute! The public will not pay 3 to 4 dollars for a visitor day of recreation. It's just not realistic! Well then, how about \$1.00 per visitor day. And, consider this proposal! In 1980, 89 percent (\$650 million) of the \$730 million timber sale revenues came from only three states--California, Oregon, and Washington. Only \$80 million came from the

other 47 states. But, the other states had 146 million visitor days of recreation. By charging \$1.00 per visitor day, \$146 million would be taken-in from these states. This is 81 percent more than the \$80 million generated by timber from these states. Perhaps we should intensively manage timber in California, Oregon, and Washington, and manage recreation as the prominent multiple use on the rest of the national forest system. At least the North Central Hardwood Forests and forests of the Northeast Region might be devoted to recreation management. If recreation management is emphasized, if services, facilities, and benefits are improved, perhaps the public would be more willing to pay for outdoor recreation.

Public's Willingness To Pay

Is the public willing to pay for outdoor recreation? Fees in developed recreation areas have increased notably in the 1980's. Campground fees have nearly doubled on many federal lands. Existing entrance fees are being increased in many national parks, while new entrance fees are being initiated in 11 national parks in 1986. More parks with entrance fees will surely follow. When Secretary of Interior Donald Hodel took office in 1985, he stated he wanted to raise entrance fees for the national parks by at least 300 percent. He said he was convinced that users of national parks, wildlife refuges, national monuments and other Interior Department areas should pay much more for using them. Of course, national forests and other USDA areas are not immune to this philosophy, for it is the Reagan Administration that is demanding it. The Reagan Administration wants Congress to raise fees so users contribute 25 percent of costs. Users now pay about 7 percent of the costs of maintaining and operating national recreation areas (Knoxville News-Sentinel 1985).

Public perception of and reaction to recreation fees is a very timely topic. Proceedings of the conference titled, Fees for Outdoor Recreation on Lands Open to the Public, contains some of the latest research in this area (Appalachian Mountain Club 1984). Studies as early as 1964 indicated the public's willingness to pay recreational fees. A Bureau of Outdoor Recreation general population survey questioned 1001 households plus over 2000 federal estate visitors about user fees. Findings indicated that a substantial majority of the population as a whole, and of every identifiable segment of the population, favored the concept that the user should pay some sort of fee for public outdoor recreation. The more recent 1982-83 Nationwide Recreation Survey, again a general household sample, indicated that likely National Park visitors were willing to pay a maximum entrance fee of about \$5.00 per person or \$25.00 for an annual National Park entry permit.

What recreation users say they are willing to pay and what they actually will pay may be two different things. One backcountry recreation area that does charge a fee for trail hiking and wilderness camping is Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina. Grandfather Mountain is a 5000 acre, privately owned, managed wilderness area that charges an adult a user fee of \$2.50 per day. According to Randy Johnson, backcountry manager of the area, "hikers at first balked at paying for what they had once used at no cost. But greatly improved trail marking, new trail construction, trail maintenance, new facilities and an absence of litter relative to nearby public trails eventually gained support" (Johnson 1984:137). A key to any group's willingness to pay is seeing their dollars put to work--in this case, to maintain recreation quality.

The privately owned, fee area of Grandfather Mountain is located nearby Linville Gorge Wilderness Area, a non-fee area managed by the US Forest Service. A recent study by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University compared the two areas concerning visitor response to user fees (Cook 1986). The study determined if fees would exclude any socioeconomic or other user group who presently uses free wilderness and determined if fees are acceptable to users. No difference was found in the socioeconomic characteristics of users of the fee and the free wilderness areas, suggesting that lower socioeconomic classes are not being excluded from the fee area. Travel cost models for the two areas also were not statistically different, suggesting users are making the same economic decision when visiting each area. Fees were found to be acceptable to Linville Gorge users if Wilderness will deteriorate without fees and fee revenues are spent on Wilderness management. Users suggest about \$25.00 for an annual Wilderness permit and about \$2.00 for a daily fee as reasonable amounts. Three-quarters of users who visit both areas said the fee at Grandfather Mountain does not influence their decision of which area to visit.

More studies of the Grandfather Mountain-Linville Gorge type need to be conducted. For example, are trout fishermen willing to pay a dollar for a day of fishing in Great Smoky Mountains National Park or the Cherokee National Forest? What about a dollar as an entry fee for floating a wild river? River floaters of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in Tennessee indicated they were willing to pay an average fee of \$4.21 per visit as an entry fee to the river (McDonald et al. 1984). The answer to these questions is simple for me, especially when I consider that I commonly pay five dollars for an evening of bowling or a two-hour movie, and accept the practice of paying two to three dollars for an hour of waitress service when dining with my family at a restaurant.

Public response to user fees at public

recreation areas is perhaps best summarized by B. L. Driver of the U.S. Forest Service (Driver 1984:48).

"My overall interpretation is that the conventional wisdom that users blanketly oppose higher fees is a myth. Instead, more people appear to be quite reasonable in their attitudes toward fees. They do not oppose fees that make sense to them, and they are especially willing to bear a higher proportion of the costs that can be attributed directly to their use, especially if the revenues collected go toward improving recreation opportunities. On the other hand, the public is concerned about equity and preserving opportunities for future users, and most people still appear to believe that participation in outdoor recreation does contribute to the general welfare. So some subsidization is still generally expected."

Timber is Subsidized, Too

It is not being proposed that outdoor recreation can, or should have to, completely pay its own way, but only that fees be appropriately established so that recreation can be intensively funded and managed as a prominent multiple use in many forest regions. This is not at conflict with timber management, for timber is a subsidized commodity on our national forests. Although timber returned \$730 million to the national treasury in 1980, five of the nine regions of the USFS showed a net loss to the government in timber sales. For example, timber sales for the East Central Rockies returned 17 cents for every dollar spent on timber (Hyde 1981). When the Congressional Research Service compared timber sale receipts with sale administration costs on national forests by state, it found:

- 1) Sale programs in 23 states had annual losses between 140 and 150 million dollars.
- 2) In 21 of the 23 states, timber sales did not even cover the cost of a third of the major sale administration costs.
- 3) These 21 states contain almost half of the national forest timber base.

Much has been written about deficient timber sales, and the point here is not to discuss why or should they occur, but only to point out that timber and recreation management on our national forests may always need to be subsidized to some extent. Road building and major facility development are long term costs that often require government funding, even in many portions of the private sector. However, some shifting of priorities so that recreation is managed as the prominent multiple use on many national forests, and timber on others, would seem to allow for a

more efficient use of limited resource dollars. Does it make sense to emphasize timber management on all national forests, realizing that some are sub-marginal as productive timber units, while under-emphasizing recreation management in forest regions where the public is demanding, and willing to contribute toward, better outdoor recreation opportunities? Do the Central Hardwood Forests fit this category?

THE CONCLUDING PROPOSAL

Outdoor recreation is a major multiple use of forests in the eyes of the general public, yet it is not a dominant multiple use on national forests. Neither current agency philosophies nor budgets allow for it. Unless outdoor recreation is treated more as a commodity in the future, where user revenues are generated, it will remain a secondary multiple use of forest environments. With decreasing recreation budgets, the goal of recreation management becomes shrinking recreation opportunities to meet reduced funds. Without appropriate management funds, the recreating public is a problem, not an opportunity for service and support. With this in mind, the following provocative proposal is offered:

- 1) Outdoor recreation should be made the dominant multiple use on many of our national forests, particularly those where timber management is being emphasized on sub-marginal productive lands.
- 2) Outdoor recreation should be treated as a resource commodity to the extent possible, with user fees charged to cover a major portion of the management and operational costs of these areas.
- 3) At current levels and projected rates of recreational use, outdoor recreation should compete well as a commodity good in the Central Hardwood Forest Region. Central hardwood forest agencies should initiate appropriate fees for outdoor recreational uses on its forests, plow the revenues back into the management of its recreation resources, and thereby serve as a model in providing professionally managed and quality outdoor recreation.

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