

**The Third Symposium on  
SOCIAL ASPECTS AND RECREATION RESEARCH**



**Diverse Challenges of Our Times:  
People, Products, Places**

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**Tempe, Arizona State University**  
**February 16–19, 2000**  
Hosted by the USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station  
**and**  
**Arizona State University at Tempe**

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**Typeset by Mary Fran Draisker at the Publication Assistance Center, College of Public Programs, Arizona State University.**

## Table of Contents

Attendees . . . . .	v
<b>Landscapes, Values &amp; Community</b>	
Diversity: Beyond Symbolism . . . . .	1
<i>Maria T. Allison, Arizona State University</i>	
A Preliminary Analysis of Attachment to Special Places among Community Residents in Northern Michigan . . . . .	7
<i>Janna B. Custer, Utah State University</i>	
<i>Dale J. Blahna, Utah State University</i>	
Developing Compassionate Sense of Place. . . . .	17
<i>Randy Haluza-DeLay, Lakehead University</i>	
<i>Brent Cuthbertson, Lakehead University</i>	
Tourist Preferences for Landscape Types on Travel Routes in Wisconsin. . . . .	23
<i>Robert Brush, University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point</i>	
<b>Social and Political Contents for Recreation</b>	
The Public Debate over the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program on the U.S. National Forests . . . . .	31
<i>David N. Bengston, USDA Forest Service</i>	
<i>David P. Fan, InfoTrend, Inc.</i>	
The Mediating Effects of Values on the Relationship Between Outdoor Recreation Participation and Pro-environmental Behavior. . . . .	39
<i>Alan D. Bright, University of Georgia</i>	
<i>Susan C. Barro, North Central Experiment Station, USFS</i>	
Urban Crimes in Natural Environments: Are We Prepared? . . . . .	43
<i>Joanne F. Tynon, Oregon State University</i>	
<i>Deborah J. Chavez, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USFS</i>	
Understanding Public Response Through the Trust Filter . . . . .	47
<i>Patricia L. Winter, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USFS</i>	
<i>George T. Cvetkovich, Western Washington University</i>	
<b>Cross-cultural Studies in Recreation &amp; Tourism</b>	
Ethnic Variation in Outdoor Recreation Use: The Case of Asian Americans . . . . .	55
<i>Woo C. Jeong, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USFS</i>	
<i>Geoffrey C. Godbey, Penn State University</i>	
Motives and Constraints to Vacationing in Natural Areas: A Comparison of Los Angeles and Hong Kong Residents. . . . .	61
<i>Patrick Tierney, San Francisco State University</i>	
<i>Rene Dahl, San Francisco State University</i>	
<i>Deborah Chavez, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USFS</i>	
<i>John Apt, Hong Kong Polytechnic University</i>	
<i>Connie Mok, University of Houston</i>	
A Cross-cultural Analysis of Perceived Communication Competence: Tour Guides in the Tourism Context . . . . .	69
<i>Denis Leclerc, Arizona State University</i>	
A Comparison of Perceptions of Trail Attributes Between Korean and American Trail Users . . . . .	75
<i>Ju-Hee Lee, Taegu University, Korea</i>	
<i>Mark I. Ivy, North Carolina State University</i>	
<i>Roger L. Moore, North Carolina State University</i>	

The Influence of "Personal Communities" on Outdoor Recreation Involvement and Environmental Career Interest among Asian and African Americans . . . . .	83
<i>Donald A. Rodriguez, Colorado State University</i>	
<i>Heather L. Van Benschoten, Colorado State University</i>	
<b>Community and Collaborative Approaches</b>	
Four Corners Gateway Tourism Initiative: Forging New, Collaborative Partnerships with Public Lands . . . . .	91
<i>Sam Burns, Fort Lewis College</i>	
From Ranchers to Recreationists, Loggers to Environmentalists: Collaborative Decision Making in the New West . . . . .	103
<i>Nancy Menning, University of Wisconsin–Madison</i>	
<i>Carol Raish, Rocky Mountain Research Station, USFS</i>	
Applying Participant Observation to Rock Climbing Issues in the Bitterroot Region of Montana . . . . .	113
<i>James A. Harding, University of Montana*</i>	
<i>William T. Borrie, University of Montana</i>	
The Arizona Rural Tourism Development Program . . . . .	123
<i>Kathleen Andereck, Arizona State University West</i>	
<i>Michael Leyva, Arizona Department of Commerce</i>	
<b>Data Gathering &amp; Modeling Approaches in Recreation Research</b>	
A Computer Cost-analysis Tool for Developed Recreation Programs . . . . .	131
<i>Christopher "Jake" Brown, Solutions 4 Recreation.com</i>	
<i>John "Fender" Diefenderfer, Solutions 4 Recreation.com</i>	
Crowding Versus Access at Delicate Arch, Arches National Park: An Indifference Curve Analysis. . . . .	135
<i>Steven R. Lawson, University of Vermont</i>	
<i>Robert E. Manning, University of Vermont</i>	
<b>Case Studies in Outdoor Recreation</b>	
State Parks: A Diverse System . . . . .	147
<i>Daniel D. McLean, Indiana University</i>	
<i>Deborah Chavez, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USFS</i>	
<i>Amy Hurd, Indiana University</i>	
To Cross or Not to Cross: Mt. Bicyclists' Resource Trail Etiquette Behavior . . . . .	153
<i>William W. Hendricks, California Polytechnic State University</i>	
<i>Roy H. Ramthun, Concord College</i>	
<i>Deborah J. Chavez, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USFS</i>	
Do Mountains Matter? A Comparison of Two Regional Mountain Biker Profile Studies . . . . .	159
<i>Jennifer L. Hoyer, Southern Illinois University</i>	
<i>Jean C. Mangun, Southern Illinois University</i>	
<i>Deborah J. Chavez, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USFS</i>	
A Preliminary Analysis of River Runners on Major Utah BLM Rivers . . . . .	165
<i>Douglas K. Reiter, Utah State University</i>	
<i>Dale J. Blahna, Utah State University</i>	
<b>Poster Session</b>	
Masters Swimming Participants: Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to a Diverse Group . . . . .	179
<i>Ellen C. Baird, Arizona State University</i>	

Popular Culture Information and Outdoor Recreation Management? Allies or Antagonists? . . . . .	191
<i>Michael G. Huffman, University of Memphis</i>	
Perceived Intercultural Competence and Training Effectiveness in a Campus Recreational Setting . . . . .	201
<i>Stefani Price, Arizona State University</i>	
<i>Maria T. Allison, Arizona State University</i>	
An Evaluation of Competitive Tracks: Developed to Alleviate Trail Conflicts by Providing an Alternative for High-speed Travel on Trails . . . . .	209
<i>Bob Skaggs, Maricopa County (AZ) Parks &amp; Recreation Department</i>	
<i>Chris LaPointe, Arizona State University</i>	
The Scenic Byway Network: Developing an Identity System for Northern California's National Forest Scenic Byways . . . . .	217
<i>Emilyn Sheffield, California State University–Chico</i>	
<i>Alan RellaFord, California State University–Chico</i>	
The Effects of Tempe Town Lake on the Climate of Downtown Tempe. . . . .	223
<i>Nancy Selover, Arizona State University</i>	
<i>Sharolyn Anderson, Arizona State University</i>	
Public Participation: A Reference Collection . . . . .	227
<i>Pat Crawford, Arizona State University</i>	
<i>Ruth Yabes, Arizona State University</i>	
<b>Outdoor Recreation and Technologies: A Janus-faced Relationship</b>	
Outdoor Recreation and Technologies: A Janus-faced Relationship . . . . .	241
<i>Alan Ewert, Indiana University</i>	
<i>John Shultis, University of Northern British Columbia</i>	
<i>Christopher Webb, Deloitte Consulting</i>	
<b>Leisure, Recreation &amp; Society</b>	
Beekeeping As a Serious Leisure Activity . . . . .	253
<i>Daniel G. Yoder, Western Illinois University</i>	
Managerial Implications for Personality and Individual Differences among Whitewater Kayakers . . . . .	261
<i>Christopher D. Jones, Utah Valley State College</i>	
<i>Steven J. Hollenhorst, University of Idaho</i>	
In the Company of Birds . . . . .	267
<i>Daniel L. Dustin, Professor, Florida International University</i>	
<b>Author Index . . . . .</b>	<b>273</b>

# **The Public Debate about the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program on the U.S. National Forests<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The Recreation Fee Demonstration Program (RFDP) is a pilot program authorized by Congress in 1996. The RFDP allows the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, and the United States Department of the Interior Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service to experiment with new or increased fees at up to 100 recreation sites per agency. The RFDP has sparked a public debate about the merits and demerits of charging fees for recreation on public lands. This study analyzed the debate about the RFDP on national forests that is expressed in a large electronic database of news media stories. Analysis of the news media is a way to quickly and efficiently take the pulse of the public on a variety of social issues. We used the patented InfoTrend method and software to code the text for frequency of expression of beliefs supporting favorable and unfavorable attitudes toward the RFDP.

The most frequently expressed beliefs supporting a favorable attitude toward the RFDP, in order of importance, were the following: (1) fees will provide on-the-ground improvements to recreation areas and benefits to recreationists, (2) general (unspecified) support of fees, (3) fees are necessary to make up for declining recreation budgets, (4) fees are necessary to deal with a large maintenance backlog in recreation areas, (5) fees are necessary because visitor use has increased significantly, (6) fees collected under the RFDP are affordable, (7) fees are necessary for good land stewardship, and (8) collecting fees has decreased illegal activities in recreation areas. The most frequently expressed beliefs supporting an unfavorable attitude toward the RFDP, in order of importance, were: (1) general (unspecified) opposition to fees, (2) free access to public lands is a birthright of Americans, (3) fees are unfair to the poor, (4) fees are too high, (5) recreation fees on public lands are a form of double taxation, (6) fees will lead to increased commercialization and privatization of recreation on public lands, (7) the fee system is confusing and overlapping, and (8) fees are unfair to local residents. Overall, expressions of favorable beliefs about the RFDP outweighed expressions of unfavorable beliefs by a factor of about 2 to 1, comparable to the findings of surveys, interviews, and an analysis of customer "comment cards" about this issue.

## **Introduction**

The Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (RFDP) was authorized by Congress in 1996 (P.L. 104-134) as a three-year pilot program, subsequently extended through September 30, 2001. This program allows the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service to experiment with new or increased fees at up to 100 recreation sites per agency (Government Accounting Office, 1998). The purpose of the RFDP is to generate increased revenues to deal with the backlog of recreation maintenance on federal lands, thereby improving the quality of visitor services and enhancing the protection and maintenance of recreational resources.

The RFDP has sparked a national debate about the merits and demerits of charging fees for recreational access and activities on national forests and other public lands. Some stakeholders recognize the need for increased recreation funding and support the program; others strongly oppose the program for a variety of reasons and have organized anti-fee protests across the country. This debate has been carried out in a number of forums in society, including public meetings, protests and demonstrations, legislative hearings, the courts, and the news media. The media play a dual role in social debates such as this, serving as a direct forum for public

<sup>1</sup> The authors thank Greg Super and Linda Feldman of the Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness Resources staff in the Washington, D.C. office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service for their support of this study.

discourse (through editorials, letters to the editor, and so forth) and reporting on the debates occurring in other forums.

This study analyzed the public debate about the RFDP expressed in a large electronic database of news media stories.<sup>2</sup> Analyses of large numbers of news stories is a way to quickly and efficiently take the pulse of the public on a variety of social issues and summarize the debate about controversial issues. A summary of the fee debate may be useful to recreation managers and policy makers charged with implementing the RFDP. The next section briefly describes the data and methodology used in this study. This is followed by a summary of the findings, i.e., a discussion of the main beliefs in the public debate about recreation fees on the national forests. A final section discusses conclusions and policy implications.

### **Data and Methodology**

A random sample of 4,347 news stories about recreation fees on the national forests was downloaded from 109 news sources (local and regional newspapers, national newspapers, newswires, and television and radio news transcripts) contained in the LEXIS-NEXIS commercial online database. All of the news sources were continuously available in the LEXIS-NEXIS database throughout the entire five-year time period of the study (October 1, 1994 through September 30, 1999). The following search command was used to identify and download stories: ((national forest) or (forest service)) and ((adventure pass) or (recreat! or camp! or demo!) and fee)), where the truncations "recreat!" and "camp!" meant that any trailing letters were permitted. Only text that was within 100 words of the search terms was downloaded. This greatly reduced the amount of irrelevant text that would have been retrieved from stories that mentioned recreation fees only in passing.

Examination of the downloaded stories revealed that many were not about the RFDP, but about other types of fees on the national forests (e.g., grazing fees, cabin rental fees, and so on). After eliminating irrelevant stories, about half of the stories from the initial download remained. The final database of stories about recreation fees on the national forests was analyzed using the InfoTrend software and method for predicting public opinion from the mass media (Fan, 1988, 1994, 1997). The unit of analysis in this study was individual paragraphs. Paragraphs were scored for beliefs supporting favorable and unfavorable attitudes toward recreation fees.

### **Findings**

#### *Main Beliefs in the Debate About Recreation Fees*

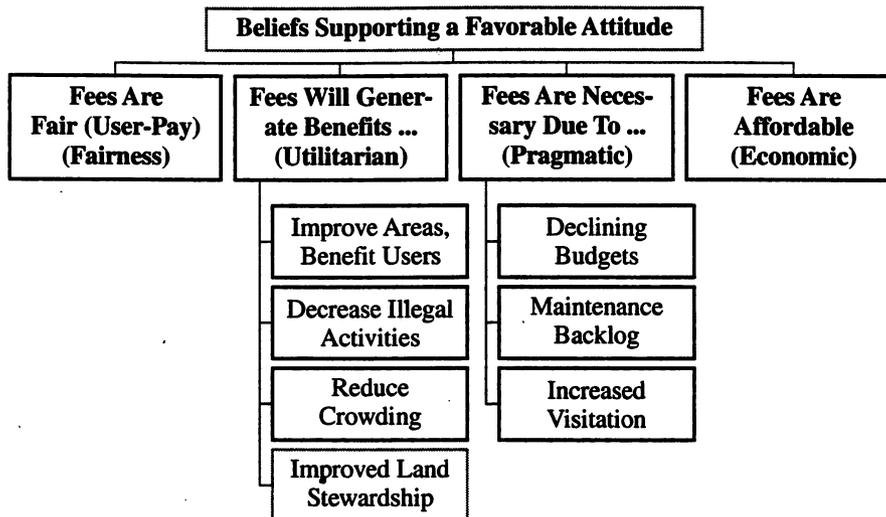
The public debate about recreation fees on the national forests is lively, complex and dynamic. We found a diversity of beliefs and counter-beliefs put forth by a wide range of stakeholders in our database of news media stories. At a deeper level, underlying differences in values and worldviews emerge from this debate.

Figure 1 summarizes the most frequently expressed beliefs in our database supporting a favorable attitude toward recreation fees, as well as the type of argument represented by each set of beliefs (shown in parentheses). The belief that collecting fees is fair because those who benefit should help pay the costs of providing recreation services was expressed in support of the RFDP. This belief—sometimes referred to as the user-pays principle—is illustrated in the following quotation:

A proposal to charge hikers and four-wheelers a fee for using national forests and Bureau of Land Management property would put the burden for maintaining such lands where it belongs—on those who use them ... All those who use federal lands should pay their way. ("Recreationists should pay fee," 1996, p. 14)

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is part of a larger study that produced time trends in attitudes and beliefs about recreation fees on the national forests. Contact the authors for a copy of the larger study.

**Figure 1. Beliefs supporting a favorable attitude toward recreation fees on the national forests**

More common were utilitarian arguments involving expressions of various beliefs about the benefits that would be produced as a result of the new fees. The most frequently expressed of these beliefs was that fees will result in on-the-ground improvements to recreation areas and therefore tangible benefits to recreationists, as shown in the following example:

The 632,000-acre preserve along the Tennessee-North Carolina border is adopting new user fees beginning today under a pilot program that could mean more money to maintain and improve facilities. (Associated Press, 1998, p. B4)

A wide range of specific improvements to recreation areas were discussed in relation to this belief, including additional and cleaner bathrooms, new or reconstructed boat ramps, more trash collection, better trail maintenance, remodeled visitor centers, restored foot bridges, repaired picnic tables, increased security patrols, graffiti removal, more interpretive programs, providing access for people with disabilities, and many other improvements.

Another utilitarian argument was that collection of fees and resulting increases in patrols by rangers will decrease illegal activities in recreation areas. This belief was not widely expressed in the debate nationally, but was expressed regionally in areas on some urban national forests where partying, drug dealing, violence, and other illegal activities have been persistent problems, for example:

A fee program at Terwilliger Hot Springs, a popular gathering spot in the Cascades east of Eugene, seems to have eased growing problems of drug dealing and violent crime. (Associated Press, 1999a, p. B3)

Other less frequently expressed utilitarian beliefs supporting a favorable attitude toward fees include the view that collecting fees would have the benefit of reducing crowding in heavily used recreation areas and the funds collected will be used to generate ecological benefits (“improved land stewardship” in Figure 1).

Figure 1 also shows several pragmatic beliefs that are put forward in support of recreation fees. These beliefs emphasize that, although we may not like to pay fees, they are necessary for several reasons. One of the most common pragmatic beliefs was that fees are necessary due to declining recreation budgets:

Longview—To help close a \$ 2.3 million budget shortfall, the U.S. Forest Service will begin charging user fees at some of the most popular sites in the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument. (“Mt. St. Helens to charge fees,” 1996, p. B2)

The “declining budgets” belief was often expressed in the same paragraph or sentence as the belief that fees are necessary because of a backlog of maintenance projects in recreation areas. The following quote is an example of the “maintenance backlog” belief:

Good for access to all four southern California national forests, the Adventure Pass program approved by Congress last year is expected to generate millions of dollars a year to improve neglected, vandalized and sometimes nonexistent trails, signs, restrooms and other amenities.

The Ojai Ranger District, one of five administrative units in the forest, has a \$3-million backlog of recreation projects. (Green, 1997, p. B1)

A final pragmatic belief was that fees are necessary to deal with the rapid increase in demand for outdoor recreation, as expressed in the following example:

In less than 15 years, notes U.S. Forest Service Forester Don Lane, the number of annual visitors to Tahoe's rugged Desolation Wilderness has ballooned from about 30,000 to 90,000. The area's growing popularity prompted the Forest Service to charge a \$5 reservation fee, \$5-per-night camping fee and \$3 parking fee, effective this summer. The charges, part of a nationwide pilot program, will be funneled back to the site to improve trails and visitor interpretation. (Bly, 1997, p. 7D)

Finally, as shown in Figure 1, the economic argument that fees collected under the RFDP are affordable (or even a bargain) was occasionally expressed by supporters, as in the following quotation:

Supporters, however, contend that the fee is a paltry sum to pay to watch a hawk soar above a litter-free meadow or to marvel at the views from atop a 6,000-foot peak. (Harpster, 1998, p. B3)

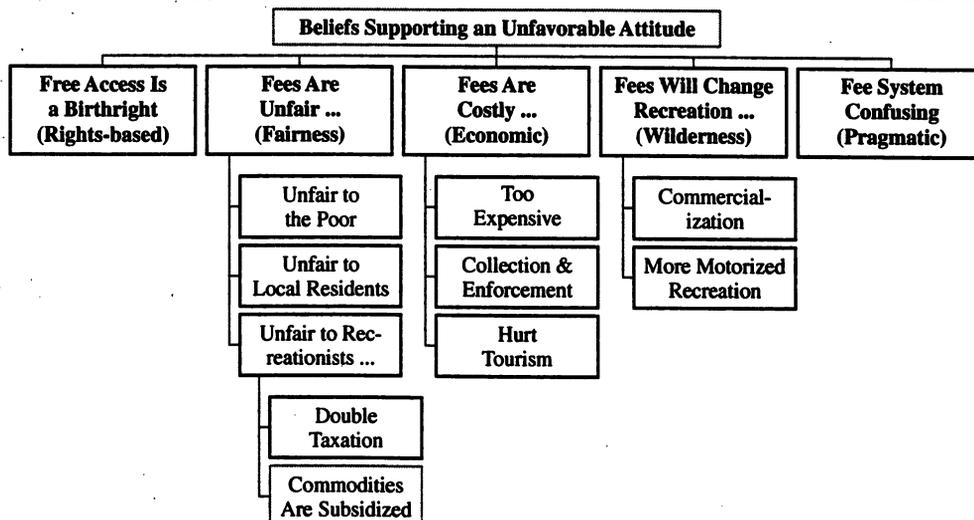
Additional favorable beliefs not shown in Figure 1 that were expressed with low frequency in our database include the economic arguments that fees create incentives for managers to be responsive to the demands of recreationists, and that "people value what they pay for" and therefore collection of fees helps promote better stewardship of recreation resources. In addition to these specific beliefs, we also found many expressions of general support for the RFDP. Many of these general expressions of support were conditional, i.e., support of the fee program as long as the money is used locally as promised by the Forest Service, as in the following example:

Many recreation users support the fee program when they can see direct results such as those found in Mill Creek Canyon or along the Mirror Lake Highway. (Wharton, 1998, p. C1)

Figure 2 shows the most frequently expressed beliefs supporting an unfavorable attitude toward recreation fees on the national forests. The nature of the arguments put forward by fee opponents is different than those of supporters. Pragmatic beliefs were almost nonexistent, while rights-based and fairness arguments were dominant. The view that free access to the national forests is a birthright of Americans was frequently expressed, for example:

I was made aware of the new program during my last visit to Los Padres National Forest and was rudely shocked and offended by this encroachment on my birthright in the form of a new tax that is now required to be paid for admission to these outdoor areas." (Yow, 1997, p. C13)

**Figure 2. Beliefs supporting an unfavorable attitude toward recreation fees on the national forests**



As shown in Figure 2, several beliefs based on fairness arguments were important components of the unfavorable side of the public debate about recreation fees. Of these, the belief that fees are unfair to the poor was most often expressed:

... others argue they will make it too expensive for low-income people to enjoy public lands. (Bolt, 1997, p. F1)

Other fairness-based arguments against fees include the infrequently expressed belief that fees are unfair to local residents (because they shouldn't have to pay for recreation in their "own backyards," or because the tax base in local communities suffers from the presence of public lands that can't be commercially developed). A more often expressed belief was that fees are unfair to recreationists because they have already paid taxes to support the provision of recreation services ("double taxation" in Figure 2) or because environmentally "destructive" commodity uses such as logging, grazing, and mining are subsidized, so why not outdoor recreation? An example of the double taxation belief is:

I was moved by the irony contained in the statement that we would still be able to visit Echo Lake free of charge. None of this is free of charge. We already pay for it with our taxes. Such fees are double taxation on what is already ours and an insult to Coloradans. (Glassen, 1997, p. E-05)

Economic arguments which focus on the cost side of fees were also used by opponents of the RFDP. These include the belief that fees are too expensive, that collection and enforcement costs will be high and will consume most of the funds collected, and that fees will decrease the demand for recreation and hurt the tourism industry. Of these three, the belief that RFDP fees are too expensive was most frequently expressed:

I consider myself an environmentalist, but this new "trial run" of fees is prohibitively expensive. One of the reasons the national forests are wonderful to use is the fact that you can go camping and backpacking for free. (McGee, 1997, p. A24)

Two main beliefs which related to undesirable changes in outdoor recreation are shown in Figure 2. One belief is that the RFDP will lead to increased commercialization, privatization, and "commodification" of recreation on public lands. This belief (labeled "commercialization" in Figure 2) includes idea that fees degrade wilderness experiences by making them into market transactions. Another concern is that the RFDP will lead to more motorized recreation at the expense of nonmotorized recreation. These two beliefs are sometimes expressed together, as in the following quote:

The fee program was designed and promoted with the help of a group of more than 100 recreation industry corporations, interests that are skewed toward motorized recreation and eventual privatization of forests, Caldwell said. (Associated Press, 1999b, p. 1A)

Finally, Figure 2 shows the pragmatic concern that the systems for charging and collecting fees under the RFDP are confusing and overlapping. The following quote is an example of this belief:

The result is a dizzying array of charges and fees, all administered differently. (Brown, 1997, p. A1)

In addition to these specific beliefs which support an unfavorable attitude toward the RFDP, we also found many expressions of general opposition to the fee program. For example, paragraphs in our database of news stories that reported on protests or demonstrations against the RFDP, or other unspecified opposition to recreation fees, were included in this "general negative" category, which turned out to be the largest category of unfavorable beliefs. The following quote is an example of general opposition to the RFDP:

The Adventure Pass is unpopular with many southern California residents who live near large national forests. It has been in effect in Los Padres, San Bernardino, Angeles and Cleveland National Forests since 1997. It can be purchased for \$5 a day or \$30 per year. (Van de Kamp, 1999, p. A9)

### *Frequency of Expression of Beliefs*

In addition to identifying the specific beliefs and types of arguments used to support favorable and unfavorable attitudes toward the RFDP, we also used the InfoTrend method to code the text for the frequency of expression of beliefs over time. This gives us a better picture of the nature of the public debate about recreation fees. The most

frequently expressed beliefs supporting a favorable attitude toward the RFDP, in order of importance, were the following:

1. fees will provide on-the-ground improvements to recreation areas and benefits to recreationists,
2. general (unspecified) support of fees,
3. fees are necessary to make up for declining recreation budgets,
4. fees are necessary to deal with a large maintenance backlog in recreation areas,
5. fees are necessary because visitor use has increased significantly,
6. fees collected under the RFDP are affordable,
7. fees are necessary for good land stewardship, and
8. collecting fees has decreased illegal activities in recreation areas.

The most frequently expressed beliefs supporting an unfavorable attitude toward the RFDP, in order of importance, were:

1. general (unspecified) opposition to fees,\*
2. free access to public lands is a birthright of Americans,
3. fees are unfair to the poor,
4. fees are too high,
5. recreation fees on public lands are a form of double taxation,
6. fees will lead to increased commercialization and privatization of recreation on public lands,
7. the fee system is confusing and overlapping, and
8. fees are unfair to local residents.

Overall, expressions of favorable beliefs about the RFDP outweighed expressions of unfavorable beliefs by a factor of about 2 to 1, comparable to the findings of surveys, interviews, and an analysis of customer "comment cards" about this issue (e.g., Chavez & Olson, 1998; Lewis & Lime, 1998; Richer & Christiansen, 1999; Garcia Tagliani & Ham, 1998; Trainor & Norgaard, 1999; Vogt & Williams, 1999; Williams, Vogt, & Bitterso, 1999). Over the entire time period, about 65 percent of the attitudes toward the RFDP expressed in our database of news stories were favorable, and 35 percent unfavorable.

### **Concluding Comments**

One of the conclusions of this analysis is that the nature of the public debate about recreation fees differs substantially between those who support a favorable view of the RFDP and those who oppose it. The arguments and beliefs in support of the fee program have been overwhelmingly utilitarian (emphasizing the various benefits that will result from collection of fees) and pragmatic (emphasizing the need to collect fees due to declining budgets, a large maintenance backlog, and increased visitation). In contrast, the arguments and beliefs expressed by those opposing fees have tended to be rights-based (the belief that free access to public lands is a birthright of all Americans) and related to concerns about fairness (the beliefs that fees are unfair to the poor, local residents, and recreationists). In addition, the "commercialization" belief is often motivated by wilderness values that are deeply held and often spiritual in nature. Therefore, although expressions of beliefs that support a favorable attitude toward the RFDP outnumbered expressions of unfavorable beliefs by about 2 to 1 in our database, the unfavorable beliefs are often based on more deeply held values and convictions. Claims based on rights, fairness, and spiritual arguments tend to be held with greater intensity and depth of emotion than claims based on utilitarian and pragmatic arguments. Recreation managers and policy makers will need to continue to address these deeply held concerns in the implementation of the RFDP to the extent possible. An example is the use of waivers for low income people to address concerns about unfairness to the poor.<sup>3</sup> Another conclusion that clearly emerges from this analysis is that much of the support for fees is conditional. Most people appear willing to pay the fees—and

<sup>3</sup> The Forest Service has recently taken measures to mitigate possible impacts of the RFDP on low income and ethnic populations (Stewart, 1999).

some are even happy to pay them—so long as the revenue that is collected is used locally to fund needed improvements in recreation areas and facilities. For example:

Under the program, 80 percent of the money is supposed to come back to each national forest where the fees were paid. When Benigno learned that, he said he would support the fee—and be glad to pay it. (Murkland, 1997, p. B1). Jim Lafortune of the Moscow Area Mountain Bike Association, a group that voluntarily performs maintenance work on trails, gave conditional support to the program. “I’m willing to pay a modest trail user fee if the money goes back to trails.” (Barker, 1997, p. 1C)

The message for recreation managers is that support for the RFDP could quickly disappear if the fees are not used for improvements that the public wants or if the improvements are slow in coming. Survey research on visitors’ attitudes toward the RFPD has also shown that support for new or increased fees is often conditional on the money being retained at the sites where it was collected to fund local needs.

The Recreational Fee Demonstration Program has stirred up a lively and sometimes heated public debate about recreation fees on public lands. This debate is reflected in news media stories discussing the RFDP. As pioneering pollster George Gallop observed in 1939, the media create a kind of national town meeting in which issues are debated: “The newspapers and radio conduct the debate on national issues, presenting information and argument on both sides, just as the townsfolk did in person at the old town meeting,” (quoted in Smith, 1997, p. 56). Analysis of this debate can provide recreation managers and policy makers with insights about the public’s reaction to recreation fees and provide guidance for implementing the program.

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