



CENTRAL HARDWOOD NOTES

Planning and Managing Recreational Opportunities on Small Ownerships

Demand for outdoor recreation in the central hardwood region continues to grow, though at a slower rate compared to the recent past. Meanwhile, land acquisition by public agencies has slowed, while some private forest lands are being converted to other uses. The result is increasing recreation pressure on a constant or declining land base. About a third of the noncorporate, private forest acreage is presently available to recreationists nationwide. Clearly, if you are a private forest landowner you have an opportunity to meet new recreation demands if you so desire.

Many landowners have decided that recreation by the public is inappropriate for their land and their objectives. Reasons include: vandalism, potential liability problems, and intrusion on privacy. On the other hand, many owners welcome recreationists as a means of improving public relations, as a source of income, or as a means to avoid vandalism or property damage.

Incentives are available in some states to owners who open their land to recreation. These incentives include tax breaks, protection from lawsuits, and/or payments from public access programs. Interested landowners should contact their state conservation agency or cooperative extension service for specific information about such programs.

Planning

Once a landowner has decided to open his or her land to recreation, the first step in the planning process is to inventory the resource. Determine land and water acreages and identify unique features of the area such as wetlands, bluffs, and areas with exceptional scenery. Note the distribution and abundance of fish and wildlife species. USDA offices in your county can provide assistance.

Landowners should also consider regional population and ease of access within the region. Both help determine the market area for any enterprise.

You must then decide what type(s) of recreation to offer. Alternatives include: hunting, fishing, hiking, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling—all requiring little capital investment. Owners also may wish to consider more intensive developments such as campgrounds and downhill ski areas. The decision concerning

level of development depends on your objectives, available capital, and potential markets. Information about potential markets is usually available from your state's comprehensive outdoor recreation plan. This plan identifies recreation needs, as well as current providers, by activity and region within the state.

You must also decide the appropriateness of charging a user fee. While fees result in additional revenue, they can be offset by collection costs, changes in liability, and potential losses of good will from opening land to recreation. Consider potential revenues and costs very carefully.

The final step in planning is to consider facilities. Activities like snowmobiling or hiking need few facilities. Trails can usually be constructed with available farm equipment or hand tools. Information about more intensive facilities are available from a variety of sources. Your local college may have a recreation-related program with faculty who are experts on the subject. Both state and federal agencies are sources of information. For example, the Soil Conservation Service has a booklet on the planning, design, and construction of farm ponds for wildlife habitat and farm fishing enterprises. The Park Practice *Program*, published by the National Park Service, includes a periodical entitled *Design* that includes plans for virtually every conceivable recreational structure. It is usually available from most libraries or agencies managing recreation resources.

Management

A major goal in managing recreation woodlots should be to maintain long term forest productivity while allowing recreational use. Human presence will impact the forest site. The key is to control the impact before costly maintenance is needed. For example, trail erosion in early stages is simple to repair with hand labor. More severe cases, however, may require the construction of check dams, plantings, or even trail closure.

Similarly, recreation areas and facilities that are kept clean and in good repair tend to have less vandalism, littering, and other forms of depreciative behavior. Conduct periodic inspections of facilities and routinely look for and correct potential danger from trees and other hazards.

Some modification of the recreation area may be appropriate. For instance, if wildlife is an important part of the recreation experience, wildlife habitat improvement may be appropriate. Information about such techniques for your area is available from wildlife and conservation agencies and organizations.

If fragile lands or endangered plant and animal species are present, you may wish to restrict permanent or seasonal access to such areas.

Managing a recreational enterprise will involve the same financial concerns found in other businesses that require careful financial management. Finally, good management requires responsiveness to customers and their changing needs. The result will be a more satisfied clientele-one that returns frequently.

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