

Recreation Connections at the Regional Level: Public Access along the Sacramento River as a Multi-agency Effort¹

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Introduction

This study was conducted to assess existing and potential public recreation uses, access, needs, and opportunities along California’s Sacramento River in a 100-mile-long, four-county study area located between the communities of Red Bluff and Colusa. The study was funded by a CALFED grant awarded jointly to The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Wildlife Conservation Board, and the California Department of Fish and Game (CALFED, 2002). The goals of the study were 1) to identify and characterize existing public access opportunities and needs associated with public recreation facilities and infrastructure throughout the study area, and 2) to identify and make recommendations for future public recreation access opportunities and management programs throughout the study area, with special consideration of five “focus sites” that were acquired by The Nature Conservancy and the USFWS Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge (SRNWR).

The Sacramento River is a large dynamic, alluvial river that drains much of northern California and serves as a water source for millions of acres of farmland and millions of people throughout the state. Much of the extensive wildlife-rich riparian forest and other habitats that existed in the river’s floodplain for thousands of years were replaced with agricultural crops over the past 150 years as the Sacramento Valley became one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world. With the loss of over 90% of riparian wetland habitats statewide during that time period, came a corresponding impact to the wildlife that depended on it. However, the hydrology and dynamic meander pattern of the Sacramento River still support fragmented but important riparian forest, grassland, and wetland communities.

The U.S. government, the State of California, and private conservation organizations have identified the Sacramento River Conservation Area as a priority for the preservation and restoration of wildlife habitat. Public and private holdings now total over 18,500 acres of land in conservation ownership. As natural habitat along the river is restored and more lands become publicly owned, public interest and opportunities for recreation use of this area will grow. Significant population changes in the adjacent Sacramento and San Francisco Bay Area metropolitan areas will also bring large numbers of people interested in finding open-space recreation experiences in the valley adjacent to their cities (California Department of Finance, 2002). While the various agencies and private entities that own properties along the river have primarily acquired more lands for habitat conservation purposes, they recognize public recreation use as an important component of their conservation objectives.

Methods

The interdisciplinary approach to this regional planning study, utilized participatory approach that takes into consideration local knowledge and perspectives. The study yielded a significant amount of information for agency and land trust managers to utilize as they work to coordinate the future of recreation access along the study section of the Sacramento River. Several methodologies were utilized to provide information for the study. Field assessments were conducted by an interdisciplinary team, including a field biologist, an environmental planner, and a recreation planner. Other research and analysis efforts utilized secondary databases for information that provides background information on previously published land and recreation-related documents that concern to the Sacramento River. Secondary sources consulted included data on land ownership in the study section

¹ The entire report is available at the website www.sacramentoriverportal.org/recreation/report.htm

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(DWR, 1999), recreation participation at the local and regional level (DPR, 1998; DWR, 1979 & 1982; Cordell, 1999) as well as demographic information related to communities in the study area (DOF, 2002).

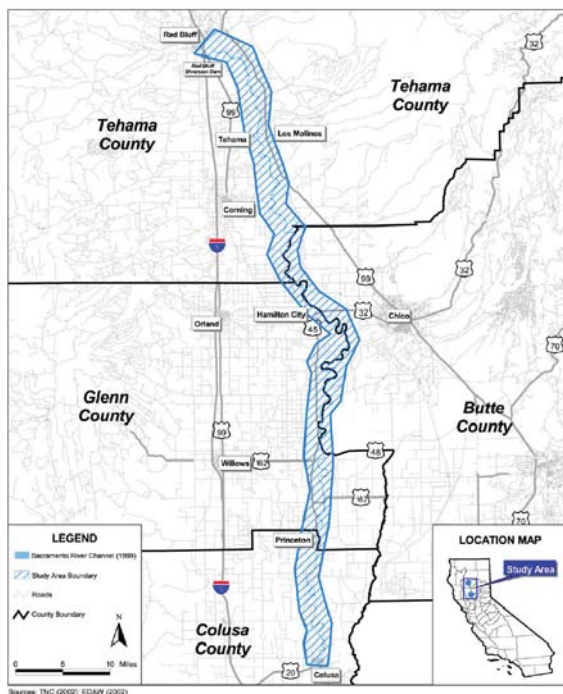
Interviews were conducted with agency and land-trust managers, law enforcement officers, as well as various community and recreational interest groups. Interviews were conducted via phone and in-person. In-person interviews were conducted in both individual and group meetings.

Recreation Facilities, Infrastructure, and Needs Assessments

An evaluation of opportunities and constraints for development or renovation of facilities that would allow recreation use and access was conducted at all sites within the inner river zone (see map) with recreation facilities or infrastructure. Phone and e-mail correspondence was conducted with site managers to further document and evaluate the sites and to determine the ownership, site types, level of use, and problems. The sites were identified through coordination with land trusts, as well as local, state, and federal agencies. Privately owned property with no public access was excluded from the study. The result of this inventory effort yielded the first comprehensive ownership map along the 100-mile river study section.

Field assessments of sites in the study area were conducted by boat, car, and on foot between July and October 2003 by the study team. Features assessed included amenities and site characteristics, buildings, trails, road access, boat facilities, camp and picnic sites, physical and vegetation conditions, and site stability.

Map of Study Area: Sacramento River Public Recreation Access Study.



Maintenance levels and problems were also assessed because they can affect the level of use of a facility. A general evaluation was also made as to the feasibility of adding new facilities to a site, based on site sensitivities and likely use and impact levels if the facilities were developed.

The recreational needs analysis for this study was based on analyses of information gathered from existing studies, including previous research conducted in the study area. The analysis was also based on interviews with representatives from 19 interest groups, and on statements provided during two public meetings held in the fall of 2002. Information was collected from community members so that the study would be informed by local perspectives. Additionally, 11 interviews were conducted with land managers during the same time period. Interviews were conducted to identify unmet needs and to characterize recreation uses, levels and

patterns of use, and to determine the needs and preferences of recreational users. The interviews were also conducted to determine maintenance and operations issues, public safety issues, priorities for development and/or renovations, as well as concerns from (or issues with) adjacent private landowners.

Management Coordination and Law Enforcement Needs Analyses

This portion of the study was based on 11 interviews with land managers and on three facilitated meetings held in the summer and fall of 2002. Land managers included federal, state, and local owners of public and private land with public recreation access opportunities or potential, including managers from land trusts. Those involved included managers from Sacramento River Conservation Area Forum, The Nature Conservancy, Sacramento River Partners, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), California Department of Water Resources, Department of Fish and Game (DFG), Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), Department of Boating and Waterways, and State of California Reclamation Board. The purpose of this portion of the study was to determine existing management coordination and partnership efforts, and to identify opportunities and constraints for management coordination in the future.

The law enforcement coordination analysis was based on phone interviews by recreation planners conducted in Nov. and Dec., 2002, and an analysis of existing data from a statewide boating study (CSUS, 2003). The purpose of the study was to determine the level of law enforcement support required to adequately patrol existing recreation areas, as well as the support needed in the future. The study was also conducted to determine the need for coordination between law enforcement staff and land managers in the region to develop effective approaches for public safety.

Results

The results of this study indicate substantial public interest in visiting natural areas for recreation, and a significant opportunity for coordinated planning of recreation use and access in future years. Potentially attractive recreation uses along the Sacramento River include trail hiking, walking, hunting and fishing, camping, wildlife viewing, nature study, picnicking, boating, beach activities, attending outdoor cultural events, and visiting museums and historic sites. Regional trends indicate a continued interest in the traditional recreation activities of boating, fishing, and hunting. Other uses such as bird watching, wildlife viewing, and other nature observation activities are expected to increase substantially over the coming decades (DPR, 1998; Cordell, 1999).

Access and Planning for Recreation Opportunities & Facilities

Research findings related to population growth within the local four-county area predict increases by 55% (or 170,000 new residents) in the next two decades, compared to a 25% (2,287,000 new residents) increase in the regional 20-county area. About half of the local area growth is expected to occur in Butte County, with Colusa, Glenn and Tehama counties sharing the remaining growth. Currently Hispanic populations include just under one-half of the residents of Colusa County, and approximately one-third of the residents of Glenn County. Butte and Tehama County have approximately 11% and 16% Hispanic populations, respectively. While the more significant regional growth estimates are in metropolitan areas adjacent to the study area, these growth areas are within a relatively short driving distance from the river.

An analysis of recreation demand (DPR, 1998) indicates that recreation activities ranked highly by people who live in the study area include many that are available or potentially available in the Sacramento River corridor. These activities include walking, museum and historic site visits, beach activities, trail hiking, picnicking, use of open areas, attending outdoor cultural events, camping, swimming in rivers, nature study and wildlife viewing. Use of undeveloped natural areas ranked highly, with research indicating significant demand for nature-oriented settings across a spectrum of development. Being in the outdoors, relaxing, and the beauty and quality of the natural setting were all ranked highly by Californians as aspects influencing their enjoyment of a recreation area (DPR, 1998).

Results from interviews indicate that both stakeholders and managers support the provision of primitive, river-based camping opportunities in the corridor. Input gathered during meetings and interviews with interest groups indicates support for recreation experiences of an unrestricted, natural character. These activities include

recreation pursuits such as bird watching, wildlife viewing, nature observation, and hiking. However, while study results indicate that demand related to hiking exists in the area, opportunities do not.

Regional trends indicate a continued interest in the traditional recreation activities of boating, fishing, and hunting. Hunting is expected to decline or remain constant, but is likely to remain higher in demand in the local 4-county Sacramento River study area than within the overall (local and regional) 24-county study area (DPR, 1998). Existing studies on recreation demand suggest that fishing is expected to increase in popularity within the study area and in the region.

Results from interviews and public meetings indicate that the condition of boat ramps and other access points in the study area have room for significant improvement. Portions of the study area have gaps in boating access opportunities and most of the study area is lacking in fueling and docking opportunities. Results from law enforcement interviews suggest that increased social pressures and use will also make greater demands on the area's law enforcement and emergency services.

Planning for a Diversity of Users and Information Needs

Results from interviews with interest groups and managers indicate that outreach programs and facilities, from web sites to kiosks to visitor centers, would be important components to improve public awareness of the area. Needs for maps and signage indicating the locations of access points and services was also indicated by the stakeholders, interest groups, and managers. This was also included as part of a suggestion to facilitate public access to the area's river recreation sites and to reduce trespassing on private property.

Many people interviewed indicated a need for optimizing balances between different recreation uses and objectives. For instance, a need to maintain a balance between natural resource conservation and recreation uses, as well as between recreation and traditional agricultural uses. While people generally support increased public recreation access opportunities, concerns were often voiced regarding the need to limit the types and locations of recreation uses in the river to protect wildlife habitat and private land. For instance, activities such as power boating and jet skiing were cited as uses that damage wildlife habitat. Kayaking and canoeing were mentioned as desirable, compatible recreation uses that are currently underrepresented in the study area.

Other needs expressed by stakeholders included using scheduling to minimize conflicts between uses, and to maximize the opportunities for those uses. An example of this would be establishing optimal scheduling for both hunting and non-hunting recreation on the same or adjacent lands (e.g., bird watching, fishing, hiking). Conflicts and safety concerns arising from multiple recreation uses are now considered by most managers in the study area to be minimal. If true, the reason may be that access is fairly limited. However, a number of recreation and interest group individuals mentioned conflicts they were aware of or had experienced. Most conflicts were between power boaters or water skiers and uses such as fishing or bird and wildlife watching, primarily in the southern part of the study area.

Integrated and Coordinated Management

Comments in interviews with land managers indicate a desire for both formal and informal coordinating efforts to enhance the ability of recreation visitors to access the river, and to plan recreation opportunities that will complement the natural character of the river corridor. Formal planning meetings that occur once or twice annually were proposed by managers, as well as a formalized structure including public and private entities responsible for management of conservation and recreation properties along the corridor. Other formal coordination discussed included the establishment of MOUs, permits, and leases between agencies. Constraints to coordinated management included limited funding, differing missions of agencies, individual personalities, high turnover rates for agency personnel, physical and geographic barriers, lack of a lead agency, timing, and differing statutory requirements. Suggestions for improved informal coordinated included mutual site visits, and frequent informal communication.

Discussion and Recommendations

Because this study was intended primarily as a planning document, a summary of recommendations determined by the interdisciplinary planning team concludes this paper. The discussion is focused on

implications of study findings for the area's recreation planning needs, as well as issues related to future coordinated management efforts and law enforcement coordination.

From this study, there is no data suggesting any departure from planning recreation opportunities that are dominated by a natural, river-related recreation setting. Overall, public recreation access should be encouraged where it is most needed and where it would have the least impact in terms of the river's natural dynamic functionality and resources. Consistent with this recommendation, additional areas could be opened and improved to accommodate increased public access, while other areas could remain closed to recreation access to preserve and protect the natural resources, character and functions of the dynamic river corridor, and to protect private landowners. The locations of public recreation facilities and amenities in the study area should be based on existing and potential public recreation demand for the area, the mission and goals of the agency or private land trust owning the land, the dynamics and values of the river system, as well as stakeholder and landowner interests in the area.

Space limitations do not permit all the recommendations from the study to be listed here, so the reader is referred to the study website www.sacramentoriverportal.org for additional information and a complete copy of the report and its accompanying map figures. However, general suggestions identified by the study planning team focused on the need to:

- improve the condition of boat ramps and other access points;
- provide more outreach, including handouts, kiosks, and visitor centers;
- provide maps and signage to assist in finding river access and services and to reduce trespassing;
- increase the number of facilities and amenities such as trails, picnicking and camping facilities, especially in the southern portion of the study area;
- provide recreation opportunities for the diversity of ethnic groups (primarily Caucasian and Hispanic) in the study area;
- minimize conflicts between different recreation uses (e.g., boating vs. bird watching, hunting vs. hiking or fishing);
- increase coordination among land managers to improve the value of the recreation opportunities within the study area by planning together and sharing resources and expertise;
- improve coordination among law enforcement and resource agencies with regard to public safety services, including coordination for large annual recreation events;
- plan for the expected substantial population growth in the study area and region over the next decades; and
- coordinate public recreation access planning among the resource agencies, non-profit land trusts, private entities, local landowners, recreation users and other stakeholders in the study area to optimize results and minimize conflicts.

Since the 1980s, the study section of the Sacramento River has likely become attractive to more people as a natural area because of conservation efforts increasing the amount of area managed for values associated with habitat restoration. Greater acreage devoted to increasing populations of plant, animal, and aquatic life will likely draw more people to the area, because Californians indicate that the qualities of naturalness are highly attractive as recreation settings. Other findings from previous recreation studies suggest that regional trail development in the area should be part of recreation planning for the river area in the near future.

Study findings also suggest that significant demand exists for information on outdoor recreation opportunities adjacent to communities in the region that are experiencing population growth. There appears to be

substantial demand for comprehensive access guides with information about using the Sacramento River area appropriately for recreation. This analysis indicates that area information dissemination should focus on identifying the various public landowners and their jurisdictions, functions and roles. From suggestions at public meetings, information outreach efforts should also direct the public toward guidance on where to go to for more information (such as websites or maps). Other findings suggest a need for education and outreach programs that relate to natural resource and habitat values of the area, as well as the role that recreation use plays in the area alongside of other human uses. Management of inter-group conflicts would also benefit from strong information programs, especially regarding schedules for potentially conflicting activities, such as hunting and birding.

As part of planning for recreation access and facilities for residents of counties local to the river corridor, resource managers will also need to consider both subcultures of user populations as part of both the local and regional areas. Findings indicate that information and education efforts should be multi-lingual, taking into consideration a diversity of local cultures and needs based on ethnic affiliation.

Concerns over potential negative impacts of recreation activities suggest that any future recreation planning efforts in the river corridor should have an impact monitoring component to determine if recreation activities are negatively affecting ecological and social conditions in the river corridor.

Coordinated Management Efforts

The study team also recommends formal and informal coordination between land management agencies and law enforcement entities in the northern Sacramento Valley region to plan for a healthy and safe recreation setting. Coordination between the recreation use providers within the region (i.e., the resource agencies, non-profit land trusts, and private entities), should also include input from landowners, recreation users, and other stakeholders in the study area. Integration of social information from the diversity of human communities involved in the health of the river will be critically important to support and plan for improvements to the existing and future recreational use along the Sacramento River.

Findings from the interview process suggest that, as access is improved, conflicts and safety issues will require coordination and planning among land managers, law enforcement, and decision-makers. The need for improving recreation opportunities and access along the Sacramento River remains strong and is growing as the area's population grows and natural settings for recreation continue to attract visitors. Recreation planning at both the local and regional level needs to strike a balance between recreation use, other human uses, as well as the broader programs for protection and restoration of the dynamic Sacramento River system. Healthy aquatic and wildlife habitat is also an important component of a strong and appropriate recreation environment.

The Sacramento River between Red Bluff and Colusa will continue to be a popular and recreation destination within the northern California region. Since the 1980s, the river has become more attractive to people as a natural area because of efforts increasing the amount of natural habitat in the area. Greater acreage devoted to conservation will likely draw more people to the area because of Californians' attraction to the quality of naturalness in a recreation setting, as are the activities of nature observation, hiking, and picnicking.

There is a gap between the public demand and the availability for public recreation access facilities in the area, including boat ramps, trails, and other facilities. There is also a considerable need for public outreach to communicate public agency goals in the region as well as basic knowledge of public access points along the river. Increased management coordination and law enforcement coordination will be needed to meet needs and handle issues such as boat ramp closures, annual tubing events, as well as planning for anticipated increases in public use. Coordination between the recreation use providers within the region should include input from landowners, recreation users, and other stakeholders in the region. Integration of social information from those concerned with the health of the river will be critically important to support and plan for improvements to existing and future recreational use along the Sacramento River.

Managers have indicated that this study comes at an important time and has opened doors to additional thinking and ideas about coordination with one another. The benefits from increased coordination among land managers will include more effective regional planning for the economic and social benefit of area communities and preservation of functionality and resources associated with the Sacramento River system. Increased coordination should also enable more efficient use of funding, available expertise, and resources. Better outreach

to the public would also result from increased coordination, and more opportunities for improvements along the river, such signage, improved boat ramp designs, and a possible regional visitor center.

Recreation planning along the Sacramento River needs to strike a balance between recreation use, other human uses, and programs for the protection and restoration of the dynamic Sacramento River system. In achieving that balance, the community, recreation users, and the river, will all flourish.

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