

A Content Analysis of USDA Forest Service Recreation Partnerships¹

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Abstract: The USDA Forest Service has been implementing a partnership initiative for 6 years as part of the National Recreation Strategy. Several internal efforts have been undertaken to evaluate the progress made in this initiative as well as to make adjustments in the initiative for the future. These evaluation efforts are extended to present a content analysis of recreation partnerships operating in the National Forest system in 1991. Results are tabulated from a sample of 292 partnership reports submitted by each National Forest to the Washington Office in 1991. Information about geographic distribution is highlighted, as well as scope, size, purpose, type of partner, and benefiting resource area and recreation activity. Results from the study have important implications for analyzing trends and informing future resource allocation decisions.

The USDA Forest Service's National Recreation Strategy was envisioned as a conceptual framework to encourage Forest Service managers to emphasize partnerships, customer satisfaction, and professionalism in providing outdoor recreation services in the National Forests. As an incentive to field units, a competitive Challenge Cost-Share grant program was established in 1988 to match private investments in innovative recreation projects.

This paper summarizes several internal efforts to monitor and evaluate the impact of the partnership component of the National Recreation Strategy and the Recreation Challenge Cost-Share program. In addition, results from a content analysis of recreation partnerships are presented that extend previous assessments and may offer one analytic approach to future appraisals of the partnership initiative.

Appraisal of Partnership

The partnership initiative has been appraised internally by two methods. One monitoring effort is the annual summary of the Recreation Challenge Cost-Share program. All field units are requested by the Forest Service Washington Office to send in profile information on partnerships partially funded through the cost-share program. These partnership profiles are compiled in an annual publication available since 1988 that highlights Forest Service and partner contributions as well as listing names and organizational affiliation of all participating partners.

A second attempt to monitor progress in the partnership initiative was begun in 1990 when a partnership commission convened to critically examine the partnership component of the National Recreation Strategy. The Commission compiled information from a number of sources including a survey of partners (Selin and Chavez 1993). In addition, testimony from Commission members and related reports and program reviews were used to define issues and interpret responses. Based on these information sources, the Commission made a number of recommendations for improving partnership programs within the Forest Service.

These two monitoring efforts have contributed to our knowledge of partnership initiatives within the Forest Service. However, other analytic methods exist which can extend our understanding of partnerships, illuminate trends, and inform future policy decisions regarding partnerships. The following study uses a content analysis method to examine a number of partnership trends within the National Forest system.

Method

The sample for this study consisted of partnership reports compiled from two sources. As part of a larger study, I mailed a letter to Recreation Staff Officers on all National Forests requesting cost-share agreements and supporting documents from two of their most successful recreation partnerships. In addition, a copy of all USDA Forest Service regional reports on partnerships during the 1990-91 fiscal year was obtained. The final sample consisted of partnership reports on 292 partnerships representing 69 different National Forests from every Forest Service region.

A content analysis method was used to systematically analyze the content of the partnership reports. The content analysis procedure consisted of several stages. First, major categories of data were identified in the partnership reports. These included geographic distribution and scope, size, type of agreement, purpose, legal status of partner, benefiting resource area and recreation opportunity enhanced. Next, recording units of the actual text corresponding to each major category were manually transferred under each major category. To minimize inter-rater error, the data was coded by only one trained research assistant. The primary investigator and research assistant reached consensus on identifying categories and questionable recording units. Once recording units were coded under each major category, this data was transferred to database software program known as Paradox. Sub-categories were identified within each major category and the data was recoded. Again, only actual recording units in the text were transferred using a query option in the

¹An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the Second Symposium on Social Aspects and Recreation Research, February 23-25, San Diego, California.

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Paradox software. Once recoded, descriptive summary statistics were calculated for each sub-category including frequencies and percentages. When one recording unit was present in each partnership, the descriptive statistics totaled 292 and 100 percent. However, in some cases, recording units were absent in some partnerships and descriptive statistics were based only on those partnerships where the recording unit was present. Also, in some cases, several recording units were identified for one sub-category (i.e., when a partnership benefited several resource areas). In these cases, the descriptive statistics totaled more than 292 and 100 percent.

Results

In this sample, 69 different National Forests submitted partnership reports. However, the number of partnerships submitted was not evenly distributed. In fact, 21 percent, or 60 of the 292 partnerships in the sample were submitted by two National Forests, the Chattahoochee and the Bridger-Teton. In addition, 20 partnerships were submitted by the White River National Forest and 28 percent of all partnerships in the sample were submitted by three National Forests.

Although all 10 Forest Service regions are represented in the sample, 63 percent of the partnerships were submitted by western regions (*table 1*). The Rocky Mountain Region (Region 2) had the highest number of reported partnerships (61). Interestingly, the Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5) only submitted six partnerships.

Most partnerships in the sample were relatively small, with one to three partners. Only 7 percent of the partnerships included more than seven external partners (*table 2*).

The sample was dominated by small community-based partnerships (*table 3*). Three local sub-categories were identified: those initiated by the Ranger District, those initiated by the Forest recreation staff, and those classified as partnerships initiated by an unverified source.

Table 1—Partnerships, by USDA Forest Service Region

Forest Service Region (E or W)	External partnerships	
	Number	Percent
Region 1 (W)	8	3
Region 2 (W)	61	21
Region 3 (W)	16	5
Region 4 (W)	56	19
Region 5 (W)	6	2
Region 6 (W)	17	6
Region 8 (E)	47	16
Region 9 (E)	60	21
Region 10 (W)	21	7
Total Eastern Regions	107	37
Total Western Regions	185	63
Total	292	100

Table 2—Partnerships, by number of external partners

External partners per partnership	External partnerships	
	Number	Percent
1-3	229	85
4-6	21	8
>7	20	7
Total	270	100

Table 3—Partnerships, by geographic scope

Scope	Number	Percent
Local	249	85
State	26	9
Local-Ranger District	10	3
Local-Forest	7	2
National	4	1
Tribal	2	<1
International	2	<1
Total	292	100 ¹

¹Before each percentage is rounded off to nearest percent, total percentage equals 100 percent.

As might be expected because of the matching funds available, challenge cost-share agreements were the most widely used type of agreement (*table 4*). However, a number of other types of agreements were represented in the sample.

Informational services had the highest number of partnerships with many emphasizing interpretive materials, promotional brochures, kiosks along scenic byways, and visitor guides (*table 5*). Many partnerships also focused on either new construction or rehabilitating older structures or buildings. Common purposes in these two areas included constructing visitor centers, campgrounds, trail maintenance, and refurbishing old Civilian Conservation Corps era structures.

The legal status of external partners was evenly distributed among state agencies, businesses, and the nonprofit sector (*table 6*). However, if one assumes that many of the associations, user clubs, and civic organizations mentioned were incorporated as tax exempt nonprofit organizations, then the importance of the nonprofit sector becomes evident.

As expected, recreation partnerships dominated in the sample (*table 7*). However, in many partnerships several other resource areas were involved. For example, public affairs benefited from the significant number of partnerships that emphasized informational services. In addition, wildlife management partnerships have their own challenge cost-share funds and are summarized annually in a separate publication.

Some outdoor recreation opportunities were enhanced more by partnership outcomes than others (*table 8*). Though

Table 4—Partnerships, by type of agreement

Agreement	Number	Percent
Challenge Cost-Share	167	87
Cooperative	5	3
Memo of Understanding	5	3
Participating	5	3
Collection	5	3
Interagency	2	1
Interpretive	2	1
Partnership	2	1
Total	193	

Table 5—Partnerships, by purpose

Purpose	Number	Percent ¹
Information	155	53
Construction	140	48
Maintenance	89	30
Rehabilitation	77	26
Administration	53	18
Cultural Resources	32	11
Special Events	7	2

¹Several partnerships had multiple purposes resulting in percentages exceeding 100 percent.

Table 6—Partnerships, by legal status of partner

Partner	Number	Percent ¹
Public (State)	94	32
Nonprofit	84	29
Business	83	28
Association	50	17
Volunteers	44	15
Public (Town)	29	10
User Club	28	10
Civic Organization	26	9
Public (County)	24	8
Public (Federal)	24	8
Foundation	4	1
Tribal Government	1	

¹Several partnerships benefitted multiple areas resulting in percentages exceeding 100 percent.

Table 7—Partnerships, by benefiting resource area

Resource	Number	Percent ¹
Recreation	233	80
Public Affairs	48	16
Cultural Resources	25	9
Wilderness	16	5
Wildlife	15	5
Administration	8	3
Ecosystem Management	4	1

¹Several partnerships benefitted multiple areas resulting in percentages exceeding 100 percent.

Table 8—Partnerships, by activity

Activity	Number	Percent ¹
Hiking	64	22
Visitor Services	59	20
Camping	24	8
Fishing	22	8
Cultural Appreciation	21	7
Miscellaneous	17	6
Historic Preservation	16	6
Snowmobiling	15	5
Driving For Pleasure	15	5
Cross Country Skiing	13	4
Facilities	12	4
Picnicking	12	4
Parking	11	4
Wildlife Viewing	11	4
Lake Oriented Recreation	10	3
Tourism	10	3
Mountain Biking	8	3
Lodging	5	2
ATV	4	1
River Recreation	4	1
Shooting Range	2	

¹Several partnerships benefitted multiple areas resulting in percentages exceeding 100 percent.

the diversity of activities represented is striking, many partnerships focused on enhancing hiking opportunities through trail construction and maintenance projects. Visitor service projects were also enhanced by partnerships dominated by the development of interpretive and promotional materials.

Discussion

The ability to generalize study findings to all recreation partnerships on the National Forest system is limited by several factors. First, National Forests that did not submit partnership reports to the Washington Office or to the investigator upon request may or may not have had a vigorous partnership program. One can only speculate whether this lack of reporting was due to disinterest in partnerships or only to the reporting function. Also, this data reflects only those partnerships in progress in 1991 and cannot be extrapolated to 1994 trends.

However, results from this study present a composite view of recreation partnerships operating in the National Forest system in 1991. Perhaps the breadth and diversity of partnership forms is the most striking finding of this study. Diversity in purpose, type of partners, benefiting resource area, and enhancement of recreation opportunities all support the contention that partnership initiatives within the Forest Service have been an unqualified success.

Despite the diversity of partnership forms represented in the data, the character of the typical recreation partnership has also emerged. Although the Chrysler Corporation's support of the scenic byway program is a high-profile partnership, most partnerships are community-based with only a small number of partners. These community partnerships make intuitive sense because at the community level people have strong attachments to special places and are empowered to protect and enhance them. Also social networks exist at the community level that can lead to productive partnerships.

Although the sample cannot be generalized to the entire National Forest system, it is disturbing that partnerships were so unevenly distributed across National Forests. The findings suggest that partnerships have been inconsistently applied at different forests. Success in implementing partnership programs appears to be dependent on the discretion of line officers at the National Forest and district levels rather than unqualified system-wide success.

This study is important because it establishes a baseline profile of recreation partnerships operating in the National Forest system. However, partnerships are dynamic relations between organizations and interests and are therefore constantly evolving. The study's real potential will be realized by replicating it at specified time intervals so that trends can be systematically analyzed in partnership initiatives. In addition, more comprehensive and flexible databases will be needed to monitor partnership progress. Incentives are needed to ensure more representative reporting from field units.

Acknowledgments

I thank Deborah Chavez, Pacific Southwest Research Station, USDA Forest Service, for assistance in the conceptual development and data collection for this project; Nancy Myers, a graduate student at West Virginia University, for the data analysis in the project; Paul Wright, Forest Service Eastern Region who provided copies of all the Forest Service regional partnership reports for 1991. Funding for this project was provided by the Pacific Southwest Research Station, USDA Forest Service.

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