

The Challenges and Related Strategies of Planning for Wilderness Experiences

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Abstract—Planning is where science, public interests and management of wilderness areas come together. Unfortunately, science and information specifically supporting wilderness experiences, if any exists, is often perceived by managers as subjective, value laden, and hard to defend. This can sometimes lead to the tough decisions about providing high quality wilderness experiences being “kicked down the road” for another time/manager. This paper outlines the challenges and related strategies of planning for wilderness experiences from the perspective of a National Park Service planner. These challenges and strategies relate to the need for sufficient investment in understanding wilderness experiences, and the thoughtful integration of this knowledge in planning and decision-making processes.

What are the unique and important characteristics of visitor experiences in a wilderness area? What are the appropriate activities and how should they be managed? What are the setting conditions that will promote these experiences and activities? What are the most significant visitor use management concerns that need to be addressed to ensure good wilderness stewardship, including providing high quality wilderness experiences? These are just a few of the frequently asked questions that may need to be resolved during a planning process for a wilderness area.

Planning for wilderness stewardship is the time and place where science, public interests, and management of wilderness areas come together. It is a process of negotiation amongst often competing interests and issues. To be most effective, planning should be thoughtful, proactive and inclusive. This includes gathering and analyzing scientific data, public input, and best professional management judgment as the basis for good decision-making.

Unfortunately, the issues and needs surrounding wilderness experiences are often not well understood or appreciated, so they may not be given sufficient standing in this important negotiation process. Planning for wilderness experiences is value-laden and can be complicated. At times it may even seem overwhelming given the subjectivity that surrounds it. In addition, planning for wilderness experiences can seem

mysterious given the frequent situation of having limited information and time to address the topic adequately. However, these challenges can be overcome through increased commitment and professionalism around planning and managing for wilderness experiences. This paper outlines some of the key challenges and associated strategies for planning for wilderness experiences.

Overview of Planning Challenges

Similar to the importance of gathering information and understanding baseline conditions for natural and cultural resources as part of planning and decision-making, assessing knowledge on wilderness experiences will aid future decision-making and day-to-day operations. Unfortunately, there is often limited recognition of the utility of this type information because few staff are specifically trained in its application. In addition, science and information specifically supporting decision-making related to wilderness experiences, if it exists, is perceived by many managers as subjective, value laden, and hard to defend. It is often referred to as “soft,” “fuzzy,” and/or “not real science.” There is also confusion over and inconsistent implementation of law and policy requirements related to managing wilderness experiences. Recent litigation over law and policy requirements, such as addressing user capacity and evaluating the “extent necessary” of commercial services in wilderness, illustrate this issue.

Finally, there is limited funding and staffing within the agencies specifically dedicated to planning, management, and monitoring for wilderness experiences. This hinders effective integration of science and public input into planning efforts. For example, the National Park Service’s social science program consists of less than a half dozen staff and a relatively small budget to support social science activities for the entire agency, including visitor experiences in wilderness. In addition, there is no central, dedicated funding source to support social science activities in the agency, so park staff usually must use their own park funding to support research and monitoring initiatives.

Overview of Planning Strategies

These are significant challenges, but with increased awareness and commitment from public land agencies, they can be overcome. One of the most important strategies is to develop guidance and train staff on better integration of basic data,

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science and public input to more effectively define the goals, objectives, and desired conditions for wilderness experiences in both qualitative and quantitative terms. It is important to articulate what experience opportunities will be provided, the appropriateness of various recreation activities, and the setting conditions needed to maintain those experiences and activities. This goes beyond just defining the facilities and services that will be provided. Wilderness planning efforts would benefit from increased awareness and instruction on the importance of these planning elements and the related data and analysis needs. Recent efforts to provide guidance on more clearly articulating and monitoring wilderness character as part of wilderness planning is a good step forward in addressing this need. These initiatives include the development of the interagency *Keeping It Wild* framework (Landres and others 2008) and the NPS' efforts to integrate wilderness character into a new *Wilderness Stewardship Plan Handbook* (Stutzman and others in press).

Another strategy is to focus science on better understanding wilderness experiences, particularly for those conditions within management control. This includes collecting data and conducting research to directly support the issues and needs (and related schedule) being addressed in planning, and helping managers prioritize information needs. For example, during the planning process for Isle Royale National Park, visitor surveys and a visitor use simulation model were developed in direct consultation with park staff and the planning team to help address specific visitor experience issues and possible management strategies related to backcountry camping (Lawson and Manning 2003a, b). Agency staff should also be trained in facilitating research related to wilderness experiences to maximize the effectiveness of data collection efforts. In addition, agency and university scientists should collaboratively identify research priorities and participate in on-going assessments of lessons learned from those research efforts. With continual attention to emerging issues and related information needs, social science will be targeted to addressing management questions.

A related strategy is to better integrate scientists as more active participants throughout the planning process. One of the most helpful elements of this strategy is having scientists at the table during key points in the planning process to "be the voice" for research findings and help understand related implications to decision-making. For example, during the general management planning process for Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Muir Woods National Monument, scientists that had conducted various visitor studies at several areas in the park attended a planning meeting to help park staff address user capacity issues. In addition to giving presentations of the data, scientists were asked to join small group discussions throughout a three day workshop to help park staff develop indicators and standards that would be used to monitor visitor experiences and resource conditions for the next twenty years (National Park Service 2009). This strategy also includes having scientists and agency representatives working together to carefully consider the most effective means of conveying information to managers and planning teams. Through targeted delivery of information, both in terms of techniques and timing, information on wilderness experiences will be more effective and well-received.

A final strategy is to increase agency capabilities related to the study, planning, management, and monitoring of wilderness experiences. Understanding the intricacies and complexities of wilderness experiences should be a priority for public land managers and it requires the same level of professionalism and science as other land management topics. More investment in terms of both funding and staffing is needed, including training staff in best management practices. In addition, more guidance on the interpretation of law and policy requirements is needed so managers can consistently implement legally defensible methods and tools. The need to more comprehensively address these issues was recently acknowledged within several public land management agencies by the formation of an Interagency Visitor Use Management Council in August, 2011. The council will develop guidance, tools and training specific to managing visitor use on public lands. Participants in the council include the National Park Service, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The council will provide a consistent and updated source of information on best practices for visitor use management being applied across the agencies (Interagency Visitor Use Management Council 2011). With more investment in this area, planning for wilderness experiences can be demystified and more fully integrated into the broader discipline of public land management.

Summary

Planning sets the roadmap for the future. It is the forum for negotiating how a place will be managed. Valuing and understanding wilderness experiences is a key part of this dialogue. Increased appreciation for and commitment to the planning, management and monitoring of wilderness experiences is needed. Further, wilderness managers and the academic community need a comprehensive and sustained dialogue on the challenges and strategies around planning for wilderness experiences. By working together, new information can be collected, new insights can be discovered, and new best management practices can be formed to ensure high quality wilderness experiences now and into the future.

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