
Commentary

Implementing the Great American Outdoors Act in the Era of Sustainable Recreation: Time for a Mission 2030?

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Abstract

The Great American Outdoors Act (AGOA) fully and permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund for the first time since it was created in 1964. This is a boon for purchasing conservation lands, but equally important, the act provides funding to address massive federal agency recreation infrastructure backlogs. The last major overhaul of the U.S. parks and outdoor recreation system was over 50 years ago, during the era of Mission 66 and related programs. Since that time, a host of environmental and societal changes necessitates new approaches for updating conservation and recreation opportunities. In addition to acquiring critical park and conservation lands, and developing and updating facilities, new park and recreation goals include increasing public use and visitor diversity and advancing environmental justice, public health, and large-scale conservation goals. Integrated systems analyses are needed to address these diverse concerns across landscapes, regions, and jurisdictions, and new interagency and interdisciplinary approaches will be needed. This is a bureaucratic crossroads: for the first time in decades we can truly advance public access, human health, and social equity values of public lands; the AGOA is a critical process step toward, but not the culmination of, this goal.

Keywords

Funding, future directions, systems planning, equity and inclusion, public health, conservation, administration

Background

Passage of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) of 2020 was a major bipartisan victory for public land conservation and outdoor recreation advocates. However,

implementation of these lofty legislative goals will require a renewed emphasis and collective passion and action to see that the policy goals are translated into transformative change and capacity-building at an institutional and field-level. To meet these goals, we need a Mission 2030 federal initiative echoing the Mission 66 initiative of the last century.

The GAOA has two major elements: provide “full and permanent” funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and establish the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (NPPLRF). State-level competition for funding will be intense as the opportunity to address park and recreation lands and public access shortfalls is unprecedented in the current political and economic climate.

The LWCF was first established in 1964. It was approved for funding up to \$900M per year, but it has rarely been funded at that level. Contrary to the fund’s title, the primary purpose of the LWCF is not conserving land and water resources, but rather buying, developing, and conserving land- and water-based recreation resources. According to the Congressional Research Service (2020: 1), the main goal of LWCF is to “increase participation in recreation and strengthen the ‘health and vitality’ of U.S. citizens.” The LWCF has three mechanisms for doing this: federal land acquisition for outdoor recreation; providing financial assistance to states to assist recreation planning, land acquisition, and facility development; and, beginning in 1998, the fund has been used to help support other natural resource programs such as the Forest Legacy Program and the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund.

The purpose of the NPPLRF is even grander and even more specifically focused on outdoor recreation than the LWCF. It provides \$1.9B annually (\$9.5B over five years) to address the massive deferred maintenance needs accrued by the federal land management agencies. Past agency budget cuts and the redirection of funding away from recreation management by federal agencies has resulted in billions of dollars in infrastructure backlog, crumbling road systems, and recreation facilities and cultural resources in disrepair (Cervený et al., 2020a).

The last major overhaul of the federal parks and outdoor recreation system was in the middle of the last century. In the 1950s and 1960s, a multitude of federal initiatives addressed crumbling national parks and outdoor recreation infrastructure in unprecedented ways. Mission 66 and Operation Outdoors, for example, led to new and updated facilities and creation of roads and trails for the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service. In 1962, the President’s Recreation Advisory Council was established and included the Secretaries of Interior; Agriculture; Defense; Commerce; Health, Education & Welfare; and other federal agencies. That political horsepower led to the establishment of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (1963), passage of the LWCF (1964), and a plethora of legislation that combined recreation and conservation values including the Wilderness Act (1964), Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968), and National Trails System Act (1968). In the last half-century, however, the U.S. has seen countless demographic, cultural, economic, and environment changes that current state and federal park and recreation systems do not address. Today’s needs are different from the land designation and recreation development needs of the past, but the mission is just as important.

The Opportunity for Parks and Recreation

The primary focus of the GAOA is on providing outdoor recreation opportunities and public access with resource conservation and environmental protection second-

ary but complementary goals. While many natural resource agency professionals and scientists consider public use and environmental protection to be contradictory goals, we believe this view is unnecessarily restrictive and based on an outdated philosophy of nature and human interactions (Blahna et al., 2020; Collins & Brown, 2007). Park and recreation professionals can help assure implementation of this lofty ‘dual mandate’ goal through strategic submissions of GAOA project and funding requests that integrate public use and environmental protection goals simultaneously.

The GAOA also provides a golden opportunity to meet other critical park and recreation needs that have been identified in the literature by park and recreation professionals and in official statements by agency leaders over the last two decades. These goals include:

1. **Enhance contributions to U.S. public health infrastructure.** While “health and vitality” of U.S. citizens has been an integral part of the LWCF since its inception, federal park and recreation plans rarely explicitly identify where, how, and under what conditions recreation infrastructure and management plans contribute to, or detract from, public health goals. There is a burgeoning field of research linking nature contacts and public health, but there is a disconnect between that literature and park and recreation planning and management (Collins & Brown, 2007; Wolf et al., 2020).
2. **Increase visitor diversity and inclusivity.** The GAOA was first introduced to the House of Representatives by iconic civil rights leader John Lewis (D-GA), who was adamant about using parks and public lands to help address economic, racial, and ethnic inequities in society. Unfortunately, the lack of visitor diversity is an ongoing problem for federal agencies. There are many systemic reasons for this throughout the larger field of parks and recreation management such as hiring staff, narrow focus of university research and training, lack of cultural sensitivity, and interpersonal and institutional racism (Flores et al., 2018; Taylor, 2015). Most research and management tools focus on understanding *existing* visitors and looking at recreational use levels as a problem to be solved rather than an opportunity to address social equity and justice concerns (Blahna et al., 2020). This reflects the resource management paradigm of the mid-20th Century that viewed land management agency goals as simply providing and protecting the resource, and partiality for natural conditions, rather than proactively meeting access and equity goals for underserved populations.
3. **Utilize multi-disciplinary sustainability expertise.** Promoting and sustaining recreation use and infrastructure must be linked to conservation of land and water resources that recreation opportunities depend on. This directly reflects the multi-disciplinary character of sustainability. The definition of sustainable development introduced by The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, p. 43)—“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”—was later revised to illustrate that sustainability depends on the three pillars of economic, environmental, and social sustainability. This was used by Cervený et al. (2020b, p. 10) who defined sustainable recreation management as “. . . the provision of desirable outdoor opportunities for all people, in a way that supports ecosystems, contrib-

utes to healthy communities, promotes equitable economies, respects culture and traditions, and develops stewardship values now and for future generations.”

4. **Conduct multi-scale spatial analyses.** Funding decisions related to use of the LWCF and the NPPLRF that are based on site-specific or piecemeal considerations will fall short of the broader goals. U.S. Forest Service guidelines for ranking LWCF proposals, for example, identify a “regional ranking” as being as important as “recreational access” for prioritizing land purchases (USFS, NFS 2020, pp. 6-7). Traditionally, however, outdoor recreation problems are addressed at the site- or activity-specific level of analysis and there are few planning guidelines to integrate and address regional needs or predict multi-scale social and environmental effects of management decisions. This limits the ability to address larger-scale environmental concerns and specific needs of urban and rural communities, special interest and tribal partners, and especially marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Incorporating these factors into park and recreation planning and decision-making will require the use of systems analysis methods and models that specifically address land and water conservation and public use/access needs *simultaneously* (Blahna, 2020). A systems-thinking approach will require the development of new, innovative analysis and decision support tools, cross-disciplinary and cross-agency initiatives, and collaborative approaches with communities, interest groups and tribal partners (McCool & Kline, 2020; Morse, 2020; Morse et al., this issue).

Conclusion

The GAOA passed by a voice vote in the House and by a 73-25 vote in the Senate. This strong, bipartisan support for GAOA is exceptional in the current economic and rancorous political climate. Clearly there is widespread social and political support for simultaneously expanding recreation use and conservation practices on public lands. Further erosion of recreation capacity within public agencies will be detrimental to this goal. The political message is that these two new funding sources should supplement, not replace or offset, existing recreation funding. The GAOA provides the political and economic impetus to revisit and revise the system, not simply to stanch the bleeding from past bureaucratic neglect.

Are our agency leaders up to the task of a Mission 2030 mirroring the success of Mission 66 but meeting 21st Century goals? A Mission 2030 could be strategically linked to the international 30 by 30 Initiative, which seeks to provide protection for 30% of lands by 2030. While 30 by 30 focuses on climate change and species diversity goals, success of a such a wide-ranging effort will ultimately need to meet social equity, diversity, and inclusion goals to secure broad political support (Cooper, 2021). 30 by 30 is also inspiring some U.S. politicians to call for reinstating the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, which was eliminated in 1981, one of many casualties of the national de-emphasis on nature based outdoor recreation at the end of the 20th Century.

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