NEWS FROM THE ALDO LEOPOLD WILDERNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE, MISSOULA, MONTANA, USA

By Vita Wright

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

—Aldo Leopold

With the increasing demand of people recreating in protected areas, managers around the world are asking questions about how to manage recreation use, whether to limit use, and if so, when to limit use. How do managers decide when recreation use is causing unacceptable resource damage and how to restrict use to limit damage? And how do they know whether restrictions that have been implemented are effective at meeting management goals? In the mid-1980s the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) process was formally defined to address these types of questions. Since then, wilderness managers in the United States have implemented this process in a variety of situations.

After a decade of LAC process implementation, the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute and the University of Montana School of Forestry jointly organized a symposium to clarify LAC concepts and terminology and to discuss when the process is and is not useful. In May 1997, 12 researchers and managers with substantial LAC process experience met in Montana. The Rocky Mountain Research Station of the USDA Forest Service published a proceedings of this symposium in December 1 997 to present results of the workshop and increase utility of the LAC process.

What Is LAC and When Is It Useful?

LAC is a process that was initially developed to resolve the issue of recreational carrying capacity. Specifically, it was an attempt to address the conflict between recreation use and the resultant degradation of natural resource conditions and visitor experiences. However, it can be usefully applied to the resolution of a wide range of issues. In its most general application, the process consists of six steps: (1) agree that two or more goals are in conflict; (2) agree that all conflicting goals must be compromised; (3) establish a hierarchy of goals and identify the constraining goal; (4) write minimally acceptable standards for the constraining goal that are measurable and attainable, and monitor these standards; (5) allow the constraining goal to be compromised initially, until standards are reached; and (6) compromise the other goal(s) so that standards are never violated.

The LAC process is only applicable when conflicting goals can be compromised, and managers are willing to decide which goal will constrain the others. Users of the process must be able to establish a hierarchy among goals and set minimally acceptable conditions for the constraining issue. If these conditions are met, the LAC process can be applied to many issues other than recreation. Examples of other conflicts where this process would be potentially useful include livestock grazing versus protecting natural conditions, allowing fire to play a natural role versus losing property due to fire, and air quality versus industrial development. However, because not all recreation issues involve conflict, LAC cannot always be applied. The LAC process is one of many tools that can contribute to more enlightened planning for natural resources management.

How to Get More Information about LAC

For an in-depth discussion of the LAC process, its limitations, and when it is most useful, see S. F. McCool, and D. M. Cole, comps. 1997. Proceedings—Limits of acceptable change and related planning processes: progress and future directions. *USDA For. Serv. Gen Tech. Rep. lNT-GTR-371.*

This proceedings is organized in three parts: (1) invited papers that discuss the original intent behind LAC, evaluate experiences with LAC applications, compare LAC with similar processes, and extend the usefulness of LAC to issues beyond recreation in protected areas; (2) postsymposium synthesis papers that summarize the results of participant discussion; and (3) an annotated bibliography of references related to using the LAC process. Specific titles of manuscripts included in the proceedings were listed in the April 1997 issue of the *IJW.*

This publication and Stankey, et al. (1985, listed below) may be obtained by contacting the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, P.O. Box 8089, Missoula, MT 59807, USA. Telephone: (406) 542-4190; fax: (406) 542-4196. E-mail: leopold_institute/rmrs_missoula@fs.fed.us.

Other publications on LAC and related planning frameworks include:

Graefe, A. R., F. R. Kuss, and J. J. Vaske. 1990. Visitor impact management: The planning framework. National Parks and Conservation Association, Washington, D.C.

National Park Service. 1997. The visitor experience and resource protection (VERP) framework: A handbook for planners and managers. USDI National Park Service, Denver Service Center.

Stankey, G. H., et al. 1985. The limits of acceptable change (LAC) system for wilderness planning. *USDA For. Serv. Gen. Tech. Rep. INT-176.*