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## FORESTERS' PERCEPTION OF WILDERNESS— USER ATTITUDES AND PREFERENCES

**ABSTRACT**—Foresters who managed wilderness were similar to wilderness users in the pureness of their perspective of wilderness, and correctly perceived users' reactions to two-thirds of several suggested wilderness-management policies and behavior norms. But these wilderness managers viewed users as less responsive to suggested behavior control measures than they actually were, overestimated user support for development, overestimated the prevalence of purist philosophies regarding resource-management practices and some behavior norms, and generally viewed users as clearly opinionated about specific issues, not anticipating the large proportion who were neutral. These misperceptions of user attitudes suggest limited exposure to typical users and bias from excessive contact with organized conservationists and comfort-seeking users commanding attention as well as selective perception based on differences between managers and users.

PROPER MANAGEMENT of wilderness and other wildland recreation areas is at least in part dependent on the accurate perception of user attitudes and preferences by managers. The ability of managers to perceive the preferences of users determines to a large extent their ability to satisfy them—or, when appropriate, to explain why they cannot, or should not, meet user preferences.

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It is important, therefore, for managers to learn about their clientele. Who are they? How do they feel about certain management alternatives? What types of facilities or services do they desire? What type and quality of experiences do they seek? It is also important for managers to check up on their perception of user opinions so that lines of communication can be improved where necessary and consistent sources of bias corrected.

John C. Hendee and Robert W. Harris



This paper presents results from a study to see how accurately foresters who managed wilderness perceived the attitudes and preferences of wilderness users.

### Public Opinion and Wilderness Management

There are several reasons why wilderness management cannot be entirely responsive to user preferences, and these should be clarified to prevent misunderstanding. First, management alternatives in classified wilderness are restricted by the Wilderness Act. Second, ecological realities of the wilderness environment restrict management alternatives. Third, many wilderness supporters do not personally visit wilderness, and those who do may change over time. As Burch (6) points out, the "forest camping system is like an omnibus—the seats are often full but occupied by different persons as they adjust to the flow of time." Finally, "user desires may be impossible, selfish, conflicting, based on faulty data, shortsighted, and changing or capable of being changed" (10). Thus, wilderness managers must be aware of user attitudes and preferences, but management of these areas cannot be based entirely on popular preference.

However, wilderness management does not operate in a complete public opinion vacuum. Some latitude is allowed, and user desires as they are perceived by wilderness managers do influence policy. Perhaps more important is the fact that effective, realistic policies must take into account the probable reactions of users to management's efforts to channel their behavior. This requires that wilderness managers correctly perceive user attitudes toward management alternatives so that decisions can be supported by appropriate information and education efforts directed at appropriate segments of users.

### Study Methods

A recent study of the characteristics, attitudes, and preferences of wilderness users in the Pacific Northwest (8) offered a unique opportunity to compare wilderness-user opinions about many management issues with wilderness managers' perceptions of what users opinions would be.

A questionnaire mailed to a sample of 2,000 self-registered visitors to the Eagle Cap, Three Sisters, and Glacier Peak Wildernesses provided information from more than 1,350 wilderness users. The questionnaire contained an attitude scale of 60 items to measure how relatively "wilderness-purist" versus "development-oriented" each visitor was, a series of 53 statements suggesting policy and management alternatives that might be implemented in wilderness, and a list of 22 conceivable behavior rules and customs that users might feel obligated to observe in wilderness. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with these statements. The same questionnaire was submitted to 56 Forest Service recreation managers from Washington and Oregon, all of whom had wilderness responsibilities, during a regional conference devoted to wilderness management, planning, and decision making.<sup>1</sup> The managers were given the attitude scale

<sup>1</sup>The training session included recreation staff officers from forests containing wilderness, regional office recreation staff, and some forest supervisors and district rangers.

to determine their personal views and were then asked to indicate *how they thought most wilderness users would respond* to each of the questionnaire statements about wilderness policy and behavior.

The recreation managers were asked to identify whether they felt "typical" wilderness users agreed, were neutral, or disagreed with the statements suggesting management policies and behavior norms. Of course, user reactions to many statements were divided, and it was perhaps unfair to force the managers to identify an average response. It might have been better to ask them to identify the proportion of users they felt agreed, disagreed, or were neutral regarding the stated alternatives. However, forcing the managers to generalize their perceptions of user sentiment was advantageous in that they were forced to indicate clearly how they thought "most wilderness users felt."

### Results

Comparison of group attitude scores indicated that managers tended to be slightly more "purist" than "development-oriented" in their personal concepts of wilderness features, activities, and benefits than were users, but not as "purist" as members of two conservationist organizations to whom the test was administered.<sup>2</sup> In their personal outlook on wilderness the managers were thus very much in tune with wilderness users. This is not surprising since their employment as foresters reflects a love of the out-of-doors much as visiting wilderness does for persons working in other fields (2, 3, 7).

The similarity between managers' and users' personal orientations toward wilderness perhaps explains why managers were able to predict correctly wilderness users' reactions to two-thirds of the questionnaire statements. But the remaining 25 wilderness policy and behavior statements for which managers did not accurately perceive typical response formed some interesting patterns. They seem to suggest a fixed perspective by managers on some important wilderness-management issues.

First, managers did not credit users with as responsive an attitude as they actually exhibited toward suggested measures of behavior control. For example, most managers did not recognize that typical users support most camp-cleanup practices, favor charges for use and mandatory fire permits; oppose shortcutting trails, camping wherever one pleases, makeshift campsite improvements; and they do not think all cleanup duties should be performed by employed personnel. In general, wilderness users seemed responsible and responsive to reasonable measures of control but were not always credited with such an attitude by managers. It is conceivable that the managers' image of users as resistant to behavior control measures has influenced past decisions and that more positive regulation of users is possible.

Secondly, managers attributed to users more support for recreational development in wilderness than most

<sup>2</sup>The wilderness attitude scale is described in John C. Hendee, *et al.*, 1969 (8) and in Hendee, Thomas Steinburn, and William R. Catton, Jr., "Wilderness—the Development, Dimensions, and Use of an Attitude Scale." Paper presented to Rural Sociological Society, August 26, 1967, San Francisco, 22p., mimeo.

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users actually expressed. For example, managers overestimated users' support for high-standard and surfaced trails, rustic facilities such as corrals, hitching posts, fireplaces, tables, and outhouses.

The overdevelopment bias in managers' perception of user desires may derive from their own concern for protecting the primeval environment from the abuses of use. Limited development of facilities is a traditional means of achieving this objective and is frequently proposed as a solution to wilderness problems (12, 13, 14). In addition, other studies have reported wilderness users as endorsing such improvements (5, 11). Our results do not indicate the wisdom of development as a wilderness management and protection policy, but they do suggest a common misperception by managers that recreational development in wilderness serves the preferences of typical users. Such a bias may stem from the existence of a professional norm among foresters which suggests that we must develop the natural environment if we are to preserve it from the abuse of recreationists.

Third, despite the fact that managers overestimated demand for campsite development in wilderness, they also overestimated the prevalence of purist philosophies among typical users. Most users, surprisingly, indicated tolerance for many practices seemingly inconsistent with wilderness conditions. For example, managers did

not anticipate that most users were willing to accept the use of helicopters—for bringing patrolmen to and from wilderness, for trail construction to avoid use of large pack strings, for routine administration and maintenance, and for wildlife observation and control. In addition, managers did not anticipate that nearly half of the users reject hunting as an appropriate activity in wilderness, that portable radios are unacceptable in wilderness to only a minority of users or that most users favor control of heavy infestations of forest diseases.

The principle seemingly adhered to by managers was that wilderness users typically hold purist points of view about management activities. Such a perspective could be the product of overexposure to the purist philosophies of vocal conservation groups. Similarly, the opposition of more wilderness users to hunting than managers anticipated may result from the managers' continued exposure to sportsmen's groups promoting hunting as a major use of wilderness.

Managers may overestimate the representativeness, and perhaps misperceive the content, of the purist philosophies espoused so vocally by conservation groups. Study indicates that less than 30 percent of wilderness users actually belong to conservation groups or outdoor clubs (8).

Fourth, managers tended to perceive users as clearly

opinionated and did not anticipate the high proportion of users who were neutral in their response. This finding may be a reflection of forcing managers to identify typical user sentiment surrounding some fairly specific issues to which most users had given little thought. But it may also reflect excessive contact by managers with users holding clear-cut and extreme opinions and too little communication with those who are uncommitted.

### Management Implications

Wilderness managers, like all of us, do not have access to complete information and must depend on their day-to-day informal samples of reality. When the opinions and preferences of recreationists are arrived at from impressions gained through day-to-day experience, the risk of bias is great indeed, for we are all victims of our limited exposure. Most wilderness managers' exposure to user preferences would seem to be heavily biased by the vocal conservation groups and the comfort-seeking parties of users commanding their attention. While fully recognizing that user preferences are not a major determinant, but only a factor to be considered in making policy, more personal contact and communication with typical wilderness users would seem justified according to our findings. Techniques to achieve this might include wilderness-ranger activity, increased use of self registration stations to keep track of use, and utilization of all possible means to encourage feedback by users with careful evaluation of this feedback as to how representative it is of all wilderness users.

Another possible source of management bias that must be considered is a phenomenon known as selective perception—the predisposition to experience events in certain consistent and selective ways (4). In other words, men see what they look for and observe what they expect to see (1). We all see but a sample of the real world in arriving at our judgments, and selective perception can bias our sample, i.e.—the only contacts making an impression are the people and ideas which suit our personal views but which we nevertheless project as a representative sample of the universe.

Two perceptive sociologists suggested a decade ago that foresters saw and explained the forest differently than did their recreation clientele (15). Selective perception by the foresters managing wilderness in our study may account for their view of users as resistant to behavior-control measures, uninterested in good campsite maintenance, and extreme in their opinions. Managers' greater skill in the out-of-doors gives them a critical eye for user shortcomings, and since a large share of their work results from problem users, it would be strange indeed if their perception of typical users were free of bias.

Again, increased communication with all users seems desirable to combat systematic bias in managers' perception of their views. But this must be combined with an awareness of basic differences between managers and users and the way in which this may affect perceptions and rapport between the two groups. For example, the managers' concern with wilderness is a responsibility, part of their work, and a frequent source of problems. For users wilderness activity is play, and the environment a source of appreciation. Managers are, for the

most part, rural resident foresters, trained to understand and engineer the use of ecological resources. Users are most likely urban residents, probably well educated professionals, and frequently engaged in social activity for a living, in contrast to the resource-oriented activity of foresters.

A wilderness trip to many users is like a pilgrimage to a place viewed with near reverence. To managers such trips may mean diversion from other pressing duties and responsibilities, and hard work to be performed under difficult conditions. The point is that managers might easily take wilderness and its values for granted, or appear to do so, and thus restrict their ability to gain information from users.

As stated earlier, despite legislative and ecological restrictions, wilderness management does not operate in a public opinion vacuum, and effective, realistic policies must take into account user reactions. Logical explanations of manager misperceptions of user preference do not dispel the costs that can result from such miscalculation. A continuing challenge to wilderness and other resource managers is to learn about their clientele: who they are, where they come from, and how they feel about management policies.

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