With growing interest in outdoor recreation, more people are competing for space in the forest. How do we make room for everyone?

BY DAVE MARCOUILLER
In a digital world where it seems everyone is staring at a screen at all times, it's refreshing to know that demand for outdoor recreation has skyrocketed in recent years.

Unfortunately, land designated for recreation, both public and private, has not kept up with the increased interest, creating a recipe for congestion and potential conflict. Plus, new technologies such as ATVs and GPS, have allowed us to experience the outdoors in new ways; some of which can be viewed as non-traditional. Even old “technology” like horseback riding can produce conflict. Thus the variety of outdoor recreation options combined with congestion and demand creates a potentially volatile mix among recreational users.

That need not be the case, however. Recreational uses can be combined to make room for everyone. Conflicts can be minimized through segregating and regulating the various competitive uses.

Public forests, especially national lands, have faced demands to provide outdoor recreation for the masses, while private forest landowners usually can avoid such pressure. Since most of the forestland in the South is privately owned, this gives the region an advantage in being able to limit the type of recreation that causes problems. Less than 10 percent of the non-industrial private forests in the South are open to public access. That’s one way to avoid conflict.

Forest managers have developed solutions to control interactions between recreational users. It’s possible to manage forests for multiple recreational uses. Recognizing that interactions between recreation users can be mutually beneficial helps with management plans. For example, hunting and fishing complement each other. Another complementary pair includes hiking and bird watching. These types of uses should be combined and encouraged to maximize recreational benefits.

Conflict between forest recreation users results from competitive demands, where benefits to the users tend to decrease with additional use. In the extreme case, some types of forest recreation preclude other activities. A good example of this is the combination of mountain biking and hiking on the same trail. Separately, they are fine. But when combined, each group can experience frustration.

Simple congestion is a recipe for conflict that limits recreational opportunities. While forests offer both wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities, there is a limit. A surefire way to create conflict is to exceed this carrying capacity. Too many hunters on too few acres can be dangerous.

**TABLE 1. A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT FOREST RECREATION USE.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction Type</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complementary</td>
<td>More use produces increased benefits</td>
<td>Overall benefits of each use increase</td>
<td>Hunting and Fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary</td>
<td>Uses don’t conflict</td>
<td>Benefits combine or add up</td>
<td>Hiking and Horseback Riding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Increased use means less overall benefits</td>
<td>Benefits will likely decrease overall</td>
<td>Mountain biking and horseback riding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antagonistic</td>
<td>Any activity of one drives the other to zero</td>
<td>One use can preclude the others, reducing other benefits to zero</td>
<td>“Wilderness” experiences and motorized uses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A simple summary of the interaction types with some examples is presented in Table 1. The idea is to plan for the most complementary or supplementary interactions between users, while minimizing the competitive or antagonistic ones. This framework will allow for more serious planning of forest recreation uses, with fewer likely conflicts.

UNDERSTANDING RECREATIONAL CONFLICT

The fancy term for what causes these conflicts is one's behavior that results in "goal interference." Conflict arises when the recreational goals of one individual or group interfere with that of another. An example is partying at a campsite marked by loud noise and other offensive behavior interfering with family campers nearby. This is a classic situation of individuals expecting a different experience that leads to conflict.

Goal interference can be explained by several factors. First, the user's activity style, or what's expected from it. An example of this is the difference between a quiet experience or one with a lot of interactions with friends. A second factor involves the significance that the individual attaches to the site itself. For instance, does the user perceive the recreation site to be a special place? Third, how the user expects others to use the site can be a factor. Is there an inappropriate use of technology (i.e. loud music) where one user does not think it belongs? Finally, goal interference can result from basic lifestyle intolerance a tendency to accept or reject lifestyles different from one's own.
“FORESTS CAN BE MANAGED FOR MULTIPLE RECREATIONAL USES.”
HUNTING AND FISHING COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER. SUCH USES SHOULD BE COMBINED TO MAXIMIZE RECREATIONAL BENEFITS.

Another train of thought links differing social values to the creation of recreational conflicts. For example, the different values people have about treatment of animals may lead to a conflict between hunters and other recreation groups even though they never interact with each other on the land. Here, education about the benefits of hunting to wildlife population health and habitat can act to improve understanding. This improved understanding can then be linked to a change in social values about hunting.

Crowding or congestion is among the most important issues and relates to controlling the sheer number of users at any given site. This can relate to both goal interference and social values. Managing recreation for user expectations attempts to provide a "normal" activity. This is referred to as "norms" that relate to expectations. That is, individuals have certain expectations about how many people they are willing to encounter during their recreation experience. Only when this "norm" is exceeded do encounters begin to impact the quality of their experience and potentially lead to conflict.

So, the critical management input becomes identifying where the competitive interactions begin to occur and to attempt some level of "crowd control" at that point. Increasing user fees during peak times or at premier parks is one way to control crowding and congestion. This is a common tactic when faced with high demands for hunting leases.

Moving to a substitute site is a common coping mechanism used by recreationists to alleviate conflict. Management can encourage and help users change sites. Educating users about other activities can assist in changing user expectations. Thus, interpretation is an important management activity. In the end, many simply accept or tolerate the conflicting activity. Those that can't tolerate it will simply substitute another recreational activity that provides them with similar benefits.

Perception plays a big role. Not everyone sees things the same way. Different recreation groups don't always view group interaction in the same way. For instance, users reliant on motorized equipment for their recreation experience (such as ATV and UTV users) often perceive less conflict than the recreation groups engaged in more silent pursuits, such as hikers, wildlife watchers, or campers. Here, adaptive site management can assist in keeping these uses apart. Motorized uses need their own trail or area in which to recreate. Likewise, silent sports require their own areas. Here segregating motorized use from silent sports can help reduce conflict.

MANAGING OUTDOOR RECREATION CONFLICT

How can these conflicts be reduced? Carrying capacity is one key; common sense says to limit use to some reasonable threshold. Separating uses in both time or space can be an effective way to segregate conflictive situations. It is a balancing act that requires an understanding of trade-offs among alternative forms of recreation.

Being clear about management goals and acting pro-actively is the key. If landowners want to attract people to partake in uses that are clearly competitive with one another, then providing ample segregated areas for each use is required. This would allow for the provision of competitive and antagonistic uses. A landowner's ability to plan for alternative uses and recreational sites that account for potential conflict is central to avoiding conflict in the first place.

Signage can be effective in educating and directing users to avoid conflict situations. This obvious consideration represents thoughtful recreational site planning that increases carrying capacity while avoiding situations that might lead to competitive and antagonistic outcomes. Obvious examples of this include signage based on landowner desires to identify restriction to recreational use or to direct users to...
areas where certain types of use are appropriate. Using interpretation signage at trail heads, parking areas, or at key locations within the site itself can act to educate users about natural resources and their management and appropriate recreation usage.

Developing new recreational technologies that minimize physical annoyance will continue to serve as an important basis for reducing conflict. Obvious examples include noise and exhaust issues from motorized recreational implements and the ability of new technologies (e.g. four stroke engines, electric storage devices, etc.) to minimize the external influences associated with their recreational use. Policies can provide incentives and-or regulations that provide the framework for less conflict-ridden recreational uses.

Landowners acting to manage alternative recreational uses of forestland are the key. Demands for increased recreational uses of our natural landscapes and expanded forms of outdoor recreation appear as inevitable. This will most probably occur at a faster rate as population increases and gains more time for recreation. Match this with the notion that our supply of recreational opportunities is, at best, constrained, and it becomes clear that the time for a comprehensive approach to managing use interaction is upon us.

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