



Visitor Use Management On Public Lands and Waters:

A POSITION PAPER TO GUIDE POLICY

Prepared by the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council*
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INTRODUCTION

The National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (collectively, these federal agencies) strive to provide maximum opportunities for recreational benefits for the public by managing its access to and use of public lands and waters. Recent public initiatives, such as *America's Great Outdoors* and *Healthy Parks Healthy People US*, demonstrate a commitment to enhance the public's connection with the outdoors for purposes of recreation, spiritual renewal, improved health, and high-quality time spent with families and friends. Providing and managing these opportunities is an important part of the missions of these federal agencies. At the same time, these agencies are challenged to strike an appropriate balance between these societal benefits and resource protection and conservation.

During the past three decades, these federal agencies have gained substantial experience in meeting these often competing objectives, but challenges remain. Managers continue to struggle with uncertainty about the best approach to balancing visitor use and access with the agencies' mandates to protect natural and cultural resources. This uncertainty is exacerbated by inconsistent use of terminology and divergent approaches to managing visitors and recreation on federal lands and waters, including how much emphasis to place on visitor capacity.¹ Recent litigation has heightened the focus on these topics.

Leaders of these federal agencies chartered the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council (the council) to enhance best practices, interagency consistency, cost-effectiveness, and the defensibility of decisions related to visitor use management. The council has been given the task of developing consistent interagency guidance for visitor use management, including visitor capacity.

This paper documents the council's position on visitor use management and visitor capacity and will serve as guidance for all subsequent council activities.



Specifically, this paper

- defines visitor use management and visitor capacity
- clarifies how these two concepts interrelate
- outlines how these concepts should be used by federal land managers to meet agency goals

This paper discusses visitor use management for all federal lands and waters administered by these federal agencies, including lands and waters where these agencies are required by law to address visitor capacity.

¹ The term "visitor capacity" as used in this document is synonymous with numeric capacity, user capacity, and recreational carrying capacity. Other users, such as administrative or subsistence users, will sometimes be included as part of visitor capacity.

BACKGROUND

Although the primary goal of visitor use management is to maintain opportunities for high-quality visitor experiences, much of the debate surrounding visitor use management has centered on the question of when and where numerical estimates of visitor capacity are most appropriate and how visitor capacity relates to the legal requirements placed on the agencies. Several statutes, including the National Parks and Recreation Act, Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and National Trails System Act, expressly require these federal agencies to address visitor capacity. In addition, the Wilderness Act indirectly requires that these federal agencies address visitor capacity in wilderness. This is because the Wilderness Act states that commercial services may be authorized only to the extent necessary to realize one or more purposes of a wilderness area.



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Extensive research and land management experience during the last 40 years have led to a reevaluation of the central importance of visitor capacity in federal land management. Specifically, that research and experience have taught us that managing the number of visitors to an area is only one tool within a suite of management actions that support protection of desired resource conditions and visitor experiences. Effective management of many of the most contentious visitor use issues is often more about managing the recreation sites, facilities, types of activities, visitor behaviors, and the timing and location of visitor use than just the number of visitors.

To further clarify best management practices, the National Park Service established a work group in 2008 to develop consistent guidance for both visitor use management and visitor capacity. The other federal agencies joined these discussions, ultimately leading to an interagency workshop on visitor use management and visitor capacity held in March 2010 in Washington, D.C. The workshop explored how to improve the ability of federal land managers to meet their legal mandates regarding visitor use management and visitor capacity.

After compiling the results from the workshop, the work group met with senior leaders in these agencies to present an action plan for moving forward. Executive leadership from these agencies chartered the council with the mission to provide guidance on visitor use management policies and develop legally defensible and effective interagency tools for managing visitors and recreation on federal lands and waters.

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions for visitor use management and visitor capacity have been developed by the council and apply throughout this paper.

Visitor capacity is a component of visitor use management consisting of the maximum amounts and types of visitor use that an area can accommodate while sustaining desired resource conditions and visitor experiences, consistent with the purpose for which the area was established.

Visitor use characteristics include the amount, type, timing, and distribution of visitor use, including visitor activities and behaviors.

Visitor use management is the proactive and adaptive process of planning for and managing characteristics of visitor use and its physical and social setting, using a variety of strategies and tools, to sustain desired resource conditions and visitor experiences.

POSITION POINTS

The primary position of the council is that best practices involve excelling in overall visitor use management with visitor capacity as one of many management strategies used when necessary and where it is legally required. To excel, these federal agencies need to shift their emphasis from the narrow strategy of visitor capacity to the broader principles of visitor use management.

Consistent and effective visitor use management requires managers to

- identify goals for the physical and social setting for visitor use
- gain a full understanding of how visitor use influences achievement of those goals
- commit to ongoing management and monitoring of visitor use to meet those goals

The process for visitor use management can be used for all lands and waters administered by these federal agencies, regardless of whether the lands and waters are subject to a legal requirement to address visitor capacity. This process is conceptually consistent with existing frameworks for doing land management and planning, including *Visitor Experience and Resource Protection*, *Limits of Acceptable Change*, and the *Recreation Opportunity Spectrum*.



Each of these federal agencies has well-established planning and decision-making processes. The framework described herein is compatible with each agency's existing planning processes and related procedures (e.g., implementing the National Environmental Policy Act). This framework is intended to provide general, but consistent, direction that maintains flexibility for implementation by different agencies in varied situations. The major elements of visitor use management include the following:

Build the Foundation

Why is there a need for this planning exercise?

1. Clarify project purpose and need.
2. Review the area's purpose, along with related legislative, policy, and management direction.
3. Assess existing information and current conditions, and identify project issues and opportunities.
4. Develop the project planning strategy.

Outcome: Understand what needs to be done and how to organize the planning effort.

Define Visitor Use Management Direction

What conditions are we trying to achieve?

5. Define desired conditions for resources, recreation opportunities, and visitor experiences for the planning area(s).
6. Define suitable visitor uses, facilities, and services based on desired conditions.
7. Determine acceptable levels of impact from visitor use.

Outcome: Describe the conditions to be achieved or maintained and how conditions will be tracked over time.

Identify Management Strategies

How will visitor use be managed to achieve desired conditions?

8. Compare and document the differences between existing and desired conditions and, for visitor use-related impacts, clarify the specific links to visitor use characteristics.
9. Identify visitor use management strategies and actions to achieve desired conditions.
10. Where necessary, identify visitor capacities and strategies to manage use levels within capacities.
11. Develop a monitoring strategy.

Outcome: Decision on strategies to manage visitor use to achieve or maintain desired conditions.

Implement, Monitor, Evaluate, and Adjust

Are we making progress towards desired conditions?

12. Implement management actions.
13. Conduct and document ongoing monitoring and evaluate the effectiveness of management actions in achieving desired conditions.
14. Adjust management actions if needed to achieve desired conditions and document the rationale.

Outcome: Implement management actions and adjust based on lessons learned.

CONCLUSION

This paper documents the council's general position on visitor use management and visitor capacity. It clearly defines visitor use management and visitor capacity and gives direction on how these concepts should be implemented by these federal agencies. The paper emphasizes developing consistent interagency guidance for visitor use management, while retaining visitor capacity as one of many strategies that can be applied. Building on this paper, the council will develop visitor use management tools, including policy guidance and communication protocols; develop and conduct training on visitor use management, including visitor capacity requirements; and strive to enhance the resources available to these federal agencies as they work to consistently and effectively apply visitor use management tools.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT AGENCY REPRESENTATIVES:



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