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ICONIC PLACES OF THE US FOREST SERVICE: CONDITIONS AND CONCERNS

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The US Forest Service manages over 7 million acres of areas protected either by Congress through legislation or by the Executive Branch via proclamation under the authority of the Antiquities Act. These sites are singled out for their outstanding examples of plant and animal communities, recreation settings, geological features, scenic grandeur, or other special attributes. These iconic places are often culturally important to tribes and local residents. Recreation and other uses of iconic places generate economic activity and support local communities. Despite their importance, there has been little research on the current conditions and needs of these places. This project examines current conditions and management of iconic places as well as management needs to sustain these places for the future.

Approach

In 2016 we surveyed site administrators for 41 USFS managed “iconic places” in all 9 US Forest Service regions that included: 19 National Recreation Areas, 8 National Scenic Areas, 11 National Monuments, 2 National Historic Areas, and a National Heritage Area.

Results

Scenic values are maintained and support high recreation use and visitor satisfaction. Respondents reported that scenic values and recreation settings were the most well-functioning of the features for which their areas were designated, both currently and if current usage continues (see Figure 1). More than two-thirds of respondents believed visitors were satisfied with their recreation experience. At sites where scenic values were well-functioning, reported recreation use and visitor satisfaction were high.

Desired conditions are well-defined but future vision is lacking at some sites. Respondents reported that desired conditions were formally defined at 83% of surveyed sites, most often in a land management plan, and that defined desired conditions drive planning at 73% of sites. However, 12 managers (31%) said they were lacking “a clear vision of the future” at the site, and 27% said that the site was only somewhat or not at all recognized by forest staff.

Iconic places of the US Forest Service

- Over 7 million acres of land
- Span 22 states and 38 National Forests

Surveyed sites were designated for:

Scenic values	30
Unique biophysical attributes	27
Unique recreation opportunities	25
Area history	19
Uniqueness of recreation settings	14

Sustainability:

Is recreation use at site sustainable over next 10 years?

- At current use levels, 66% of respondents agreed
- If current trends continue, 44% of respondents agreed

Fig. 1 Current resource conditions and trends over next 10 years, top resources in each classification

Current resource conditions		
Well-functioning	Impaired but functional	Deteriorated
Scenic values (30) Night sky quality (21) Recreation settings (13)	Recreation settings (24) Trails (23) Roads and access (18)	Interpretive facilities (12) Dispersed recreation (11) Roads and access (9)
Trends in conditions		
Improving	Static	Declining
Recreation opportunities (6) Trails (4) Developed sites (2)	Scenic values (33) Recreation opportunities (27) Night sky quality (24)	Dispersed recreation (18) Interpretive facilities (16) Developed sites (16) Roads and access (16)



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Iconic places face a wide array of internal and external challenges. Respondents most commonly identified lacking capacity, both operational budgets and staffing, as challenges to sustaining the values and opportunities provided by these places (see Figure 2). Conditions occurring at the site such as the amount of recreation usage and infrastructure were identified by more than half of respondents. Broader challenges such as climate change and disturbances were identified the least, but were each still noted as challenges by more than a quarter of sites.

Additional site-specific information is needed to improve site management. Although more than half the respondents said they had an estimate of recreation use in the last five years, estimates were largely from National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) data at the forest level. Respondents frequently expressed needs for more site-specific monitoring data, including for recreation use, but also for visitor behavior, trends, satisfaction, and expectations from visits. Respondents said they would also benefit from more information on: how visitors are getting information about the area; information about activity impacts, capacity, and facility status; and information about legislative, local government, or administrative intentions.

Expanded partnerships offer the greatest opportunity to meet future goals. 83% of respondents reported an array of partnerships (see Figure 3) that contribute in-kind and monetary resources, and 73% of respondents indicated that they market their sites through partners. Tribes and volunteers were reported as key partners at many places. Respondents noted that for sites with recent designation changes, designation is as a moment of “enormous opportunity to form external partnerships to bring more resources to the management of the area.” Regardless of when sites were designated, respondents most often selected “deepening and diversifying partners” as an opportunity for sustaining sites valued characteristics.

Implications

Administrators for the iconic places we surveyed felt that the values for which the areas were created were still functioning well, but they were concerned with long-term sustainability, particularly in regards to trails, signage, roads, and other developed resources.

Areas of need included: increased recognition, more site-specific information, and more attention to capacity and site condition concerns. Focused efforts on expanding partnerships to increase capacity and visibility, alongside addressing ongoing internal challenges like funding, staffing, and management vision, will maximize opportunities to sustain the valued characteristics of these iconic places into the future.

Figure 2 Challenges for sustaining the area’s valued characteristics and opportunities over next 10 years

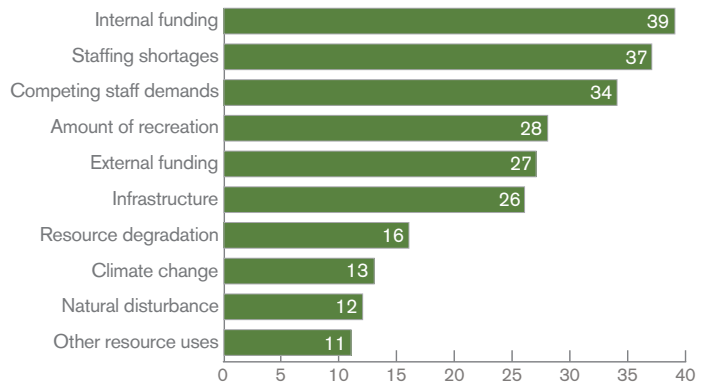
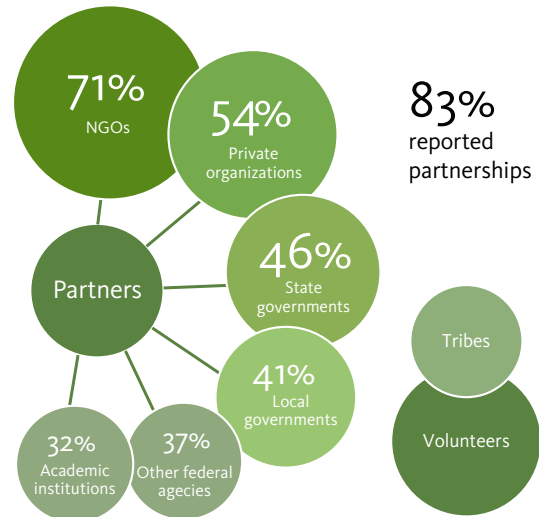


Figure 3 Partners that help manage the area



More information

An full-length report on survey results is forthcoming and will be available at: <http://ewp.uoregon.edu>

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