



USDA FOREST SERVICE International Programs

Addressing the Four Threats in an International Context Unmanaged Recreation

Introduction

Unmanaged recreation is one of the four threats* that the Chief of the Forest Service has identified as the main challenges to the management of national forests and grasslands in the United States.

Increasing population and demand for resources have led to damage to resources from unmanaged recreation, which can affect not only our nation’s public and private forests but can also cross international boundaries.

Through International Programs, Research and Development, and other government and nonprofit partners, the Forest Service is working to define and address unmanaged recreation issues in an international context, primarily related to ecotourism in protected areas. Our work focuses on sharing domestic experiences with international partners and learning from the experiences of countries that are addressing similar issues.

This paper describes the international scope of the unmanaged recreation threat, the actions currently being taken by the Forest Service and others internationally to address the problem, and options for future action that can be taken both globally and domestically.



*Buddhist temple and surrounding forest at Borabudur, Indonesia.
Photo by USDA Forest Service.*

Scope of the Unmanaged Recreation Problem

Global extent of unmanaged recreation

Internationally, the issue of unmanaged or inappropriate recreation often is addressed through a focus on ecotourism or nature-based tourism, typically in the context of travel to protected areas. Globally, 12.4% of forests are classified as protected by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) (FAO 2001).

A key issue related to ecotourism is the management of recreation impacts and the amount of recreation pressure an area can absorb before resources are harmed. Many countries are struggling to balance economic development and resource capacity with regard to recreation and tourism.

While ecotourism generally focuses on international travelers, protected areas with nearby urban centers often have high numbers of local recreational visitors as well. For example, forests near Mexico City and in Israel both experience very large numbers of local users.

Primary reasons why unmanaged recreation problems are increasing

The growth of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in recent decades have contributed to the increasing problems with unmanaged recreation in protected areas. The World Tourism Organization estimates that international tourism will grow by an estimated 4.1 percent per year through 2020, resulting in 1.56 billion tourists in 2020. Increased visitors will mean increased impacts, which are disproportionate to the number of tourists: *the largest impacts come from the first few visitors*. Therefore, concentration and control of recreation into designated areas may be a way to produce large social and resource conservation benefits while still allowing for growth in the number of visitors.

Effects of unmanaged recreation

Popular tourism destinations and remote wilderness

If tourism and recreation are not planned or managed thoughtfully, they can lead to resource degradation, negative social impacts, and loss of revenue for the protected area, the local community, and local businesses. There are two types of forest areas of particular concern to recreation managers: very popular tourist destinations, which can be overrun by visitors, and remote regions, where even a few visitors can have large impacts. For example, the wilderness surrounding Mt. Everest has been called the “world’s highest garbage dump” because of the large amount of discarded rubbish and climbing gear. In other areas, increased access to forest areas can facilitate illegal logging, increased incidence of wildfire, introduction of invasive species, and wildlife poaching.

In developing or transition economies, a high priority typically is placed on the economic benefit of tourists and the challenge of attracting new visitors. Because tourism is likely to be limited in areas with primitive infrastructure (Tanner et al. 2000), projects that promote sustainable practices and seek to alleviate poverty must be carefully planned.

Benefits of well-managed recreation

Tourism is the world’s largest industry, supporting approximately 200 million jobs worldwide and generating industry revenues in excess of \$475 billion (TNC 2001). Well-planned ecotourism can be a boon to economies in many countries, and the benefits extend beyond the rural setting or park destination.

For example, the cities, airlines, and restaurants that are the initial receiving point for international tourists also benefit. The hope of capturing ecotourism dollars thus can provide incentives for the protection of the world’s great natural and cultural resources, although experiences in the 1990s have tempered many forest managers’ expectations about the economic returns of ecotourism.

Both ecotourism and local recreation do offer alternatives to other more damaging land uses. They also provide opportunities to connect people with natural resources and to educate them about the value of environmental and cultural diversity.

Social impacts of outside visitors and recreationists

Recreational visitors not only can affect resources but they also can generate social conflict and challenges to cultural identity. Communities that serve as “gateways” to ecotourism areas may face large social and economic changes (both positive and negative) as tourism and recreation increase. Such changes are especially likely if new protected areas exclude traditional land uses and resource relationships. Once exposed to large numbers of visitors, indigenous people may struggle to retain their cultural traditions and relationships with the environment.

Lack of reliable information

Despite the escalating worldwide threats to ecosystems and communities from unmanaged recreation, managers often lack specific information about numbers of ecotourists, places they visit, and specific impacts of recreation on wildlife, plants, and cultures. Because much outdoor recreation is dispersed through relatively undeveloped areas, accurate estimates may be difficult to obtain. In addition, statistics on ecotourism trips may be indistinguishable from more general figures on international tourism.



Guam coast. Photo by Leonard Newell, forestryimages.com

Links and Lessons: Policy Forums and Projects Addressing Unmanaged Recreation

International Programs facilitates Forest Service participation in numerous efforts to address the unmanaged recreation issue, such as policy forums, cooperative agreements, and technical cooperation with other agencies, nations, and organizations. We link Forest Service managers to international networks, tools, and resources that can help them better address recreation management issues at home through lessons learned abroad.

Multilateral forums and activities

Organizations such as the World Tourism Organization and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) actively promote and assess ecotourism. A number of other forums also address the unmanaged recreation/ecotourism/protected area issue. For example, the Forest Service participated in IUCN's 2003 World Parks Congress in South Africa. The Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) provides another opportunity for Forest Service managers and researchers to share information about protected area management, even though the U.S. Government has not ratified the agreement.

Other international conventions, charters, and guidelines addressing unmanaged recreation include (IUCN/World Commission on Protected Areas 2003):

- The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) International Cultural Tourism Charter: Managing Tourism at Places of Heritage Significance;
- The Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism;
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Heritage Program and sites; and
- The World Tourism Organization's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism.

International Programs also has hosted workshops and produced educational literature on ecotourism and protected areas management. Management courses and exchange opportunities have been provided in South Africa, Mexico, and the U.S. for resource professionals from around the globe.

The Consortium on International Protected Areas Management (CIPAM)

The Consortium on International Protected Areas Management (CIPAM) was founded in 2000 by the University of Montana, Colorado State University, and the University of Idaho, in cooperation with Forest Service International Programs. The consortium aims to strengthen the capacity for policy making, planning, and managing protected areas throughout the world through education, training, technical cooperation, and research. Current activities include an annual International Seminar on Protected Areas Management (ISPAM) and support for other workshops and training activities around the world.

Bilateral technical cooperation

International Programs also works with other countries to share knowledge about recreation management:

- Several "sister forest" projects link U.S. national forests and protected forests in Mexico. For example, the Idaho Panhandle National Forest and Bosque la Primavera, both near urban centers, have teamed up to learn from each other on issues of fire and recreation management.

Sharing our expertise: Forest Service is a world leader in recreation management

Forest Service experts have valuable experience and knowledge to share with the international community because we are already facing the challenge of unacceptable social and environmental impacts from domestic and international recreational visitors. Tourism management plans based on the theory of limits of acceptable change (LAC) (Stankey et al. 1985) are increasingly being developed for many of the most heavily used recreation destinations. Given the desire of many nations to capitalize on the economic benefits of tourism and outdoor recreation without excessive resource degradation, such management plans will become increasingly important globally.

- International Programs has been involved in recreation-focused workshops and educational literature in China.
- The Lake Tahoe/ Lake Baikal project is helping Russia develop a trail system and conduct large-scale watershed planning in the Selenga River watershed.
- Landscape planning and recreation plans are being developed for a new national park in Gabon as part of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership.
- A protected area program was developed with the University of Natal in Kwazulu Natal, South Africa.

Key Policy Issues, Opportunities, and Steps Forward

Developing standards and certifications for ecotourism

Efforts have been made to establish standards for ecotourism because of the possible negative impacts of this form of recreation. For example, Australia has developed criteria and indicators for sustainable ecotourism operations.

Potential certification systems for “green” ecotourism concessionaires might provide another tool for recreation managers. However, currently no recognized labels are available to certify sustainable operations. For instance, the “Green Globe” symbol authorized by the World Travel and Tourism Council as part of the Agenda 21 Tourism Initiative can be purchased for \$200 and is simply a pledge that an operator will work toward environmentally sound practices (Rome 2000).

Finally, classification systems such as IUCN’s scheme for protected areas provide a common background for discussion and might provide a framework for the management of appropriate recreational use in various areas.



Victoria Falls. Photo by Kenneth M. Gale, forestryimages.com

Improving research on protected areas and ecotourism

There is still much we don’t know about protected areas and ecotourism. Topics for further research on protected areas identified at the 2003 World Parks Congress include:

- Effective monitoring and collection of reliable data on numbers of visitors and their impacts;
- Determination of appropriate governance and management models in harmony with the local context of a protected area;
- Development of appropriate tools and techniques for financing protected areas through tourism, including recreation fees and private sector partnerships;
- Determination of optimum types and levels of protected area visitation; and
- Provision of appropriate training in resource and heritage conservation to protected area and recreation management personnel.

Areas for ecotourism study include establishing equitable flows of benefits to local communities and further defining the relationship between ecotourism visitors and impacts on the environment and community.

Balancing potential impacts and costs of recreational use

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing recreation managers worldwide is that for all the benefits associated with recreational use, recognition is not yet high that ecotourism and local recreation are a prime source of damage to natural systems and cultural resources, both domestically and abroad. To date, “well-planned ecotourism” and “managed recreation” have been elusive concepts driven more by short-term politico-economic gains than by long-range concern for sustainable management of the resources on which tourism and recreation are based. Concern is also growing for collateral damage to resources that are secondary to the main resources being exploited for recreation use, and for the cost of managing recreation use and tourism. As recreation use increases, rules on access and use are being written to ensure that resources are managed sustainably. The social, political, and financial costs of enforcing these rules have not been fully identified and they may force changes in traditional views on management of recreation and tourism.

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For More Information

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Websites:

- Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation <http://www.ahlp.org/>
- Australia Criteria and Indicators for Ecotourism <<http://www.ecotourism.org.au/ies:asp>>
- Characterizing Historic Landscapes, <<http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/histland/tanat/tanat.htm>>
- Consortium for International Protected Areas Management (CIPAM) <<http://www.protectedareas.net/>>
- Convention on Biodiversity, <<http://www.biodiv.org/>>
- Dept of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria, <<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/dse/index.htm>>
- Heritage Victoria, <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/web/root/domino/cm_da/NRECPR.nsf/0/30f4b66025a95713ca256d32001b3521?OpenDocument>
- The Nature Conservancy Ecotourism Resource Page, <<http://nature.org/aboutus/travel/ecotourism/resources/>>
- World Heritage Landscapes, <http://www.iiasa.ac.at/Research/ERD/DB/data/env/env_1.htm>
- World Parks Congress Website, <<http://iucn.org/themes/wcpa/wpc2003/index.htm>>