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Outdoor Recreation in the United States: The Quiet Explosion

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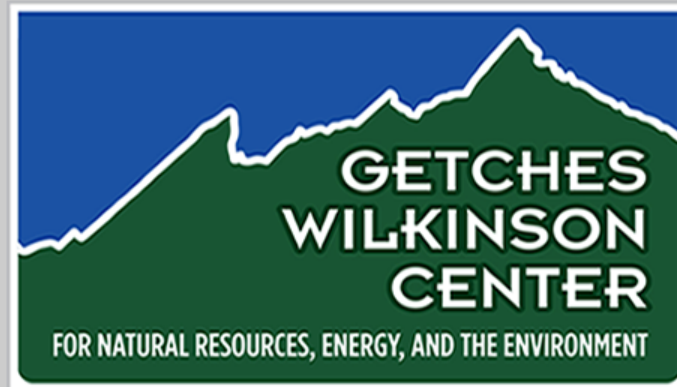
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Outdoor Recreation in the United States: The Quiet Explosion

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Prepared for

Outdoor Recreation: Promise and Peril in the New West

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I Summary

The dilemma of recreation in the New West is defined by the fact that it simultaneously holds both the promise of easing the economic and environmental effects of older extraction-based industry, and the peril of additive costs. Both are underlined by the potential to either ease or exacerbate the alienation of people from their local landscapes. Recent statistics bear out the "quiet explosion": outdoor recreation is growing, demand is and will continue to rise, and "non-consumptive" activities are leading the way. This current wave of growth must be set against longer trends in the history of the development of recreation resources in the West. We can identify four distinct, though overlapping, "ages" based on modes of transportation, materials, equipment, and other characteristics: the "Victorian Age" of railroad-based touring (1870s-1910); the "Beauty Engineer Age" (1890s-1930s) marked by the beginnings of automobile travel and the grudging inclusion of recreation within the land management agencies; the "Industrial Age" (1945 to present) that coincided with the post-WWII economic boom, marked by the growth of recreation as a mass industry; and a still emerging "Post-Industrial, Post-Modern Age" marked by the annihilation of recreational time and space through new technologies in the increasingly service-oriented economy. In sum, we see a long trend toward greater numbers, greater mobility, greater wealth, and greater access to recreational resources. This accounts mainly for the dominant waves of development of recreational resources; more localized, home-based recreational activities should not be overlooked. In this discussion, we need to remind ourselves too that there is a deeper implicit peril, marked by the increasingly fragile nature of human communities; that conservation and outdoor recreation cannot be assumed to have the same goals; that the relationship between quantity and quality in outdoor recreation has always been problematic; that recreation not as consumption, but as the *creation of outdoor satisfactions*, yet holds potential for defusing the perils and realizing the promise.

- II Defining the promise and the peril
 - A Opening the discussion of the "accounting"
 - 1 The promise: recreation as more benign, environmentally sensitive, sustainable form of development
 - 2 The peril: recognizing the ecological, economic, political, and social risks
 - B Recognizing the deeper peril and promise
 - 1 Seeking to reconnect people to landscape through this transition
 - 2 The potential for further alienation from the land

- III Assessing the explosion
 - A Some statistics
 - 1 The key long-term indicators: human population, life expectancy, size of the automobile fleet, price of gasoline. We are more numerous, live longer, and are more mobile.
 - 2 Results from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (1994-94): size of the outdoor market; most popular activities; trends in land-based recreation
 - B Corroborate observation that out recreation is large and getting larger, with demand rising as a result of human longevity, economic prosperity, "migration" of retirees, and other factors
 - C Need for longer-term time scale to appreciate current explosion

- IV Four "Ages" of modern recreation in the West
 - A Compare Lewis Mumford's classification of periods in the history of technology based on use of materials, energy sources, modes of organization
 - B Four distinct but overlapping periods
 - 1 The Victorian Age -- 1870s to around 1910. Those of relative wealth and leisure able to travel, by railroad, to charismatic landscapes (Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Glacier, etc.). Railroad and telegraph are the key technologies, with important political alliances between railroads and proto-conservationists
 - 2 The "Beauty Engineer" Age -- 1920s to 1930s. (Named in honor of Arthur Carhart, first landscape architect in the US Forest Service. Marked by the gradual and somewhat grudging acceptance of recreation and aesthetics as subsidiary concerns within the professionalized conservation movement. Much greater political visibility with Theodore Roosevelt and other leaders at the forefront. Culmination in the mid-1920s National Conferences on Outdoor Recreation. Key technologies include the automobile and new equipment materials (rubber aluminum, etc.).
 - 3 The Industrial Age -- from 1945 to present. Marked by growth of recreation as a mass industry, and its inclusion within the "multiple use" mix in land management. Feeds and feeds off the rise of environmentalism as a political movement. Key technologies include expanded auto and air travel, outdoor

- gear (especially new synthetics), cameras, television.
- 4 The Post-Industrial, Post-Modern Age -- early 1980s (?) and accelerating! Recreation becomes critical sector within more service-oriented, globalizing, high-tech economy. Key technologies include computer, cable TV, cell phone; new modes of "micro-transportation" allow expansion of recreation activities in time and space.
- C Summary of trends: after 100 years of increasing attention to recreation, there are vastly more of us, we are vastly more mobile through space and time, we are less tied to our local landscapes or local conditions, we are wealthier and more diverse, we are creating and filling ever more recreational niches
- D But caveats: this schema focuses on a subset of activities that have come to dominate our view of outdoor recreation, and by implication focuses mainly on activities that take place on public lands, or using public resources. Also overlooks quieter, more local, more home-based recreational activities, e.g., gardening.
- V Looking ahead: some closing/opening observations
- 1 Let's not disregard the deeper peril: the impact of the recreation industry and economy on community.
 - 2 Let's not confuse conservation with an interest in and passion for outdoor recreation.
 - 3 Let's not suppose that there is any simple relationship between quantity and quality in the pursuit of outdoor recreation, either personally or societally.
 - 4 Let's not forget the literal meaning of re-creation. Aldo Leopold (138): "The disquieting thing in the modern picture is the... motorized ant who swarms the continents before learning to see his own back yard, who consumes but never creates outdoor satisfaction."