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**Conflict Among User Groups:  
An Overview of Major Issues and Opportunities**

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**OUTDOOR RECREATION:  
PROMISE AND PERIL IN THE NEW WEST**

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Natural Resources Law Center  
University of Colorado School of Law  
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## **Conflict Among User Groups: An Overview of Major Issues and Opportunities**

### **I. Summary**

Conflict among user groups has become one of the most pervasive and perturbing issues facing managers of outdoor recreation settings in the West. Public land agencies, already struggling to cope with declines in staffing that have accompanied the move toward a balanced federal budget, have had to deal with a steady increase in the number and complexity of situations in which one or more recreation groups has been at odds with each other or with another public land constituency. Perhaps nowhere is this situation more difficult than in the forests and rangelands that surround the growing communities of the “New West.”

Conflict is typically defined in outdoor recreation management as “goal interference attributed to another’s behavior” (Jacob and Schreyer 1980). This definition assumes that people engage in recreation activities to satisfy certain motives and achieve desired outcomes. Because motivations and desired outcomes differ across recreation activities — e.g., backcountry skiers may be much more likely than snowmobilers to seek places where they can escape the sounds of the city — conflict is said to result when the activities of one group restrict another group’s ability to achieve its goals for a recreation experience.

Recently this definition has been criticized for its inadequacy on several grounds. First, it doesn’t account for recreationists who perceive a conflict because of beliefs about appropriate behavior irrespective of whether their experience goals are infringed upon. Second, it focuses on conflict at the recreation site, yet conflicts between user groups are played out largely in interactions with managers and policy-makers who attempt to manage or resolve problems associated with shared use of recreation settings.

Perhaps a more useful way of looking at recreation conflict can be found in discussions of natural resource conflicts that occur outside the realm of outdoor recreation. Amy (1987) describes three

general sources of conflict: *misunderstandings*, when parties are differently informed about an issue; *interests*, in which people want to use the same resource for different things; and *values*, in which disputants differ in deeply rooted beliefs about what is “right.” The goal interference model refers almost entirely to interest conflicts, yet one can easily imagine recreation conflicts that arise from misunderstanding (“I thought this area was off-limits to snowmobiling”) or values (“I hate snowmobilers because they selfishly pollute the backcountry with their noise and exhaust”).

If outdoor recreation conflict is indeed on the rise in our part of the West, there is likely to be several reasons for this. Foremost of these is the continued proliferation of “new” activities that can be enjoyed in dispersed recreation settings. Population growth in both urban and rural areas of the West has led to perceived crowding at many recreation settings, which tends to intensify disputes between constituencies that must share those settings. And recreation conflict mirrors the trends in environmental politics overall — as the political environment becomes increasingly contentious, recreationists have learned to organize activity-focused interest groups that have successfully used the same political and legal tactics as commodity and preservation groups.

When we think of outdoor recreation conflicts, we are likely to imagine disagreements between participants in two different activities which are wholly or partly incompatible. Recent examples from outdoor recreation research include: horse packers versus hikers (Watson *et al.* 1994), horse packers versus llama packers (Blahna *et al.* 1995), hikers versus mountain bike users (Watson *et al.* 1991), and power boaters versus river rafters (Cole 1989). However, conflict can also occur between participants in the same activity. Such conflicts may result from differing ways to enjoy the same activity — as when catch-and-release fly fishers perceive conflict with anglers who use bait and/or eat their catch — or from disagreements about the management emphasis that should be given to commercially outfitted versus non-outfitted users of recreation settings.

There are also conflicts between recreation users and other natural resource stakeholders. A classic example involves conflicts between recreation interests and advocates of commodity land uses. For example, timber companies and timber-dependent communities may oppose plans to

designate a stream as a Wild and Scenic River (16 U.S.C.A. §§ 1271-87) because such designation carries restrictions on logging that can reduce visual quality. A variant on this theme that is increasingly common involves conflict between recreation interests and environmental organizations. Such conflicts most often involve groups such as the Blue Ribbon Coalition that advocate motorized recreation and oppose plans to close or obliterate roads, but increasingly there are examples of environmental organizations calling for restrictions on non-motorized uses which they believe might pose a potential threat to wildlife, rare plants, or other ecological values.

Finally there are outdoor recreation conflicts between public land managers and their constituents. Managers tend to see themselves as “just doing their jobs” as stewards of the land or mediators between competing interests, but persons angry over unfavorable solutions to shared-use problems often see managers as being as culpable as those who hold the competing interests. Conflicts can also occur entirely within agencies as managers whose primary responsibility is recreation disagree with colleagues responsible for commodities or environmental protection.

Jacob and Schreyer (1980) identified four “major factors” which can be used to predict the intensity of perceived conflict and the likelihood that conflict will be perceived. One such factor is the personal meanings that people attach to activities; e.g., the extent to which an individual’s self-concept is linked to the activity. A second factor is the significance attached to using a particular setting for a particular activity. Still another factor is the mode of experience for a particular activity, since people may be more likely to perceive conflict if their preferred activity involves continued awareness of their entire environment rather than focused attention (as when a bicyclist hurtling down a mountainside must concentrate fully on the trail ahead). The fourth factor is the perceiver’s tolerance for lifestyles different from his or her own.

Managers have several options for addressing situations of conflicts over shared use of recreation settings. Although we often hear references to “conflict resolution” — and some of us may even make our livings through that activity — it may be more reasonable to refer to these as strategies for conflict *management*. The latter term accounts for the fact that recreation use conflicts often

cannot go away entirely since they are rooted in fundamental differences over how one should experience the natural environment. It also is consistent with the idea put forth by social theorists that conflict serves a crucial function in the maintenance of societies.

In a sense, all conflicting interests are likely to attempt to “manage” conflicts in ways that can tilt the balance of a dispute in their favor. Lincoln (1990) describes a continuum of these strategies which vary according to the intensity of the conflict. In order from lowest to highest intensity, these strategies include: inaction, negotiation, facilitation, mediation, arbitration, administrative appeal, judicial appeal, legislative appeal, non-violent civil disobedience, violence.

Public agencies also undertake to manage conflict as part of their legal mandates to balance the needs and interests of multiple constituencies. Again, these may vary according to the intensity of the conflict, since organizations are motivated to choose the least costly approaches (in terms of dollars, time, and personnel) first. Initial efforts are likely to focus on education/information campaigns, often in conjunction with increased enforcement of existing regulations. If those fail, managers may change rules that segregate or otherwise restrict some or all recreation uses, or they may seek solutions through design or construction of on-site facilities.

Because solutions in this second category are frequently disputed by one or more parties and can be very costly if they prompt administrative or judicial appeals, agencies increasingly promote collaborative decision-making processes that allow the conflicting interests themselves to join in crafting a way to minimize the conflict. Such processes hold promise, but they require managers to have “people skills” that go beyond the traditional leadership skills required of natural resource professionals (Rasmussen and Brunson 1996), and they must be carefully organized in order to ensure that they are consistent with the Federal Advisory Committee Act (5 U.S.C. Appendix 2).

## II. Definitions

- A. Conflict in outdoor recreation typically is defined in terms of social-psychological consequences of on-site interaction, following Jacob and Schreyer (1980) who defined conflict as “goal interference attributed to another’s behavior” (p. 369).
- B. A frequently observed phenomenon in recreation conflict situations is “asymmetric antipathy,” which is said to occur one party perceives conflict with another due to goal interference, but the second party experiences little or no goal interference from the first and thus perceives no conflict (e.g., Adelman *et al.* 1982).
- C. Recently the Jacob and Schreyer (1980) definition has been criticized for failing to describe the full range of conflicts that center around outdoor recreation.
  - 1. There may be occasions when people simply feel that others in a shared setting should not behave as they do, regardless of whether that behavior interferes with their ability to achieve desired outcomes; e.g., some people may believe loud radios are inappropriate at the beach even if escape is not among their recreation goals (Ruddell and Gramann 1994).
  - 2. Jacob and Schreyer’s conceptualization focuses on causes and symptoms within the recreation setting itself, yet recreation conflict is often manifested in the policy arena through public debates over appropriate uses of recreation settings or through administrative and judicial actions intended to force or prevent restrictions on one or more user group.
  - 3. Much of what is termed “asymmetric antipathy” is in fact two-way conflict in which one group perceives the conflict on-site while the other perceives it off-site as soon as the first group attempts to influence policy to improve its ability to achieve its goals (e.g., by imposing restrictions on uses that are seen as interfering with them).
- D. Further insight can be found in analyses of non-recreation environmental conflicts. Amy (1987) describes conflict as arising from any of three sources.
  - 1. Misunderstanding-based conflicts surface if there is inadequate access to available information or differing interpretations of the information.



2. Interest conflicts occur when people want to use the same resources for different things. In the case of recreation, visitors may want to use the same landscape to pursue activities that are partly or fully incompatible (e.g., skiing and snowboarding; fly fishing and water skiing).
3. Value conflicts are based on differences in the deeply rooted beliefs of user group members regarding proper modes of conduct and/or desirable end-states. Often outdoor recreation can be a symptom of higher-order value conflicts, as when “urban environmentalists” who enjoy backcountry skiing move to rural communities where snowmobiling is the predominant recreation activity for longtime residents employed by extractive industries.
4. Some experts in the field of conflict resolution (e.g., Burton 1990) suggest that only value-based disagreements truly qualify as conflict. Burton refers to the other types as “disputes.”

### III. Conflict’s Rise to Prominence in Recreation Management

- A. As new activities such as snowboarding, mountain biking, llama packing, or jet skiing have become popular in the past decade, so has conflict between groups.
  1. The potential for conflict with other recreation users grows exponentially with each new activity at a given site, because each user group can have points of negative interaction with participants in all of the other activities.
  2. Exacerbating the situation is the tendency for participants in more traditional pursuits such as hiking, horse riding, downhill skiing or water skiing to view those who enjoy newer activities as “interlopers” who do not deserve equal standing in disputes over territory or regulations.
- B. Perceived crowding associated with increased recreation use tends to cause simmering disagreements to intensify into full-blown conflict.
  1. Use of outdoor recreation settings seems to be growing nationwide after a period of stagnation during the 1980s, and nowhere is this more evident than in the mountains outside New West metropolises such as Denver, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, or Portland.

2. While sheer numbers of recreationists may be smaller in rapidly growing rural areas such as Durango, Moab, Jackson, or Bend, recreation conflicts in such places can be intractable because new migrants — for whom outdoor recreation often is a chief reason for moving — may pursue different activities than longtime residents who are already distressed by the sudden increase in use of their outdoor backyards.
- C. Activity-focused interest groups such as the Blue Ribbon Coalition, Access Fund, or National Off-Road Bicycle Association use more sophisticated political/legal strategies than the more local or loosely organized recreation groups of the past.

#### IV. Categories of Outdoor Recreation Conflict

- A. The most typical form of recreation conflict is that which occurs between participants in two different activities that are wholly or partly incompatible yet must share a recreation setting. There are hundreds of pairs of such activities, but some of the most common ones include:
1. Participants in non-motorized activities such as cross-country skiing, whitewater boating, and backpacking typically perceive conflicts with persons who enjoy motorized pursuits. Such conflicts can be extremely contentious. For example, Floyd (1993) developed a model of rangeland conflict intensity based on the degree of similarity of competing interests. He later reported (pers. comm.) that his model worked well except in the case of motorized versus non-motorized recreation conflicts.
  2. Inter-activity conflicts often occur if participants in one activity tend to see another activity as promoting reckless or unsafe behavior. Conflicts involving horse riders often fall into this category, since horses may spook at the sight of llamas or mountain bikes if encountered on the trail. Hiker-bicyclist conflicts can also fall into this category. In water-based recreation, the popularity of personal watercraft has led to an increase in these sorts of conflicts.

3. Activities whose participants tend to be especially sensitive to the presence of others (at least in terms of the number of times they appear in scientific or popular articles about recreation conflict) include fishing, Nordic skiing, whitewater boating, and wilderness backpacking.
- B. Conflicts can also occur within activities due to differences in the ways that people prefer to participate in that activity.
1. Variation in experience levels can lead to conflicts within activities, as more skilled participants may prefer not to share areas with groups they identify as less-experienced (e.g., Boy Scouts versus veteran backpackers).
  2. Experience levels can be correlated with status hierarchies in some sports. The classic example is fishing, where fly anglers may prefer not to share a fishery with anglers who use bait and/or spinning gear. Rock climbing also has disagreements between purists and other participants.
  3. Outfitters and their clients may come into conflict with non-outfitted participants in the same activity. On several western rivers where boating use is restricted, there are ongoing disputes over the proportion of permits allocated to outfitted boaters. An especially contentious, ongoing conflict in the Salt Lake City area is between non-outfitted backcountry skiers and those who hire helicopters to gain access to the slopes.
- C. Conflicts also occur between recreation participants and other natural resource constituencies.
1. The most typical of these involve conflicts between recreation interests and commodity uses such as timber harvesting, mining, or livestock grazing.
  2. Increasingly there are conflicts between recreation users and environmental organizations. Although preservation groups sometimes oppose non-motorized recreation uses, most often these conflicts involve motorized activities such as OHV or motorcycle riding that environmental activists see as detrimental to wildlife and other resources. Fears about erosion of “rights” to motorized access led to formation of the Blue Ribbon Coalition.

3. Similar kinds of conflicts have arisen between recreation interests and advocates for Native American cultural rights — cf. the ongoing argument over climbing access to Devil’s Tower, Wyoming — and between animal rights activists and hunters or recreational trappers.
- D. Participants in recreation activities often perceive conflicts with managers whom they blame for decisions which somehow reduce their ability to participate in a preferred activity at optimum times and places. In such cases managers may not see themselves as part of the conflict (though they typically recognize that others are displeased with them). Within agencies, there also can be conflicts between managers responsible for recreation uses and those who focus on other resources.

#### V. Factors that Can Enhance the Likelihood of Recreation Conflict

- A. While the concept of recreation “activity” implies a more or less standard set of behaviors, people may place different personal meanings on the same behavior. These differences in meanings can make persons more sensitive to conflict under certain situations.
1. Some people may view their activity as a central life interest — a critical source of rewards outside work. Often such persons choose jobs or places to live because they enhance opportunities to participate in that activity.
  2. Persons who perceive their mode of activity as having higher status — e.g., fly fishers as opposed bait fishers, or sport climbers as opposed to “top-ropers,” are more likely to perceive conflict with others.
  3. More experienced participants tend to be more susceptible to conflict.
- B. If a person attaches a special meaning to a particular place for engaging in a particular activity — because of its superior qualities for engaging in the activity or because of an emotional “attachment to place” — conflicts with other users may be more likely to occur.
- C. A major component of a recreation experience is interaction with the natural environment, but some activities allow more awareness of the environment than

others. Participants in activities that require more focus on their personal behaviors (e.g., bicyclists or motorcyclists who must concentrate on the trail ahead or risk crashing) are less susceptible to conflict perceptions than those engaged in less physically demanding activities that allow more time to enjoy surroundings.

- D. Some outdoor recreation participants may have greater or lesser tolerance for diversity in lifestyles. Conflicts over nude sunbathing are often rooted in this phenomenon. Non-motorized recreationists may be intolerant of people who use motors in the outdoors; conversely intolerance may be one explanation for the antipathy of longtime rural residents toward recreation pursuits that are preferred by new migrants.

## VI. Strategies for Conflict Management

- A. Conflicts often are more effectively addressed if the focus is on “managing” rather than “resolving” them. Resolution may be an unrealistic goal for two reasons.
  - 1. Conflicts often are rooted in basic value differences, i.e., fundamental disagreements about the proper way to experience the environment which are not easily “resolved.”
  - 2. Many sociologists believe that conflict, rather than being a symptom of dysfunction in society, plays a vital role in the evolution and maintenance of social institutions (Bernard 1983).
- B. Strategies to “manage” conflict in a particular direction can be adopted by all competing interests, who may use a wide range of approaches ranging from cooperative persuasion to violence against others.
- C. Public land agencies have management tools for recreation conflict that can be employed both on- and off-site. Typically agencies try to first use approaches that do not entail changes in the site or its management. These are favored because they are inexpensive in terms of dollars, time, and personnel, and because they are less controversial among recreationists.

1. Education/information campaigns are often the first strategy tried when a conflict arises. Often these focus on teaching proper etiquette, as when hikers are told to step to the downslope side of a trail when approached by horse riders or a pack string.
  3. Often educational approaches are coupled with efforts at improved enforcement of existing boundaries of segregated use and/or rules against depreciative behaviors.
- D. If education and enforcement fail, managers are likely to adopt strategies that change the physical and/or managerial characteristics of the setting.
1. The standard way to do this is to segregate uses. This approach ensures that recreationists have a place where they know their experiences won't be diminished by interference from others. The disadvantage is that the total area available to participants in all or some activities is reduced. Motorized users dislike this approach because usually their territory is reduced while non-motorized users retain free access to the entire setting.
  2. For this reason, groups such as the Blue Ribbon Coalition favor solutions that "design out" conflict — e.g., by straightening blind corners on a road or trail, or widening trails so there is room for all to pass. Some agencies are more amenable to design solutions than others.
- E. Increasingly agencies seek collaborative solutions to problems of shared use.
1. Such processes allow the conflicting interests themselves to join in crafting ways to minimize conflict. For example, if hikers and OHV users are able to jointly choose locations for segregated use, they may be able to agree on areas they are more willing to "give up" to the competing interest, rather than having managers choose the sites and face acrimony from all sides.
  2. These approaches build on theories of procedural justice (e.g., Lind and Tyler 1989) which suggest that people are more willing to accept unfavorable outcomes if they had a hand in designing the process by which the decision was made, and believe that process was fair.

- F. Collaborative processes hold promise, but they remain largely unproven and pose some new challenges to outdoor recreation managers.
1. They require skillful management by people with “people skills” that may be rare within agencies because they surpass the traditional leadership skills required of natural resource professionals (Rasmussen and Brunson 1996).
  2. There can be enormous time demands for collaborative processes.
  3. Some interests shy away from participation in collaborative processes, believing either that their interests are more likely to be served by alternative to a negotiated settlement, or that they cannot allow their values to be compromised by offering concessions to a competing interest.
  4. Agencies are leery of violating the Federal Advisory Committee Act (5 U.S.C. Appendix 2). The structure of collaborative processes must be carefully designed to ensure consistency with the tenets of FACA and the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C.A. §§ 4231-61).

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