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Bruce R. Brown

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**OUTDOOR RECREATION AND WATER DEVELOPMENT:  
THE NATIONAL RECREATION LAKES STUDY**

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National Recreation Lakes Study

Outdoor Recreation:  
Promise And Peril in The New West

June 8-10, 1998

Natural Resources Law Center  
University of Colorado  
School of Law  
Boulder, Colorado

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# **Outdoor Recreation and Water Development: The National Recreation Lakes Study**

By Bruce R. Brown

The Omnibus Parks and Public Land Management Act of 1996, Public Law 104-333, created the National Recreation Lakes Commission, to be appointed by the President to conduct a study “... to review the current and anticipated demand for recreational opportunities at Federally managed man-made lakes and reservoirs, and to develop alternatives for enhanced recreation use of such facilities.”

## **I. Demand and values of water-based recreation**

### **A. The most popular recreation activities are water-based.**

1. More than 90 percent of all Americans participate in some form of outdoor recreation. Water is the number one recreation attraction in America. About 75% of all recreation occurs within 1/4 mile of a land/water interface.
2. Water-based recreation consistently ranks among the most popular activities in Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans (SCORPs) prepared in compliance with the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act. Swimming in lakes, streams and oceans is ranked among the top ten recreation activities; lakes and oceans remain the top vacation destination in America.
3. Whether one uses aquatic resources to swim, boat, ski, fish or simply take advantage of surrounding resources such as bicycle paths, walkways and hiking trails, water is a recreation resource that offers rest, relaxation, fun and fitness. According to a 1994-95 survey, Americans spent 1.24 billion days recreating at lakes, streams or oceans, an increase of 38.2% over the

prior ten-year period. For families participating in outdoor recreation activities, lakes, rivers and streams were the second most popular destination. Participation in water skiing increased 12.6% from 1982 to 1995. Motor boating increased 39.9% over that same period while overall participation in the several forms of boating rose 17.4%.

**B. The Federal Government administers significant water recreation resources.**

1. The Federal Government owns or manages 1,795 man-made lakes and reservoirs nationwide. These lakes formed behind dams built by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Corps of Engineers, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, National Park Service, Tennessee Valley Authority, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army, and U.S. Navy (including the Marine Corps). Fifty-four percent (972) are located in the 17 Western States. More than 600 State parks are located on Federal lakes and reservoirs.
2. There were 1.5 billion visits to federally-managed public land in 1995. Recreation visitation is expected to increase 2% annually over the next 20 years.
3. More interesting statistics about Federal lakes:
  - 47% of all lake fishing (excluding the Great Lakes) occurs at Federal lakes.
  - 97% of the federally-managed, manmade lakes and reservoirs are located within 50 miles of a city (one hour drive or less).

**C. Recreation is not only a health and social necessity, it is a substantial contributor to the Nation's wealth.**

1. Recreation constitutes 10.5% of all consumer spending and contributes over \$350 billion annually to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It's estimated that \$180 billion of recreation GDP is generated by visitation to federally-managed public land.

2. Water related recreation and tourism create jobs and generate revenues for local and regional economies. The total economic impact associated with recreation at Federal lakes in excess of 1,000 surface acres (490) is \$44 billion annually. The total employment associated with recreation at those Federal lakes is 637,000.
3. For example, the Corps of Engineers, administer only 2% of the federally-managed public land, but drew 380 million visitors to its lakes in 1994, who spent over \$12 billion on recreation, and provided for 187,000 jobs.

## **II. Development and Management Challenges**

### **A. Facilities are in need of rehabilitation.**

1. Many of the existing recreation facilities at manmade lakes are in need of rehabilitation but the costs of needed repairs are beyond the means of current Federal and State government budgets. Eighty-four percent of the 1,975 Federal lakes and reservoirs are 25 years old or older.
2. For example, a 1989 survey indicated the backlog of recreation rehabilitation and expansion needs at Bureau of Reclamation projects to exceed \$400 million.

### **B. Construction and maintenance funds are a limiting factor.**

1. Many Federal manmade lakes could accommodate more recreation but the costs of construction and maintenance of access roads, bathhouses, swimming beaches, trails, fishing piers, campgrounds, boat ramps and other facilities are beyond the means of current Federal budgets for those purposes.
2. Federal and State budgets suggest that improvements are unlikely without greater involvement by the private sector.

- C. **Agency policy and procedures may need reform.**
1. **Current Federal agency practices to allow for commercially provided facilities and services need to be reviewed and improved.**
  2. **There needs to be better collaboration among the Federal management agencies so that policies and programs reflect the needs of whole communities, and not just the needs of distant and separate agencies.**
- D. **Some legislation stymies partnership opportunities.**
1. **Concession reform has been on the Congress' agenda for more than 20 years. GAO has performed over 30 reviews with the issues centering on competition to bid and fair return for the privilege to operate on Federal land.**
  2. **More than 25 years ago Congress required local non-Federal entities to cost-share in the construction of new recreation facilities at Federal water projects, and to assume all operation and maintenance costs; however, their inability to keep pace with current funding has resulted in many areas turned back to the Federal Government to manage either as minimum basic facilities or to close.**
  3. **Some in private industry argue there are not enough incentives to encourage high dollar investments on the Federal land.**
- E. **There must be more community involvement.**
1. **Local communities must be empowered by building local capacity for decision-making through quality information and technical assistance.**
  2. **We must take a closer look at how we go about our planning -- giving local communities an earlier, more in-depth role in the planning process as the norm, rather than the exception. Partnerships currently exist between the Federal, State and local governments and the private sector to provide and maintain some facilities on Federal manmade lakes. How to create more--and more successful--partnerships of this kind is one of the goals of the Commission's study.**



### **III. The National Recreation Lakes Study Commission**

- A. The Congress recognized the increasing demand of water-based recreation and the management problems facing the Federal stewards, and created the National Recreation Lakes Commission “. . . to review the current and anticipated demand for recreational opportunities at federally managed man-made lakes and reservoirs, and to develop alternatives for enhanced recreation use of such facilities.” In the authorizing law, the Omnibus Parks and Public Land Management Act of 1996, Public Law 104-333, the Commission is charged to:
1. Review the extent to which recreation components identified in specific authorizations associated with individual Federal man-made lakes and reservoirs have been accomplished;
  2. Evaluate the feasibility of enhancing recreation opportunities at federally managed lakes and reservoirs under existing statutes;
  3. Consider legislative changes that would enhance recreation opportunities consistent with and subject to the achievement of the authorized purposes of Federal water projects;
  4. Recommend alternatives for enhancing recreational opportunities, including the possible establishment of a National Recreation Lake System, where specific lakes would receive national designation and are managed through innovative partnership-based agreements between Federal agencies, State, and local governments, and the private sector;
  5. Ensure that the conservation of watershed and ecosystem values associated with man-made lakes, is a primary objective of the process to plan for recreation uses and construction of facilities.
- B. The nine-member Commission appointed by the President, includes representatives of the Interior, Agriculture, and Army Departments, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the National Governors' Association, and 4 other appointments that may represent local, tribal, environmental, or private interests.

- C. The Commission is staffed with senior professionals from the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, Fish & Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Forest Service and the Tennessee Valley Authority. They are at work gathering research and conducting stakeholder briefings for the Commissioners.

#### **IV. Study Approach**

- A. The first step was to develop an action plan to establish an interagency staff, identify issues, develop specific action steps, gather data, conduct workshops, appoint senior advisors/workgroups, draft finding reports, develop options, and make recommendations.
- B. Some of the issues to be studied are:
  - 1. How infrastructure improvements and management of facilities at these lakes could be accomplished through innovative partnerships with the public and private sectors.
  - 2. The viability of development by private interests of public attractions, such as marinas, lodgings, nature centers, visitor centers, golf courses, and other associated enhancements at Federal man-made lakes.
  - 3. Review the impacts of increased recreation on other project purposes such as power generation, irrigation, and wildlife protection at federally man-made lakes.
  - 4. Ways to protect the valuable environmental resources associated with lakes -- the water, fisheries, and surrounding ecosystems that were created when the dams were built and reservoirs formed.
  - 5. Whether or not it is advantageous to create a National Recreation Lakes System and how such a designation would be defined.
- C. The stakeholders will be involved through several means including public meetings

to identify the full range of issues and interests affected by its work. Through these various meetings, the Commission and staff will seek to identify senior advisors who could represent their individual group's position and provide valuable feedback to the Commission.

- D. The Commission's final report to the President and the Congress will consist of a series of options and remedies, including the possible creation of a National Recreation Lakes System and the criteria for such a designation.
  
- E. Some of the Commission's recommendations could be implemented through adoption of a new agency policies, while others may require enactment of Congressional legislation.

**V. Accomplishments/Expected Outcomes**

- A. The major accomplishments to date include:
  - 1. Identified major tasks to be accomplished and assigned staff responsibilities.
  - 2. Defined and identified the federally managed man-made lakes and reservoirs.
  - 3. Collected and analyzed general recreation data on 1,795 Federal lakes and more detailed recreation use information on the 490 largest lakes (those exceeding 1,000 surface acres).
  - 4. Listed and analyzed legislation and audits which may effect Federal lake recreation.
  - 5. Involved numerous stakeholder groups
  - 6. Developed a Communications Plan and produced a:
    - Brochure
    - Fact Sheet
    - Web Page [www.doi.gov/nrls](http://www.doi.gov/nrls)
    - Article in People, Land and Water (Interior's Newsletter)

7. Conducted a workshop on the effects of increased recreation use.
8. Conducted a workshop on the barriers to public/public and public/private partnerships.
9. Prepared preliminary draft papers on:
  - Economic and demand analysis
  - Carrying capacity
  - Barriers to public/private use
  - Recreation funding and revenue generation
  - Impacts of recreation on other project purposes
  - Protection of lake ecosystems
  - Suggested qualities and criteria for a National Recreation Lake System

**B. A proposed list of expected outcomes include:**

1. Increase the awareness of the importance of the unique Federal lake settings and the highly sought after recreation opportunities and benefits they provide - both socially and economically.
2. Show that the demand and potential for increased water recreation activities is high.
3. Provide a data base of information about recreation at all Federal lakes.
4. Identify solutions to providing enhanced opportunities, particularly through public/public and public/private partnerships.
5. Bring together a community of stakeholders who have a shared view of the benefits of water related recreation -- to revitalize communities, conserve natural resources and promote physical and mental well-being.
6. Develop a list of facilities that can best be developed by the private sector.
7. Develop a more unified Federal approach to water recreation management.

## **VI. Challenge to Stakeholders**

### **A. Provide input to the study.**

1. Provide technical information on applied surveys and research.
2. Help develop a list of ways to increase recognition of the values associated with public access to water recreation.
3. Help define existing and potential recreation opportunities around Federal lakes.
4. Characterize current and future local demand for water based recreation.
5. Share research and findings/recommendations on enhancing water recreation.
6. Help develop communication plans to solicit input and inform stakeholders.
7. Offer guidance on strategies for balancing increased recreation use with stewardship of the natural resource.
8. Identify areas where we can find common ground to work on projects to meet the recreating public's needs; improve customer and user services; and continue to improve the environment using best management practices.

### **B. Be an advocate for the recommendations.**

1. Be a primary advocacy organization representing recreation managers and producers of products used in recreation activities.
2. Champion support and carry the message -- information transfer.
3. Be an advocate for investments which enhance public recreation resources and experiences.
4. Support State and local entities in their efforts to meet growing demand for close-to-home, accessible and affordable recreation.
5. Help to solidify the recreation community and to explain benefits to other groups.
6. Contact your local, State, and National elected officials and community leaders to develop opportunities for Federal lake recreation enhancements.
7. Additionally, when the Commission's report is distributed, contact your

**local recreation manager and assist them in adopting the report's recommendations.**

- C. See that the ethics of stewardship, the principles of sustainable communities, and the principles of community-based problem solving are woven into the fabric of the National Recreation Lakes Study.**
- D. Visit our web site at, <http://www.doi.gov/nrls>, to learn more about the National Recreation Lakes Study Commission.**