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**THE NEW CHALLENGE
OF
OUTDOOR RECREATION**

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Outdoor Recreation:
Promise And Peril in The New West

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Natural Resources Law Center
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The New Challenge of Outdoor Recreation

by Roz McClellan

Outdoor recreation is perhaps the most transformative force affecting public lands today. In the permanence and pervasiveness of its impacts, outdoor recreation has the potential to overshadow traditional extractive uses such as logging and mining. While less damaging *on-site* than logging and mining, outdoor recreation has the potential to extend human influence over much greater expanses of public lands than do mining and logging. And, while impacts from mining and logging are often recoverable over the long term, recreational trail systems, once established, become permanent features of the landscape.

Outdoor recreation has been, in the past, an ally of land conservation. Initiatives such as the Appalachian Trail, the Land and Water Conservation Fund and, more recently, Great Outdoors Colorado were founded upon the twin goals of nature preservation and recreation. However, at current levels of population growth and recreational technology, outdoor recreation may not continue to be compatible with preserving natural values. Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Jim Lyons says that by the year 2000, recreation will account for \$97.8 billion of the \$130 billion generated by national forest activities, compared to \$3.5 billion generated by timber, \$1 billion by grazing and \$10.1 billion by minerals (High Country News 12/23/96).

Recreation impacts until recently have been limited to topography. Places too steep for cars and logging roads have remained relatively natural—inaccessible to intensive recreational use. However, in the past decade, new recreational technologies such as snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and mountain bikes are increasing access to previously little-used areas. Because of their high speed nature, these new uses require more terrain than do traditional biking and horse activities. Whereas a hiker or horseback rider might travel ten miles in a day, mountain bikes or trail motorcycles might need

double or triple that mileage for the same, one-day experience. Other new technologies such as infra-red scanners, global positioning systems and cellular phones are likewise expanding the limits of where and when people can access nature.

Recreational expansion into back country areas is challenging the quality of the back-country experience. Silence and solitude are giving way to high-use trail systems. Roadless lands which until recently had remained pristine enough to qualify for wilderness have become disqualified by higher levels of recreational use. For example, the Rio Grande National Forest's eight largest roadless areas, seven (totaling 256,000 acres of 21% of the Forest) are described as having established motorized use. None of the eight were recommended by the Forest Service for wilderness in the recent plan revision. Some Forest Service road closure programs are likewise jeopardized by pressures to keep logging roads open as mountain bike and motorized trails.

Among the fastest growing recreational uses are those which require large amounts of land. Examples of fast growing recreational uses are: mountain bicycling, snowmobiling, back-country ski hut touring, commercial outfitting and endurance events sponsored by off-road vehicle, mountain bike and jeep groups. Less land-intensive uses such as fishing and hiking are staying even or declining. For example, in the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest, while hiking and small game hunting are expected to decline between 1993 and 2005, snowmobile and mountain bike use are projected to double and triple respectively, with motorcycle and all-terrain vehicle use increasing by one third.

To a large degree, recreational development on public lands is occurring incrementally through social use, rather than passing through any formal decision process. Upgraded trail systems, whose impacts taken together would be great enough to require a NEPA evaluation, are established by users without ever going through the NEPA process. These new-user-created trail systems are often ratified by the public lands agencies after the fact, a process somewhat analogous to approving a "user created" timber sale.

Budget cuts in the agencies mean the agencies lack adequate funds either for enforcement of off-trail restrictions (for example, of ATV use during hunting season) or for maintenance of recreational facilities and trails. This is leading to a push for maintenance partnerships between federal land management agencies and the private sector which some people, for example, Dave Iverson, President of the Forest Service Association of Employees for Environmental Ethics, believe could lead to an "amusement park" atmosphere prevailing on public lands.

Biologists inside and outside of the agencies are concerned about the impacts of recreation on wildlife and wildlife habitat. Studies show that trails, like roads, fragment habitat into smaller patches, increase habitat edge and potentially reduce the abundance of some "habitat interior" species, such as brown creepers, nuthatches, vesper sparrows, northern three-toed woodpeckers and others. Trails have been shown to reduce breeding bird reproduction, for example of solitary vireos and Townsend solitaires, and to facilitate the spread of weeds and bird predators such as magpies, crows and blue jays into interior habitat areas.

New policies can be based on the array of coping strategies which land managers are currently improving to meet the challenge of recreational growth. Carrying capacity models, designated trail programs, timing and seasonal restrictions, habitat effectiveness models and Travel Management Plans are among the approaches which could form a basis for new recreational policies. Another potential policy tool is exemplified in a handbook on trails and wildlife which is being developed by the Colorado State Parks Department.

Recreation managers and wildlife biologists are beginning to formulate trail planning guidelines which recognize the need to conserve sensitive wildlife habitat in large blocks of unfragmented land. These guidelines include planning trails so as to protect riparian

and roadless areas, building trails along existing corridors rather than in pristine habitat, and concentrating—rather than dispersing—trail use.

The current expansion of outdoor recreation is a function of a growing and more mobile population with a hunger for physical challenge and access to nature. While conferring many social and economic benefits to society, outdoor recreation must be managed responsibly so as to maintain the natural attractions—scenery, natural values and an authentic outdoor experience—on which it is based.

Public education, self-regulation and self-restraint will be important components of any successful recreational policy. Another solution may be the reclamation, through landscaping and other means, of recreational settings in already disturbed areas, as a substitute for entering irreplaceable, naturally-evolved habitat. Ultimately, the National Park Service, with its “visitor experience/resource protection” models, may offer some of the best prospects for managing the human recreational experience so that it stays within the carrying capacity of the land.