

The Outdoor Resources Review

The Outdoor Resources Review is an initiative to assure that parks, outdoor recreation, open space and related issues are high on the American agenda as the new Administration takes office. It is important to keep these issues before decision-makers.

The basic elements of land conservation – parks, open space, wildlife protection – have been neglected over the past three decades by both Democratic and Republican Administrations. These essential elements of environmental quality should be brought back to prominence as a new Administration approaches. There are good precedents for doing so.

A small, bipartisan group will undertake a review of conservation, outdoor recreation and related issues in light of changes in the needs of the American public and the resources available to meet those needs since the last such review more than 20 years ago. It will also project anticipated changes and needs over the next 20 years. The group began work in 2008 and will report to the new Administration and the public in early 2009. The group will have the flexibility to assess current issues and to make recommendations for near-term action. If a Congressional or Presidential Commission is found to be needed to do more extensive study and analysis, the group will make recommendations as to the scope and structure of such an effort.

Senators Lamar Alexander and Jeff Bingaman have agreed to serve as honorary co-chairs of the advisory panel for the review. The National Geographic Society and The Conservation Fund have agreed to be partners and participate and support the effort. Funding will be through private philanthropy. Resources for the Future (RFF), the outstanding independent research institution, will provide a background assessment of the field that will form the basis of the review and serve as staff to the panel. Phase I of the initiative will result in the report to the new Administration and will take 11 months. Phase II will entail five months of follow-up activities.

The review will be in the tradition of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission of 1962 (ORRRC) and the Americans Outdoors Commission of 1987. ORRRC was a bipartisan study commission created by Congress made up of eight members of Congress and seven presidential appointees. It was chaired by Laurance S. Rockefeller. After three years of study, ORRRC made a series of recommendations leading to such landmark legislation as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Wilderness Act, the National System of Rivers and Trails, and a new Bureau of Outdoor Recreation within Interior.

This proposal is modeled on the review organized by Laurance Rockefeller 20 years after ORRRC, which led in turn to the Americans Outdoors Commission chaired by Governor Lamar Alexander. That group stressed the significance of the outdoors in American life, and recommended significant new federal funds and programs to meet outdoor recreation needs and proposed significant new conservation initiatives, including a national system of greenways and wildlife corridors.

These reports have had a major impact on America's efforts to conserve and protect its outdoor heritage and have been influential in raising the nation's concern for parks, refuges and open space at federal, state and local levels. However, the most recent of these studies is now more than 20 years old. Much has changed in the American landscape and many new concerns have arisen indicating the need for a new review. This effort will assess results to date in conserving our outdoor heritage and can be expected to suggest new programs and initiatives for the 21st century. It will consider urban issues as well as those involving threats to open space in rapidly developing regions of the West. It will take into account changes and emerging issues such as health, climate change and related programs such as agriculture and transportation.

The background assessment conducted by RFF will explore issues related to outdoor recreation demand, recreation supply, values and funding trends, and emerging issues and concerns in recreation, conservation, and open space. Following is more detail on the importance and scope of each of these elements in the assessment, which will inform the final report to the Administration.

Demand for Outdoor Recreation. Visitation to national parks in the U.S. has remained steady since the late 1980's, though on a per capita basis, visitation has declined slightly. On the other hand, visits to other types of public lands have risen. For example, National Wildlife Refuges have seen a steady increase, as have National Forests. And some data suggests that National Trails and Heritage Areas have become increasingly popular. It is time to take a closer look at the demand for visits and recreation on our public lands with an eye to how demand is likely to change in the future.

In addition, broader surveys of outdoors recreation provide some critical information on activities taking place on public lands. The National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, conducted by the Forest Service in partnership with two universities, gives a useful picture on recreation trends nationwide since the 1960s. Similarly, the Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation Survey, conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has been carried out for many years and provides good information on trends in wildlife-based recreation.

We will trace the patterns of participation in various kinds of outdoor recreation activities, calling on data and information from these surveys and others (some private organizations also conduct surveys). In addition, we will analyze how population growth, changes in demographics of population, increasing urbanization, changes in household incomes and the widening distribution of incomes all affect recreation demand and how those trends will affect recreation in the future. Likewise, we will look at the advances in technology that have taken place since the 1980s and the increases in availability of competing leisure activities and assess how these changes have affected outdoor recreation demand and are likely to do so in the future. Finally, special trends such as the growth in eco-tourism, agro-tourism, and most recently, a phenomenon that

the National Geographic is calling geo-tourism, all affect the demand for outdoor recreation. We will discuss these special trends as well.

The Value of Outdoor Recreation. Tracking participation and visits to parks and natural areas is useful, but a question that may be more important is the value of these resources. Valuation of a nonmarket good such as outdoor recreation must call on methods pioneered by Marion Clawson in the late 1950s that relied on travel costs as estimates of willingness to pay. Since that time, surveys, data, and estimation techniques have become increasingly sophisticated, but the basic principle of the approach remains the same. We will discuss the large body of literature that is available on the topic and describe remaining gaps.

Outdoor Recreation Supply. Federal lands make up almost 21 percent of the total area of the lower 48 states and 42 percent of lands west of the 100th meridian. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands account for much of these western lands and not all acreage is available for recreation. Some recent studies show, however, that recreation values on these lands are high and rising; in some cases, recreations values appear to be greater than the value of livestock grazing, a significant and often controversial activity on BLM lands.

Growth in acreage in the federal estate has been limited, but special designations such as wilderness and national rivers have increased appreciably since the 1980s. Recently, the National Trails System and National Heritage Areas have rapidly expanded. Moreover, state park systems have grown substantially nationwide.

To understand whether and how supply meets demand, we will look at acreage of different kinds of parks, open space, and recreation resources and the location of those lands. New advances in Geographic Information System (GIS) software allow for a more careful look at land uses than was possible 20 years ago. We will also document and discuss trends, such as the larger role now played by state and local governments, by land trusts, and by private actors. In addition, we will look at the role played by private lands and commercial provision of recreation. With conservation easements and other restrictions on development growing in popularity, the potential for recreation opportunities on privately-owned land may be growing. However, many issues remain with how those lands are managed and the degree of public access.

Funding. A number of important concerns about funding of parks, open spaces, and recreation resources exist and deserve further study. It will be important to track the trends in federal funding since the last review, including trends in funding for our most important resources such as national parks, as well as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), and other agencies such as the Forest Service. It will also be key to look more closely at the exact nature of the funding for some of these agencies. For example, recreation has become increasingly important on Forest Service lands, but much of the spending goes toward fire fighting and other activities. LWCF funding is split between federal land and water acquisition and grants to states; how has this changed over time? And money for preservation of open space has come from a diverse set of federal sources

in recent years, including those specifically for recreation. Both the number of referenda and the dollar amounts of funding approved have risen over time. We will explore the factors that seem to be explaining this movement and attempt to uncover where and how these monies are being spent.

Emerging Issues. There are a variety of new concerns on the horizon with respect to outdoor resources. For the background assessment, we will focus on the following issues:

- *Health concerns.* Sprawling development patterns without sidewalks, parks, and communal open space may be contributing to obesity. Also, parks, trees, and open space contribute to cleaner air and water, which has positive health effects. In general, there may be evidence of a link between health and access to the outdoors. We will discuss findings in this area.
- *Children and access to nature.* Similar to the concerns over health in general, some experts have decried the “nature deficit” experienced by children in the U.S. Literature on the topic is growing and we will summarize the findings and discuss the nature of the problem, if it is significant.
- *Tensions and synergies between conservation and recreation.* Natural areas and parks often provide the dual benefits of recreation and conservation. Wetlands, for example, provide wildlife habitat, floodwater retention, filtration of nutrients, and a variety of other ecosystem services, but they also can provide recreation benefits in the form of bird watching and duck hunting. But in many cases, there can be tensions among uses. What recreation activities should be allowed in wilderness areas is a source of debate, for example. We will address the issues here and discuss the literature on valuation with respect to this topic.
- *Tensions and synergies on public lands.* Public lands provide a range of uses but often those uses conflict with one another. Livestock grazing on BLM and Forest Service lands is one example; the damage that is done to riparian areas, the degradation of streams, weed infestations, and damage to wildlife areas that have high value for recreation is a source of tension. Off-road vehicle use has become a popular recreation activity on some BLM and Forest Service lands, yet the vehicles can damage fragile resources. We will document and discuss these concerns and analyze potential remedies.
- *Special problems for urban areas.* Approximately 80% of the U.S. population lives in urban areas. Although open space, parks, and recreation areas in close proximity to people’s homes may be highly valuable, city parks in the U.S. are uneven in quality both within and across cities. We will discuss trends in quality and quantity of parks, patterns and trends in funding, and special issues associated with the “smart growth” movement and with so-called “brownfields.”

- *Climate change.* No discussion of the environment and natural resources today is complete without an examination of the implications of climate change. We will assess climate change impacts on recreation resources, including issues associated with sea level rise, drought, and wildfires. We also will look at the ability of forests and conservation resources to reduce the impact of rising greenhouse gas emissions and the important role for offsets policy.

In summary, the Outdoor Resources Review will provide – as did the ORRRC and the reviews and commission that followed – a rigorous and thought-provoking analysis of the status of America’s outdoor recreation resources as well as identify emerging needs. It has tremendous potential to lead to significant new federal programs and increased attention to conservation, open space, and recreation resources.