

Positives and Negatives of Recreation in Riparian Areas

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The Wildland Recreation and Urban Culture Project of the Pacific Southwest Research Station has been in existence since 1987. With a focus of study on wildland areas, we have had excellent opportunities to study urban-rural interface issues. We have conducted many of our studies in riparian day-use areas because we have found such areas to be reliable contact points for recreationists.

Riparian Areas Attract People

Water is a drawing force for recreation. Riparian areas are cool and relaxing. One can either recreate in the water, or at the water's edge. Riparian areas are often shady, and if there is not enough natural shade we have discovered that our visitors will bring their own.

Riparian areas near large urban centers offer residents an opportunity for a brief escape from the hustle and bustle of the city and can attract users from further distances as well. Such areas invite a diversity of activities including, but not limited to, picnicking, swimming and wading, hiking, panning for gold, fishing, enjoying music, and cycling. However, "relaxing" is the activity that the majority of our users report engaging in on weekends.

The Importance of Relaxation

A day-use study from two years ago revealed that relaxation was not only engaged in as the primary activity, it also was selected as an activity that heavily contributed to one's sense of self (Chavez 1992). Riparian areas invite a diversity of users in different group sizes, different ethnicities, and varying degrees of physical mobility.

Ethnic Diversity

Site studies in southern California have revealed an increasing ethnic diversity over the past several years. For example, at the San Gabriel Canyon on the Angeles National Forest, visitors of Hispanic origin represent the majority (Simcox, Pfister, and Hodgson 1989). Ongoing studies are revealing large differences in the diversity of ethnic and racial groups represented between sites. The potential for adjacent communities to benefit from tourist dollars continues to exist, although many of our recreationists are repeat visitors (Chavez 1991) who live throughout southern California (Simcox, Pfister, and Hodgson 1989).

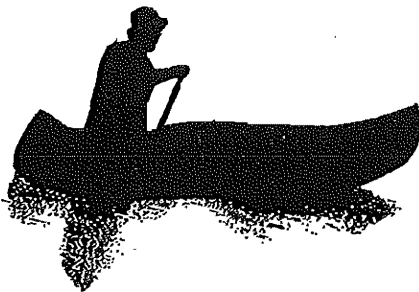
A Negative Side to Recreation in Riparian Areas

However, there is a negative side to recreation in riparian areas as well. As the popularity of an area increases so can the problems in that area. Problems are most likely to be experienced in riparian areas closest to large urban centers. More people are likely to visit, and those individuals, according to Ewert and Knopf (1989), may lack an appropriate land

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ethic because of their limited experience with the land. One set of problems occurs when riparian areas suffer from over-visitation. At times parking can be inadequate, leading visitors to leave their cars wherever an open area can be found. Toilet facilities may be inadequate, increasing the chances that people will relieve themselves in the stream or along the water's edge. Not only does this reduce esthetic value, but creates a health risk as well. Litter becomes more likely when trash cans are far and few between or are obviously overflowing.

With increasing numbers the recreation experience of individual visitors may be adversely affected. Recreationists may begin to experience a sense of crowding if the number of individuals in an area is greater than what they expected to encounter. Work by Debbie Chavez (1991) showed that crowding was perceived to be moderate to extreme by more than a third of the visitors at one site. That same study showed that a little over half of the visitors expected a larger crowd than was present. Current research by Heywood and Chavez is revealing that people hold a set of behavioral conventions for an area that may include the expectation of being crowded to the point of having people that they do not know walk through the site they are using. We believe that over time, recreationists who find the increasing popularity of an area and the accompanying changes to be undesirable, will be displaced to other areas. Findings by Hartley (1986) suggest that displacement occurs, although our work has yet to confirm these findings. A future series of day-use studies will shed more light on displacement.



Conflict becomes more likely as an area's popularity increases, and it is more intense near large urban centers. As the demand for recreation in urban-proximate areas continues to increase, the opportunities will probably remain at the same level, or be reduced, thereby leading to competition over a scarce resource. Even now, conflicts are occurring between users whose recreational choices are incompatible. Conflicts occur when a recreationist wishes to engage in an activity that has taken place in an area for years, but with increasing numbers may be viewed as unsafe.

A policy of multiple use requires that such potential conflicts be carefully considered and measures taken in advance to help avoid problems wherever possible. In some instances areas can be specifically designated for special use, such as for shooting. With such actions, however, comes the question of which uses will be allowed. Who, if anyone, can be excluded?

Meetings between resource managers and various user groups may also be helpful in reducing conflicts. We have found several instances of successful conflict resolution when representatives from multiple interest groups have met with resource managers (Chavez, Winter, and Baas 1993). There is the additional benefit of groups being more likely to accept a final decision when they have been able to participate in the decision making process.

Depreciative behaviors are likely to occur in areas with high use. Whether intentional, or unintentional, the impact upon a resource can be dramatic as evidenced by signs being knocked over, trash bins with graffiti, trees with carving on almost every inch of exposed bark, and litter. A multitude of underlying factors are related to these depreciative behaviors including differing land ethics and a desire to rebel when one feels unfairly dealt with. Our project is continuing to examine the dynamics behind depreciative behaviors and the best intervention strategies.

Some Recommendations

What has become very clear in examining all of these negatives is that communication with visitors is increasingly important and increasingly complex. While most of our visitors find out about recreation areas through word of mouth, once they arrive at the site several messages may need to be conveyed.

Activities permitted, hours of use, and habitat information would be a few examples. The use of signs in a resource area continues to be an effective medium for communication when used properly. Some considerations in signing that our research has uncovered include these:

(1) Signs should have messages that are short and simple. Few recreationists are motivated to read a sign that has complex and lengthy messages, and the messages might not be understood or remembered even if they are read;

(2) Signs should be positive whenever possible. People are more likely to respond and comply with positive messages than they are with negative ones. The one exception here would be if a visitor would be cited for a legal violation, in which case the disallowed behavior has to be clearly stated;

(3) Signs have to be carefully examined for the possibility of multiple interpretations; and

(4) Signs have to be multi-lingual in areas with diverse users (Simcox, Pfister and Hodgson 1989). If the majority of visitors to an area speak and read Spanish as their primary language, for example, then signs in the majority language should be provided.

Finally, communication is most effective when face-to-face, particularly if the communicator speaks the same language and is similar to the communication target (Cialdini 1988). Eco-teams of bilingual urban young adults are being used on the Angeles National Forest in cooperation with the California Environmental Project. Their purpose is to communicate messages about land ethics and other basic visitor information. While this program is very new, it appears to be quite promising.

Summary

In summary, riparian areas invite a diversity of activities and users. As riparian areas continue to increase in popularity as recreation sites, new management challenges are created. Concerns related to over-visitation, crowding, conflict, depreciative behaviors, and communication will only increase. We intend to continue to work on understanding and meeting those challenges.

"There is a direct link between recreation and family unity; between recreation and social cohesion; between recreation and the prevention of crime and juvenile delinquency, reduced health care costs, and local economic growth and diversity." The President's Commission on Americans Outdoors

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