

UNIT 3

Comprehensive Recreation Resource Planning Approach

The objective of Unit 3 is to describe the comprehensive approach to natural resource recreation planning and provide several examples of it. The comprehensive approach has been widely used by natural resource agencies for such efforts as river management planning, greenway and trail system planning, and state comprehensive outdoor recreation planning. This approach to recreation planning addresses issues and problems associated with *systems* of recreation resources spread out over a large area, region, or state. In this respect and several others, it differs from the protected area approach (to be covered in Unit 4) to planning, which focuses mainly on issues and problems associated with recreational impacts to wildlands. The comprehensive recreation planning approach has been heavily influenced by synoptic planning theory in terms of process and transactive planning in its emphasis on stakeholder involvement.

The comprehensive recreation planning process is described in Riverwork Book (1988), a technical assistance manual published by the National Park Service to guide stakeholders in river planning efforts. The process described in Riverwork Book is roughly the same whether planning for a multi-jurisdictional river corridor, a regional system of trails and greenways, or for a statewide recreation plan. Though comprehensive recreation planning is done differently depending on the project and agency involved, the process generally includes seven steps, which are described below.

Step 1: Developing the Planning Framework and Stakeholder Committee

The first step in the planning process is to specifically identify the problem that needs to be solved through planning. Usually, the planning problem is first detected by resource managers or dedicated stakeholders/recreationists. Planning problems frequently addressed through the comprehensive approach may relate to a lack of recreational resources in an area or region, intra-regional inequities in recreation resource delivery, conflict between user groups, lack of interagency coordination in managing recreation resources, funding concerns, etc. The planning problem may be as simple as the fact that a plan be conducted every five years to be eligible for federal funding.

Once the planning problem is defined, stakeholders are formally developed into a steering group or committee that will work collaboratively with the lead agency to develop the recreation plan. Chapter 3 of Riverwork Book, as well as the Carroll and Hendrix (1992) reading and the two readings on public involvement from Unit 2, provide a good justification for involving stakeholders throughout the comprehensive recreation planning process. The reading by Shindler and Neburka (1997) on public participation in forest planning describes numerous practical aspects of forming and maintaining a stakeholder group/committee.

Step 2: Issue Identification

Effective recreation planning responds to stakeholder needs and resolves stakeholder problems. During this step of the planning process, the stakeholder group comes together in a meeting or forum to identify the issues that relate to the planning problem described in the first step. For example, if a large county parks department has identified a lack of trail opportunities as an important planning problem, it then would need to identify, analyze, and prioritize the issues related to this problem. The issues might relate to distribution of current trails in the system, specific conflicts on certain trails, a lack of developed trailheads in the system, etc.

In addition to the stakeholder committee, other public involvement techniques might be used to identify important issues, including on-site surveys of recreationists or surveys of residents. When assigning priorities to issues, consider the factors of magnitude, attitude and time frame, which are discussed in Chapter 2 of Riverwork Book.

Step 3: Inventory and Assessment of Relevant Resources

This step has its origins in synoptic planning, which focuses on the collection of specialized, quantifiable data to be used in the planning process. Examples of resource data that may be important to collect in the comprehensive recreation planning process include number, type, location, and quality of recreation resources in the system; type, location, and quality of biophysical resources; demographic and regional economic data; etc. The focus of resource inventory and assessment varies widely depending on the planning problem.

The lead planning agency, rather than stakeholders, usually is responsible for conducting this step in the planning process. Geographic information system technology and trained resource specialists are important to this effort. Chapter 1 of Riverwork Book provides a good description of resource inventory and assessment for river management planning projects. For examples of resource inventories/assessments for trail and greenway systems planning projects and state comprehensive recreation planning projects, contact the recreation planning official in your state for relevant plans, or contact a representative of the National Association of Recreation Resource Planners. This professional organization, comprised of county, state, federal and private sector recreation planners, maintains a website and welcomes technical assistance inquiries.

Step 4: Goal/Vision Development

In this important step, the stakeholder group meets to fashion goals/a vision out of the information collected in steps two and three. In effect, the stakeholder group acts as a computer to process key information on issues and resources into a set of goals and/or a vision to direct future actions. Chapter 4 of Riverwork Book describes a goal setting process.

It is the responsibility of the lead planning agency to set up the stakeholder group meeting during which goals are considered, make sure the stakeholder group has the information from steps two and three well in advance of the meeting, and to facilitate the meeting. Planners need to make the information collected in steps two and three accessible to the stakeholder in terms of understandability.

Step 5: Development of Alternatives to Address Goals/Vision

Once goals (or a vision) is developed to direct future actions, a range of alternatives (usually three or four) is developed to achieve the goals/vision. This is done collaboratively between the lead planning agency and stakeholders. Alternatives are written statements, usually 1-2 paragraphs in length that describe broad strategies needed to achieve the goals/vision outlined in step four. As described in Chapter 5 of Riverwork Book, the alternatives that are developed may differ in feasibility, timing, responsibility for implementation, etc.

Once the alternatives are developed, the stakeholder group needs to select its preferred alternative and justify their selection of it. This alternative forms the basis for the development of specific actions to implement the alternative.

Step 6: Development of Action Statements

To implement the preferred alternative, actions must be identified, prioritized, and assigned a responsibility. This step is conducted in a meeting of the stakeholder group and planning agency. The “action agenda” that is developed during this step answers three questions:

1. Who will take responsibility for initiating and implementing the action?
Fortunately for natural resource recreation planners who have followed the transactive planning orientation outlined in this course, responsibility for accomplishing many actions may naturally fall into the lap of stakeholders who feel ownership in the planning process (and, hence, the implementation process).
2. How will the action be taken? The action should be broken down into component parts to give direction to the group/agency responsible for its implementation. In other words, action statements should be specific and measurable in terms of the accomplishment.
3. When will the action be taken? Fix a deadline for accomplishing the action.

In this step of the planning process, the stakeholder planning group often “mutates” into a management partnership organization with formal memoranda of understanding or agreements between the agency and partners to accomplish specific actions. Steps six and seven are described in Chapter 6 of Riverwork Book.

Step 7: Implementation and Monitoring

During this step, the agency and partnership group(s) meets on a regular basis to assess implementation efforts outlined in the action plan. There is a serious focus on results, or the accomplishment of actions. Sometimes, universities or private firms are hired to assess implementation efforts.

Importantly, this step involves funding and politics. Management partners must be dedicated in their efforts to use budget proposals and relationships with elected officials to secure funding for implementation of actions. Proposals may be made to foundations, friends groups, and private sector organizations. As Riverwork Book suggests, be comprehensive and persuasive in your pursuit of fiscal and human resources for implementation.

Summary

The comprehensive recreation planning process summarized above, and described in more detail in Riverwork Book, is brought to life in several documents in your reading packet. See the Decatur (IL) Metro Area Greenway Plan for one perspective on planning a regional trail/greenway system. This planning process was a collaborative effort between local government agencies, environmental groups, and interested citizens called the Decatur Metro Area Greenway Coalition. Though general in many places, the plan describes in some detail the vision/goals of the coalition, their priorities for action, and concludes with a call for the Coalition to continue their efforts into the implementation phase.

Another case study for your review is the Lower Saluda River (SC) Corridor Plan. The planning process for this corridor is described in detail in the chapters entitled “The Lower Saluda River: Past and Present,” and “Study Process.” A final case involves the Arizona State Trails Plan, which takes a “big picture” look at trail system planning. Several pages of this plan are included to provide a background into the process employed in its development. Taken as a whole, the readings in this unit suggest the importance of collaboration, goal setting/visioning, conducting inventories/assessments, and action planning.

Discussion Question

Read the planning scenario presented below. Then, using the information provided in the scenario, design a planning process based on the seven steps described earlier in the unit. Consult Riverwork Book and any other source for guidance. In effect, you are the “recreation staff person” alluded to at the bottom of the scenario. In your answer, don’t simply list the seven steps. Rather, for each step, briefly describe the planning tasks you think need to be taken to develop the plan. Assume the U.S. Forest Service has no guidelines for recreation planning and you have the freedom to design the process as you wish.

Scenario

The community of Pinetop-Lakeside (PL) is located 5 hours east-northeast of Phoenix, Arizona and is a growing resort and vacation home area with a resident population of 20,000. Located in the White Mountains at an elevation of about 5,500 feet, PL and surrounding smaller communities enjoy four seasons. PL is a gateway to diverse recreation opportunities (hiking, riding, biking, hunting, fishing, sightseeing, snowmobiling, skiing, wildlife viewing, camping, etc.) in the immediately adjacent Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest (ASNF), which is managed by the U.S. Forest Service. The ASNF is comprised of mountain and chaparral terrain with elevations to 11,000 feet and numerous rivers, creeks, and lakes. The Forest is home to several threatened and endangered species, Native American archaeological sites, extensive cattle leases, several small mining operations, and numerous active timber sales. It is bordered on the west by the White Mountain Apache reservation and the north, east, and south by a combination of state trust land and private land. Two small Arizona Game and Fish Commission sites border the Forest on the south.

An active trail organization in PL called the White Mountain Trail Association (WMTA) approaches the forest supervisor (located in PL) with the idea of expanding the Forest's existing trail system and making it more accessible to PL residents. At the present time the Forest has about 200 miles of maintained and signed non-motorized trails, which includes approximately 120 miles in designated wilderness areas distant from PL. WMTA's membership is comprised of equestrians, hikers, and mountain bicyclists. The WMTA "idea" has the backing of the local park and recreation department and the visitor and convention bureau, and has as its officers a retired attorney and an influential local businessperson. They would like to help in planning the "new" trail system, and building and maintaining it, but understand they need the approval of the supervisor as well as staff support.

How does the supervisor proceed from here? She knows that trail use is the most popular recreation activity on the Forest and is aware of the proliferation of resort and vacation home development in the PL area. She realizes the WMTA includes members with ties to local media, businesses, and the influential Mormon church and believes that their request is reasonable and sincere.

After consulting with the regional forester's office, the forest supervisor meets with the WMTA and conveys Forest Service support of their idea in principle. However, she tells the group that trail expansion must be preceded by planning. She assigns her recreation staff person to work with the organization and other stakeholders to develop a plan to expand the existing system of trails in the Forest.

How does the recreation staff person proceed from here? He feels overwhelmed by the task, which is complicated by the fact that he has been on the Forest less than a year. A landscape architect by training, he has worked on numerous environmental assessments but never a trail system planning project.