

UNIT 5

Selected Issues in Natural Resource Recreation Planning

The objective of Unit 5 is to expose you to various practical and professional issues related to planning. The potpourri of readings in this Unit focus on the roles that planners play in their organizations, the essential competencies of the outdoor recreation planner, some advice to guide the management of planning projects, and the importance of monitoring the progress and documenting the performance of planning efforts.

Planners' Roles

Early in their careers natural resource recreation planners typically conceive of their role in the planning process as that of the neutral technical expert whose job centers on information collection and analysis. In the first reading of this Unit, Alexander challenges this view of the planner, which he terms the "technician-administrator role." In reality, planners work in turbulent social environments that require them to play a wide variety of roles, including mobilizer (to rally popular, political, and media support for the implementation of the plan), mediator (consensus-builder among disparate groups in the planning process), entrepreneur (win financial resources to implement plan), and advocate (actively represent a particular point of view--for instance a preservation perspective--in a planning process). In a fitting close to his chapter, Alexander states:

"Today, the only thing certain about planners' roles is uncertainty: the changeability of roles in different contexts, the ambiguity of previously unquestioned claims of scientific infallibility and professional expertise, and the continuing emergence of novel views of planners roles with the diffusion of different views of human and societal relations. As a result, the burden on the individual planner is heavier than it has ever been before."

The multi-role view of planners described above is more cryptically articulated in your second reading, which lists some of the competencies needed to occupy the position of Outdoor Recreation Planner for the National Park Service. Other agencies will describe their planning positions in slightly different ways and you are encouraged to discover those job descriptions on your own.

Managing Planning Projects

If you have never managed a planning project, the Moore reading will provide some basic techniques and strategies that can be used both to create a planning process that will address the planning problem you are facing, and manage the planning project for time, budget, and quality factors. The article has numerous practical suggestions (about such topics as defining the planning problem, developing the work program, writing and editing the plan) based on the author's considerable experience in managing planning projects. He states: "With this article I hope to stimulate planners to think more about how to manage projects rather than assume that the title of planner conveys with it that skill."

Measuring Plan Performance

Related to managing projects is the important idea that we must also be able to judge the performance of our plans and plan recommendations. To stress the importance of performance measurement in the federal government, this Unit includes a reading on the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), which affects all federal natural resource recreation planning projects, including those related to protected areas, trails and greenways, rivers, etc. GPRA requires agencies to focus on program results, service quality, and customer satisfaction by requiring performance measurement of all agency planning and management efforts. However, as planners are aware, measuring how well plans accomplish what they are meant to accomplish can be very problematic. In Planners on Planning (1996), Robert Marriott describes the difficulty of measuring the performance of planning efforts: "Effectiveness as a planner is difficult to measure in a society that does not place high value on long-term thinking but instead glorifies the bottom line or the home run on one swing."

One way to measure a plan's effectiveness is to measure the success of its implementation. In other words, have the plan's recommendations been implemented by managers? In the final reading in this Unit, Jaten and Driver describe a performance measurement system for recreation planning and management called "Meaningful Measures." This system is fairly new and was designed specifically for use by the U.S. Forest Service, though the authors conclude that the logic embedded in the system is adaptable to other agencies and levels of government. As described in the first Unit, the goal of natural resource recreation planning and management is the provision of high quality recreation opportunities. The Meaningful Measures system uses national standards to help ensure cost-effective, responsive, and accountable delivery of high quality recreation opportunities.

Discussion Questions

1. Identify a planner in your agency, or an agency with which you are familiar. Interview the planner about their formal and informal duties as a planner. Based on the interview, characterize the planner in terms of the roles described in the reading by Alexander. What specific skills do you believe are essential for any natural resource recreation planning effort?
2. Identify a planning project with which you are familiar (it can be the same project identified in the Unit 2 discussion questions). Ask the planning project manager if there are any criteria that will be used to determine the effectiveness of the planning effort. Ask the manager to identify three lessons learned in managing the planning project.
3. Finally, define the term "natural resource recreation planning" in a brief paragraph. Your answer should be comprehensive of the previous units, yet concise.

4. At this point in the course you should be working on your project, integrating and applying what you have learned. Planning is a complex, collaborative process. Many times we need multiple perspectives to fully understand concepts or to generate creative or critical thinking. What concept, terms, regulations, theories or possibilities need more thought? As you develop your project would you benefit from a discussion with other planners? Go to the Natural Resource Recreation Planner's Connection (<http://dlp.gmu.edu/nrrpc>), click on "Join a Discussion" and participate in one of the discussions. If you do not see a discussion that meets your needs, go to the "General Planning" discussion and begin a new discussion thread. There is a link on the "Join a Discussion" page to directions for participating in an online discussion.