

A New Perspective in Strategic Planning: The Great Smoky Mountains Experience

Great Smoky Mountains National Park covers 514,885 acres, with 477,670 recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. With a difference of over 5,800 feet in relief, it is possible to gain a vertical mile in elevation within the park's boundaries while traversing its trail system. Over 800 miles of horse and hiking trails, and 106 designated camping areas, shelters, and vehicle-access horse camps provide entry into the park's backcountry for the 500,000-700,000 visitors who come to the park each year seeking a backcountry wilderness experience.

Visitation figures during the years 1979-1993 suggest that backcountry camping, private horse riding, total backcountry visitation, and day-hiking increased approximately 15%, 30%, 45%, and 60%, respectively (GSMNP 1995). At the same time, however, the park's ability to maintain backcountry trails and facilities declined, resulting in an increase in trail deterioration and visitor complaints about poor trail conditions. The decline in attention to the backcountry coincided with an increase in annual visitation from 8 million to 9.3 million—and static purchasing power.

In an attempt to address increasing staff and visitor concerns about resource impacts, the park initiated an assessment of trail conditions (Marion 1994). The assessment used a standardized format for sharing information about trail and campsite conditions (Marion 1993). Information was collected from 72 trail seg-

ments covering 35% (328 miles) of the total trail system. The surveyed trails represented those that were either known or reported to be in poor condition and all of the Appalachian Trail, a multi-state trail which runs through the park. Survey staff recorded information on all occurrences of 25 trail features in four categories: general inventory, resource condition, design and maintenance, and visitor attraction.

The resulting data documented that 14.6 miles of trail had soil erosion exceeding one foot below grade. An additional 11.3 miles had wet and muddy soils. An average of 25.3 tread drainage features (e.g., waterbars, culverts, lateral drains) per mile of trail was also documented. Analysis of the data indicated that both the amount and type of trail use were important determinants of trail condition. Heavily used trails also had significantly more soil erosion and tree root exposure, while trails re-

ceiving a high proportion of horse use were significantly wider, muddier, and had more multiple treads. This work also indicated that water on trails, trail location, and lack of routine preventative maintenance were as important, if not more so, than the amount and type of use, as these indicators relate to trail condition. In general terms, over 100 miles of trail spread over the 800-mile system were in very poor condition.

With a quantitative description of the trails in hand, the next phase of the effort, one quite possibly unique to the U.S. National Park System, was the development of a strategic plan for managing backcountry recreation (GSMNP 1995). The uniqueness of the planning effort is based on how the plan was developed. It was obvious the park could not afford to bring the deteriorated trails up to an acceptable standard without help. It was also obvious that the park could not begin the process of closing heavily impacted trails without generating considerable negative sentiment, both from visitors and in the political arena. The park decided, therefore, to involve those individuals and groups most affected by, or most concerned about, trail conditions in an attempt to develop a comprehensive strategy with their input at the beginning of the planning process, rather than in reaction to a completed document.

This "new perspective" is different from the planning efforts usually undertaken in parks since public involvement in, and review of, man-

agement-oriented documents usually occurs after a draft has been completed. Exceptions obviously include General Management Plans, road construction projects, and related efforts where scoping meetings are usually scheduled early in the planning exercise. Five important points are thus relevant to the exercise as a contrast to traditional planning:

1. All discussion about why we do what we do (legislative history, policies, financial capability, etc.) is addressed at the beginning of the exercise so that participants understand our capabilities, constraints, and limitations. Although they may philosophically disagree with some of the management concepts presented, they develop a basic understanding of our role and mission.
2. We have the opportunity to facilitate discussions and focus them on what the real issues are and what needs to be done to accomplish positive change.
3. Consensus is not necessarily an intended outcome. Divergent viewpoints tend to make consensus elusive and compromise management prerogatives. However, the participation that is normally associated with the scoping is extended throughout the duration of the planning process. This tends to build momentum toward collaborative implementation, which is a more reasonable and constructive outcome than consensus.
4. Stakeholders need to become part

of the solution to the problems articulated, since the park no longer has the resources to effect positive change by itself.

5. Without the support necessary to effect positive change in a park's program, the alternatives, including the worst-case scenarios, become obvious early in the planning process.

In the fall of 1994, Peter Williams, a graduate student with Virginia Polytechnic Institute working under a cooperative agreement with the park, began the process of developing the strategic plan. He met with anyone and everyone who was interested in the issue in an attempt to not only convey the magnitude of the problem the park was faced with, but to solicit support from outside the park to become part of the solution. The process was not intended to seek consensus; rather, it sought informed participation in a process to: (a) portray the current situation, (b) assess the acceptability of that situation, and (c) determine any redirection the park needed to take.

The meetings were often intense and not without controversy. Horse-riding groups attempted to defend their interests while others pointed an accusatory finger. But the consistent theme emphasized by Williams throughout the exercises was the need to focus on trail conditions as the common concern of all, regardless of attitude or approach to enjoying the park. It also became apparent that, if a solution were to be found, it

had to include both hikers and horseback riders who were willing to assume some responsibility for their actions in the backcountry.

The resultant strategic plan is divided into several components. It is intended, in part, to walk the reader through a thought process to a set of recommendations that, when implemented, should provide for marked improvements in trail conditions over the next three to five years. The introduction describes the project's process and the document's structure and defines assumptions about implementing the recommendations. The document describes the historic origins of the current trail system. The current situation is described including a discussion of mandates guiding park actions and current backcountry conditions, including the setting (which is resource-specific), opportunities (which are visitor-oriented), and stewardship (which is management-oriented). Different scenarios portray the likely condition of backcountry resources if the park isn't able to change or redirect effort towards improving conditions. Finally, the strategic plan provides management direction based upon a shared vision and—using the themes of setting, opportunities, and stewardship—provides comprehensive recommendations based upon priorities, goals, objectives, and recommended modifications to the existing trail system.

As implemented, the strategic plan focuses on a dramatic and proactive increase in trail maintenance volun-

teerism as being the cornerstone for program success. Opportunities for repairing and maintaining trails, shelters, and campsites will increase, as will visitor enjoyment. A decrease in park-based preventative maintenance demand is, likewise, expected—although it is obvious that the need for coordination will increase.

Although not completed until September 1995, the year-long planning process spawned a new beginning in how the park will manage its wilderness resources. The intensive communications process brought together, for the first time, individuals and groups with differing points of view to focus on the common theme of trail conditions. One result of this effort was the development of the Appalachian Trail Task Force, composed of organized hiking and horse-riding groups, and the Appalachian Trail Conference, which entered into a Memorandum of Agreement for joint management of those segments of the Appalachian Trail where horse riding is permitted. The Task Force also developed and printed a publication entitled "Gentle on the Land," a hiker and horseback rider code of conduct which is similar to the Leave No Trace (LNT) materials popularized by the National Outdoor Leadership School. Under a challenge cost-share agreement with the School, the park also published an LNT brochure entitled "Leaving No Trace in Great Smoky Mountains National Park." Although the Smoky

Mountain Hiking Club and the Appalachian Trail Conference have been partners in maintaining the Appalachian Trail for quite some time, organized horse-riding groups have recently stepped forward to adopt trail maintenance on certain horse trails. In addition, the park was reorganized to accommodate this new thrust by establishing a full-time position dedicated to coordinating volunteerism and partnership efforts, and an additional full-time position dedicated to coordinating backcountry management functions across division boundaries.

To date, nearly 450 copies of the strategic plan have been distributed. Without exception, review comments have been positive and favorable. One stakeholder even provided an alternative location for a trail in need of relocation! Renewed interest in volunteerism has also exceeded expectations, with individuals, organized groups, local businesses, and others stepping forward to sign up for trail maintenance and other related projects.

We are now at the beginning of a new and challenging process. For too long, we have attempted to rely on internal mechanisms to meet our basic resource protection mission. Through this strategic planning process, we are now intimately involved with those who benefit most from the park in a collaborative effort to manage the park's backcountry and protect its wilderness values.

Copies of the strategic plan are available for purchase through the Great Smoky Mountains Natural History Association at its sales outlets in the park, or by contacting them at 115 Park Headquarters Road, Gatlinburg, Tennessee 37738; telephone (423) 436-0120.

References

- Great Smoky Mountains National Park [GSMNP]. 1995. *A Strategic Plan for Managing Backcountry Recreation in Great Smoky Mountains National Park*. Gatlinburg, Tennessee: GSMNP.
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