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Agroborealis

Spring 2018 Research Highlights

Two bikers enjoy the trails in the White Mountains National Recreation Area. Photo by Craig McCaa, Bureau of Land Management

Conducting recreation surveys

Cost-effective approach looks at outcomes, benefits and experiences sought by visitors

UAF Professor Pete Fix and two other recreation researchers have developed a cost-effective approach that will be used nationally to evaluate visitor experiences on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Since 2014, BLM has required incorporating what is called “outcomes-focused management” into land-use planning. The approach to parks and recreation management focuses on the positive outcomes from recreational experiences. It calls for identifying the activities, settings, experiences and benefits sought by visitors, local residents and businesses. The approach also considers how satisfied visitors were with their experiences and the facilities.

Fix said the approach is different than one in which a park or recreation unit strives to achieve a particular outcome without determining whether that outcome was achieved or visitors got what they wanted.

“It will identify more specifically the experiences people are most interested in,” he said.

Fix and two other experienced recreation researchers, Timothy Casey of Colorado Mesa University and Randy Virden, a retired professor from Arizona State University, formed the Public Land Recreation Research Partnership to help implement outcomes-focused management for BLM.

As part of a five-year project based at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the research consortium

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developed a standardized approach to conducting recreation studies.

To hold down the cost, the consortium collaborates with researchers at universities near the park or unit. Working with the unit to be studied, the consortium determines which research methods are best. Generally, its approach includes on-site and follow-up surveys of stakeholders and focus group sessions. Students or interns conduct the surveys under the supervision of the university investigator and Fix's group. Survey questions come from a master list and are tailored for each area.

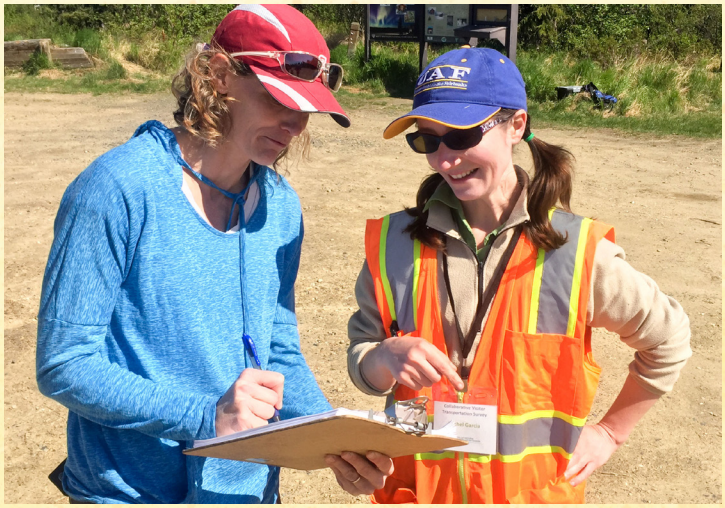
For example, the consortium recently completed an analysis for the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument near Las Cruces, New Mexico. The consortium worked with a researcher at New Mexico State University, who hired and supervised students and interns to conduct on-site surveys. UAF staff completed follow-up surveys and Casey led nine focus groups in person.

The professors analyzed the data, which looked at the general characteristics of the visitors, the reason for visits to the monument, the desired experiences and benefits sought by visitors, the degree to which those desired benefits were achieved and evaluations of site conditions. Their reports touched on what visitors valued, how the monument was used, how satisfied visitors were and comments on facilities.

Mara Weisenberger, planning and environmental coordinator for the BLM district office in Las Cruces, said the information from Fix's group will be used in the planning process for the monument, which was created in 2014.

"It's been incredibly helpful," she said. "This gives us an insight of what is important to the public."

The consortium developed a template for BLM's future recreation survey reports. The entire process will cost $30,000 to $45,000 per site. Fix said BLM's recreation planning office in Washington, D.C., directs units that need an outcomes-focused management report to his group. The consortium is also completing an analysis of a ghost town near Missoula and a fall hunting survey in Montana.



Survey assistant Rachel Garcia, right, helps a visitor take a recreation survey near the Wickersham Dome in the White Mountains National Recreation Area. Photo by Craig McCaa, Bureau of Land Management

The next step is to develop a database that compiles previous studies. A meta-analysis of those data could be conducted and the database shared with BLM.

Fix studied recreation management while earning a doctorate at Colorado State University. After coming to UAF, he and an expert in outcomes-focused management organized and led a workshop on the management of wildlife-viewing programs. Several representatives from BLM attended.

Fix started doing recreation surveys for BLM shortly after that meeting, beginning a relationship that has endured for 15 years. He has completed recreational surveys across Alaska, including the Dalton and Steese Highways, the White Mountains, the Fortymile River, the Bering Sea, the Western Interior, the Kenai Peninsula, Southeast and Southcentral.

Fix said the research consortium will provide information that helps BLM make good management decisions with the greatest level of positive outcomes to individuals, local communities and the environment.

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