RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: FOR VISITORS

Many recent events in resource management tend to be just the opposite of what resource managers are obligated to do. The increased pressure to abandon private inholdings, particularly in National parks; the emphasis on protectionism; and some evidence of misdirected interpretation—all are indicators of increased disinterest in the users, the visitors to resource areas. Yet, except for some military lands, nearly all federal and state resource lands are not only open to the public but are mandated to serve the public. But resource management practice today seems bent upon reducing, not increasing, the encouragement and stimulation of public use of these resources. That public, who so generously gives its tax monies in support of vast acreages of public land, seems to be the last of consideration amongst resource managers.

While I look with pride at the custodial efforts of most resource managers in this country, I feel we have failed to wring out of our resources the very public utility they were created to provide. If we expect the public to support our resource management programs, then why not exercise people-use policies of "more and better" rather than "fewer and poorer", which seems to be the practice today? Personally, I am convinced that with proper design and management, we could triple our public use of most resource areas at the same time the resources could be enhanced. Our parks and resource areas are not being "loved to death"; they are not loved enough, mainly because of biased and restrictive resource management that is anti-people. And, increased public use does not necessarily demand greater public agency budgets.

At a time when publics are questioning tax levels and high governmental
budgets, it would seem prudent for resource managers to enlist greater cooperation and support from the private sector. Instead, there seems to be an attitude among government agents to do it all. Great opportunities lie ahead in fostering, not limiting, the inputs from the private sector: commercial enterprise and nonprofit organizations.

Outside of fragile, rare, or endangered areas, commercial complexes can provide for many visitor needs. An excellent example is the relationship—a symbiosis—between Gatlinburg and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. They represent two sides of the same thing—a total experience for a visitor. The park managers can concentrate on resource management and interpretation of the natural and cultural resources while the private sector provides the lodging, food, car service and entertainment nearby. But, seldom do we find any federal or state programs that foster this relationship—instead, the trend is toward greater polarization and therefore poorer functioning.

Volunteerism is almost equivalent to Americanism. If it were not for non-profit organizations, few historic sites would be available to visitors—from the Alamo to Williamsburg. It would seem that with greater encouragement to cooperate and collaborate, non-profit organizations could make much greater input into interpretation of both historic and natural areas.

By not getting trapped into massive campground development, generally the Fish and Wildlife Service has provided people-sensitive interpretive programs for quite some time, even before they were authorized.

I recall vividly the valiant interpretive struggle the Seney Wildlife Refuge staff made in the 1940's, even against its own bureaucracy. Because of public demand to gain insight into the wildlife there, the staff boot-legged funds to add drives, walks and interpretive programs. My grown sons
still recall the fine talks given along trailsides, not realizing that this was against the rules at the time. After some thirty years, it is refreshing to read Bill Sontag's article on the great progress interpretation has made in the Fish and Wildlife Service (News: Dec. 1978, Jan. 1979).

But, generally, our philosophy still seems to be one of "resource first, people last" rather than the other way around. I contend that if we did a better job of handling people, the resources would almost take care of themselves. This is being demonstrated here and there, in instances where excellent and massive interpretive facilities and programs explain the area and its resources to the people. As a result, the managers have little or no problem with public abuse of the remaining sensitive lands. An excellent example is the superb interpretive policies and practices of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. By good design and management, thousands of visitors a year are so well handled and so well satisfied that over the years the wildlife has been enhanced. A rare woodpecker, the Florida sandhill crane, the round-tailed water rat and the American alligator have increased in number even though they are on the threatened list.

If policy is directed toward people as a first priority, nothing but good can come—enlightenment, enrichment, enjoyment and public support for the balance of the agency's program. It seems unfortunate that today, after so many years of operation, we know so little about the visitor—where he comes from, what he seeks, what he knows and how he'd like to use the resource areas.

Let me list just a few bits and pieces of research and observation (covering a wide range of federal and state agency management) that have brought me to the conclusion that great opportunities lie ahead if we can observe, understand and encourage the visitor.
* After spending many thousands of dollars on an excellent exhibit maze in a certain visitor center, it fails to function for the majority of visitors because its position in the building encourages entering the exit of the maze, viewing the sequence backwards.

* A survey of some historic sites showed that non-whites were dissatisfied with the biased white interpretation of history.

* One survey of interpretive programs brought comments such as: "Didn't learn much you didn't already know"; "Too much trivia"; "Slide show at this historic site had nothing to do with the site and its history"; "Landscape restoration doesn't fit the character of the building restoration".

* A survey of park users showed that 93% didn't know interpretive programs were going on. "We have ten kids and we more or less have our own programs". "We don't go to interpretive programs anymore; we're getting to the age when we come out here to sit and relax". "I've got too many other things going: fishing, skiing, women".

* A study of western national parks shows a need for stratifying programs (57% have completed college); a need for interpretation in nearby motels equally as important as on site (49% stay outside the park); a need for more (not less, as was being done by the resource managers) turnouts along park drives (84% stopped to observe flora, 79% to observe wildlife); better vantage points for photography (83% take photos).
* Because of poor planning and poor interpretive policy, a national seashore now is strewn with trash for over 80 miles.

* A survey of historic sites indicated considerable irritation by the many prohibitions (don't take pictures, don't walk here) with no logical explanations.

From my personal observations and study of interpretive programs, I reach the following conclusions:

1. If visitors are disturbed by arbitrary rules and regulations, why can't the management and interpretation eliminate minor and obsolete regulations and provide adequate explanation for necessary rules, such as "don't touch", and "no photographs". It is my opinion that with proper design and information, nearly all of the don'ts can be eliminated. Certainly, those controls that remain must be reasonable and justified.

2. If visitors are to avoid confusion and congestion, why can't interpretive designers create people-circulation flows that provide a maximum of contact without difficulty? Management should be constantly feeding attendance information and forecasts to designers to adjust building and ground design and construction as well as interpretive programs to meet new needs. Good functional design is a part of interpretation.

3. If visitors come to natural and cultural sites with varied interests and needs, why can't interpretive facilities and programs be segmented? It need not demand an overly-complicated system--just recognition of the need for different displays, literature and narratives for certain groups. Planning for the average will surely produce mediocre interpretation, suited to no one.

4. If visitors come in contact with park personnel and environments
outside structured interpretive settings and programs—and they do—why shouldn't management consider interpretation in its broadest context? Interpretation, although needing specialized individuals, facilities and programs, cannot be left only to these specialized functions. The major justification for all management's budget and personnel is that of serving the visitor. And, incidentally, properly serving the visitor is good resource management.

5. If visitors in fact enjoy, appreciate and gain information and insight from non-typical media and programs, why can't these be used? In many instances, drama, art, music, photography and special events could be used but today are refused because of prejudices against them by management.

6. If visits to natural and cultural resource areas are in the context of vacation trips, bus tours, camping trips, weekend outings and even post-convention tours, why shouldn't management and interpretation be planned in this context? This would mean greater collaboration with external and supporting services, such as airlines, bus companies, motels and hotels, travel wholesalers and highway agencies.

7. If greater understandings of visitors are needed, such as knowledge of their interests, habits, background, degree of sophistication and amount of time available, why can't management and interpretation run regular observation surveys of visitors? We find that managers and interpreters know much about resources and techniques but little about their visitors.

My final conclusion is this: At the same time that resource managers profess to protect resources, they invite erosion of resources through poor design and management of public use. The problem seems to stem more from attitude and philosophy than from lack of technology or professional design
and management. Landscape architects, building architects, engineers, foresters, ecologists, biologists, social scientists and marketing specialists are available and can make substantial input toward the solution of people-use problems. But, it takes commitment on the part of resource managers to make use of these specialists. When this is done, and most especially in interpretation, excellent results can be expected. I have great confidence in the ability and creativity of both interpreters and resource managers to show great accomplishment when their efforts are redirected toward the visitor.

Dr. Clare A. Gunn
Recreation and Parks Department
Texas A&M University