



# Recreation Research Update



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## Volunteers Management Capacity in the USFS (And an Invitation to Participate)

As part of an ongoing collaboration with Dr. Jeffrey Brudney of Cleveland State University, Dr. Jim Absher (PSW Station) recently reported research about volunteer management capacity in the US Forest Service (USFS). The study was based on the notion that natural resource agencies rely upon partnerships and volunteers to assist with many tasks for which they may lack the expertise, authority or budget to accomplish. However, neither partnerships nor volunteers are “free” additions to dwindling budgets. Both are dependent upon community good will and close working relationships. In addition to the common direct volunteer supervision mode, USFS employees often manage volunteers indirectly, i.e., they work with a group or organization that provides the volunteers in an event-based or longer term partnership. Either way, the USFS is ultimately accountable for the volunteers and the programmatic outcomes.

Data from agency records and a staff survey suggest that volunteer involvement is a developing area. Results show that the USFS, particularly its recreation and heritage programs, relies heavily on volunteers and partnerships. More specifically, results suggest that improvements to the agency’s volunteer management capacity (VMC) is an ongoing effort that will benefit from more attention to the administrative tasks as well as the advantages and challenges that make partnership-based volunteer programs successful. Results also reveal that partnerships are a significant, but not a dominant, part of the agency volunteer program and involve VMC issues that are similar to those reported in other nonprofit sectors.

Taken together, our results provide a glimpse into the USFS’s use of partnership-based volunteers, and provide implications for improving VMC in this area. The findings reveal some commonalities with other charitable sectors as well as aspects unique to the USFS. The data provide some specific examples of how partnership-based volunteering is managed today, invite future cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses, and suggest that the USFS will benefit from continued attention to important aspects of organizational and policy support for volunteer involvement.

Help wanted: We need partners, too! Going further into this area Drs. Absher and Brudney are currently

organizing a series of field-based surveys of land management agency volunteers (including OMB approval for multiple surveys). We are seeking partners to assist with questionnaire review and to provide study sites. If you, or your agency, would like to be part of this series, or to obtain a copy of the above referenced VMC report, *contact Jim Absher at 951-680-1559 or [jabsher@fs.fed.us](mailto:jabsher@fs.fed.us).*

## Youth Day in Los Angeles: Connecting Youth and Nature with Technology

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS) hosted a recreation forum series in 2007 across the United States. Regional in focus, the forums were meant to obtain information about needs and opportunities for success in meeting those needs from members of the public and outdoor recreation partners. During the Partners Outdoors Conference (Lake Arrowhead, CA in January 2007) more than 30 persons participated in planning the regional forum to be held in Los Angeles in March 2007. Potential forum topics that were discussed included access, connecting Americans to the outdoors (especially youth and urban populations), and volunteers/partnerships with non-profits and others. One topic of interest was technologies and whether youth would be more likely to go outdoors if some technologies were available for their use outdoors. After considering the difficulties of having youth at the Recreation Forum a subset of the planning committee formed (included Dr. Debbie Chavez) and decided to pilot an effort to listen to kids and to develop a process for others to follow. The result was Youth Day in March 2007 in Los Angeles.

The need for active participation directed the actions taken on Youth Day. For the pilot, to determine if kids are attracted to the outdoors by technology, we offered four activities—two were dependent on technology and two were not: (1) Camera safari where each child borrowed a digital camera and took pictures of things that interested them as they took a short hike, (2) Etching or rubbings on paper of natural surfaces of their choice, (3) Geocache for treasure where each participant used a global positioning system unit to locate hidden treasure along a trail, and (4) Nature scavenger hunt where each child had a list of items to locate along a trail. Each of the 38 youth (ages 6 to 17) participated in each activity. The City of Los Angeles Department of

Recreation and Parks assisted with recruitment of participants.

We used cards (green, yellow, and red) for the participants to rate each activity. The participants indicated green to indicate if they liked the activity and red if they did not. Yellow indicated they were undecided. We also had adults observing each group of children, reporting back what they heard

Green vote percentages were highest for the technology dependent activities (geocache 92%; camera safari 86%) as compared to the non-technology dependent activities (nature scavenger hunt 76%; etchings 62%). The adults noted that most youth were interested in the activities, and that most activities were easy for the youth to do. These results suggest the use of technology to get youth outdoors. More research is needed to confirm these results. *For more information please contact Debbie Chavez at 951-680-1558 or dchavez@fs.fed.us.*

## The Experience of Community Residents in a Fire-Prone Ecosystem

Dr. George Cvetkovich (Western Washington University) and Dr. Pat Winter summarized their work in a recent station publication (see publications list). The study involved residents of communities surrounding the San Bernardino National Forest and several findings of interest were reported.

Eighty-nine participants gathered for focus group discussions and completed surveys. The majority had a number of direct personal encounters with fire including seeing a fire, smelling smoke, experiencing a road closure, evacuations from their homes, and having power shut off to reduce fire risk. Fire-related events were viewed as having moderate to extensive personal impact on these individuals. An assessment of possible difficulties linked to fire showed a continuing psychological impact from fire and fire risk even a few years after the last major fire.

Participants were concerned about fire and fire risk on the forest, and believed other community residents were concerned as well. Additionally, they felt they were knowledgeable about what effective fire management would involve.

While a number of actions to reduce fire risk were reported (see Update #59), about one-fifth indicated the following as barriers to personal fire management activities: inadequate financial resources, own physical limitations, don't want to change the landscape, don't want to change roof or other built structures, and not worried about fire risk. Barriers also involved others not doing their part to reduce fire risk, with a majority citing fellow community members.

Participants leaned towards trusting the Forest Service to manage fire and fire risk and most believed the agency shared their values. Reasons they relied on the Forest Service included procedures that ensure effective management, and personal relationships with personnel.

Participants preferred to find out about fire issues through public meetings led by the agency so the community could ask questions, community meetings, websites, brochures and pamphlets, articles in the local paper, and email tree sent through fire safe councils, local television and radio spots, and information and displays at visitor centers. Other ideas offered in discussions included flyers or newsletters distributed through communities and left on residence doors and messages on community bulletin boards.

The researchers will be continuing this line of research by focusing on another western National Forest in 2009. *For more information about this study contact Pat Winter at 951-680-1557 or pwinter@fs.fed.us.*

## Unit Publications

Absher, J.D. 2009. **Partnerships and Volunteers in the US Forest Service.** In: Fisher, C. & Klenosky, D. (comps.) Proceedings of the 2008 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium; Gen. Tech. Rep. NRS- P- 41. Newton Square, PA: Northern Research Station, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. (Available c. March 27)

Cronan, M. K.; Shinew, K. J.; Schneider, I.; Wilhelm Stanis, S. A.; Chavez, D. 2008. **Physical activity patterns and preferences among Latinos in different types of public parks.** *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* 5: 894-908.

Cvetkovich, G.T.; Winter, P.L. 2008. **The experience of community residents in a fire-prone ecosystem: A case study on the San Bernardino National Forest.** Res. Paper. PSW-RP-257. Albany, CA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station. 42 p.

Grulke, N.E.; Minnich, R.A.; Paine, T.D.; Seybold, S.J.; Chavez, D.; Fenn, M.E.; Riggan, P.J.; Dunn, A. 2009. **Air pollution increases forest susceptibility to wildfires: A case study in the San Bernardino Mountains in Southern California.** In: A. Bytnerowicz; M. Arbaugh; A. Riebau; C. Andersen (eds.). *Developments in Environmental Science*, Vol. 8. Elsevier B.V. ISSN: 1474-8177; p. 365-403.