

Recreation and Tourism

Goal: Provide a range of recreational opportunities consistent with public demand, emphasizing locally popular recreation places and those important to the tourism industry.

Objectives: Manage the Forest's recreation settings in accordance with the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) standards and guidelines for each Land Use Designation. Construct or reconstruct at least an average of 7 miles of hiking trails per year. Construct or reconstruct enough developed recreation sites to annually increase or improve the developed site capacity for an average of 190 people at one time.

Background: The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) framework helps to describe the range of settings on the Tongass NF that are intended to meet identified needs for recreation and related services. ROS also helps managers design and maintain recreation facilities compatible to the land use designation and setting in which they are located. Southeast Alaska, of which the Tongass National Forest makes up about 80 percent, possesses a remarkable and unique combination of features. These include inland waterways with over 11,000 miles of shoreline, mountains, fiords, glaciers, and large or unusual populations of fish and wildlife populations that provide a wide range of excellent outdoor recreation experiences. Many of these opportunities cannot be duplicated elsewhere in North America, or most other places in the world. Southeast Alaska imparts a feeling of vastness, wilderness, and solitude. A relatively small resident population and absence of development compared to most other National Forests helps contribute to the wild nature of these lands.

Recreation and Tourism Question 1: Are areas of the Forest being managed in accordance with the prescribed Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) class in Recreation and Tourism Standards and Guidelines?

Overall, districts have reported that areas on the Tongass are being managed within the ROS classes as described in the Forest Plan Recreation and Tourism Standards and Guidelines. (Note: the only ROS that is prescriptive is the ROS found in the Admiralty National Monument Wilderness Plan).

Many sites selected for monitoring in 2007 were chosen based on the location of existing recreation facilities, and in areas of districts where high use has traditionally occurred. Some remote locations were visited during the course of regular patrols of the roads and waterways. Outfitter / guide special use permit records along with written and verbal accounts of guiding activity helped determine high commercial use areas. This information is compiled in a database that can be used to track long term trends in use locations and patterns of activity.

Observations were also made during the course of completing condition surveys for trails and developed recreation facilities. Additional monitoring was accomplished during the course of other project work, such as during timber sale environmental document preparation.

Monitoring Results

In 2007, individual districts tracked changes to ROS inventories in GIS at each ranger district. Districts conducted monitoring work in conjunction with the normal course of business. Forest wide monitoring indicates that recreation visits to day use areas, campgrounds and cabins are

stable overall but there are some areas of change. Assessments of cabin use and potential decisions to close low use cabins have generated interest in partnerships from outside groups. The forest will likely see reductions of the number of facilities over the next few years in response to reductions in program funds. In certain locations, such as wilderness, the elimination of facilities could improve the wilderness character by allowing for a more primitive recreation experience.

Petersburg Ranger District

Condition surveys of 20% of the recreation facilities and 20% of the trails did not reflect any visitor impact conflicts with ROS class. Use at the Ohmer Creek Campground did not exceed 80% of the design capacity. The use levels at individual cabins met standards and guidelines for ROS. Visual surveys of dispersed recreation places indicate almost all places meet the standards and guidelines for number of encounters. The use at the mouth of Petersburg Creek on the Petersburg Lake Trail may have exceeded the semi-primitive motorized encounter guideline of six parties on several occasions. This was a qualitative observation since there was not any standardized sampling method performed to monitor this site. This site also receives a substantial amount of use from boats on short daytrips from Petersburg, and many of the people do not get out on shore.

Ketchikan / Misty Fjords Ranger District

In 2007 visitor encounter monitoring was conducted in several ways: fixed point visitor use observations (all encounters and visible traffic is recorded from a fixed observation point for an indicated amount of time) and informal, non-scientific visitor use observations (boat, kayak or hiker encounters are recorded for an unspecified amount of time). In addition, end-of-season wilderness cabin use numbers were collected from the reservation system. This methodology allows the monitoring crew to gather site specific temporal encounter data by remaining in one location recording every visitor observation and social encounter. Information collected includes exact time of encounter, direction of travel, and mode of transport. Fixed point visitor use observations were performed periodically throughout each monitoring trip this season. Collected fixed point visitor use observations are entered in an access database which was developed specifically for Misty Fjords National Monument Wilderness (MFNMW). This visitor use observation database can then be queried and analyzed and serves as a useful tool for wilderness managers.

Twenty four wilderness Value Comparison Units (VCUs) were visited by wilderness monitoring personnel this season. VCUs were inventoried for new wilderness recreation use sites. Existing use sites were re-surveyed as well. A total of 24 previously documented wilderness use sites were inventoried in 2007. Two new sites were found and recorded. Areas of current or historic disturbance were surveyed for rare and exotic plants. Site inventory and monitoring results indicate that visitor use impacts continue to be concentrated, but not limited to, the Misty Core Area (MCA) which is comprised of Rudyerd Bay and vicinity. Three site re-surveys were done at high use sites in the Rudyerd Bay area. One new survey was completed at a site previously recorded, but the previous survey used a slightly different protocol. A change in levels of impact and site size was found at the three sites surveyed. The site surveys indicate that there are increases in site size at two locations. Since 2004, there have been additional areas cleared of vegetation for tenting and increased erosion on the social trails joining the different tenting areas.

Though surveys show increases in site area and impact levels in some locations, the overall impact score has remained unchanged since 2004. Encounters with aircraft over-flights and landings and large tour boats in the MCA continue to be high.

An extended wilderness monitoring trip was conducted in the northwestern portion of MFNMW on the Revillagigado Island mainland. The inaccessibility of the shoreline prevents any use along the north half of the East Behm Canal. Use in these areas is generally associated with camping or activities related to subsistence and homesteading activities. The latter is especially true in the Unuk / Klahini River area. Encounter levels fell within their designated limits for these areas.

Use at wilderness cabins is low and has been decreasing gradually over the past several years, with the exception of two wilderness saltwater cabins which receive a moderate amount of use.

The Punchbowl Lake trail, the most popular trail in MFNMW, was monitored for several weeks this season. Low to moderate use levels were observed during this time, never exceeding the social encounter guidelines for the established ROS class.

In addition to wilderness areas, monitoring was also conducted in 9 VCUs in General Forest Areas (GFAs) of KMRD. Monitoring results from 2007 indicate that recreation and tourism use in non-wilderness GFAs occurs frequently but use levels fall generally within prescribed ROS classes. Some high-use outfitter guide areas near Ketchikan may approach the threshold for social encounters recommended in the semi-primitive motorized ROS class guidelines. Use levels and impacts in these areas will be inventoried and monitored during the 2008 season.

GFA saltwater cabin use continues to be popular, while use at GFA lake cabins has been variable. Cabin use at lakes has trended toward a gradual, steady decline over the last several years. In town, trails connected to the road system continue to receive frequent use, with areas such as the Ward Lake / Creek Trail complex being incredibly popular. All GFA trail use meets the guidelines established by ROS classes.

Evaluation of Results

Information related to the ROS and the Recreation and Tourism Standards and Guidelines were being incorporated into special use decisions. In reviewing documents for management actions there was a review of changes to the ROS based on proposed alternatives. All documents appeared to be consistent with direction in the 1997 Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the recreation resource.

Recreation and Tourism Question 2: Is Off Road Vehicle (ORV) use causing, or will it cause considerable adverse effects on soil, water, vegetation, fish and wildlife, visitors or cultural and historic resources of the Forest?

The primary ORV use on the Tongass is snowmobiles, and three and four wheeled All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs).

Snowmobiles generally make use of forest roads and higher alpine areas during the winter months, although some use does occur on the Stikine River within the Stikine-LeConte Wilderness and in the Yakutat Forelands. Use of this equipment in designated wildernesses

during winter months is restricted to times when there is adequate snow cover as provided by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA).

The region received training regarding travel management in preparation of the completion of Access and Travel Management Plans that are required to be completed by 2010. Suggestions for forest plan direction were made for inclusion in the 2008 update that reflect changes in national direction regarding the use of ORVs on National Forest System lands.

Monitoring Results

Snowmobile use on the Tongass in general is not causing adverse effects on soil, water, vegetation, fish and wildlife, visitors or cultural and historic resources. It is not generally a management concern in the Tongass. Most districts had minor adverse resource impacts that could be grouped into the following two areas: rutting and vegetation loss in muskeg areas where the wet, organic soils are impacted by repeated passes by ORV users, and degradation of fish habitat by using stream courses as travel routes and diverting or blocking water flow at small stream channel crossings.

Yakutat

The district is still working with the community to improve the management and opportunities for the uses of ORV's. The Access and Travel Management plan should help all stakeholders to maintain adequate access for recreation and other uses while protecting the area's resources.

Evaluation of Results

Off Road Vehicle (ORV) impact to the soil productivity and water quality monitoring showed that in general, ORV use is causing neither considerable impact nor adverse effects on soil and water resources on the Tongass. The primary ORV use on the Tongass has been all terrain vehicles (ATVs) and snowmobiles. Snowmobiles generally use forest roads and higher alpine areas. Some winter use of snowmobiles takes place within the Stikine-LeConte Wilderness when snow and ice conditions on the river permit. Generally, the impacts caused from ATV use have been minor damage to wetlands and soil rutting. In response to these site-specific impacts, the districts worked to educate the public on soil and water resource protection and enforcement to ensure compliance. Monitoring has shown some disturbance to soil, water, and wetland resources and evaluation of the impacts is ongoing.

Action Plans

Recreation

The recreation monitoring and refinement of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) classes will continue. Sites with existing recreation facilities and areas of traditional high-use are the focus of the monitoring. Emphasis will be placed on monitoring sites where potential conflicts with users are reported. The actual use records provided annually by outfitters and guides, one of the best sources for information regarding activities on NFS lands, will continue to be used to identify areas of potential high use.

Districts plan to accommodate monitoring work as a normal course of business. Information related to the ROS and the Recreation and Tourism Standards and Guidelines will be incorporated into special use decisions.

Monitoring will also be completed during the course of trail condition surveys, surveys of developed recreation facilities, and completion of assessments for environmental documents.

Off Road Vehicle Use

Off Road Vehicle (ORV) monitoring indicates impacts to soil and water. Although mostly minor, any increased use of ATVs and snowmobiles in the future could significantly increase the impact on these resources. Working with the public on the Access and Travel Management Plans over the next few years will better define and regulate the use of ORVs in the forest. Maps showing the public where ORV use is allowed on NFS lands will be available in the future. (Snowmobiles are not affected by the Access and Travel Management work). Several districts began in 2007 to work towards the completion of the much needed environmental assessments and a district Access and Travel Management Map. Completion of all Access and Travel Management Plan maps for each district on the Tongass is scheduled by the end of 2009 calendar year. Continued monitoring of the impacts associated with ORVs is recommended. Emphasis should continue on high use areas, wetlands, and other high sensitivity areas. Soil ecologists and botanists should be involved in site evaluations. Upon the completion of Access and Travel Management Maps, more enforcement action by the agency are likely to be required in years to come.