

Updating the Pere Marquette River Plan

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Background

In 1978 PL 95-625 designated a 66.4-mile stretch of the mainstream of the Pere Marquette River as a Scenic River under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act with management responsibilities delegated to the United States Forest Service (USFS). The designation included a corridor of approximately one-half mile in width totaling about 13,000 acres. Also in 1978, the state of Michigan designated the entire Pere Marquette River and its tributaries as a Michigan Natural River under the authority PA 231 of 1970. This resulted in implementation of zoning regulations that restricts development adjacent to the river to safeguard environmental and aesthetic values.

The Pere Marquette is a naturally productive, free flowing, high quality stream that maintains large populations of brown trout and provides spawning grounds for steelhead and salmon. The watershed includes an abundance of wildlife habitat that provides opportunities for hunting and wildlife observation. These qualities are the reason the Pere Marquette was designated a Scenic River and must be managed under the law to maintain these unique values.

Scenic River Planning

In 1983 the USFS approved its first management plan for the Pere Marquette Scenic River corridor. The plan was updated in 1990 based on an update process recommended in the 1983 plan. The 1990 update recognized and focused primarily on the increasing recreational use of the river and accommodating that use in an environmentally sensitive manner. It included “hardening” and better screening of some public access sites and campgrounds, placing designated parking areas 100 or more feet from the river, providing walk-in access to better distribute fishing pressure, and developing watercraft user rest stops without public vehicle access to reduce trespass on private lands.

Thirteen years have passed since the last update to the river management plan. Many of the ideas for accommodating river use in the 1990 plan have been implemented and are in place today. However, use has continued to increase. Changes in fishing regulations have also shifted the locations that anglers fish along the Pere Marquette, causing new impacts. Changes in use, concerns about impacts on the qualities for which the corridor was designated (both social and environmental), and a need for continuous planning are the rationale for an update to the USFS Pere Marquette River Scenic Corridor Management Plan.

The Limits of Acceptable Change Process

The plan update will be developed using a process called “Limits of Acceptable Change” (LAC). This process was initially developed for planning in wilderness areas. However, the LAC process applied to the management of the Pere Marquette will help maintain the special values and beauty of the river for which it was designated a Wild and Scenic River. LAC is a **six-step** process that revolves around compromise and identifying the priority of multiple management goals, making it an ideal way to update the management plan. The steps are:

1. Identify concerns, issues and goals, agreeing that some goals may be in conflict.

2. Establish that all goals must be compromised to some extent.
3. Decide which goal(s) will ultimately constrain the others by establishing their effects on one another.
4. Define indicators of goals (e.g. dissolved oxygen levels as a potential indicator of water quality and the ability to support aquatic life) and standards (lowest acceptable level of dissolved oxygen based on standard sampling practices) and monitor the goals in relation to these indicators.
5. Allow the ultimately constraining goal(s) to be compromised until the written standard is reached (the limit of acceptable change).
6. Compromise the other goals so that the ultimately constraining goals(s) limit of acceptable change is never violated (i.e. put into effect predetermined restrictions to combat negative impact(s)). (Cole and Stankey 1997; Cole and McCool 1997)

The use of LAC for this update to the management plan is fitting because if recreation as a use of the river is going to be allowed, then deterioration is inevitable and must be accepted. Although impacts must be accepted, limits must be placed on the level to be tolerated. When these limits are reached, steps should be taken in order to prevent further negative change and reverse negative impacts (Cole and Stankey 1997). The LAC process will identify and plan for this, benefiting from stakeholder and public input. Input will be sought and received at public meetings, as well as through written comments by the range of stakeholders in an iterative process.

The roles of the indicators and standards (Step 4) are very important. Specific indicators can provide quantitative documentation of trends in meeting broad goals. They serve as an early warning system to help predict future conditions and impacts and can signal the need for corrective action, assist in evaluating management effectiveness, and determine if desired conditions are being achieved.

River Use Issues

Recreation has impacts on the Pere Marquette corridor environment. Research has been conducted on recreation use of the corridor by shoreline owners and their guests (Nelson and Johnson 1998) and visitors accessing the corridor through public lands and roads (Nelson *et al.* 1998). Following on these two studies, a study was conducted to examine the relative importance of corridor management issues to visitors and shoreline owners. The issues that were rated on average as being “extremely important” or “highly important” by both visitors and riparian landowners were:

- Water Quality
- Fish populations
- Presence of litter
- Public access
- Number of river users
- Level of regulation
- Sense of personal security (Smith 1999).

These issues will be the initial focal point in updating the management plan. It is anticipated that others will surface as well during the LAC planning process, reflecting the dynamic nature of the corridor and its use.

Invitation

Using the LAC process, the full range of stakeholders is invited to participate in planning for the maintenance and restoration of Michigan’s longest standing wild and scenic river corridor.

References

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