

Santa Barbara County and Los Padres National Forest: Facilitating Community Collaboration in Recreation Management

By: Nicholle Fratus, Jill Komoto, Carolina Morgan, Tom Whitaker, Sarah Worth

Introduction

In 2001, more than 1.5 million people visited Los Padres National Forest. The rapidly expanding population of Southern California will continue to bring more people to the forest seeking recreation, solitude, and the experiences that nature has to offer. The rise in forest use has not only led to an increase in recreational use conflicts, it has also put natural resources and ecosystem health under increased stress.



Over the past two decades, forest managers have found it increasingly difficult to maintain the balance between recreation demand and forest resource health due to continued budget cuts by Congress. These cuts have led to a decline in employees to perform traditional forest management tasks, such as trail and facility maintenance. The Forest Service sought to relieve budget problems by implementing the Adventure Pass program - designed to provide additional funding by collecting user fees from forest visitors. Although this program has gone far to alleviate the budget constraints for Los Padres, it has also served as a barrier between many community members and the Forest Service.

For future management of Los Padres National Forest, the Forest Service has come to recognize that

they must become more dependent upon the resources available in the communities surrounding the forest. Community members can provide the additional human, capital, and technical resources that are needed to help manage the increased recreational use and supplement the declining congressional budgets. While volunteerism currently fills many of the deficiencies, the public's contribution does not fully meet the needs of Los Padres National Forest. To increase the community's interest and involvement in forest management issues, it is important that the Forest Service begin to include and empower the public in decision-making processes. A collaborative approach to forest management, in which community members and forest managers work together to solve forest issues, would help build trust between the public and the Forest Service, as well as generate a larger interest in forest stewardship by giving community members more say in forest decisions. Additionally, it should lead to an improved quality of the decisions made by utilizing knowledge, ideas, and viewpoints from various avenues into the processⁱⁱ.

Project Approach

This project sought to help the Forest Service increase the public's involvement and interest in recreation management by developing a handbook that contains the tools, process steps, and reference information necessary to guide both forest managers and community members through a successful collaborative process. To assess the public's willingness for involvement in forest management and to provide key background information on community stakeholders, the project team conducted a survey of different community member groups. Additionally, collaborative efforts addressing land management issues throughout the United States were researched, contacted, and compiled into 22 case studies designed to provide concrete examples from which local collaborators may learn. The survey results and case summaries were combined with a guideline of process steps and a collection of useful tools into a handbook specifically designed to ease the transition from a traditional top-down approach into a more community-managed national forest. To initiate the collaborative efforts, the team facilitated a workshop between Forest Service personnel and board members of Los Padres Forest Association to discuss each

party’s goals for collaboration, assess resources that may be allocated towards the process, and develop a plan of action for further integration of the public into the management of Los Padres National Forest.

The Handbook

The “Collaborator’s Handbook” is designed to guide collaborative efforts between the community of Santa Barbara County and the Forest Service. Each section demonstrates a vital component of a successful collaborative effort from gathering background information and context for the issue, to learning the basics about collaborative process theory.

Sections of the “Collaborator’s Handbook”

- Collaborative Theory
Describes what collaboration is and general reasons for pursuing it.
- Understanding the Context
Provides background information on Los Padres and the important role collaborative efforts can play in future management.
- Developing a Collaborative Process
Guides the reader through the main phases of a successful process, from how to start to concluding or continuing an effort.
- Appendices
Toolbox, case studies, community survey results, applicable laws and policies, and contact information for stakeholder organizations of Santa Barbara County.

Community Survey

Three target groups - General Public, Forest User, and FS Mailing List - were distributed questionnaires designed to evaluate the level of recreation use, amount of involvement in forest management, and opinion of Forest Service management of Los Padres National Forest. The General Public target group was a random sampling of 1% of the Santa Barbara County population (approximately 4,000 individuals) to which the questionnaire was mailed. Addresses were obtained through a third-party firm that selected a representative distribution from each county zip code. The Forest User group was simply a sample of forest recreational users. The questionnaire was available at ten drop-boxes located at trailheads, campgrounds, and information centers within the Santa Barbara County portion of Los Padres National Forest. Additionally, the questionnaire was distributed

to individuals purchasing Adventure Passes at the Los Padres Headquarters in Goleta and the Santa Lucia Ranger District office in Santa Maria. To reach the FS Mailing List group, each individual on the Forest Service mailing list for Los Padres National Forest with an address in Santa Barbara County was mailed a copy of the questionnaire.

In order to increase the response rate of the mailed surveys, a monetary incentive and multiple mailings were utilized. The return rate for the FS Mailing List target group exceeded 50%, while the return rate for the General Public target group was 17%.

Key Components of the Community Survey

- Demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity, and zip code).
- Preferred recreation activities, frequency of forest use, and level of satisfaction with recreation in Los Padres.
- Methods of interaction with Forest Service or reasons for not interacting with them.
- Satisfaction level of interaction with forest managers.
- Preferred method to provide input to forest management.

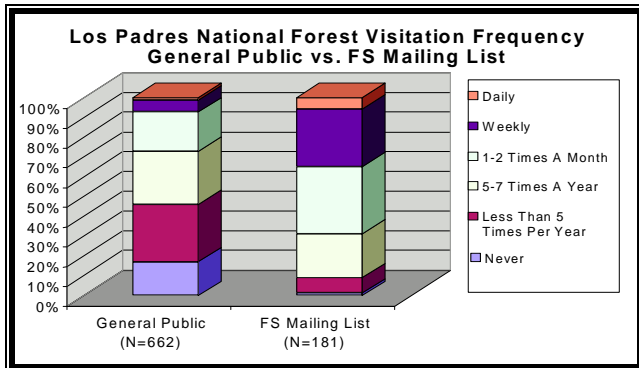
Key Results

Unfortunately, the limited number of responses from the Forest User group made it difficult to compare this target group with the others. However, a comparison of the FS Mailing List and the General Public groups provides insight into the crucial differences between those that will potentially be involved in collaborative efforts (FS Mailing List) and the public at large. The key results from the community survey are as follows:

- Preferred Input Method: Individuals in the FS Mailing List group indicated a preference to utilize more active methods of providing input on forest management concerns, such as public meetings, visiting with Forest Service staff in person, and through an organization representative (50% FS Mailing List to 25% General Public). The General Public group indicated more passive input methods, such as through mailed or e-mailed comments and posted messages on a website (60% General Public to 43% FS Mailing List).
- Interaction with Forest Service: A larger proportion of individuals of the FS Mailing List group indicated they had interaction with Forest Service personnel

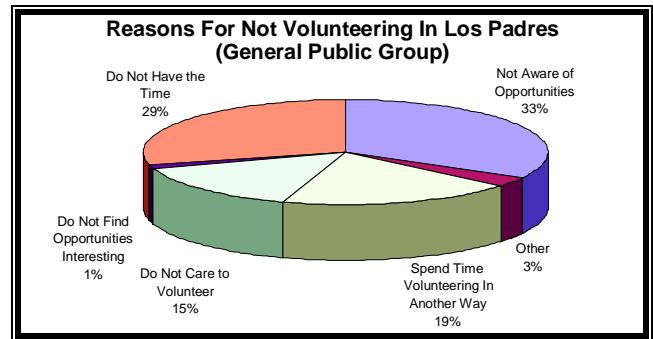
(97%) compared to those of the General Public group (42%). The types of interaction also varied, with individuals on the FS Mailing List more likely to attend public meetings (79% to 8%), workshops (32% to 5%), and volunteer activities (49% to 14%) than those in the General Public group.

- **Forest recreational use:** FS Mailing List participants visited the forest more frequently than those in the General Public target group. However, the average level of user satisfaction was lower among the FS Mailing List than the General Public Group. This may indicate that a high frequency of use or dissatisfaction with forest recreation opportunities may serve as the catalyst to increased interaction with forest managers. In many cases, the collaborator may be among the minority in their perception of a problem. Informing the public about the magnitude of a problem and collecting their input on the issue is an important aspect when involved in a collaborative process.



- **Lack of representation:** The Spanish, Hispanic, and Latino ethnic groups represent 12% of the participants in the General Public target group and nearly 17% of all forest users, yet, the responses received from the FS Mailing List group consists of less than 4% of individuals from these ethnic groups. Certainly, barriers must exist that prevent further involvement of these ethnic groups in forest management. Overcoming these barriers is important for the collaborative process as it is critical each effort includes the viewpoints of a wide array of stakeholders and seeks the involvement of all individuals with a stake in the issue.
- **Volunteerism:** Only 10% of the General Public group indicated they had volunteered in Los Padres National Forest. This is a small fraction of the 83% of those surveyed from this target group that indicated they use Los Padres for. Although 33% of those surveyed indicated they do not volunteer

because they are unaware of opportunities, volunteer opportunities are readily accessible on the Los Padres website or via a simple phone call to the forest offices. Reducing general apathy toward volunteering may be a matter of increasing the public's perception of their stake in the forest through collaborative management.



- **Adventure Pass as a barrier:** Although never specifically addressed in the survey, 12% of the General Public group and 18% of the FS Mailing List group wrote in comments indicating that the Adventure Pass is a key inhibitor to their involvement in forest management issues.

Case Study Compilation

Twenty-two case studies of collaborative processes were researched, contacted, and compiled as part of the handbook. Each case study explains the background of what triggered the process and how it was established. Some key points for each case study are highlighted, such as the management issues, stakeholder groups involved, and funding sources. Each case study also includes a summary of the mechanics of the group process, the organization of the group, how the public got involved, how they solved problems, and what their method of agreement was. In general, successful efforts exhibited the following traits:

- A level of trust was built among the collaborators.
- A strong amount of support existed from committed agency participants.
- An open dialog existed among process participants.
- The outside public was kept updated on the progress of the effort.
- Regular funding was enlisted from different sources.

The Workshop

To close out the project, a workshop was held to begin implementing a more collaborative approach to

forest management. Initial discussions were limited to Forest Service employees and the board members of Los Padres Forest Association (LPFA), an organization of diverse forest users in a position to serve as the link between the community and forest managers. There were three main objectives for bringing these groups together: 1) to prompt each organization to define their goals for community collaboration, 2) to brainstorm questions that need to be addressed so that collaborative management is possible, and 3) to begin answering the resultant questions by formulating an action plan for the immediate future. An underlying objective of the workshop was to utilize the handbook where appropriate in the workshop, thereby providing instruction about its application. For example, tools from the handbook were used to structure the workshop, and specific applications of certain collaborative phases were discussed to demonstrate how the handbook will be effective.

Two members of the group project team facilitated the workshop to help the Forest Service and LPFA move through the objectives of the meeting. From the goal-defining session, the following major reasons emerged to explain why these organizations want to further increase the public's role in forest management:

- To educate and bring awareness to the public.
- To increase public buy-in in future decisions affecting forest management.
- To reduce conflicts by increasing public involvement.
- To enlist public support and mobilize resources within the community.

The second step of the workshop engaged the participants to frame the organizational questions that must be addressed in order to reach the goals of collaboration. Both long-term and short-term outcomes were addressed and, in general, the group developed five overarching questions:

- What resources can each organization contribute to a process, and are there outside resources to tap into?
- In what capacity can each organization participate in a process, what roles will they play, and what barriers do they bring to the table?
- How do you get the community involved in a process as well as the implementation of an outcome?

- What will the relationship be between the Forest Service and LPFA?
- How do you identify and prioritize projects ready for collaboration?

The final objective of the workshop included constructing an action plan for the two groups so that the Forest Service and LPFA can continue addressing the issues involved before initiating the process of collaborative forest management with the community at large.

Conclusion

The role the public has in the management of national forest lands is changing. As available budgets continue to decline, the Forest Service will have to increasingly rely on the resources of the community to meet their management requirements. However, in order to fully realize the benefits of increased community volunteer efforts, it is important that the public is given a larger part in the decision-making process. Forest Service personnel of Los Padres National Forest see the critical role that community collaborative efforts will play, and are eager to move away from the more traditional methods of public participation.

This project is another step towards the future of recreation management in Los Padres. As the most appropriate convener of collaborative efforts concerning the forest, Los Padres Forest Association will take ownership of the handbook and begin introducing it to various community organizations with an interest in forest management issues. As projects ripe for collaborative management begin to emerge, forest managers and community stakeholders will utilize the handbook to make the processes more effective at integrating public concerns into management decisions.

References

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- ⁱ USDA Forest Service, "National Visitor Use Monitoring Results: Los Padres National Forest", 2002.
 - ⁱⁱ Cote, M.A., and Bouthillier, L. "Assessing the Effect of Public Involvement Processes in Forest Management in Quebec." Forest Policy and Economics 4 (2002): 213-225.