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ACCESS DIVIDED:

STATE AND FEDERAL RECREATION MANAGEMENT IN THE WEST

Key Points

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Introduction

Outdoor recreational activities such as hiking, mountain biking, hunting, skiing and fishing are a way of life for most Westerners. As population increases; new forms of outdoor recreation emerge; and access to federally managed public lands declines, the challenge of meeting growing demands for outdoor recreational access has become critical in many communities throughout the West.

In response to this and other concerns, several Western states have considered resolutions calling on the federal government to transfer much of its land holdings to state ownership. State-managed lands play a pivotal role in providing various forms of recreational access, and this responsibility would expand significantly if federal lands were transferred to state control. To better understand the possible implications of a land transfer, we must examine how recreation factors into federal and state land management and how these management institutions affect the provision and quality of recreational opportunities on the ground.

The Property and Environment Research Center's *Access Divided: State and Federal Recreational Management in the West* delves into these questions by offering insights into how federal and state land agencies respond to demands for recreational access and how each resolves competing forms of recreational activities. Some key findings and highlights of their report are as follows:

Federal Lands

A wide range of recreational opportunities are available on federal lands, but federal agencies often have no clear method of prioritizing competing uses.

On federal lands, competing recreationalist groups frequently fight for their preferred use of public lands through political, legal or administrative processes. The multiple-use mandates that govern most federal lands, however, do not provide federal agencies with a clear method of prioritizing competing uses. This can make it difficult to resolve conflicting demands over recreational use.

Federal land agencies often struggle to meet – or even establish – recreational management goals.

Maintaining trails, roads and recreation facilities on federal lands requires resources and funding. But the lengthy planning process and threat of litigation lead to high management costs for federal agencies and a lack of resources for recreational management. Moreover, federal agencies often lack the overall agency direction to set priorities over competing recreational uses in the face of seemingly infinite recreational demands. With high costs and multiple competing demands, it is not surprising that federal land agencies often fall behind on management responsibilities. The total deferred maintenance backlog for the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management is nearly \$6 billion – much of it associated with recreational quality and access.

State Trust Lands

Each state allows some form of recreation on state trust lands, often with user fees or recreational leasing.

Recreation is typically allowed on state trust lands if it meets one of two conditions: (1) recreation earns a financial return for the trust

agency, or (2) it does not diminish the revenue-generating capacity of the land. Modest fees, leasing, and contracting with other state and local agencies ensure that state trust lands meet their requirement to generate revenue while also allowing for recreational activities.

Each state varies in how it manages recreation on state trust lands.

Recreation was not historically an active part of trust land management. In recent years, however, state trust agencies have evolved to accommodate more recreational opportunities, but each state varies in the amount and types of recreation it allows, and under what conditions.

In some cases, state trust agencies offer high-quality recreation experiences by leasing lands for specific recreational purposes.

Some states allow recreational leases that enable the lessee to manage trust lands for a particular recreational purpose, avoiding other conflicting uses that would interfere with or diminish the

quality of the recreational activity. Although recreational leases can exclude parties that are not part of the lease, the land can often be managed for an enhanced, user-specific recreational experience better than lands that are managed for multiple recreational activities.

State trust agencies have found innovative ways to accommodate recreational demands while meeting their fiduciary responsibilities.

The ability of state trust agencies to accommodate recreational demands demonstrates an element of flexibility inherent in the trust management model. The “best interest of the trust” does not necessarily require trust managers to blindly maximize revenues from extractive industries or ignore new demands on trust resources. Instead, in many cases, trust agencies have found innovative ways to accommodate a variety of recreational demands while meeting their fiduciary responsibilities for long-term resource stewardship. However, it can be difficult to reconcile recreational values with the traditional state trust model.

State Parks

Throughout the West, state parks are an effective provider of public recreation opportunities.

State parks are incredibly popular. In fact, state parks receive more recreation visits per acre than any of the federal land agencies. And although Western state parks make up only one-fifth as much land as national parks in the West, they bring in nearly twice as many visitors as national parks in the West (see Figure 1). This popularity is in large part due to the types and quality of recreational opportunities they provide.

State park agencies often generate more revenue from visitors than federal land agencies do, providing park managers with

incentives to provide the type of recreational experiences that visitors desire.

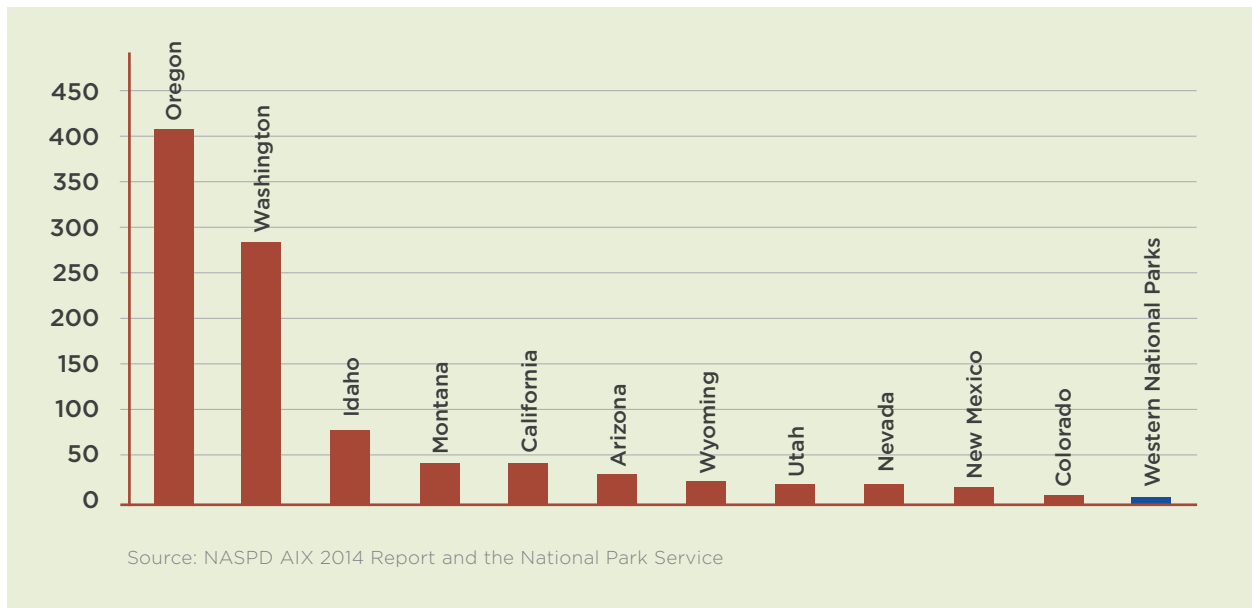
State park agencies typically rely on general funding from state legislatures for the majority of their budgets. But when legislative funding falls short, as it often does, park officials are forced to find alternative sources of funding. Today, many state park departments receive a significant portion of their revenue from visitors – leading to self-sufficiency and park managers finding ways to meet new recreation demands.

Some state parks have adopted public-private partnerships to enhance recreation opportunities while keeping costs down.

Many state parks have concession agreements in which the rights to manage some park amenities are leased to the private sector. In return, the state park agency is paid a fee or a portion of revenues earned as rent. These public-private partnerships help reduce agency costs and

enhance customer service. The private sector carries out the day-to-day management responsibilities while the state park agency retains ownership and oversees the contract to ensure the care of amenities meet agency standards.

FIGURE 1:
STATE PARK VISITS PER ACRE



Conclusion

The demand for recreation on public lands is growing, both in terms of the number of people and the diversity of recreational activities. Today, there are more hikers, mountain bikers, snowmobilers, and off-road drivers than ever before in the West. States have proven to be responsive to recreational demands and able to provide the types of recreational activities that people desire, on both state trust lands and in state parks.



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