

Preliminary Results from Nationwide Survey of Trail Enforcement Personnel

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December 5, 2006

Introduction

Safety and security are major concerns for visitors to all types of parks, including linear parks and trails within more traditional parks. Concerns about safety and security, especially those voiced by adjacent residents, often form the core of arguments against the acquisition or development of trails. They also may be challenges for continuing trail operation and management.

Methods

This study examined the perceptions and experiences of two groups of recreation law enforcement professionals in providing safety and security on trails across the country. A mail survey was sent to the 302 chief rangers at Army Corps of Engineers (COE) projects (reservoirs) and to 147 recent attendees of the Michigan State University Park Law Enforcement and Ranger Institute (PLERI). Each sample member received an initial mailing of the questionnaire, a reminder postcard if they did not respond and a second mailing of the questionnaire with a revised cover letter if they still had not responded.

Background

Most COE projects are in the central and southern US, while the majority of PLERI attendees work in the Midwest. Trails at COE projects are complementary to the reservoirs which are generally the primary attraction. However, trails are becoming increasingly popular at COE facilities and the COE is involved in creating links to nearby population centers in cooperation with other units of government and non-profit entities. Many PLERI enforcement personnel and the agencies they represent have been at the forefront of trail development. For them trails are often viewed as core recreation facilities and opportunities. PLERI enforcement personnel were most commonly from local units of government (city, county, region, special district, township).

Results

- Response
 - 108 (36% response rate) COE chief rangers
 - 72 (49% response rate) PLERI attendees

Findings: COE Chief Rangers

- Trail user group most likely to be involved in conflict
 - Bicyclists 25%, Equestrian 21%, Walk/Hike 17%, ORV 16%, All uses equally likely or other trail uses 9%, No trail conflicts at project hence no most likely conflicting group 12%

- Most serious trail conflict
 - Incompatible motorized use 22%, Unauthorized use/trespass 20%, Incompatible equestrian use 13%, No serious trail conflicts 12%, Hunting related conflict 11%, Lack of respect among range of uses/users 9%, All other conflicts 12%
- Trail user group most likely to violate rules
 - Bicyclists 24%, ORV riders 20%, Walkers/Hikers 17%, No one or no single group 15%, Equestrians 13%, Snowmobile 3%, Some other use (e.g. dogs, events, unspecified unauthorized use, etc.) 8%
- Most serious trail enforcement problem
 - Illegal motorized trail use 28%, Trespass on adjacent private lands/unauthorized use 11%, Dog related 9%, Vandalism/assault/theft 9%, Litter 8%, Lack patrol time/personnel 6%, Sexual activity related 5%, No enforcement problems 5%, Lack of respect 5%, All other problems 14%
- Primary enforcement strategy/need to combat most serious enforcement problem
 - Increase patrol 53%, Increase signage 13%, Increase education/interaction 11%, No strategy 9%, Increase cooperation with volunteers/friends groups, etc. 6%, All other approaches 8%
 - 23% use volunteer safety patrol to act as "eyes and ears", public relations

COE trail systems

- 94% had a non-motorized trail system
 - 29% with non-motorized trails provided some paved miles
 - 45% with non-motorized trails had some miles open to equestrian use
 - Mean COE project had 16 miles of non-motorized trail
- 8% provided motorized/non-motorized trail
- 13% provided motorized only trail (ORV)

Findings: PLERI Attendees

- Trail user group most likely to be involved in conflict
 - Bicyclists 35%, Walk/Hike 24%, Equestrian 15%, Snowmobile 8%, Cross-country ski 6%, No trail conflicts 4%, All other uses 8%
- Most serious trail conflict
 - Incompatible bicycle use 20%, Incompatible motorized trail use 18%, Unauthorized use/trespass 14%, Lack of respect among uses/users 14%, Incompatible equestrian use 11%, Dog related conflicts 9%, Vandalism/assault 6%, No serious conflicts 4%, All other conflicts 4%
- Trail user group most likely to violate rules
 - Bicyclists 37%, Walkers/hikers 21%, Snowmobilers 14%, Non-authorized users in general 8%, No one or no one group 6%, ORV riders 5%, Equestrians 5%, All other users 4%

- Most serious trail enforcement problem
 - Vandalism/assaults/theft 27%, Illegal motorized trail use 23%, Dog related 12%, Bicycle related 8%, Alcohol/drugs 8%, Lack patrol time 6%, No enforcement problems 6%, Trespass/unauthorized use 4%, Lack of respect 4%, Hunting related 2%
- Primary enforcement strategy to combat most serious enforcement problem
 - Increase patrol 68%, Increase education/interaction 12%, Increase signage 8%, Increase cooperation with volunteers/friends groups, etc. 6%, All other approaches 6%
 - 34% use volunteer safety patrol to act as "eyes and ears", public relations

PLERI Attendee Agency Trails

- 93% of governmental entities represented had a non-motorized trail system•
 - 80% of entities had trails with some paved miles
 - 60% had some trail mileage open to equestrian use
 - Mean agency at local level provided 64 miles of non-motorized trail
- 22% provided motorized/non-motorized trail
- 9% provided some motorized only trail

Management Implications

Conflicts and enforcement challenges vary by jurisdiction with no single, overwhelming type. However, some recurring situations are apparent. First, bicyclists are seen as the group most likely to be in trail conflicts by both sets of respondents. This is logical in that bicycles can use a wide variety of trails (paved and non-paved), are the most common use of trails in many systems (and were in the 5 studies done by Vogt, Nelson and others across Michigan over the past 5 years), are capable of a greater rate of speed than most other trail uses and are quiet with the potential to startle other users.

Horses and ORVs, which have relatively few trails designated for their use, can be in conflict in many situations as they may be an unplanned use. They also may not be easily compatible with other uses due to noise (ORV), speed (ORV), droppings (horse), skittishness (horse), size (both) and lasting reminders of their presence such as erosion (both). In situations where their use is planned, they are often segregated to single use trails (e.g. separate ORV trail or equestrian trail).

Another area that is an on-going conflict and is found in both sample populations is conflicts related to dogs. Often, the dog owner is also breaking park rules with dogs off a leash on a designated trail. However, even dogs on a leash can be a conflict with many trail users who are uncomfortable around dogs, allergic to dogs or riding a horse that may be skittish. Hunting is an area of conflict for the COE rangers in that hunting is legal at most locations on most COE projects. Conversely, at most PLERI parks and trails, hunting is not legal. Hence, hunting is a COE area of conflict often due to safety concerns and noise even though a legitimate, near trail use, while for PLERI agency sites, hunting is generally illegal and is a rare violation.

Trails present a challenging environment in which to reduce conflict and achieve a high level of compliance with laws and rules. Factors creating challenge include numerous entry/exit points, many neighbors, a variety of uses, users with differing motivations, multiple jurisdictions and a perceived lack of trail opportunities for certain uses may all contribute to conflicts. In terms of enforcement however, while some challenges may relate to a trail use that is unauthorized on a certain trail, but generally legal, other enforcement challenges are purely illegal behavior at all times, in all places. This includes vandalism, trespass, assault, theft, litter and illicit drug and alcohol use. These crimes against property and person are about half of the most serious enforcement problems reported by both groups. Response to them may require certified police officers. For the COE, they contract for such services from local units of government. For most PLERI attendees, they are certified police officers whose beat is the parks and trails.

The most common agency response to enforcement problems is to increase patrol and enforcement efforts. A minority have gone further and partnered with interested trail users to form volunteer safety patrol that provides eyes and ears for enforcement as well as positive public relations/visitor assist as well as visible presence. It is our contention that agencies need to make greater efforts to promote volunteer safety patrol approach in concert with the visible presence of certified rangers/police officers to deter problems prior to their emergence, while providing positive role models for trail users and having the capability to promptly respond to a range of visitor assistance and law enforcement situations. This also provides an outlet for avid trail users, especially those of different types (e.g. equestrians and bicyclists) to cooperate on a common, positive endeavor such as helping a trail user in distress and diffusing conflicts, while better understanding each other's point of view.

East Bay Regional Parks in the Oakland California area has used this approach for over 15 years with significant success, linking equestrian and mountain bike enthusiasts in a safety patrol under park ranger supervision where rangers are certified police officers. The safety patrol volunteers have been especially instrumental in assisting injured trail users (e.g. fall from bike or horse). Their cooperation in such endeavors has enabled them to work out a time zoning schedule to reduce conflicts between equestrian and mountain bike trail users which had previously seemed insurmountable. In Kent County Michigan on the Fred Meijer White Pine Trail, the Kent County Sheriff Department has organized and trained a volunteer safety patrol of over 60 trail users to provide visitor assistance, communicate with trail users and others about appropriate trail behavior, provide a visible presence and act as "eyes and ears" for the Sheriff's Department.

Additional trails research by Drs. Christine Vogt, Charles Nelson and others is available at www.carrs.msu.edu/trails.