

## 136 A participatory assessment of the USDA Forest Service Southwestern Region's sustainable recreation strategy

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Public land management agencies, both in the United States and internationally, have been challenged mightily to operationalize sustainable outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism policies and practices at a field level. Needed are action-oriented and field-based evaluative research focused on “how” sustainable recreation is being operationalized in the field. The purpose of this research study was to conduct a participatory evaluation of the Southwestern Region (Region 3) Sustainable Recreation Strategy (SRS) after five years of implementation. Using both outcome-based and process measures, the study evaluated the efficacy of SRS policy/program actions and interventions in progressing towards its original goals and expected outcomes. In addition, the study also assessed what policy/program adjustments are needed in the SRS to adapt to system and agency change and to strengthen the capacity of Region 3 Recreation Programs across the 11 National Forests.

Participatory evaluation is a partnership approach to program evaluation where stakeholders actively engage in developing the evaluation and in all phases of its implementation (Zukoski and Luluquisin, 2002). This makes intuitive sense. Those who have the most at stake in the program—staff, partners, beneficiaries, funders, and key decision-makers—should play active roles. Used extensively in the philanthropy and nonprofit sector as an assessment tool, participatory evaluation differs from more traditional evaluation models in its participant focus and ownership of the evaluation process, broad range of stakeholders participating, focus on learning, and flexible design (USAID, 2011). With participatory evaluation, the process of evaluation is as important as the outcomes of evaluation. A participatory evaluation process can promote participant learning about the program and expand their understanding of other stakeholder perspectives. It can improve participant evaluation competencies, and can mobilize participant sense of

teamwork and shared commitment to a common cause.

This research study also focused squarely on the topic of how institutions are mobilizing to operationalize sustainability in their operations and programs. Integrating sustainability concepts, tools, and best practices across the outdoor recreation and park profession has gained momentum over the past three decades (Manning et al., 2011; McCool & Moisey, 2001; Selin, 2017). This is also true in the forest recreation area where the concept of “sustainable recreation” has gained prominence as an integrative framework (Selin, 2017). For example, for the past ten years, the Forest Service has worked to operationalize their Framework for Sustainable Recreation (USDA Forest Service, 2010) which emphasizes “reconnecting” the American public with their National Forests and inspiring citizen responsibility to take care of it. This research study analyzes how one Forest Service Region (Region 3) has worked to operationalize sustainability through their Sustainable Recreation Strategy over the past five years. How one Forest Service Region has worked to operationalize sustainability is analyzed through the methodological lens of a participatory evaluation study of their Sustainable Recreation Strategy after five years of implementation.

Following this approach, the study incorporated multiple data sources into the participatory evaluation including: annual SRS Performance and Accomplishment Measures Reports, a literature review of previous research and evaluation studies from Region 3, and a telephone interview of 38 Region 3 SRS stakeholders. These telephone interviews followed a carefully scripted interview schedule with some open-ended, qualitative questions and some close-ended, quantitative questions. Telephone interviews were transcribed into WORD documents and then analyzed using NVIVO 12 qualitative analysis software.

Final results from the research study will be presented at the MMV 2021 conference. Results from the Sustainable Recreation Strategy (SRS) stakeholder survey provided decision-makers with useful input about the overall effectiveness and future direction of the SRS. Stakeholders felt that the SRS, as a broad regional strategy, has been a positive force across the Southwestern Region. Stakeholders felt that, after five years, progress had been made towards the Leadership, Partnership, and Action Plan Critical Success Factors identified when the SRS was initiated in 2014 and more generally on a more positive organizational culture and employee morale across Region 3. This is especially meaningful at a time when, nationally, Forest Service employee morale has been reported to be on the decline (Marsh, 2018).

Contrary to these positive comments, some respondents suggested that the SRS maybe losing some management focus and it may be time, as a Region, to update and revise the Strategy so it continues to generate significant benefits across the Region.

Stakeholders also identified both internal and external constraints to achieving sustainable recreation goals across the Region. While a number of constraints are identified in the results section, challenges associated with the reorganized Grants & Agreements protocols attracted the most comments

along with sentiment about a loss of management and leadership focus on the SRS as a result of competing priorities like the fuel reduction flagship targets being implemented across the Agency.

Results from the stakeholder survey also provide useful input into the future trajectory of the SRS. Stakeholders surveyed expressed strong support for the continuation and strengthening of the SRS. In addition, stakeholders provided input into how the SRS should be updated, making many programmatic recommendations to inform decision-makers. Common themes raised here included updating broad SRS goals and implementation strategies, focus Regional Office support on helping local units implement their Forest Action Plans, and strengthening continuous communication strategies between Forest Service units and externally with stakeholders, volunteers, and partners.

Results from this participatory evaluation of the SRS can provide meaningful feedback to other public land management agencies, both in the United States and internationally, about how to effectively operationalize sustainable recreation at the field level. These results also support the continued use of participatory evaluation methods to strengthen more adaptive and collaborative approaches to the design, planning, and implementation of sustainable recreation policies and practices.