Minnesota’s Network of Parks & Trails

Framework January 2011
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In 2009, the Minnesota Legislature directed the University of Minnesota Center for Changing Landscapes (CCL) to create a long-range framework for an integrated statewide parks and trails system. The framework provides information that can guide decisions for acquiring and developing parks and trails. It suggests ways to link resources to meet the needs of a growing and diversifying populace and create a synergistic statewide network.

The full recreation experience for users was considered - from anticipation and planning through participation and then recollection of the activity - as a guide to enhance programming, planning, and management approaches. Similarly, the full spectrum of recreation opportunities, from primitive to developed, was considered when assessing acquisition and development opportunities. Strategies presented in the framework are a range of responses to the opportunities: they are not prescriptive nor are they exhaustive, but rather possibilities.

Natural resource-based recreation data for federal, state, and regionally significant lands generated in the Minnesota’s Network of Parks and Trails Inventory were used for the framework. With these data, the supply of outdoor recreation resources in each of five regions (Northwest, Northeast, Central, Metro, and South) was compared to the state supply overall, using population size estimates, inter-regional demand estimates, and land area estimates.
Opportunities at both the state and regional levels reflect similar themes:

**Link.** Connect trails to other trails, connect trails to parks, and connect communities to parks and trails. Each of these opportunities takes on a high priority in creating a statewide network of parks and trails.

**Address diverse visitor groups.** Decision-makers need to understand visitors and potential visitors to create opportunities that will engage and retain them. Diversity across age, life stage, and race or ethnicity leads to diversity in recreation preferences.

**Respond to multiple setting preferences.** Minnesota has opportunities to continue to offer a wide range of outdoor settings, from primitive to developed, in an integrated network.

**Embrace ecology.** Outdoor recreation areas can help preserve and protect Minnesota’s varied ecosystems, both by retaining their character and through interpretation and education around the values of different ecological systems.

**Coordinate and integrate.** Working across agency and administrative boundaries maximizes resources and returns on investments.

**Consistently communicate.** Information about natural resource-based recreation opportunities needs to be consistent, easily available, and appropriate to varied visitor groups and their different interests and needs.
Key opportunities to create an integrated parks and trails network include:

**Enhancing Assets**

- Maintain existing areas and trail miles across and throughout seasons, as appropriate.
- Support and expand communications, facility design, and programming for:
  - Younger generations that promote recreation experiences associated with achievement, stimulation, and challenge (e.g., taking risks, being active, feeling exhilarated, being adventurous, developing new skills).
  - Racial and ethnic groups that promote activities and experiences sought by diverse groups. For instance, multi-lingual information/interpretation and facilities that accommodate large groups and onsite meal preparation (e.g., group picnic areas with barbeque grills, group campgrounds, fishing piers).
  - Older generations that promote recreation experiences associated with learning (e.g., cultural and natural history).
- Examine existing facility accessibility through audits and planning processes to implement 2012 accessibility standards (http://www.access-board.gov/ada-aba/ada-standards-doj.cfm#recreation)
- Plan for continued increases in demand for camping opportunities and consider supply as well as appropriateness for inter-generational, multi-modal, and ethnically/racially diverse group preferences.

- Plan for increases in nature observation through identification and clustering of existing opportunities with attention to both protection of and recreation access to diverse natural habitats across ecological regions and sections.
- Plan for increases in all-terrain vehicle ridership and consider supply and visitor capacity for types of activities (particularly in the Central, Northeast and Northwest Regions) as well as rider preferences for communications, facility design and programming.
- Acknowledge, identify, and reduce constraints to participation across age groups, in particular younger and older populations.
- Acknowledge, identify, and reduce constraints to participation across racial and ethnic groups.
- Consider the full spectrum of ecosystem services of existing assets as well as in future acquisitions.
- Consider integrating with existing and planned transportation systems to enhance commuting and multi-modal transportation that connects residents and tourists to parks and trails.

**Developing Assets**

- Prioritize Central Region for outdoor recreation resource development because of projected population growth and relative deficit of outdoor recreation resources.
Prioritize Metro and Central Regions for nature-based trail development, based on current population size and population growth.

Prioritize Metro, Central and South Regions for non-motorized winter trail-related activity.

Develop accessible resources that meet the 2012 accessibility standards (http://www.access-board.gov/ada-aba/ada-standards-doj.cfm#recreation) and reduce constraints for aging population.

Anticipate stable-to-increased participation in walking/hiking and jogging/running and address trail supply accordingly.

Limitations
The existing systems of parks and trails in Minnesota is dynamic: new lands may be acquired, access points created, and infrastructure developed. This analysis is based on the best available county, state, and federal data as of October 26, 2010.

The available data offer insight into recreation resource supply, based on the distribution of areas and trails across the state and the presence of select facility attributes. However, the data and analysis do not assess the quality of the resources or whether resources are meeting real demand. The analysis only considers potential demand, based on state population estimates and inter-regional demand, because accurate and comprehensive demand statistics are unavailable.