



Since the enactment of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, federal government decisions that might affect the "human environment" have strongly involved review and comment by the nation's citizens. Additional opportunities for citizen involvement in management planning for the National Forests and lands managed by Bureau of Land Management were provided by the National Forest Management Act and the Federal Land Policy Management Act, both enacted in 1976.

What You Don't Know Can Hurt...

With these opportunities being available for over 40 years, one would think that trail horsemen using federal lands would be highly knowledgeable of and avidly involved in the land management planning processes. Our antagonists have certainly become adept at making their arguments known. In addition, they quote, without reticence, the statutes to the agencies. Not all horsemen in all states have been lackadaisical about their involvement in an admittedly laborious process of natural resource conservation. (This is part of the "burden" of democracy, where citizens explain their values and concerns to a government that works for them.) Back Country Horsemen of America and its various chapters and affiliates have been a major advocate for horse trails on the public lands, although until recently their influence was almost entirely in the West. The newly formed U.S. Equestrian Trails Coalition hopes to become meaningfully involved with public land management planning. The Recreation Committee of the American Horse Council has also become a major force affecting federal land management policy with respect to trails. Unfortunately, as average horse-

men, our involvement throughout the nation has been much like the following scenario:

Several years ago the Sumter National Forest in South Carolina began its first round of public hearings on its proposals for a new Long Range Management Plan. Three hearings that invited public comment were held in strategic locations near the Forest. I required the seniors in my conservation policy class to attend at least one of the hearings. The graduate students were required to attend all three, as I did.

In addition to my academic responsibilities to my students, I paid close attention to the number of trail horsemen attending these very important information exchange events. Counting horsemen was easy. There was one representative of the South Carolina Horsemen's Council that attended one meeting. One other equestrian attended the same meeting, which was held near the Ranger District on which she rode.

This lack of participation was not the result of a lack of trails issues. All three Ranger Districts have substantial trail mileage and they all get intensive use by horsemen. In fact, there is a tremendous need for more trail mileage and improved maintenance. On

the other hand, the Forest Service is faced with the economics of doing more with less, as well as that of resolving conflicting values among Forest users. Trail horsemen missed an important opportunity to involve themselves in discussions of user wants and Forest limitations.

Why the Lack of Involvement?

I think that there may be several reasons why trail horsemen have, by and large, failed to become meaningfully involved in management planning for the public lands. First, while trail horsemen may have their own riding organizations, they are an independent lot with a bent for going their own way either in relatively small groups or individually. Trying to keep up with agency rules and regulations regarding trail use is to them bad enough. Having to become involved in creating some bureaucratic framework that defines the availability of trails and how the trail systems will be used in concert with a large number of natural resource issues adds insult to injury. In contrast, while such local groups and individuals fail to take advantage of the opportunities given to them to participate in establishing a framework for specific management decisions, they are often very visible in the District Ranger's office wanting both improved trails and more trail mileage.

Second, these trail horsemen tend to believe that they only need to appropriately finesse the District Ranger to get what they want. They forget that every other user group is pressuring the Ranger for their "wants": Most of these other users have done their homework by participating in the management planning process, thereby working to ensure that the plan accommodated their wants.

Third, there is the group that believes that if we just offer to construct and maintain trails with volunteer labor, equipment, and materials, we can have whatever we want. Such a perspective often results in disappointment at best and a highly damaged agency-trail user relationship at worst. What such horsemen forget is that while well-intentioned individuals make these promises to the agencies, such individuals – and even their organizations – come and go over time. The agency, on the other hand, is where the buck stops from now on. New trails bring on new liabilities. Obviously any agency, already thinly stretched, is going to be reluctant to take on responsibilities not already clearly envisioned in the management plan under which it must operate.

Fourth, in avoiding the planning process and its implications for future management and use of land, equestrian trail users have forfeited their voice at a time when it could have mattered. Often, they do not realize that once the planning document is finalized, the framework has been set for the next 15 years, in the case of the National Forests. Adjustments can be made only by plan adjustment or amendment, which may be a substantially involved and a time-consuming process.

Fifth, it is not uncommon for all user groups, including horsemen, to forget that natural resources are collectively like a pie; as the number of slices increases, individual slices decrease in size. For example, as designated natural areas that prohibit horse traffic on the land increase in number and size, trail system opportunities decrease. The framework for such a scenario is established in the planning process.

Finally, there is a certain category of rider that takes great pride in being defiant of processes, rules, and regulations. They boast, "I don't care what they say. I'll ride where, how, and when I please. They'll have to catch me." What such an attitude has done and continues to do to the image of equestrian trail users is obvious. Hopefully, this group is decreasing in size. The remnants that may remain always will have a negative impact on equestrian trail issues.

Privileges and Rights

When granted by the land management agencies, it is our privilege to ride and use recreational stock on public land trails. As trail horsemen, we are a small minority of the total American citizenry that owns these lands. It is therefore incumbent upon us to demonstrate that our intended uses are within the capacity of the land to withstand our use, and that our activities will be in harmony with other appropriate uses of the landscape. It is also incumbent upon the various land management agencies not to arbitrarily and capriciously deny our requests for these privileges.

Where the National Forests and BLM lands are concerned, National Forest Management Act of 1976 and Federal Land Management Policy of 1976 have mandated the rights of American citizens to participate in the planning processes that create a vision for the future conditions of the land and what will constitute appropriate and harmonious uses of the land. By in large, trail horsemen have forfeited these rights while almost every other major user group has voraciously seized them. These rights constitute the absolute cornerstone of environmental organization activity that frequently has the most clout in shaping land management plans. Hunting, fishing, hiking, water sports, biking, and off-road vehicle organizations are always well represented in the planning arena. Trail horsemen simply can no longer afford to ignore the shaping of a management framework that might count them and their values as insignificant relative to the values and wants of other land users.

I am very pleased to report that South Carolina has risen to this need. Our trail horsemen learned the lessons of past negligence, and are currently intensively involving themselves in the National Forest planning process.

A Conservation Context

The congressional mandate for natural resource conservation undergirds all federal land management planning efforts. Horsemen, and all other land users,

must recognize this reality. Further, we must strive to assist the agencies in devising strategies that will envision our recreation as commensurate with natural resource conservation efforts and not contrary to them.

We cannot claim that we have a right to degrade the ecosystem values of the rest of the American public. We can plead our case for the privilege to use these lands in a non-degrading manner. To make such a plea requires a humble willingness to admit that:

- We are only one user group among many.
- Our values are not necessarily shared or understood by many others.
- Our land and trail stewardship objectives are aimed at the preservation of lands with horse trail opportunities for the future.
- We are striving for a sustainable relationship with the land. This is conservation in its most fundamental sense.

In summary, while in recent years trail horsemen and recreational stock users have begun to claim their rights to participate in federal agency land management planning, we are the last significant user group to do so. Even now, our voices pale amid the din of all the other interests, including those of other recreational users, as they plead concerns for what they want from the land.

Agency personnel that are trail horsemen and that are experienced in harmonizing horse trail interests with other user values are few and far between. It is only the equestrians themselves who can accurately portray their values and concerns. Only equestrians themselves can display the true image of the land ethics and stewardship of trail horsemen. The creation of that image is best done in the land management planning arena. The questions remain whether we will we build that image and whether it can command respect from the rest of the American citizenry.

Dr. Wood is Professor and Extension Trails Specialist at Clemson University, Clemson, SC. He teaches several senior and graduate level courses in conservation policy. He also worked in the conservation policy arena as a consultant to the forest products industry for 10 years.