

# Forest Service Wilderness Planning Process Overview

## *Introduction*

Wilderness planning is the art of understanding the character of the wilderness, translating it into desired conditions, monitoring the wilderness resource, and implementing actions to protect wilderness character. Wilderness planning is the essential tool developed by managers, scientists, and the public to ensure that the mandates of The Wilderness Act of 1964 and subsequent legislation are implemented.

The term "wilderness planning" is most commonly associated with the task of producing a wilderness plan. However, wilderness planning involves many important components or steps and begins long before the plan is written and continues long afterwards. In fact successful wilderness planning begins with elements of the planning process that are pre-work for the actual plan. These elements include: 1) determining the need for change, 2) inventorying conditions, and, 3) involving the public.

The planning process is really a circle or loop that never ends. Once indicators, standards and zones are established and management actions have been implemented it is necessary to monitor conditions to determine if the desired conditions are being attained. If conditions are not met, management actions are adjusted using "adaptive management" prescriptions described in the plan. Once again monitoring determines if the actions are effective.

## *The Planning Process*

Wilderness planning processes have been developed by research scientists and managers and implemented and modified for many years. Various processes such as Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC), Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP), and Visitor Impact Monitoring (VIM) exist and have somewhat different focus but all utilize a similar set of elements to portray the loop process described above.

All wilderness planning processes address the need for establishing a "recreation carrying capacity" by relating visitor use to visitor caused impacts to the social, biological, and physical components of the wilderness resource. Carrying capacity is determined not just on the basis of how many people at one time can be in or pass through an area, but by identifying the amount, location, timing, and type of use and relating it to existing and desired conditions for the wilderness resource. Management actions related to visitor use and experience are developed to maintain or improve the wilderness character of the area.

## *Planning Outline*

### Element 1: Building a Foundation

- identifying characteristics and issues
- establishing a process
- building an interdisciplinary team
- establishing a timeline

## Element 2: Public Involvement

- Identifying the audience and participants
- Strategies and Tactics for meaningful participation

## Element 3: Desired Condition

- Need for Change
- Wilderness Character

## Element 4: Inventory Conditions

- Likely indicators
- Information on hand
- Data gaps
- Collection, analysis, and use of data

## Element 5: Zoning

- Determine the need
- Appropriate criteria

## Element 6: Indicators

- Meaningful measures

## Element 7: Standards

- Limits on impairment or degradation of wilderness character
- Objectives for management

## Element 8: Management Actions

- Adaptive management prescriptions

## Element 9: Monitoring

- Conditions
- Trends
- Reporting