

CURRENT

"As we traversed the seemingly endless jumble, we became aware of a sensation new to us: at a time and in a part of the world where opportunity to do so was rapidly vanishing, we knew that this was the way it felt to be pioneers, bound for a land so little visited that it was as if no man had come this way before."

Phoebe Anne Sumner



CONDITIONS

Current Conditions

This unit focuses on gathering the information that is needed to develop desired conditions, standards, and indicators based on the significant issues. It will address how to get started with collecting needed information and how to avoid getting caught up in too much detail. This information will provide the basis for writing the “affected environment” section of the NEPA document that accompanies proposed Wilderness management direction.

Objectives

1. Participants can identify what information they need about current conditions to address the issues, where they can go to get the information, and how to obtain information that is not available.
2. Participants can describe how they will analyze, store, and display information about current conditions.

Key points

- Avoid the "paralysis of analysis." Gather information only related to the issues and only to the level of detail needed to be able to describe desired conditions and identify objectives.

Current Conditions

Purposes

To describe the affected environment. One of the primary purposes for gathering information is to help describe the affected environment. However, general descriptions of every Wilderness component just adds bulk (i.e. it doesn't provide information that really helps make the decisions). Information should focus on describing current conditions for the significant issues identified by both managers and citizens. Information should also be summarized regarding outstanding features, values, or special attributes of the particular Wilderness. Place the Wilderness in a regional context to identify attributes that are not duplicated elsewhere. Examples might include: key habitat or corridors for wildlife species that are of concern, rare plant communities, outstanding examples of prehistoric or historic uses, unique experiences (e.g. opportunities for long horsepack trips, subalpine areas accessible in day trips).

As a baseline to develop desired conditions. Information about current conditions in the wilderness is necessary to further demonstrate the need for change and to give a realistic baseline from which to develop desired conditions. Information about current conditions will help identify the spectrum of future conditions that are possible. This information will also be useful after programmatic direction is developed and you are ready to identify the gap between existing conditions and desired conditions and develop possible management actions to improve conditions.

To set realistic, attainable standards that move conditions in the direction of desired condition. To set realistic standards for the significant issues, it is essential to have good information about current conditions. If this information is lacking, there is a chance of setting a standard too high to be achievable. This leads to frustration and a sense that progress can't be made. Where current conditions are unacceptable, standards must be set so that conditions will be improved, even if just an incremental progress will be made toward the desired condition.

As a baseline for future monitoring. Information collected about current conditions to develop programmatic direction will help establish a baseline so that monitoring efforts can begin to show trends over time.

Inventory information

Often there will be considerable information already available about wilderness conditions: use it. Wilderness ranger reports, annual reports to Congress, old management plans, environmental documents for projects in the Wilderness, office files, and scientific/technical literature are all good places to look. You can also get considerable detailed information by asking resource specialists, external experts (e.g. citizens, university professors), and specialists in other agencies (e.g. State Wildlife agencies). Often, the major task is to concisely summarize and display information, not conduct new inventories.

Managers usually have some idea of what the major issues will be, but beware of conducting intensive field inventories before you have verified issues with the public. In order to be useful for planning, issues must be very specific so you know what information you need to collect. Sometimes, information about current conditions is primarily qualitative (e.g. description of natural fire regime). For other issues, you will

**Components of
information
gathering and
management**

need to be specific enough so you know what variable you will measure to assess conditions relative to the issue. For example, if you are hearing complaints about crowded conditions in a particular area, it may not be wise to begin a new effort to count encounters between groups. What if you find there are few encounters between groups? Does it mean that the people who complained were wrong? Probably not: they may have used the word “crowding” to represent another problem. With more refinement of the issue, you may discover that it isn’t the number of encounters that are causing complaints, but one particular behavior—parties playing loud music or leaving a lot of litter. Or perhaps the few campsites that exist are very close together. Any of these conditions could cause people to complain about crowds. Knowing what the true source of the complaint is will help you decide what information you need to collect.

Gathering Information Already Collected and Use What You Can

Identify information needs based on the issues. What’s in the file in the office—range conditions, campsite inventories, maps of crucial wildlife habitat, wilderness ranger reports, visitor comment cards or surveys, old management plans, environmental documents....

Ask experts (including citizens with personal experience and scientists), resource specialists, other agencies what they have.

Research the scientific and technical literature to uncover past studies, theses, dissertations.

Identify Gaps in Information

Where are the holes in existing information?

Design an inventory method: location, frequency, sample size needed. Can you link your efforts to other agency’s inventories?

Focus on areas where you have the least amount of information.

Determine What Methods Will Be Used

Adapt the methods successfully used elsewhere. Consult written reports, and others who have applied the methods.

Train Field Personnel

Data gathering method must be repeatable and accurate. People must be trained so there is consistency in observations.

Information Management

One person needs to be responsible for collecting, checking quality, and storing information. Develop a system so the information can be easily accessed by those who need it. Use a computer to store and analyze large amounts of data.

Analyze and Display Information

Analyze and display information in a way that makes it easy for people to see what current conditions are relative to each issue. Include information on trends where

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possible. You may want to consider developing a chart for each issue with column headings that read—current condition, desired condition, monitoring indicators, standards. This will ensure that you are developing direction that will truly respond to the issues.

Example

Issue

Recreational stock grazing could change the plant composition in meadows near popular campsites causing unacceptable impacts to natural meadow conditions. This may reduce future productivity of the meadows for other visitors and may reduce aesthetic and scientific values. A decline in meadow condition may also reduce the amount and quality of forage available for wild ungulates.

Existing Condition

Recreational stock (primarily horses and mules, but also llamas and goats) graze throughout the Wilderness. In addition to stock brought in by private parties, there are about 35 summer outfitters and 26 fall hunting outfitters who use stock in the Wilderness. Each group is currently permitted up to 35 head of stock, with some exceptions during the fall. Current regulations limit groups to 35 head of stock.

The condition of the forage in meadows associated with campsites was recorded over the past three summers. The table below displays these condition (it does not include camps used by outfitted groups in the fall). Short term trends, in the form of utilization, were also measured.

Condition Class of Meadows Associated with Campsites

*Unranked	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Total
6	120	78	42	3	1	250

(*Unranked meadows were generally in excellent condition.)

Definitions

Condition Class 1: Decreasers (plants which are known to decrease in abundance with heavy grazing pressure) predominate. No visible impact on vegetation and no beaten out barren areas. Vegetation is very close to the potential natural community.

Condition Class 2: Increasers (plants which are known to increase in abundance with heavy grazing pressure) predominate. Some annuals are present, especially if gopher activity is high. Small barren areas are present such as salt grounds, roll areas, or fly grounds.

Condition Class 3: Obvious vegetation changes are present. More than 25% of the existing vegetation is annual grasses and annual forbs. Climax species are rare. More than 100 sq.ft. of barren ground is present.

Condition Class 4: Over 50% of the meadow is covered with annual grasses and annual forbs. Several large barren areas exist. Only remnant perennial grasses and forbs are present.

Condition Class 5: Over 75% annual grasses and annual forbs are present. A significant amount of barren ground is present.



CURRENT CONDITIONS

PURPOSES FOR GATHERING INFORMATION

- * To describe the affected environment.
 - Relevant to significant issues.
 - Outstanding features, values, attributes in regional context.
- * As a baseline to develop desired conditions.
- * To set realistic, attainable objectives.
- * As a baseline for future monitoring.

COMPONENTS of INFORMATION GATHERING & MANAGEMENT

- * Identify information needs.
- * Find out what is already available.
- * Identify information gaps.
- * Determine how to get needed information.
- * Determine how needed field information will be collected.
- * Train field personnel.
- * Determine how information will be stored, analyzed, and displayed.

WORKSHEET

CURRENT CONDITIONS

Select an issue from the ones identified in the “Need for Change” unit. Complete the following information.
Issue:

What information is already available?

Where is the information located, who has it, how do we get it?

What information do we need that we don't have?

Where might we obtain needed information?

Are there information needs which will require a field inventory?

How will field information be collected—where, what methods?

How will field personnel be trained?

How will information be stored, analyzed, and displayed?
