
**Recreationists at the Coopers Rock State Forest:
A Survey of User Characteristics, Behaviors, and Attitudes**



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Recreation Plan for State Agency Managed Land at Coopers Rock State Forest

This plan has been assembled for the purpose of addressing the needs of recreation users at Coopers Rock State Forest (CRSF). West Virginia University researchers from the Division of Forestry and Natural Resources conducted a study of recreation users at CRSF in 2007. The findings of this study have allowed CRSF management to identify important recreational issues. This plan will serve as a vehicle for the managing agencies of CRSF to make use of in establishing potential objectives. The overarching goal of this study is to provide managers with research supported information that will better enable them to improve the recreation experience at CRSF while maintaining the ecological integrity of the area.

RECREATION MISSION STATEMENT:

“As caretakers of the forest, we strive to provide diverse forms of quality recreation without yielding the silvicultural practices of a multiple-use philosophy. It is our belief that recreational activities play an important role in maintaining a thriving forest that is the source of emotional, spiritual, and financial prosperity for the general community. The overriding goal of the managing agencies is to work in harmony with one another in order to maximize the recreational experience at Coopers Rock State Forest, while emphasizing a stewardship ethic that will not compromise the future of the forest.”

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I. Introduction

Coopers Rock State Forest is located just east of Morgantown, West Virginia, and consists of 12, 713 acres of state lands. The Forest is bisected by Interstate 68, with a North Sector and South Sector. Most of CRSF to the north of Interstate 68 is leased to the West Virginia University Division of Forestry and Natural Resources for research, teaching, and demonstration. The rest of the acreage at CRSF is managed by the WV Division of Forestry, with the WV Division of Natural Resources playing a significant role in the management of natural resources and recreational activities in the forest.

The tremendous views and easily accessible location of CRSF have resulted in it becoming a major tourist attraction. The Forest can be visited by travelers who are passing through the Morgantown area, and provides prime recreational opportunities for the entire region. Most of the Forest's existing recreational facilities date back to the late 1930s, when the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built numerous structures in the Forest. These facilities include the rustic pavilions near the overlook area, built of durable American chestnut wood, as well as other historical sights such as the Henry Clay Iron Furnace. Because of these various shelters and structures that exist at CRSF, picnickers and campers have the ability to enjoy many recreational opportunities throughout the developed and undeveloped areas of the Forest. Hunting is a tradition that West Virginia prides itself on, and CRSF offers up most of its 12,000+ acres every year for that very purpose. Many diverse forms of rock climbing have become popular recreational activities on the grounds as well. A maze of enormous boulders and cliffs give climbing enthusiasts of all skill levels a chance to have an enjoyable experience.

In order to better understand the recreational users that occupy CRSF, the WV Division of Forestry requested that the Department of Recreation, Parks, & Tourism Resources at West Virginia University conduct a study of recreational use in the areas of the Forest that are managed by the WVDOF. The results of the study have identified many issues that will be addressed by the collaborating managing agencies in this recreation plan for the state agency managed lands of CRSF.

II. Research Methodology

Introduction to Methodology

There are many diverse types of recreational use that occur at Coopers Rock State Forest. Accordingly, many diverse and complicated management issues may arise if recreational objectives are not thoroughly discussed and studied prior to being executed by the managing agencies.

This recreational research study, conducted by West Virginia University (WVU), is meant to serve as a starting point for management to identify recreational issues. The research findings will also serve as baseline data for management so that they may observe potential changes to recreational trends over time. After the completion of the actual recreational user study, researchers from WVU assumed the role of facilitating dialogue between the managing agencies to develop practical objectives that will positively address recreational issues.

The objectives that are discussed in this original recreation plan for state agency managed lands at CRSF should be viewed as a solid foundation for management to address the recreation and tourism aspect of managing the Forest.

Research Surveying Methodology

The study in this plan employed three main surveying methods: (1) On-site surveys, (2) E-mail Rock Climbing surveys and (3) Mail-returned Hunting surveys. In order to understand which survey methods would be effective, it was necessary to know how to best obtain quality data from a diverse range of CRSF recreationists. The four main areas of focus for this recreation plan are: (1) Facilities Management, (2) Trails Management, (3) Rock Climbing Management, and (4) Hunting Management.

Facilities and Trails fall under the category of Developed Recreation. On-site surveying was deemed as the best method in understanding how the users of the facilities and the trails view the recreational opportunities of CRSF. *Rock Climbing* and *Hunting* fall under the category of Dispersed Recreation, since these recreationists are not typically concentrated in developed parts of the forest during their actual recreation experience.

Though on-site surveys were also used to survey the dispersed recreationists, alternative methods were used to obtain a sample of that population. E-mail Rock Climbing surveys were sent out to a random sample of about 250 clients of an outdoor recreation store in Morgantown who were likely recreationists at CRSF. Since it is ineffective to seek hunters using an on-site methodology, a mail-returned survey was utilized. A total of 340 mail-returned Hunting surveys were sent to hunters who have previously registered as successful hunters at CRSF.

On-site surveys were conducted at CRSF from September 4th – October 20th of 2006. This survey (Appendix C) consisted of 24 questions that were designed to understand the demographics and characteristics of the users, their opinions of the facilities, and how those views affect their overall satisfaction at CRSF. Questions relating to conflict and perceptions of crowding were used to further gauge their satisfaction. The interviewers for the on-site survey consisted of eight graduate and undergraduate students from the WVU Department of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Resources. The interviewers were trained by professional researchers and instructed on how to strictly ask the question on the survey and write down the exact answers, unless otherwise asked to clarify a question by the respondent. The survey was administered by the interviewers in face-to face encounters with a random respondent at predetermined areas on random days throughout the surveying time period.

In order to understand the locations and main areas of CRSF prior to selecting the surveying areas, a tour was given by a manager from the WV Division of Forestry to the WVU research leader. Since CRSF has such a diverse set of recreational users, it was important to obtain surveys from respondents that use all of the different developed recreational opportunities that are available. In order to accomplish this, interviewers were instructed to obtain a given number of surveys in a certain area on a day within a specific time slot to ensure that all of the areas and their main recreation points were sampled properly.

There were five main data collecting areas which consisted of popular recreation points within those areas at CRSF.

- A. Concession Stand Area
 - a) Overlook Area
 - b) Sunset Rocks Climbing Area
 - c) Picnic Loop Area #1 and #2
 - d) Shelter #3 Point
 - e) Rock City Climbing Area

- B. Ravens Rock Area
 - a) Ravens Rock Parking Lot
 - b) Ravens Rock Trail
 - c) Roadside Trail

- C. McCollum Campground Area

- D. Day Use Parking Area
 - a) Parking Lot
 - b) Scott's Run Trail

- E. Henry Clay Iron Furnace Area
 - a) Henry Clay Parking Area
 - b) Trail to Henry Clay Iron Furnace
 - c) Roof Rocks Climbing Area

Rock Climbing at Coopers Rock. Rock Climbing is a popular recreation activity at CRSF. Since climbing is a dispersed recreation activity, climbers are notoriously difficult to obtain interviews from while recreating on-site. In order to obtain the opinions of rock climbers, an e-mail survey was used, resulting in 23 completed surveys. The email addresses of the respondents were obtained by contacting a local outdoor recreation store in Morgantown. This local business is well known in the climbing community as an important source for climbing information in the region. The survey instrument (Appendix D) was designed slightly different for the e-mail version in order to better fit the concerns of climbing enthusiasts. However, the basic questions concerning demographics, crowding, conflict, and overall satisfaction were still the main focus of the survey.

Hunting at Coopers Rock. A study of CRSF hunters was conducted to better understand their use patterns and opinions. Hunting is a unique form of recreation, requiring a much different set of questions on the survey instrument (Appendix E). The only questions that remained consistent on all of the survey instruments were the questions concerning crowding, conflict, and demographics. The satisfaction questions on the mail-back survey were related only to hunting at CRSF.

A WV Division of Natural Resources (DNR) District 1 Wildlife Biologist provided an address database of hunters who had previously checked in game that had been harvested at CRSF. A total of 340 hunters' names/addresses were randomly drawn from this database. The respondents included residents from West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, Massachusetts, and Maine.

General Recreation Information: Focus Group Interviews.

Focus Groups were held in August and September 2006 at the Cheat Lake Fire Hall for any person in the general public who wished to express their comments and concerns with a recreation plan for CRSF. The focus groups were promoted with e-mails to known recreation users, as well as with fliers that were displayed at CRSF on all of the bulletin boards and any other place of relevance that could be seen by recreationists. The focus groups were open to anyone who wanted to discuss an issue related to the recreation plan for CRSF. The purpose of the focus groups was to identify key issues that the public had with the current management of CRSF and to take note of any suggestions they might have on what would be included in the plan.

Facilitation Methodology

A draft recreation plan was presented to the WV Division of Forestry in December 2006. This document was based entirely on the results of the recreation research conducted by WVU researchers. CRSF resource managers were able to systematically view the results of each area of recreation that was studied. Individual meetings were held between the research team and each respective managing agency to discuss the implications of the recreation study. After each agency had a chance to provide input on an individual basis, a collaborative meeting of all of the managing agencies was held in order to discuss the strategies that would be pursued in developing sound and reasonable objectives for recreation at CRSF.

III. DEVELOPED RECREATION STRATEGIES

A. Goals & Objectives of Facilities Management

The purpose of this section is to explain recreational facility objectives that address the issues and concerns of recreational users at Coopers Rock State Forest.

Goal # 1

Further enhance and develop the relationship between managing agencies and recreation users at Coopers Rock State Forest.

Discussion of Goal # 1

The survey comments section revealed that some recreation users feel that the agencies may not be effectively communicating to the public what is actually happening regarding the management of CRSF. The managing agencies would like to strengthen the relationships among the various stakeholders and user groups related to making recreational decisions. It is the intention of the managing agencies to set up, at the very least, an annual meeting that would be aimed at establishing long term solutions that could solve any shortcomings that may be experienced by recreation users in the Forest. Managers are currently working on a plan to form a committee that would evenly distribute public participation among the diverse types of recreation users that exist at CRSF.

Objectives

- Establish a recreation committee by the year 2009. The recreation committee should consist of members from the WVDOF, WVDNR, Coopers Rock Foundation, WVU DFNR, and representatives from the local recreation community such as rock climbers, hunters, mountain bikers, and hikers.
- Set ground rules for the recreation committee that would require that all members work within the current parameters of the multiple-use philosophy at CRSF.

Goal # 2

Sustain the primitive style pavilions and day-use facilities at Coopers Rock State Forest while providing the necessary maintenance to keep these facilities in good condition.

Discussion of Goal # 2

The primitive style facilities throughout the Forest will continue to be upheld into the future. Management understands that CRSF holds a great historical and cultural value to almost anyone who visits it. New signs that are needed in the forest will likely be made out of a plastic laminate material for durability. Management is also looking at possible volunteer programs that would assist staff in sustaining and improving the upkeep of facilities.

Objectives

- Establish a volunteer program for the summer of 2009 season so that CRSF staff will have more time and resources to focus on maintaining the facilities.
- All new signs should be consistent with existing rustic signs, and remain as close to a primitive style that plastic laminate material will allow for.
- Conduct an annual inventory of picnic tables, pavilions, and signs to ensure that all physical features of the recreation areas are in acceptable condition.

Goal # 3

Focus on better educating the visitors of Coopers Rock State Forest with more interpretive and informative signage around the entire Forest.

Discussion of Goal # 3

Providing accurate and consistent informational and interpretive signs is critical to improving the overall recreational experience at CRSF. It is the goal of management to create a better experience for CRSF recreationists by improving the signs that direct visitors to the main tourist attractions. Management is currently developing a relationship with interpretational specialists in the RPTR Program at WVU, who are working on developing affordable interpretive signs that are already being considered for use on the new Roadside Trail.

Objectives

- Place two interpretive signs on the Road Side Trail by the year 2009.
- Replace the interpretive sign at the Henry Clay Iron Furnace with a new and refurbished interpretive sign by the year 2010.
- Add one or two interpretive signs at the Henry Clay Iron Furnace by 2010 that give visitors a better idea of what went into making an iron furnace function during the 19th century.
- Place two interpretive signs around the Overlook area by the year 2010 that give visitors a perspective on the significance of the overlook.

Goal # 4

Work toward implementing required standards at Coopers Rock State Forest that will enable the facilities to be more handicap accessible.

Discussion of Goal # 4

Management would like to make the Forest's recreation sites more easily accessible. All recreational facilities will be monitored and evaluated in order to assure the public that everyone has access at CRSF. The managing agencies are looking toward the possibility of obtaining a viable funding source that would be used to accomplish this task. Results of the survey showed that a priority for this project should be at the Scenic Overlook. Management is also considering the long term feasibility of laying out a completely new route to the Henry Clay Iron Furnace in order to enable easier access and a more interpretive friendly trail.

Objectives

- Make additions and improvements to the trails and facilities around the Overlook and Concession Area during the next five years in order to ensure easy access for any person that visits CRSF.
- Inform visitors that CRSF is ADA Accessible by putting up ADA approved signs at conforming recreation areas in the Forest.

B. Goals and Objectives of Trails Management

The purpose of this section is to explain recreational trail objectives that address the issues and concerns of recreational users at Coopers Rock State Forest.

Goal # 5

Maximize the potential of the current trail system by developing and maintaining standards of the highest possible quality.

Discussion of Goal # 5

The overarching goal of this objective is to sustain quality standards for the official trails that are already in existence at CRSF. With the exception of the new Roadside Trail, all of the official trails have been adapted from pre-existing roads or access routes. Many of these pre-existing routes have never received the proper initial treatment that would allow for quality maintenance to be sustained at an acceptable standard. Management is investigating the possibility of having a contractor rebuild the official trail system to an acceptable level.

Objectives

- Conduct a thorough trail inventory by 2009 that points out problem areas that need to be remedied in order to meet the trail standards set by the WVDOP.
- Bring all official trails to an acceptable minimum quality level by the year 2015.

Goal # 6

Develop a standardized trail head setup for every official trail which includes maps and mile markers of the trail, along with a bulletin board that will inform all users of the rules and regulations of the trail.

Discussion of Goal # 6

A standardized trail setup is necessary to inform recreationists of the rules and desired behaviors of recreationists. A bulletin board should display basic hunting information about when hunting seasons are in so that trail users will know that they should dress accordingly if they are using the trails. The boards may also provide timber harvesting information so that trail users will know which areas of the Forest have recently been harvested, as well as which areas may be harvested in the near future. Mile markers would be placed at the beginning and end of the trails. These markers would serve to better inform trail users that lack the necessary maps that indicate how long the trails are. If maps are to be placed at trail heads, they will likely be made out of a lasting material as to endure the elements and potential criminal activity. Paper maps inside of clear plastic will not be sufficient enough for this objective. Management is also looking to provide quality trail maps that can be available on the CRSF web site and at the concession stand during the season.

Objectives

- Develop standardized bulletin boards at the major recreation sights by 2009.
- Develop a quality trail map that is made available for the public by 2010.
- Develop a link on the official CRSF website that gives recreation users detailed trail information.

Goal # 7

Work toward solving staffing issues by working with West Virginia University to establish a summer internship program for a Trails Coordinator.

Discussion of Goal # 7

Management is striving to provide a working internship for WVU by creating a trails coordinator position. This position would be overseen by DNR Parks during the summer months. Because of the small staff at CRSF, it is difficult to convey guidelines to volunteer groups that assist in trail maintenance activities. Management understands the importance of getting a diverse number of groups involved in performing volunteer trail maintenance, so they will advocate working together with numerous trail maintenance groups to inform them of the importance of proper trail maintenance. A qualified trail coordinator could facilitate the proper organization of a volunteer schedule.

Objectives

- Create an internship program with WVU for the summer of 2009 that would institute a trail coordinator position at CRSF. The job of this trail coordinator would be to organize volunteer workers throughout the summer.
- Obtain a funding source for the trail coordinator position by the summer of 2009.
- Solidify the summer internship program so that it can be reconstituted annually.

IV. DISPERSED RECREATION STRATEGIES

A. Goals & Objectives of Rock Climbing Management

The purpose of this section is to explain rock climbing objectives that address the issues and concerns of recreational users at Coopers Rock State Forest.

Goal # 8

Address the needs of the diverse climbing community by providing general climbing information at well known climbing areas.

Discussion of Goal # 8

The three primary climbing areas of CRSF (Sunset Rocks, Rock City, and Roof Rocks) are some of the most popular climbing spots in the entire region. There should be basic trails with directional signs that lead to the popular climbing areas in the Forest for those who may not be familiar with CRSF. Signs and trails leading to climbing areas should help prevent unofficial markings which destroy the haphazard appearance of trees that have been spray painted. There should also be kiosks on these trails. Signs on the kiosks should display general climbing guidelines and address potential liability concerns, while also serving as a place for climbers to sign in. Potential guidelines should discuss suggested maximum group sizes and climbing safety tips.

Objectives

- Provide a kiosk at each of the three main climbing areas by 2009 which contains climbing guidelines, potential liabilities of rock climbing, emergency information, and a sign in sheet.
- Develop and maintain official trails that lead to the three popular climbing areas at CRSF by 2010.
- Provide climbing information on the official CRSF website.
- Construct a parking lot near the Roof Rocks area in order to provide easy access for all recreation users.

Goal # 9

Use interpretive signage to educate climbers on the different species that are unique to Coopers Rock State Forest.

Discussion of Goal #9

It is important that managers thoroughly understand the current threatened species situation at CRSF. Management will then plan to inform the climbing community through interpretive signage on federally threatened species that are unique to the cliffs at CRSF, such as the Flat-Spined Three Toothed Snail. These interpretive signs would serve as to elaborate on the various species that can be found at CRSF.

Objectives

- Place one interpretive sign at each of the three main climbing areas which conveys the importance of protecting endangered species.
- Continue monitoring all federally threatened species of concern so that managing agencies will have consistent and reliable information when making sensitive decisions that could potentially affect the ecosystem at CRSF.
- Develop strategies for bouldering at CRSF that will lesson the impact on snail habitats, and inform the climbing community on how to avoid negative impacts (i.e. - don't clean away leaf litter from the base of rocks).

B. Goals & Objectives for Hunting Management

The purpose of this section is to establish hunting and trapping objectives that address the issues and concerns of recreational users at Coopers Rock State Forest.

Goal # 10

Conserve and manage wildlife populations and their associated habitats for a wide array of game and non-game species to provide for a diversity of outdoor experiences for all recreation users.

Discussion of Goal #10

Management recognizes that sustaining a diversity of wildlife habitats is the key to meeting the above goal. Wildlife species associated with early successional habitats (i.e. sapling forests) have declined significantly over the past decades due to the lack of an active forest management program. Subsequently, habitat quality for various wildlife species (i.e. ruffed grouse) has declined. The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources will work closely with the WV Division of Forestry in providing input and recommendations pertaining to future timber sales and forest treatments.

Objectives

- Forest management activities will be instituted that will create various forest age classes within the forest. In addition, wildlife enhancement activities such as savannah and forest opening developments will be recommended in conjunction with future timber sales to create additional habitat diversity on the Forest.
- Continue monitoring and surveying work that is related to rare, threatened, and endangered species, in order to assure the public that management activities and recreational uses at CRSF do not negatively impact these populations.
- Continue with on-going wildlife management activities on the Forest.

Goal # 11

Regulate wildlife populations for hunting, trapping, fishing, and non-consumptive recreational opportunities that are compatible with habitat conditions.

Discussion of Goal #11

The WV Department of Natural Resources will continue monitoring efforts to evaluate hunting regulations and wildlife populations at CRSF. In addition, the DNR will continue with the older age deer management program at CRSF which provides for a unique hunting experience.

Objectives

- Continue wildlife population monitoring efforts such as evaluating harvest data and surveying deer populations in order to assure that hunting and trapping regulations are implemented at CRSF, which are based upon sound scientific evidence.
- Promote the older-age deer management program at the CRSF and continue to monitor deer harvests and public opinion relating to the antler restriction regulations.

Goal # 12

Improve information dissemination pertaining to the hunting and trapping season and regulations to the various recreation users at the Coopers Rock State Forest.

Discussion of Goal #12

Management will increase public informational efforts in order to promote and facilitate recreational opportunities and management of the forest. It is management's goal to post sufficient signage that will educate the public about the hunting and trapping season, along with specific regulations that will aid in minimizing user group conflicts. It is also management's goal to delineate and mark the CRSF boundary in order to eliminate potential conflicts between CRSF recreation users and adjacent property owners.

Objectives

- Utilize G.I.S. by delineating and marking the CRSF boundary by 2010.
- Develop a quality CRSF map/brochure that identifies important recreational opportunities and topographic features by the year 2010.
- Numerous informational boards have already been constructed and erected at the various trailheads throughout the CRSF. Management will continue to evaluate the need for additional information boards and put them up as needed. The boards will contain information pertaining to the hunting and trapping season, along with special regulations (i.e. antler restrictions) relating to CRSF.
- Management agencies will upgrade public information pertaining to CRSF via various avenues such as websites and publications.