Managing Forests on Wisconsin State Park Lands

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Bureau of Parks and Recreation
January 2010

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Background

Wisconsin's forested lands are some of our state's most valuable resources, prized by visitors and citizens alike. People come to these special places for moments of quiet reflection or simply to be in the great outdoors. They pursue recreational opportunities ranging from biking and hiking to camping, wildlife watching, and cross country skiing.

Scenic beauty — or "visual quality" — is one of the primary reasons people choose to spend their recreation and vacation time in or near forested areas and within Wisconsin State Park System (WSPS) properties. They are also attracted by the serenity and solitude of the outdoors. Forested landscapes inspire spiritual and emotional connections resulting in deeply personal experiences for many people.

Protecting and enhancing this sensory experience is a priority for those entrusted with managing WSPS properties. In addition, management must work to sustain healthy communities that provide economic, social, and ecological benefits, now and for future generations. This careful oversight of our natural resources is a cornerstone of the WSPS mission.

This document provides guidance related to the management of WSPS forested lands, including desired outcomes that will preserve the value of these resources for millions of WSPS visitors, into the future

Opportunities for Management

Forested lands on WSPS properties include a wide variety of natural community types, as well as altered landscapes. These various types of forests allow for different types of management activities that should be determined through careful planning (including property master plans and resource management plans) and consultation with foresters, wildlife managers, and other resource experts. All management actions must be consistent with the ecological capability of the landscape, optimize forest health and maintain or enhance the recreational, aesthetic, and other social aspects of the property.

Forest management activities may be undertaken to accomplish a variety of objectives on a property. Forests altered by human activities like fire suppression, development, or removal of hazard trees may be managed to restore the lands to a natural condition. Landscapes disturbed by natural phenomena such as tornadoes, fires, pests, or disease may be managed by allowing recovery to occur naturally. In cases where visitor safety or park developments are threatened, more active management efforts may be necessary. And, forests affected by exotic species or nuisance wildlife may be restored through more intensive management activities.

Just as forested lands reflect a diversity of habitats, so, too, forest management encompasses many different approaches. In some cases, management activities are virtually undetectable to property visitors. In others, timber sales are obvious, at least in the short-term. Over time, as these landscapes regenerate, the scenic beauty is restored

and the benefits of management become much more apparent. In all cases, management must be conducted with both the forest resource and the visitors in mind.

Visual Quality Management

Property visitors place an extremely high value on the aesthetics and scenic beauty of forested lands. Thus, visual quality is one important aspect of integrated forest management. Visual quality management can:

- Enhance the aesthetic value of forested lands for recreational users, contributing to a healthy tourism economy.
- Encourage public acceptance of forest management and timber harvesting, thereby building support for Wisconsin's forest industries.
- Minimize visual and audible impacts of forest management activities including perceived size of harvest areas, presence of logging slash, timber harvest landing operations, road building, site preparation, and herbicide treatment.
- Promote more natural-appearing forest stands.
- Provide opportunities to educate property visitors about forest management practices, benefits of sustainable forestry, and other related concepts.

Within any property, different forested landscapes have varying levels of visual sensitivity that are determined by factors including:

- Perceived degree of sensitivity to landscape aesthetics of users of that travel route
- Volume and type of use the travel route or recreation area receives
- Speed of travel within the route or area
- Terrain/topography

Based on these factors, the WSPS identifies three levels of visual sensitivity to be applied to forested lands. The definitions of these various levels of sensitivity will assist the property manager and forester in development of prescriptions specific to each site being managed. Language insuring proper completion and compliance with aesthetics practices should be included in timber sale and silvicultural activities contracts.

- **Most Sensitive:** applies to travel routes and use areas where **significant public use occurs** and where **visual quality is of high concern** to typical users.
    - *Examples of such areas may include picnic areas, campgrounds, nature study areas, local roads, recreational lakes and rivers, designated trails and surrounding viewshed and other areas that provide a high level of scenic quality.*
- **Moderately Sensitive:** applies to travel routes or recreation areas, not identified as "most sensitive," **where visual quality is of moderate concern** to typical users. These types of areas provide **moderate to high scenic quality but less significant public use.**
    - *Examples of these areas may include public highways and local roads, recreational lakes and rivers, and areas receiving a moderate amount of public use outside designated use areas.*

- **Less Sensitive:** applies to travel routes, recreation areas or all other lands, not identified as "most sensitive" or "moderately sensitive," **where visual quality is of less concern to typical users**.
    - *Examples of these areas may include remote local roads and low-volume local forest roads, areas removed from designated use areas with limited access, and remote areas receiving minimal public use.*

By attempting to manage visual quality of forested lands based on these categories and following the Forest Management Guidelines, Timber Sale Handbook and Aesthetic chapter of the Silviculture Handbook, property managers can minimize visitor disruption and maintain or enhance scenic resources.

Overall Management Priorities
Sustaining healthy forests is a vital role of WSPS properties, and the key to sustaining healthy forests is pro-active management. To ensure that management practices are consistent with the goals and objectives of the WSPS, several management priorities have been established but may vary depending on site characteristics:

- **Aesthetics**: Protect scenic views and allow forest cover to provide settings for solitude and privacy.
- **Recreation:** Sustain large canopy cover and shade in picnic areas, campgrounds, along nature trails, and high use areas.
- **Habitat:** Provide habitat for a wide variety of wildlife and plants, including endangered and threatened species.
- **Forest Health**: Allow for regeneration of the forest through quality forest management and seek opportunities that enhance or maintain the overall health and vigor of the forest ecosystem.
- **Pest management**: Manage invasive plant and animal species, pests, diseases, and nuisance wildlife through prevention, control, and eradication activities.
- **Education and research**: Provide opportunities for interpretation, education, and scientific research.
- **Water quality**: Sustain and enhance local watersheds and water resources including erosion control along waterways, trails, and other property features.

The Wisconsin State Park System has created these priorities for forest management experts to utilize when preparing forest management plans for WSPS properties. These priorities take into consideration both visitor demands and the need for sustaining high quality, healthy forests. Of course, site capabilities help define sustainable forestry practices. Each particular growing space has its own set of environmental conditions affecting tree growth. To achieve long-term health and vitality of forests, factors like soil type, aspect, and climate that influence moisture and nutrient supplies must be considered. The art and science of sustainable forestry blends program priorities with site capabilities to adapt high quality forest management systems.

Desired Outcomes
By considering these overall priorities and managing for visual quality, property

managers and resource professionals can prepare property and/or site specific forest management prescriptions that will create desirable outcomes for the WSPS. These desired outcomes include:

- Maintenance and/or enhancement of visually acceptable and functional forest cover for areas within easy view of WSPS users, particularly in picnic areas and campgrounds, along waterways and trails, and next to park roads and scenic outlooks.
- Use of appropriate forest management techniques to prevent or minimize damage from pests, disease, and nuisance wildlife.
- Planning of approved timber harvests to maintain visual quality in high and moderate use areas; require buffers between harvest areas and designated use areas, roads, and trails; and require immediate attention to negligent harvest practices. Consider contract language that includes specifications for waste, stump heights, forest fire prevention, slash management, sale area use and cleanup, and best management practices.
- Restoration of natural forest communities where practical.
- Development of areas for education and interpretation on topics such as forest protection and management.