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Environmental Assessments in Parks and Recreation Planning



Craig W. Kelsey, PhD.
Utah State University
PlaySafe, LLC Planning Team

Environmental Assessment preparation is both a realistic and sensitive approach to parks and recreation planning. Realistic in that the planning process is good management, adheres to local laws and perhaps federal mandates and allows for a democratic method and review. Sensitive in that the planning places value on the parks and recreation resource and protects, conserves and develops that resource only to the extent appropriate for that site.

This planning effort is becoming an increasingly more complex and detailed process necessitating additional attention and expertise. Perhaps the following questions and answers will prove helpful in understanding better this important concept.

What is Environmental Assessment?

A generally accepted definition of an environmental assessment is:

The planning process that describes the effects of a proposed action on an environmental area: this includes investigating and disclosing the environmental conditions and consequences of that action on the environment and also appropriate management strategies that will govern that area. Thus, there are three main elements of the definition:

1. a process: environmental assessment requires time, investigation, public involvement, thorough analysis of potential harms or benefits that the proposed action may bring.
2. condition and consequence: the environmental area will have certain physical, biological, social and economic elements that may be effected directly or indirectly by the proposed action. Scientific studies are conducted to determine the condition or consequences of the environment on these types of elements.
3. appropriate management strategies: emerging out of this process will be specific strategies that the management agency will have developed to properly oversee the environment with its associated changes. These strategies must be a good blend of sensitivity to the environment and appropriate use of the environmental area.

What are the purposes of an Environmental Assessment?

There are a number of important purposes to this planning and some of the most important are described here:

1. the process charts the best possible balance between use and protection
2. the process helps to establish both short and long term policies
3. the process acts as a catalyst for bringing individuals, groups and agencies together
4. the process creates significant information about the environmental area that can be used by many groups
5. the process allows for public involvement and scientific study so that multiple views are considered
6. the process is a good planning procedure and may comply to legal requirements

When is it necessary to prepare an Environmental Assessment?

The environmental assessment process may occur anytime an agency desires to closely study the effects of a proposed action on an environmental area. There are times however that the process is clearly necessary or required by agency regulations or pre-existing laws. The general thought is that an environmental assessment is prepared when any one of the following three characteristics is present:

1. significant changes to the environmental area are proposed that would affect the land, air, water and other elements
2. changes that affect a large geographic area that involves ownership or use by many individuals, groups or agencies.

3. changes that require compliance to specific laws, rules and regulations that are local, state or federal in stature.

Therefore, this format is used depending on the amount of change, size of area or compliance to legal mandates.

Who is involved in the preparation of an Environmental Assessment?

Three groups are generally involved in the primary components of the environmental assessment process. However, it should be remembered that good planning is an open model where many different publics have an opportunity for involvement. The three parties involved are:

1. the interdisciplinary planning team who consist of full time professionally trained staff such as landscape architects, engineers, anthropologists, watershed managers, economists, wildlife managers and recreation planners. These individuals generally work for the agency that is preparing the environmental assessment. The team can be large or small, significantly or minimally involved depending on the nature of the project.
2. the citizen participation work group(s) who are made up of interested volunteer citizens that are organized to prepare ideas, evaluate alternatives and liaison with the general public. These citizens usually consist of representatives from specific geographic areas, special interest or user groups, or others.
3. the expert testimony of any others who are asked or desire to share their views about the conclusions or process of the assessment activity. These individuals may be professionals from other government agencies, special interest groups, elected or appointed representatives. Generally these individuals share their views as written comments to the draft work.

Who uses the Environmental Assessment Material?

There are two primary groups that seem to best use the completed environmental assessment. The first are agency management groups that either proposed the change to the environment or are responsible for managing the environment with its changes. The second common group are citizens who own

or use the environmental area. These individuals are directly impacted by the results of the environmental assessment. There are many others that might use the material but their use would generally be minimal.

How long does the process take?

A great variety of factors could impact the time and cost of this course of action but generally it is a more lengthy activity. If the planning process is too fast there is a potential for pushing data and missing key people and information. If the process is too slow then time sensitive information and studies may no longer be relevant. The following may be helpful:

1. Scoping Process: an investigation of the issues and opportunities concerning the environmental area. This is usually a 6-12 month process.
2. Draft Report: the preparation of a report that displays findings and recommends actions. This is usually a 1-3 month process.
3. Public Response: an opportunity for all affected publics to review and comment on the draft report. This usually is a 3-6 month process.
4. Final Report: the final document is prepared incorporating all information. This is usually a 1-3 month process.

Therefore, a typical project would run from one to two years from approval to completion.

Environmental assessments are a critical aspect of proper parks and recreation planning. Many projects are small enough that this format is not necessary but increasingly the need to prepare this type of document is becoming a standard convention in the community setting.

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