

A Standards-Based Approach to Addressing User Capacity

David N. Cole

A standards-based approach is one in which decisions about appropriate management, including estimates of user capacity, are based on standards, specific and measurable statements about desired future conditions or outcomes. In such an approach, user capacity is addressed by implementing a suite of management actions that ensure standards are not violated—that desired conditions are attained. If a numerical estimate of capacity is desired, it is the maximum amount of use that can be sustained without violating standards, given a defined suite of management actions.

Many of the concepts underlying this approach have been around for close to half a century, but the first step-by-step articulation of a standards-based process was the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) process. Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) is a more recent version. The beliefs at the core of this approach are that:

- User capacity is dependent on management objectives.
- Objectives need to be specific and measurable.
- Capacity can only be defined in the context of the suite of management actions that will be taken in the area.
- Addressing user capacity is usually more about managing user behavior and distribution and about facility development than about amount of use.
- Research on the relationship between recreation use and management objectives is seldom adequate for setting capacities. Adaptive management is needed—take action, estimate capacity, monitor and adjust.

The basic steps in a standards-based process for addressing user capacity are:

1. Develop specific, measurable objectives, outcomes, indicators and standards.
2. Monitor use and indicators—assess current conditions.
3. Assess the management program, based on a comparison of conditions to standards, and take new actions as needed.
4. Estimate numerical user capacity, if needed.
5. Monitor and adjust management actions and capacity estimates as needed.

Such a standards-based approach provides a process for making **all** the decisions needed to address user capacity issues—the entire suite of necessary management actions, as well as numerical capacity estimates or use limits, if they are needed. It is based on management objectives that have the desirable qualities of being explicit and specific and of being descriptors of desired conditions rather than of the management actions an agency wants to implement. It makes monitoring integral to planning and management, making actions more defensible and managers more accountable. It also explicitly provides for a diversity of conditions.

The primary downside to such an approach is that it requires more professionalism, time and resources than is typically allocated to visitor management. It also requires hard proactive decisions about what we want these places to be in the future—decisions that will please some and displease others.