

Research Natural Areas Get Hard Look From Scientists and Managers

"Do not speak of oceans to a well frog, creature of another sphere. Do not speak of winter to a summer insect, creature of another season."

Old Chinese Proverb

More than 50 researchers and managers – creatures of different spheres and seasons – met Feb. 1-3 in Portland, Ore., to discuss research natural areas (RNAs), their mission and management. The untypical blast of snow-laden wind and deep freeze temperature that persisted doggedly all week outside the meeting room were balanced by the heated discussions taking place inside.

The different values that drive research scientists and land managers can usefully be separated under the headings long-term and short-term. Of the more than 600 RNAs now either existing or on the verge of establishment, most lie within the boundaries of either USFS or BLM lands – lands whose managers are under tremendous pressure from timber, grazing, and mining interests to "turn a profit." To a lesser extent, even the RNAs within U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuges and Nations Parks are feeling the hot breath of an increasingly numerous and recreation-hungry population. Recommendations for how to handle this conflicting clamor for immediate, as opposed to long-range, gratification, was the workshop objective.

The burning need, according to the scientists, is for a management plan that spells out specific objectives for RNAs and makes it part of the manager's job description to see that those objectives are carried out. Greater commitment, better definition of "natural," inclusion of RNAs in the area land management plans,

and line item funding for long-term research were among the most urgent needs to emerge. Secondary, but vastly important, was the felt need to educate the public and the parent agencies themselves as to the vital role RNAs can play in monitoring national and even global environmental health.

The managers present, although not averse to the goals and objectives of RNAs as described by the researchers, deplored the "fuzziness" of the RNA concept and seemed almost to be pleading for the same kind of specific objectives for RNAs that they have for timber, grazing, and mining activities.

Words describing RNAs and their intended uses are not lacking. In a document titled *Standards and Policy Guidelines for RNAs*, written for all Federal land-managing agencies, a Research Natural Area is defined as "a physical or biological unit in which current natural conditions are maintained insofar as possible." The need for a comprehensive RNA system, representing all biomes and ecotypes, is based primarily on three factors: Science and education, base line studies, and germ plasm reservoirs.

Two days of presentations and intensive discussion were followed by a half-day of formulating recommendations. The product of six work groups, while not yet finalized, achieved rough unanimity on the needs described above. Sarah Greene, Research RNA Scientist with the USFS, coordinated the workshop and is working with the steering committee to gel the recommendations and devise an action plan.

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