

# Visitor Capacity Principles

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The Administrative Procedure Act (1946: 60 Stat. 237, 5 U.S.C.A.) set forth the legal standard that decisions must be principled and reasoned; that is, arbitrary decisions are in violation of federal law. Professional principles help meet this responsibility by clarifying institutional values, philosophy, and perspectives. They also serve as a guide and rule of thumb for professional recreation resource planning, decision making, and management.

1. **Definition.** A visitor capacity is the prescribed number, or supply, of available visitor opportunities that will be accommodated in a specific location and specific time.
2. **Decision Standard.** Visitor capacity decisions are administrative decisions based upon sound professional judgment. Sound professional judgment has been defined as a *decision that has given full and fair consideration to all appropriate information, that is based upon principled and reasoned analysis and the best available science and expertise, and that complies with applicable laws.* (TF 2002)
3. **Process.** Visitor capacity decisions should be made within a legally sufficient public planning process (e.g., NEPA); a process that includes public participation, best available science and information, formulation and evaluation of alternatives, and one resulting in the adoption of a management prescription(s).
4. **Context.** A management prescription is a comprehensive and integrated bundle of decisions which describe the desired future conditions, development and management for an area. A prescription should address management objectives, desired future conditions, quality standards, intended recreation experiences, management actions, visitor capacities, monitoring and evaluation, adaptability, and budget and personnel requirements.
5. **Decision factors.** Visitor capacity decisions are not isolated and independent decisions but rather should be integrated into and “fit” with the other decisions in a management prescription. Additional factors to be considered include management capability, public preference, recreation demand and trends, economic effects, best available science, availability of other similar settings or visitor opportunities in the region, and potential consequences and risk.
6. **Standards.** Quality standards describe the desired conditions for an area and are important considerations for establishing a visitor capacity. They provide clarity, detail, and enable the monitoring for unacceptable change and management effectiveness. Quality standards may be set for the desired resource, social, and managerial conditions, as well as for important programmatic aspects of recreation resource management (e.g., monitoring, maintenance, interpretation).

7. **Level of analysis.** Visitor capacity decisions will use the sliding-scale of analysis rule, whereby the level of analysis (e.g., modest, ordinary, extraordinary) is commensurate with the level of concern that the current visitation may be compromising important values, resources, or opportunities.
8. **Capacity focus.** A management unit may have a number visitor capacities distributed throughout, yet within the constraints of practicality, reasonableness, and utility. Generally, capacities will be most useful when they address specific conveyances (e.g., foot, horse, boat, bus, train, air tour), specific times (e.g., overnight, hourly, daily, at one time), and specific locations (e.g., boat launch, trailhead, lodging facility, river segment, overnight destination, canyon, mountain peak, visitor center).
9. **Purposes.** A visitor capacity is a proactive and fundamental management tool serving multiple purposes: (a) enables recreation demand-supply analysis, (b) enables timed-entry and registration systems, (c) provides predictability for local businesses, concessionaires, and communities, (d) helps in the responsible management of high-risk situations (e.g., mountain climbing, boating, caving), (e) improves the clarity and comparability of management alternatives in a planning process, (f) enables allocation decisions between the general public and private businesses using the public estate, (g) serves as a trigger to help justify additional resources or a change in management intervention, and (h) helps protect the integrity of the recreation experiences an area is being managed to provide.
10. **Management response.** A visitor capacity itself does not prescribe any specific management intervention and does not automatically limit the number of people to an area. As visitor demand (visitation) approaches the available supply (capacity) of visitor opportunities, one or more management interventions may be employed to maintain the situation within management prescription. There are many management interventions to choose from, some targeted to the demand-side (e.g., timed-entry or reservation system; low-impact education, marketing alternative destinations, differential pricing) and some targeted to the supply-side (e.g., site hardening, trail relocation, facility expansion, increased maintenance, area closures).
11. **Monitoring.** The effectiveness of a management prescription depends on an appropriate program of monitoring that is commensurate with the level of potential consequences, risk, and uncertainty.
12. **Adaptability.** A visitor capacity decision, as with all decisions set forth in a management prescription, needs to be adaptive to new science, information, uses, technology, trends, conditions, and other circumstances of importance. A change in a visitor capacity should be subject to the same level of careful and deliberate analysis as went into the original decision, and may benefit from a new legally sufficient public planning process.