2000

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SCORP
State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan
Nebraska Action Program

NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION
Rex Amack, Director
State Liaison Officer
Prepared by
Planning Section / Division of State Parks
June 2000
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NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION
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Prepared by
Planning Section / Division of State Parks
June 2000
July 5, 2000

William W. Schenk, Regional Director
Midwest Regional Office
National Park Service
1709 Jackson Street
Omaha, Nebraska 68102-2571

Dear Mr. Schenk:

It is with pleasure that we are sending (under separate cover) the required ten copies of Nebraska's 2000-2005 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCaRP).

This plan is the official document designed to guide the state in its outdoor programs and to qualify the state for continued eligibility to participate in the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund Program. I do, hereby, certify that ample opportunity for public participation in the SCaRP planning process has been duly accorded, as required by the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund Manual.

This planning document is published under the continuing eligibility option, and will be distributed to those agencies and individuals with various levels of public and private recreation interest who have a need for the plan. This document incorporates the previous SCaRP, the comprehensive trail plan, and Nebraska's wetlands plan.

We look forward to continuing the excellent working relationships established with the National Park Service. The partnership existing between local, regional, state and federal agencies, as well as with private enterprises concerned with outdoor recreation opportunities has proven itself to be an effective means of addressing outdoor recreation and natural resource conservation needs in Nebraska.

Sincerely,

Mike Johanns
Governor
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Outdoor Recreation is a booming business. Tourism is Nebraska’s third largest revenue source from outside the state, following agriculture and manufacturing. In 1999, Nebraskans and visitors from other states and around the world made over 19 million trips in the state to destinations 100 miles or more from home. These trips had a significant economic impact, according to the Nebraska Department of Economic Development (DED). Over $2.7 billion was spent in Nebraska in 1999 on day trips to places 100 miles or more away from home and on trips with overnight stays in paid accommodations.

Activities include camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, birding, sightseeing, photography, following historic trails and many others. A major stimulus to tourism growth in Nebraska has been expansion of attractions and events, including growth in state parks, state recreation areas and other outdoor recreation facilities. Support facilities such as hotels, motels, bed and breakfast homes and a full calendar of events scheduled across the state are important components. Americans, including Nebraskans, want to get the most from their leisure hours. Outdoor recreation continues to be a preferred way to do it.

Over a third of nonresidents who visit Nebraska in the summer months go to attractions and events. For each attraction or event visited, they spend an average of a half-day longer stay in Nebraska and spend an additional $64, according to data from Nebraska’s DED. Outdoor recreation will likely continue to increase with active families, climbing incomes, and shorter work weeks. However, Nebraskans may spend more on long weekends and vacations closer to home in coming years if fuel prices keep climbing. If Nebraska is to meet existing and expected recreation and tourism demands, the long-range statewide forecasts to meet these demonstrated needs contained in Nebraska’s State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) are necessary.
Nebraska published its last full five-year SCORP (1990-1995 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan) in 1990, which received five-year approval from the National Park Service. Public demands and needs continue to grow for expanded recreational opportunities to hike, golf, play tennis, fish, hunt or swim at available recreation areas. Existing trails have been woefully inadequate. Potential for new state or local areas received a major setback when Congress withheld all funding for state Land and Water Conservation Funds (LWCF) from the National Park Service portion of the Department of Interior’s budget for the last five years.

Nebraskans responded eagerly to trail use needs shown in community, regional and statewide proposals in the state’s 1994 SCORP update on trails, A Network of Discovery: A Comprehensive Trails Plan for the State of Nebraska. Several state resources agencies joined together to support a study initiative funded by the Nebraska Energy Office “to effect restitution for oil overcharges by the Exxon Corporation.” Sponsors included representatives from federal, state and local agencies and from various state and local trails organizations.

Planning outdoor recreation opportunities for Nebraskans and their visitors requires serious consideration as we move into the new millennium. Trying to change recreation priorities to meet new demands for public facilities can only increase financial pressures on state, regional and local entities when there are few grants in sight. Enactment of the LWCF Act in 1964 made federal matching grants available to the states and their political subdivisions in 1965. For 30 years local, state and private entities pooled money to meet the required 50% match for available federal grants, which gradually declined from 1965 through 1995. These grants were critical to state outdoor recreation programs. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) managed the program for the state from the outset, awarding nearly $38 million in matching grants through the funded years.

Congress first cut federal LWCF grants to the states in FY 1981, ultimately appropriating no funds between 1995 and 1999, although the money from the 2% set aside for the program from the federal Offshore Oil Tax revenues continued to be allocated to the fund. It proved difficult to find new ways to attempt to meet the needs shown for healthful, safe and regular recreation and exercise opportunities demanded by the public.

Communities, individuals and families have supported efforts to restore funding through petitions, letters, phone calls and even personal visits to the Nebraska Congressional delegation. Then, something changed this year – a modest amount was put into the LWCF matching recreation grants program to fund state LWCF efforts for fiscal year 2000.
Chapter 1 – The Process

The Land and Water Conservation Fund has been administered on the federal level by the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (BOR), the Heritage, Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS), and finally, National Park Service (NPS). Grants-in-aid have been on a 50% federal match to state and local governments from the LWFC since 1965.

Nebraska received from $2 to 3 million annually in federal matching grants under this program through 1981, with 60% of these funds awarded to state and political subdivision projects and 40% to state projects for land acquisition and development. Local applicants had to provide the 50% match. Fortunately, Congress renewed this modest federal LWCF funding in FY 2000.

Pairing the LWCF program with the new Conservation and Recreation Act of 1999 (CARA) was crucial in gaining the necessary support needed to obtain funding for FY 2000. To continue to be eligible for the ongoing federal LWCF matching recreation grant program, states are required to prepare and maintain a comprehensive outdoor recreation plan (SCORP). These plans are designed to assess changing recreation demands on potential supply of facilities and new opportunities to choose among various outdoor recreation needs. Proposed projects must highlight critical deficiencies and ensure that the highest priority projects will be implemented first wherever possible.

Nebraska’s first State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan was formulated in 1965, with revisions completed in 1968, 1973, 1978, 1983 and 1990-1995. Summaries of the long form SCORP were used to publicize the goals and expectations for the program. Public meetings were held throughout the state. Projects partially financed under this program since 1965 are both diverse and extensive – swimming pools, ballfields, tennis courts, shelter houses, picnic facilities, golf courses, campgrounds, trap ranges, hunting practice facilities, handicapped fishing area accommodations, natural, historic areas, etc.

While the amount of money allocated annually may seem large, the demands upon those funds is huge. Because so many hands reach for the same dollars, it is mandatory to implement first those plans which best meet priority recreational needs of the people of Nebraska and their visitors.
The purpose of SCORP is to help determine the current supply of recreational facilities, to assess current and projected demands on these facilities and to recommend the proper actions to alleviate crucial shortages. With no funding available earlier, the regional National Park Service office in Omaha approved a short form SCORP in 1998, including several attachments.

The required Nebraska Wetland Plan update along with several other projects, such as Nebraska's state trail plan, prompted continuing cooperative interest from state, federal and public partners. Former Governor Ben Nelson endorsed the 1998 short SCORP update, emphasizing the interagency aspects and approving the variety of opportunities given for public comment. Nebraska's eligibility was extended through July 2000 to share in modest LWCF funds granted by Congress for FY 2000.

Fundamental to implementation of any plan is the need to establish firm goals and objectives at the outset of the planning effort. All who are involved in or may impact outdoor recreation management in the state must work to decide which direction to take and which policies will best guide decisions along the way. The earlier Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), which assisted the Commission in the planning
and review, was originally chaired by the former State Office of Planning and Programming. In 1970 that became the Governor’s Policy Research Office with a mandate to provide an opportunity for various local, state and federal agencies to review and comment on all sections of mutual interest, as required in comprehensive planning efforts. SCaRP made good use of this process, but as the required plans increased in complexity, scheduling and completing all the required reviews and discussions became more difficult.

TAC membership continues to cooperate through phone calls, letters and other inter-agency recreation and trail-related meetings. Marked copies of the various chapters augment regular contacts with the majority of those working with NGPC on trail and recreation-related or overlapping studies in the 1990-1995 SCaRP process as well as in the 1998 short form SCaRP submittal.

The planning process for the State Trails Plan, A Network of Discovery, actively involved most former TAC members and NGPC staff. Implementation of some of the plan was supported by grants provided through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) and reauthorized in 1998 as TEA-21 (the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century). NGPC asked original TAC member agencies to continue the productive SCaRP review process on a less formal basis.

The Commission broadened its review process by placing current copies of the SCaRP in the libraries of the 47 Nebraska communities with over 2,500 population. Copies also went to state Natural Resources District (NRD) offices, which also carry varying responsibilities to provide public recreation developments and facilities closer to home.

The Nebraska Department of Roads (DOR) accepted a major financial responsibility for expanding opportunities for building up the Nebraska Trail System, managing selection and funding of the ongoing FHWA grants for developing trails, scenic byways and special historic area renovations through ISTEA and TEA-21. With the assistance of its appointed Select Committee membership, no trail funding was allowed to lapse.

Allocating new grants and developing a new office of state trail administrator in the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission have involved considerable interagency cooperation. Under evaluation are various Natural Resources District programs as well as specific long-range plans for expansion of other state and federal agencies’ outdoor recreation plans. Nebraska’s U.S. Senator Robert Kerrey’s new “Back to the River” study points out many resources for supporting local projects that can bring about many long-term recreation benefits. Mutual dialogue and input, plus review briefings with TAC members and NGPC staff will continue to precede planning for publication of the SCaRP.

In the absence of LWCF funding during the 1995-1999 period, primary federal trail funds came from the National Recreational Trails Funding Act (NRTFA) portion of the Federal Highway Administration’s 1991 ISTE A program. These funds were administered in Nebraska by the Game and Parks Commission and were very modest. Trails development also occurred under provisions of the National Trails Act of 1968 through the implementation of rail-banking sections of railroad rights-of-way (ROW) being advertised for abandonment. Such rights-of-way could be saved for public use as a recreation trail by implementing Interstate Commerce Commission rules.

In 1994, NGPC took advantage of this opportunity to railbank the 321-mile ROW of the former Chicago and NorthWestern Railroad across northern Nebraska. With generous assistance from the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and several FHWA trail construction grants, more and more of the former ROW is being readied for trail use by local residents and many new visitors. Meanwhile, the ICC became the Surface Transportation Board (STB) as federal oversight agency for any proposed railbanking proposals.

Nebraska resource agencies and the public pioneered this area by increasing opportunities to use a growing network of local and statewide recreational trails. This involved studying, supporting and publishing a private study of potential trail opportunities and ideas, resulting in a publication entitled A Network of Discovery. Consultants scheduled and conducted public hearings across the state. New and existing trail
support groups responded to the popular idea of developing more outdoor recreation trails for Nebraskans and their visitors. By pushing every opportunity to develop and fund some proposed new trails, Nebraska could also begin to meet the growing need for beneficial outdoor exercise that would be both family-oriented and close to home. Eventually the local trails will connect with long distance ones.

Twelve focus group meetings across the state were held to make trail recommendations. Over 400 attended these sessions. Common themes emerged, including one suggesting that trails development is the most significant recreational need in most parts of Nebraska. Participants felt that trails should accommodate a variety of user groups and should incorporate the history and sense individuality of the various regions of Nebraska. Perhaps one of the strongest themes was the need to continue studying and predicting the increasing role trails could play in building local tourism. Nebraska's location on several important National Historic Trails has been a real drawing card for tourists to date. The upcoming 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark Expedition will be celebrated all along their route in the coming years.

New funding to the states for trails, scenic byways and historic preservation was being pushed in 1993 by the FHWA (Federal Highway Administration). It would open a new trail program, with 100% federal funding for the first year through what would be called ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Equity Act). Its successor, called TEA-21 (Transportation Efficiency Act for the 21st Century) required a 50% local match for the next three fiscal years of 1996, 1997 and 1998, then a 20% match for FY 1999 and 2000. Nebraska was able to expand its trail construction with some $12.5 million in federal DOT funds by 1998. Funding was again at an 80/20 match for FY1999 and 2000. To date, some 302 projects have been funded at a total of nearly $35 million.

Four major objectives have been delineated in Nebraska's SCORP which extend far beyond trail needs:

1. To develop a balanced state park system by providing non-urban park areas for the inspiration, recreation and enjoyment primarily of resident populations; wayside parks for picnic areas or rest stops to accommodate the traveling public, and historic parks to offer representative interpretation of Nebraska's rich historical heritage for the education and enjoyment of both Nebraskans and their visitors.

2. To manage and preserve public areas which are valued primarily for wildlife habitat, public hunting and fishing or with natural or scenic features unique to a region.

3. To enhance the quality of life and physical environment in Nebraska by encouraging development of adequate outdoor recreation opportunities by political subdivisions to meet identified regional, county, municipal or local needs with federal funding assistance from Land and Water Conservation Funds as well as grants from the Nebraska Department of Roads, Economic Development, and Health and Human Services.

4. To encourage the development of improved parks and recreational facilities and programs through inter-local cooperation involving municipalities, counties, school districts and other relevant governmental units. The Game and Parks Commission is the agency administering the Land and Water Conservation Fund and bears responsibility for a wide range of outdoor recreation and resource management. Its purpose and objectives are also reflected in SCORP planning. The overall purpose of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, as outlined is and has been the "husbandry of the state's wildlife, park and outdoor recreation resources in the best long-term interests of the people and the resource." Within the guidelines of this overall purpose are specific goals toward which all agency efforts are to be directed:

- to plan for and implement all policies and programs in an efficient and objective manner,
- to maintain a rich and diverse environment in the lands and waters of Nebraska,
- to provide outdoor recreation opportunities,
- to manage wildlife resources for maximum benefit of the people, and
- to cultivate man's appreciation of his role in the world of nature.
Chapter 3 - Description of the State

Nebraska is a large, diverse state. The eastern half has the vast majority of the population. The southwest has many reservoirs while the northeast has few. The northwest has many acres of public land, but the southeast does not. The west has considerable beef and wheat production, while the east has more intensive agriculture. Given these variations, analyzing the relationship of outdoor recreation opportunity within each section of the state, and estimating current and future needs is difficult.

Circumstances and measurements allow a reasonable comparison of ratios of people to acres of available recreation land open to the public, giving SCORP planning a general sense of equity. However, it is possible to analyze populations shown in the 1990 census and relate them with recreation acres for each of the seven official planning regions. Census 2000 figures will be used for estimates of need and demand as soon as they are available.

Region 1 encompasses four counties and includes the Omaha metropolitan area. It is characterized by high population and resultant deficiencies in outdoor recreation resources and facilities. In contrast, Region 7 is a sparsely populated area, dominated by Sandhills ranch lands. It covers the most land area but has the lowest population. The other five regions fall between these extremes of population density and resource accessibility.

Nebraska's main recreation dilemma becomes obvious – the four eastern regions have three-fourths of the population, while three western regions have 85% of the non-urban recreation lands. Stated more simply, most of the people are in the East, while the recreation areas are mainly in the West. To recommend and implement programs to correct, or at least minimize this disparity and others like it, became one of the major functions of Nebraska's State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

Certain preliminary surveys and databases are required, prior to any actual planning, to determine existing supplies of federal, state and local outdoor recreation resources. Over 500 Nebraska cities, towns and villages were contacted, along with state and federal agencies that own or administer lands available for outdoor recreation.

A survey was mailed to 16,000 Nebraska households and followed up with a telephone survey to some 500 households. It was designed to determine current outdoor recreation participation and patterns for the 1973 SCORP. Existing use levels were linked to predictable socioeconomic projections to arrive at projected levels of participation, based on Nebraska's Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS).

The Game and Parks Commission has participated in this survey effort with the University of Nebraska's Bureau of Sociological Research off and on since 1978. Results are statistically reliable for estimating activity by region, age, sex, activity days and combinations of interests. NASIS uses random digit dialing to obtain statistically valid responses, which are helpful in a wide variety of ways in determining possible solutions to such questions as ours as well as to many different users.

Having determined existing supplies and estimating both current and projected demands, planners were then in a position to pinpoint and quantify many of the land and facility deficiencies in the state. Established guidelines for desirable levels of land and facilities per capita were related to the situation in Nebraska communities. Then planning regions and deficiencies were estimated. However, as funding from the LWCF became less, unmet needs grew more intense.
The Regions

Metropolitan Omaha dominates REGION 1. No survey was really needed to verify that recreational demands of this area continue to surpass existing supplies. This four-county region occupies about 2 percent of the state while embracing nearly 34 percent of the population. Because people are concentrated in such a small area, there are very definite and urgent needs for additional facilities. A critical need in Region 1 are additional boating and fishing facilities. Today there is still an estimated deficiency of nearly 18,000 acres of water suitable for fishing, skiing and power boating. The Papillion Creek Watershed reservoirs, now nearing completion, will relieve some of this pressure but cannot be viewed as a cure-all for recreational shortages. This project will provide 20 lakes with some 4,000 surface acres suitable for water-based recreation. Some lakes will be too small for power boating and skiing but can provide fishing, hiking and picnicking.

A great deal of recreational demand in Region 1 is being met outside of the four-county area. Planners anticipate that the Papio project may change this use pattern somewhat, but it may never be possible to fully meet the demands of such a large number of people in such a confined area. Establishment of a major non-urban park between Omaha and Lincoln was recommended in the 1973 SCORP. It was suggested that this would go a long way toward meeting the recreational needs of eastern Nebraska. Since then the Game and Parks Commission has built Eugene T. Mahoney State Park near Ashland. Perhaps the new trail connection proposed between Omaha and Lincoln will fill another portion of that need. Distance biking is becoming very popular, and this 60-plus miles may prove a real challenge.

REGION 2 encompasses 17 southeastern counties. The area has approximately 3.5% of the state's public lands and 24% of the population. The state capital of Lincoln is the population center. This region's recreational land shortages are similar to those of Region 1 but are much less severe.

Previous SCORP plans indicated that the greatest deficiencies for recreation in Region 2 were for lakes suitable for power boating, skiing and fishing. The Salt Valley lakes now provide over 4,400 surface acres, with additional waters from new Natural Resources District (NRD) lakes. However, demand still far exceeds supply. The state recreation areas in the Salt Valley annually host the more visitors than other any area in the state. Region 2 deficiencies can be attributed partly to the large number of Omaha boaters and anglers who use the Salt Valley lakes. A need for additional rural and municipal park areas and picnic areas also exists here.

REGION 3 covers 16 northeastern counties and could be characterized as a transition zone from intensive crop and feedlot operations to ranch and grazing lands. About 12% of the state's population lives here, and the area has about 2.5% of the state's non-urban public recreation lands. Recreation problems seem similar to those in Regions 1 & 2 and characterize the situation across eastern Nebraska - the bulk of the population has easy access to only a small percentage of the public recreation lands.

The greatest recreation deficiencies in Region 3 are rural and municipal park lands. Additional camping areas are needed on these park lands to meet current and future demands. Region 3 also may experience demand from the Omaha area. The Missouri River bluff lands are hardly suited for intensive agriculture but do provide a wide range of recreational opportunities. The Omaha, Winnebago and Santee Indian reservations in Thurston and Knox counties occupy comparatively large natural areas that could be well-suited to some recreational development. Facilities there would not only meet some recreation needs of eastern Nebraska but could also bolster the economy.
Lewis and Clark Reservoir and the Missouri River provide enough water to meet the current and projected needs for power boating and water skiing in this region. If surface acres were the only standard, Lewis and Clark Reservoir would easily satisfy the region's lake fishing needs. However, Lewis and Clark is perceived by some as a rather poor fishery and may not be quite as attractive to anglers as one might expect. However, it produces many of the paddlefish that are harvested in the river downstream. In addition, the Game and Parks Commission has made major improvements there, including a marina, new campgrounds, and cabins. Area access has also been improved, but the lake is considerable distance from population concentrations. Other areas there might be updated to include a wide range of recreational opportunities, such as golf, tennis, horseback riding, snow skiing and marina facilities for this area.

On April 30, 2000, the National Park Service banned personal water craft (PWC) on NPS waters. Some of the waters of the Wild and Scenic Rivers system, including sections of the Missouri River, are included in this ban.

REGION 4 includes much of south-central Nebraska. This 14-county region, most of which is under intensive cultivation, contains about 12% of the state's population and 6% of the non-urban public recreation land. Grand Island, Hastings, Holdrege and Kearney are regional population centers. Recreational demand is growing steadily, as evidenced by increasing interest by local residents and visitors from all around the world to view the spring Sandhill crane and waterfowl migrations.

The supply of rural parklands is currently adequate to meet the demands. Federal and state-owned rainwater basins offer some 10,000 acres of wetlands for consumptive and non-consumptive use. Harlan County Reservoir provides some 30,000 acres of recreation land and water within easy driving distance of the population centers. The greatest needs in Region 4 appear to be for municipal parks and for facilities like golf courses, tennis courts and swimming pools.

REGION 5 encompasses 14 southwestern counties, where the recreation is dominated by reservoirs. The public water acreage in this region is over three times that of any other region. Though constructed primarily for irrigation and flood control, these manmade lakes also provide many thousands of activity days of outdoor recreation. Planners suggest that this region has the potential for accommodating some of the demands of the more populous east, especially on long weekends, holidays and vacations. This region's greatest deficiency is in good camping facilities. Since the reservoirs were not created just for recreation, much of the current camping occurs on sites not specifically designed for that use.

Additional sites have been developed, but more needs are anticipated.

Interstate 80 and the proximity to Kansas and Colorado are significant factors in the recreation patterns of this region. Nonresident visitation at the southwest reservoirs has increased rapidly in recent years, particularly at Lake McConaughy near Ogallala. Interstate 80 also contributes to the heavy use of the other southwest reservoirs bringing in travelers in ever-increasing numbers. This trend is expected to continue and will likely intensify.

REGION 6 is the Nebraska Panhandle, and public lands abound in the 11-county region. It includes parts of the Nebraska National Forest, Scotts Bluff and Agate Fossil Beds national monuments, Oglala National Grassland, Fort
Robinson and Chadron state parks, the new Wildcat Hills Nature Center and numerous state recreation areas. The 6% of Nebraska's population that lives in the Panhandle has easy access to over 20% of the state's public land.

Still, there are strong needs for additional development. Planners recommend that another 1,200 acres of "developed" recreational land are needed. Shortages are not for more public land, but rather for public facilities designed for intensive use. There is also some need for developments such as municipal parks, tennis courts and golf courses. Entrepreneurs are also leasing hunting and/or recreational rights to major land areas, which could pose some access problems in the future.

Irrigation reservoirs provide opportunities for boating, water skiing and other water-based outdoor recreation. Late summer draw-downs preclude some of these activities, but such areas provide high-quality sites through much of the peak season. The Panhandle region has more than enough raw recreational resources to offset many of the deficiencies of other regions in the state. The problem, though, is how to get the people from the east to the recreation available in the west. Omaha and Lincoln are a full day's drive away. One long-range solution might be increased emphasis on intrastate bus and air travel. This could permit better use of the large western park lands while taking advantage of the fuel savings of mass transit.

REGION 7 covers 14 counties largely in the Nebraska Sandhills. Like the Panhandle, the Sandhills have abundant public land and a relatively sparse population. Over 20% of the state's recreation lands are here and only 4% of the population. The current and projected recreational needs of this region are primarily for developments for camping, picnicking, hiking, etc. There is also a shortage of water suitable for power boating in the Sandhills region. The many small lakes and ponds adequately meet the needs of local and visiting fishermen. Small, but comparatively expensive, deficiencies also exist for municipal parks, tennis courts and swimming pools.

The bulk of Region 7 public land is within the boundaries of two national forests and two national wildlife refuges. These areas offer good opportunities for hiking, nature study and observing wildlife. Fishing is excellent on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, south of Valentine, and hunting is good on both forests and the Valentine Refuge.

The Niobrara River flows through the northern portion of the Sandhills region. Because of its high aesthetic and recreational values, portions have been included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Now largely under private ownership, the Niobrara will continue to be an important recreational asset in future years.

The Nebraska Sandhills are an uncommon resource, both on a state and a national scale. Total recreational use of this region, like the Panhandle, is far below what it could support. However, planners caution that the Sandhills ecosystem is fragile and over-development could destroy the very features that make this remarkable region unique and interesting.
CHAPTER 4 - Action

SCORP listed several recommendations for actions needed to overcome the resultant deficiencies. Presented on the following pages are some of the findings.

Volumes have been written in an attempt to describe and predict factors affecting demand for outdoor recreation. Anyone who used the parks over several years can attest to the fact that visitation is up and use patterns are changing. State and federal agencies concerned with recreation have noticed these changes, too. That is one reason that comprehensive outdoor plans such as SCORP exist. Sound planning is an absolute necessity if one hopes to catch up to or keep pace with ever-increasing and changing recreational demands.

A fact of life in our state and in the nation is that populations are concentrating more in urban areas. These urban dwellers seem to have more leisure time, magnifying the demand for outdoor recreation facilities. Then, too, surveys show that the recreational tastes of urban dwellers can differ greatly from those of rural Nebraskans. This disparity of outdoor recreational interest, coupled with the uneven distribution of Nebraska's natural resources and recreational facilities, makes it advisable for recreation planners to deal with the state region by region. This approach allows planning for specific demands and shortages, area by area, rather than shotgunning proposals that would work for some regions and fail for others. Since the 2000 census figures are not yet available, 1990 figures are being used to estimate demand.

All of these factors were analyzed region by region in the 1990-1995 SCORP document and will be used as a basis for decision making. In addition, planners have the necessary data to examine individual community, county and other regional needs and deficiencies as called upon and to advise decision makers at all levels. The goal is to improve the balance between the supply and the demand of outdoor recreation opportunities for Nebraskans and nonresident visitors.

Such things as the current fuel price increases and shortages will almost certainly impact on recreation patterns and necessitate changes in funding priorities for state areas and programs. Only time will tell, but planners and administrators will closely monitor recreational
demands in the months ahead to determine how best to cope with any new problems.

Some trends, such as continuing growth in popularity of off-road vehicles, have caught local, state and federal recreation agencies unprepared. The need for motorcycle, snowmobile and jeep trails is real and apt to increase dramatically in the years ahead. Ways are being sought to provide such opportunities while protecting the enjoyment of others.

Conflicts among users of recreational lands are inevitable. The word "trail" means different things to different people. The naturalist with an interest in native plants and animals on a public area is understandably upset by the presence of trail bikes. Solutions are available but require cooperation from all users, as well as effort by managing agencies to plan properly in the acquisition and development of both new and existing areas.

The list of conflicts among users could go on and on. Suffice it to say that such conflicts are symptomatic of a general problem of insufficient land and water resources to meet all the varied demands placed upon them. It is the role of the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan to help pinpoint areas of need and promote implementation of reasonable programs to help overcome them.

Almost everyone agrees that planning is a good idea. But planning without implementation accomplishes about the same as no planning at all. Reams of proposals are of no use unless functional, on-the-ground action is taken to improve the outdoor recreational opportunities for Nebraskans and their visitors.

SCORP provides a wide-ranging summary of the outdoor picture in Nebraska. It contains many and varied recommendations for actions that are needed to take advantage of existing potential and to alleviate the land and water shortages previously identified. They are far too lengthy to treat in this short version, but some more important ones warrant mention.

Only about 1.5% of the state's 77,355 square miles is available for public outdoor recreation, with most of the recreational lands in the west and the majority of the population in the east. The SCORP recommendations to help ease this problem involve purchasing or leasing of additional recreational lands in eastern Nebraska. Private interests that would benefit from development of recreational areas should be encouraged. Access easements to enable public use of private holdings and tax incentives to landowners who retain natural features should be implemented. Also, the initiation and completion of major park developments in eastern Nebraska, such as the suggested Missouri River Front upgrade in and around Omaha, should be endorsed and continued as funding allows. Public access to rivers, streams and small watershed structures such as farm ponds should be sought wherever existing conditions permit.

Camping space to accommodate some 5,700 additional camping units is needed now. About three-fourths of this total deficiency centers around the Omaha area. To increase camping facilities the SCORP plan again recommends a closer look at the significant potential for recreational use of the lands along the Missouri and Platte rivers. Access sites to the Missouri River, as proposed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, should be pursued along with development of complementary facilities allowing camping, boating, picnicking and other outdoor activities. All types of camping needs, from primitive to highly developed facilities, must be provided where most needed.

Water has traditionally been the No. 1 attraction for recreation, either as a place to boat, swim and ski or as a scenic backdrop for other outdoor activities such as picnicking, camping or hiking. Because of the uncertain status of many of the proposed multipurpose water resource development projects (similar to those that created Lake McConaughy, Harlan County Reservoir or Branched Oak Reservoir), Nebraskans should find means to make better or more efficient use of existing waters. More intensive management of existing water bodies, including rivers, natural lakes and reservoirs, may be a means for improving the quality and quantity of water-oriented recreation.

The number of anglers seems to be increasing, and pressures exerted on existing waters often exceed the biological capabilities of those waters to support a viable fish population. To increase fishing opportunities in the state, SCORP planners recommend that efforts be escalated to improve access to rivers and
streams, which are largely hemmed in by private land. It is also suggested that less desirable species of fish may hold significant potential for meeting fishing demands in some areas. Species, such as carp, may be a potential source of fishing sport in areas where habitat conditions preclude the establishment of more traditional sport fish species.

Boat registrations more than doubled from 1960 to 1972, then climbed to more than 80,000 in 1990 and to 76,286 by 1999, attesting to the popularity of this sport. (See regional and state registration trends over the years in the accompanying figure.) Eastern and southeastern Nebraska are the most deficient in boating waters. It is unlikely that water resource developments in eastern Nebraska will be implemented in number or size sufficient to meet the growing demands for water-based sports. Construction of Papillion Creek sites is providing Omahans with opportunity to participate more often during evenings and weekdays, helping to reduce some of the peak day demands on the Salt Valley lakes near Lincoln. Ultimately, though, there may be a need for zoning or other restrictions to spread out pressure throughout the week.

Urged in the 1973 SCORP and later implemented was inclusion of portions of the Niobrara River in the National Wild and Scenic River Act categories for protection. Protection under this act has helped ensure that part of this unique, prairie river system will be preserved in its primitive form.

Bicycling activities accounted for the highest number of total outdoor recreation days in the 1973 SCORP survey, as they did in the 1997 NASIS and will likely show again in the 2000 NASIS results due in December. Growth since then has surpassed expectations. Health, environmental and energy concerns are increasing the demands for bike trails. The walkers and runners claim in current surveys to be exercising more often and for longer times in the interest of keeping fit (1998 Nebraska Health and Human Services' survey of hikers and bikers). Implementation of increased bike trails funded at every level of government continues to be strongly recommended.

Local governments continue to be encouraged to establish appropriate bikeways within their areas and contribute to finding solutions for meeting the increasing need for a statewide system of trails. There is a real possibility, judging by current trends that bicycling should be given higher priority in future recreation developments as the activity's demands continue to outpace facility development.

Planners need to take note of such concepts as building livable communities, adding vital traffic calming measures or plotting a trail network as essential and required parts of building a new addition adjacent to an existing community to make both areas more livable. Traffic safety rules should require wider consideration of the tradeoffs for providing reasonable safety restrictions for better, safer bicycle traffic.

Motorcycle registration has grown steadily in recent years, increasing over five-fold during the last 10 years alone. Motorcycle and other off-the-road vehicles are often incompatible with more traditional forms of outdoor recreation and present special problems for multiple-use areas. The irritation resulting from noise pollution and the potential damage to the environment may preclude the setting aside of portions of existing state recreation areas in most instances. The SCORP plan suggests that this interest group rely more upon local developments or private enterprise to meet some of their need. Some clubs have worked out excellent cooperation for use of former logging roads with personnel at the various national forests in Nebraska such as Bessey and the Pine Ridge.
The opportunity for hunting in Nebraska is provided largely by the private landowner. Most of the 759,000 acres of public non-urban land in Nebraska is not suitable for hunting and falls far short of meeting the demand. Wildlife populations for the hunter, as well as for the non-consumptive user, depend on habitat which, in turn, is largely determined by land-use practices. To encourage preservation and restoration of wildlife habitat in the state, SCORP planners recommend implementation of tax incentives for those landowners who leave riparian habitat, woody cover, marsh areas, the Rainwater Basins or other marginal lands out of crop production. Farm programs that allow for long-term diversion of crop lands and provide some funding for the maintenance of cover on these lands should also receive support.

Competition is fierce for the state's resources. Few expect that recreational interests will always be able to get all they ask for. However, by documenting the needs and deficiencies that exist and by cooperation with other agencies that can implement programs affecting recreational opportunities, planners are in a better position to compete in the decision-making. Competition is equally strong within the various recreational interests. This was well illustrated during a short four-week period when FY 2000 applications were accepted. State, county, and community requests exceeded $4 million, while appropriated funds were only $400,000, just 10% of the total applications. When demand exceeds supply, priorities must be established. Guidelines were set by SCORP planners under which priority recreation projects would be given first consideration. Under these guidelines, priority classifications will go to:

1. Areas and projects that conform to existing local or regional comprehensive plans;
2. Projects that assure the preservation of open space in the state's urban centers,
3. Projects which benefit society as a whole rather than small groups of specialized users;
4. Projects of a basic nature rather than those which are highly specialized or elaborate;
5. Acquisition rather than development where shortages of recreational land exist;
6. Projects that emphasize participation sports or activities as opposed to spectator type;
7. Projects that alleviate existing deficiencies instead of those designed to meet projected shortages.

The optimum goal of SCORP planners, and all those agencies concerned with outdoor recreation, should be to provide enough public land and facilities to allow for reasonable satisfaction for all users, regardless of the particular philosophy to which each might adhere. One example of the benefits realized from meeting SCORP Planning requirements may be seen in the acceptance and interest in the Nebraska Wetlands publications which are to be published again in a third update.

Dr. Frank Tysen described the public's craving for outdoor recreation like this: "Regardless of whether they live in the suburbs or the central cities, Americans of all ages consistently demonstrate their craving to surround themselves with a bit of nature."

State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan update for 2000 is Nebraska's attempt to guide programs aimed at providing the public with adequate lands and facilities to meet this very basic human need.