

# RESEARCH

## Triage Law Enforcement: Societal Impacts on National Forests in the West

**DEBORAH J. CHAVEZ\***

Pacific Southwest Research Station  
USDA Forest Service  
4955 Canyon Crest Drive  
Riverside, California 92507, USA

**JOANNE F. TYNON**

Forest Recreation Resources Program  
Department of Forest Resources  
Oregon State University  
Corvallis, Oregon 97331-5703, USA

**ABSTRACT** / Uses of outdoor natural areas, like National Forests in the United States, have been undergoing change. Some changes, including criminal activities and domestic terrorism, may have quite important impacts to outdoor enthusiasts and managers. Activities include some relatively traditional management challenges, like arson and thefts, and newer challenges, such as domestic violence and murder.

To better understand the prevalence and impacts of these activities, selected managers in the western United States were interviewed in summer and fall 1998. Results indicate criminal activities and domestic terrorism are found in both urban-interface and rural sites. The most prevalent challenges were arson, criminal damage, domestic violence, dumping of household trash and landscape materials, marijuana cultivation, satanic cult activity, and thefts. Not as prevalent but found in almost all study sites were body dumping, extremist group activity, gang activity, murders, and suicides. Managers felt that most outdoor recreationists were unaffected by the activities. Most managers noted the increasing prevalence and the costs to management in time, personnel, and in other ways. They noted that their job had ceased being one of natural resources law enforcement and became one of "city" law enforcement. The findings of the study raise serious issues that require additional research.

Uses of outdoor natural areas, like National Forests in the United States, have been undergoing change. The most apparent changes have been increasing levels of use and nontraditional user groups (Baas and others 1993, Hospodarsky and Lee 1993, Dwyer 1994, Chavez 1998). In part, these changes are due to societal shifts, such as increasing populations and shifts toward urbanization. Other societal changes are now found in outdoor natural areas; these may have quite important impacts to outdoor enthusiasts and managers. Some of these changes can be labeled "domestic terrorism." Included under this label are activities where federal managers and recreationists are subjected to politically motivated intimidation tactics. Some criminal activities are increasing, including the relatively traditional management challenges like arson, thefts, and dumping of household trash or landscape materials. There are also newer challenges, including domestic violence, gang activity, body dumping, and murder.

While some studies have found relatively safe recreation taking place across the United States (Tracy and Morris 1998), the literature, newspapers, and popular

culture (Rendell 1997, Clancy 1998, Grafton 1998) point to a less idyllic picture. Some of these acts include ecoterrorism (Paulson 1998), crimes (Clifford 1998), and extremist group tactics aimed toward discrediting the environmental movement (Stapleton 1992, Helvarg 1996).

Because crimes are on the increase in many urban areas across the United States, we might expect similar increases in urban proximate outdoor sites. We were interested in learning much more about crimes and their impacts to outdoor recreation and management in both urban and rural outdoor natural sites. Of particular interest were the types of crime or acts of domestic terrorism that might occur, how prevalent the activities were, whether these activities were on the increase, the impacts to management in terms of time, personnel, and budget, and the impacts to recreation activities at those sites, if any.

### Methods

To better understand the prevalence and impacts of these activities, we interviewed selected managers (district rangers, law enforcement officers, special agents, recreation officers, and public affairs officers) in the western United States in summer and fall 1998. Our discriminate sample included eight National Forest sites

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\*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

in the western United States (including sites in Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington). Half of the sites were urban proximate; half were rural. Half of the interviews were conducted at ranger district offices; half were at supervisors' offices. We chose most sites (six) based on prior media reports of problems, and the other two sites were chosen because there had been no reports; they were intended to serve as "control" sites.

For this qualitative study we conducted guided conversations (face-to-face interviews) (Rubin and Rubin 1995, Kvale 1996) with the managers. Typically, the two authors met with three forest officials (we met with as few as two and as many as four others). We used a scripted guide to ensure consistency in our interviews. We tape recorded and transcribed each of the conversations. Both researchers examined these in search of common themes. All conversations were voluntary, and we assured confidentiality to all participants. Average interview time was 3 h. At all but one site we went on site visits and/or collected slides or pictures to illustrate the issues we had discussed.

We divided the many criminal activities and domestic terrorism activities into the following categories based on interviewee comments: *urban-associated crime* (arson, body dumping, domestic violence, drive-by shooting, gang activity, murder, rape/sexual assault, shooting in inappropriate ways or areas, suicides, and thefts), *assaults* (criminal damage, threats against personnel, and threats against property), *drug activity* (armed defense of crops, booby traps, marijuana cultivation, methamphetamine (meth) chemical dumps, meth labs, and meth manufacture), *extremist and nontraditional groups* (EarthFirst!, militias/supremacy groups, motorcycle groups, property rights groups, satanic cults, survivalists, white power groups, and wise use groups), and *other* (armed defense of forest products, dumping of chemicals, dumping of household waste and landscape materials, homeless people living in inappropriate areas, and trespass by undocumented immigrants). Murders are deaths that take place on the forest, whereas body dumpings involve murders that occur elsewhere and the bodies are placed somewhere on the forest. When we began the interviews the list was a bit shorter, and as we interviewed we added a few items to the categories that we had developed (we added domestic violence, meth manufacture, meth chemical dumping, wise use, property rights, and survivalists). Because some of these items came up after some interviews had taken place, follow-up phone calls to some sites were necessary.

## Results

Though we focused on making the conversations as open as possible, we did have some categories for which we wanted managers' perceptions. These included the types of challenges faced and their prevalence, the impacts to recreationists, and the impacts to managers. Also, we thought it might be reasonable to expect more problems in urban sites than rural sites and wanted to examine that aspect. Through the course of the study we uncovered some amusing and some alarming information.

### Challenges Faced

Results indicate that the criminal activities and domestic terrorism activities are found in *urban-interface and rural sites* (Table 1). The challenges reported by *all sites* were arson, criminal damage, domestic violence, dumping of household trash and landscape materials, marijuana cultivation, satanic cult activity, and thefts. Domestic violence was said to occur mostly in campgrounds, but was also reported for some day-use sites. Some managers had special names for some activities, for example "car clouting" and "cooler hopping" for some types of thefts. Challenges found in almost all study sites (seven of eight sites for each) were gang activity, suicides, indiscriminate shooting (not at targets or in allowable sites), meth labs, meth chemical dumps, other chemical dumping, and homeless people residing in inappropriate areas. On one site visit, we were taken to a place where several people had committed suicide by hanging. It is believed that the people who are suicidal go to this particular site to hang themselves at sunset, when the views are most spectacular. The most recent occurrence was a few weeks prior to our visit. Also quite frequent (six sites reporting these) were murders, threats to Forest Service personnel, armed defense of marijuana crops, and extremist or nontraditional group activities. Many years ago marijuana crops were safeguarded by booby traps. We found that none of the sites have to deal with booby traps anymore because they are often now being guarded by people who are armed. In several cases we were told that undocumented immigrants (Latino and Asian) were brought there specifically to guard these crops or other forest product crops. All sites reported facing *at least half* of the crimes and activities on our list, even the sites we considered "control" sites.

### Urban versus Rural Challenges and Prevalence

We had thought there might be differences in responses to the criminal activity and domestic terror-

ism categories based on whether the sites were urban proximate or rural. We did not find much difference in the categories we called urban-associated crimes or “other” at least in terms of whether they had faced the problem or not (*Table 1*); they all did. We did find a higher *prevalence of these crimes in urban areas*. We heard from urban managers: “Murders are more common now and are related more to drug transactions” and “Murder is fairly frequent, we even had a homicide in wilderness.” A manager from a rural site said, “Murders happen maybe a couple of times per year.” About arson managers said, “Arson is a continuing problem,” and though this sounds “traditional” other managers pointed out that the cause was not the usual “fire bug” but many arson fire starts were from “torched vehicles.” They explained that often fires are started by criminals who stole the cars in the city, used them for a crime, and then brought them to the forest and set them on fire.

Also, we found some differences in the assaults category—more occurred in urban interface (or as one manager termed it “urban in-your-face”) areas. One manager said, “With the growth and change in society people now have a shorter fuse, you see more road rage and intolerance.” Another manager said, “Criminal damage is prevalent. It is purely vandalism for vandalism sake.” Several managers spoke of threats to personnel. A couple of managers said they have had “death threats made against employees.” Some managers said threats against employees were so common that employees become “callused to threats, so many are probably not even reported.”

Also in urban areas we found more affirmative responses to our queries about drug-related activities. One manager said, “Meth labs are a big problem, especially with the new cold cook method.” We heard similar remarks from several managers. Still problematic were marijuana crops. One manager said they had all but eradicated marijuana production (“We have poured money and personnel to curbing drug activity and it is working”), but almost everyone else noted the increasing crop problem. Many crops are located off the beaten track, and as one manager said, “Eight out of ten marijuana crops are located by non-Forest Service people; usually hunters come across these gardens.”

In rural areas we found more affirmative responses in the extremist or nontraditional group categories than we did in urban areas. One manager from a rural area said: “There are some people with sharp teeth [satanic cults], and we’ve found pentagrams and skulls from cow and other animal sacrifices.” Another said, “About five to ten percent of users are human predators.” Several managers had quite complicated stories

Table 1. Criminal and domestic terrorism activities found on western National Forest sites in the United States, ordered within category by occurrence

Site	Urban				Rural			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>Urban-associated crime</b>								
Arson	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Domestic violence	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Thefts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gang activity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Body dumping	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Shooting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Suicides	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Murder	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rape/sexual assault	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Drive-by shooting				✓	✓		✓	
<b>Assaults</b>								
Criminal damage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Personnel threat	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Threats against property	✓		✓	✓			✓	
<b>Drug activity</b>								
Marijuana cultivation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meth labs	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Meth chemical dump	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Meth manufacture		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Armed defense of crops	✓		✓	✓		✓		
Booby traps								
<b>Extremist and nontraditional groups</b>								
Satanic cults	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White power groups	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Earth First!	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wise use			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Motorcycle groups	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Survivalists	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Militias/supremacy groups		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Property rights groups	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Other</b>								
Dump								
household/landscape	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dump chemicals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Homeless people	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trespass by undocumented immigrants	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
Armed defense of forest products							✓	✓

to tell about EarthFirst!, wise use groups, and property rights groups. One of our field visits was to a site being “protected” by EarthFirst! We found most of the group to be quite reticent to chat with us, though one young person did serve as our guide. He showed us where the “dwellings” were and where holes were dug and presumably people were living. He told us that the leaders of the group were in town “tabling” (gathering food and money) and that he and the others stayed there at the site and were given food to live on. We found he had

some knowledge about other sites he had “protected” before, but he was not very knowledgeable about the particular site where he was. He explained that he had only been there a few weeks and had heard about the site from other people.

#### Impacts to Recreationists

Many managers felt that users of outdoor recreation sites were either completely unaware of these activities or were unaffected. About urban-associated crimes they said: “Urban crime activities don’t seem to bother recreationists” and “We had a gang stabbing in a parking lot and the next day we had the same amount of people come out.”

About drugs and drug lab impacts to recreationists, managers said: “Probably recreationists don’t know about it [drugs] and even if they did, they don’t pay much attention to it” and “Drug activities are not a huge issue for most of the recreating public.” By way of explanation one manager said, “People are usually unaware of drug activities, it does not even get into the media here.” Several managers noted that few of these types of activities are made public, often because they are such common occurrences as to not be newsworthy.

For some other problems managers said there were a few, if minimal, impacts to recreationists: “People get excited when they see someone in camouflage, and they get anxious about paint ballers, but we don’t get but maybe ten calls per year.” On whether inappropriate shooting displaces recreationists the managers said, “Sounds of gunshots get people worried, but I don’t think it keeps them from coming back” and “We think some people have been displaced, but we don’t know how many.” A couple of other managers said, “Whether people report gunshots or not depends on where they live” and “If there is a shooting near an area with [minorities], then there is little reaction. If one occurs near a trailhead where whites are, then there is more reaction.” A couple of managers noted that many people are armed when recreating on the forest, which may not be for personal protection from other people but from forest animals. “People have fear beyond urban crime, they have a fear of the forest because they are not used to forests.” Finally, some managers thought the public should be more concerned than they appeared to be. One said, “Public safety is a big issue. We consider smuggling to be a traditional use of this forest. It is an extreme threat to recreationists.”

#### Impacts to Management

At the beginning of each interview, before we addressed any other topic, we asked the managers their top five management issues for the ranger district or the

National Forest. *Criminal activities and domestic terrorism activities were one of the top five management issues on all eight sites.* At two sites, extremist or nontraditional groups were among the top issues; at three sites the “other” category (trespass of undocumented immigrants and armed defense of special products) was among the top issues; at one site assaults were on the list; and two sites said urban-associated crimes were in the top five issues. At seven of the eight sites the managers said that they believed the increasing crimes at their site were related to urban spillover. One manager in a rural area said, “We get 24-hour use.”

Almost all of the managers interviewed noted the increasing prevalence of criminal activities and domestic terrorism activities and the costs to management in time, personnel, and in other ways. “We’ve had to install big, strong gates and put locks on buildings. We have to use anti-graffiti materials and use more metal and concrete. There are phenomenal costs to replace equipment and facilities, and this has a negative impact of having money available for services.” One manager said, “It’s problematic for managing. This isn’t a traditional forest. There is not enough facilities and parking, and more people are coming each day.” Another manager said, “Dumping of household products are an eyesore. Sometimes we don’t have the people or the money to clean it up.” Another said, “There’s lots of trash left behind for us to clean up.” Several managers also noted other impacts to management, such as “little or no respect for the uniform or the weapon.” And at one site they “have a ‘war chest’ . . . that includes handcuffs, identification bands, etc.” Of one area the managers told us, “Most employees know about the problems and won’t camp on the forest because of the reputation of associated illegal behavior.”

#### Discussion

Though the study was meant to uncover information about crimes and other depreciative behaviors on western National Forests of the United States, we found some unexpected outcomes. Many of the managers noted that their job had ceased being one of natural resources law enforcement (natural resources management would be curbing unlawful firewood gathering, unlawful outfitters, etc.) and became one of “city law enforcement.” Several said, “If it happens in the city, it happens here.” To be able to cover the vast acreage with relatively few law enforcement officers, many locations had formal agreements with other agencies, either state, local, or both, to jointly conduct law enforcement activities. At one site, the managers said, “We get these really large parties late at night. It might take a couple



of hours to get others to help us respond, and sometimes they don't come at all."

When asked about "city" law enforcement one manager said, "We do a lot less prevention work, our presence used to be enough and now we do mostly enforcement." Others said, "Some of these people are not reacting to law enforcement" and "This goes beyond a lack of respect." At some sites they have started using canine officers as partners.

Additionally, we found two important issues related to communication. A lack of public awareness of criminal activities and domestic terrorism on the forests reveals one communication gap. We also found that many managers we spoke to, who were not law enforcement officers or special agents, had little knowledge of the problems and were surprised at the extent of them. This wasn't true in all cases; there were three sites where it appeared excellent staff communications were taking place.

## Conclusions

This study was a preliminary examination of criminal activities and domestic terrorism. There were eight study sites, all located on National Forests in the western United States. At all eight sites some aspect of criminal activities or domestic terrorism, as measured in this study, was one of the top management issues. Though half the sites are in rural areas, all face problems considered "urban-associated crimes." While a few of these crimes are "traditional" (arson, thefts), others are relatively new to National Forests (domestic violence, body dumping, murder). All sites are now reporting some urban-associated crimes are on the increase. Criminal damage and threats against Forest Service personnel were common, as were drug activities and extremist and nontraditional group activities.

The findings of the study raise serious issues that require additional research. First, we think much more research needs to be conducted on the extent of the problem of criminal activities and domestic terrorism. We would suggest a national, multi-agency study (Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, etc.). Several managers referenced other agencies that are faced with similar difficulties. For example, one manager said, "The Bureau of Land Management gets many more bodies dumped, and many more stolen cars are found there because they are closer to the city." We think, too, that communication issues should be addressed through additional research of both the

communication and knowledge levels of the general recreating public and that of natural resource agency personnel. After hearing all the activities that take place at one site, one non-law enforcement person said, "Welcome to America's great outdoors." We also believe that impacts to recreationists need to be examined in detail. We suggest that additional research on natural resources impact be conducted.

It appears these acts of criminal activity and domestic terrorism are on the increase and it is time to study them further. To quote one manager, "We're doing triage law enforcement."

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