

City of Boulder
Open Space and Mountain Parks Department
Visitor Master Plan

Process for Passive Recreation Determination and Evaluation Criteria

In the City of Boulder Charter, passive recreation is described as one of the purposes of Open Space with six activities listed as examples: hiking, photography or nature studies, and, if specifically designated, bicycling, horseback riding or fishing. However, the Charter does not provide an actual definition of passive recreation, nor a comprehensive list of what activities are appropriate for Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks. In the past, recreational activities have been evaluated and managed on a case-by-case basis.

The Visitor Plan establishes criteria to evaluate the appropriateness of activities. These criteria and the passive recreation definition were developed by the Visitor Plan Citizen Advisory Committee. The criteria provide a consistent process to evaluate all recreational uses on city of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks. Both existing and future recreational activities will be evaluated using these criteria and managed correspondingly.

When evaluating specific activities, potential benefits and impacts must be determined by using the best available information. If potential impacts from recreation are not clearly understood or adequate resource information is unavailable, a cautious approach will be used and priority will be given to protecting natural resources. An adaptive approach will be used to manage passive recreational activities. This approach enables managers to incorporate new information and better manage changing desires.

Evaluation of recreational activities will occur at two levels. A "coarse level" assessment will be conducted initially to determine the general appropriateness of the activity and to identify considerations and potential management constraints. A "fine level" assessment will be completed as information becomes available for specific areas. The "fine level" assessment is specific to a given area, considers the resources and makes site-specific recommendations for the activity. A numerical rating system may be applied to the criteria during the "fine level" assessment to establish the relative appropriateness of various recreational activities. Initiation of this passive recreation determination process may be proposed by staff, the Open Space Board of Trustees, or members of the public.

"New" recreational activities are either completely new types of recreation (possibly using new technologies), new locations for existing types of recreational activities, or substantially increased levels of a previously evaluated and approved activity.

The steps to evaluate and manage recreational activities are described below.

Step 1. Background Research

The first step is to research and discuss the recreational activity with participants, other Open Space and Mountain Parks visitors, members of the community, other agencies, and resource specialists.

Step 2. Identify Considerations Associated with the Activity's Compatibility with Open Space and Mountain Parks Criteria

Once background information about the activity has been summarized and general parameters have been established, considerations associated with the activity's compatibility with Open Space and Mountain Parks criteria will be identified.

Does the activity contain any of the following elements that are not acceptable on Open Space and Mountain Parks? If so, the activity is not appropriate for Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks and further evaluation is not necessary. If unsure, please continue with the next steps in the evaluation process.

Incompatible activities include:

- Motorized activity (except motorized wheelchairs)
- Involves collection of natural or cultural features (except by permit or license)
- Requires visitor facilities beyond designated soft-surface trails or requires a high level of services and/or equipment to safely accommodate proposed use or to minimize impacts
- Has significant adverse impacts to other visitors or natural, cultural, scientific, or agricultural values
- Competitive sporting event

If the activity does not involve any of the unacceptable activities, identify considerations associated with the activity based on the level of compatibility with Open Space and Mountain Parks criteria. Criteria that are underlined denote more weight or importance.

Compatibility with Other Uses

- Preserving the quality of other visitor's experiences (considering potential conflicts, crowding, visual or aesthetic concerns such as leaving materials or equipment, and how activities are organized or structured).
 - How would significant increases in activity use levels affect preserving the quality of visitor's experiences (participants and non-participants).
- Ability to yield to other visitors (considering the average capabilities, speed, and control of participants).
- Effect on adjacent public and private land uses (considering noise, trash, traffic, and parking problems that may be associated with the activity).

Potential Impacts to Natural, Cultural, Scientific, or Agricultural Values

- Compatibility with long term preservation of:
 - Natural values (effect on plants, water quality, wetlands, riparian areas, and potential disturbance to wildlife)
 - Activity's potential to cause additional fragmentation of plant and animal habitat (off-trail may increase habitat fragmentation)
 - Activity's potential to cause trampling of vegetation and soil erosion
 - Cultural values (effect on historic or prehistoric resources such as artifacts or historic buildings)
 - Scientific values (effect on ability to conduct research such as tampering or other activity influences that could impact scientific values)
 - Agricultural values (effect on livestock grazing or crop production and potential hazards when visitors and cattle are in the same areas)
 - How would significant increases in activity use levels affect compatibility with preserving plants, wildlife, cultural, scientific, or agricultural values
- Compatibility with leaving no trace (leaving physical evidence or remains which may affect natural values such as equipment placed and left or other markings such as paint or flagging).

Relationship to Setting

- Activity's dependence on a natural, near natural, or agricultural setting (is an Open Space and Mountain Parks setting integral to the experience and are more appropriate settings available which can better accommodate the activity such as a developed park?).
- Activity's ability to increase peoples' appreciation of nature or understanding of Open Space and Mountain Parks purposes (e.g., educational aspects).

Facilities and Services

- Compatibility with a low level of visitor facilities (e.g., soft-surface trails, small parking areas, and minimal signs needed to provide a safe, quality experience or to mitigate impacts to other visitors and natural, cultural, scientific, or agricultural values).
- Compatibility with low levels of visitor services (e.g., minimal maintenance, enforcement, monitoring, and education needed to provide a safe, quality experience or to mitigate impacts to other visitors and natural, cultural, scientific, or agricultural values?).
- Safety considerations (accident track record, past liability issues, number of emergency responses associated with an activity).

Step 3. Analyze Considerations and Develop Potential Mitigation Techniques or Management Needs

The next step is to analyze the considerations listed and identify areas where the activity can possibly be made more compatible. Mitigation techniques can then be explored to see how compatible the activity can reasonably be made to meet the criteria. These mitigation factors must be evaluated to determine the effectiveness of the mitigation techniques, whether they are realistic (can they reasonably and effectively be implemented and monitored given all the other staff responsibilities) and to identify what resources (staff, funding, facilities) would be needed.

Possible mitigation or management techniques must address the time, place, and conditions necessary to provide the proposed activity. Important considerations include anticipated use levels and characteristics of the activities that affect other visitors and natural values.

Step 4. Decide Appropriateness of the Recreational Activity and Management Strategies

The final step is to carefully weigh the potential benefits of the activity with the potential impacts and costs/complexity required to mitigate before determining the appropriateness of the activity. Although potential mitigation techniques may appear to resolve conflicts and impacts, it is easy to overlook how difficult and costly it may be to actually implement these actions.

Impacts may be direct and obvious (such as erosion of a trail) or indirect (such as reduced reproductive success of wildlife). Impacts are often incremental and cumulative. The specific impacts of one activity must be kept in perspective with existing impacts, future impacts from any new activities and increasing visitor use levels. Activities that occur primarily off-trail cause resource impacts such as vegetation trampling, soil compaction, erosion, weed spread and may increase fragmentation of natural areas and should be carefully evaluated. Some Open Space and Mountain Parks areas are relatively intact, while others are already fragmented by roads, residential and commercial development and trails.

This step will be accomplished at two levels: (1) a "coarse level" assessment to determine the general appropriateness of the activity and potential management constraints, and (2) a "fine level" assessment which is specific to a given area, considers the resources, and makes site-specific recommendations for the activity. The "coarse level" assessment will primarily occur during the development of the Visitor Plan, while the "fine level" assessment will occur as information becomes available. In areas where resource information is unavailable or incomplete, new recreational uses will not be considered until adequate resource information is available.

An interdisciplinary team of Open Space and Mountain Parks staff will make recommendations on activities to the Open Space Board of Trustees; after public notice and an opportunity for public comment, the Board will make a decision.

As new research and monitoring data becomes available, recommendations on specific recreational activities will be re-evaluated. Activities that have been allowed in the past may have to be limited or restricted based upon new information. Likewise, activities that may have been limited in the past may be allowed or managed less intensively if new information becomes available that demonstrates there are fewer significant adverse impacts.

Application of the Passive Recreation Decision Process and Evaluation Criteria

The Visitor Plan Advisory Committee developed a set of criteria and process to evaluate recreational activities and identified some initial considerations associated with each activity.

Staff then refined this analysis. Considerations were developed based on general Open Space and Mountain Parks conditions and normal participants' behavior. It is important to recognize there are many variables which can influence these considerations and an activity's compatibility with Open Space and Mountain Parks. Some variables include weather, participant behavior, site-specific information, changing conditions, lack of research on the activity, etc.

Benefits of Recreational Activities

Passive recreational activities enhance many visitors' understanding of the natural environment and create community support for Open Space and Mountain Parks. Potential benefits of the activity must be carefully weighed with the potential impacts and costs/complexity required to mitigate before determining the appropriateness of the activity. This step must determine the overall benefit to the community considering the number of people benefited and/or impacted by the proposed activity. To minimize repetition, only unique characteristics of each specific recreational activity are described on the following initial considerations.