Tips for Improving Your Forest Wilderness Website

Updating or creating your forest wilderness website? Be sure to check with your forest or regional web specialist for current technical guidelines and policy requirements. Here are a few general website design tips on organizing your website, helping visitors navigate through your website and making your website attractive and inviting to visitors.

Organizing Your Forest Wilderness Website

Use the Wilderness Information Management Steering Group’s (WIMSG) guidelines (see Guiding Principles for Web Sites) to determine what types of information should be posted on your forest wilderness website. Once you know what content should be on your forest wilderness website, create an outline of this information by partitioning and grouping information into categories and sub-categories of similar information. For example, you may decide to group information about major trails, trailheads and maps together. This outline will form the basis for your navigational elements (discussed below), which allow visitors to move easily through your site.

Detailed information should be subordinate to broad descriptions or generalized information. For example, if you talk generally about how wilderness is a unique and special resource, you may then want to talk about why your specific wilderness is unique and special. Critical information, such as trip planning services (where to get maps, office locations and hours of operation, permit systems, fees, regulations, outfitter and guide services etc.) should be located toward the top of the outline.

Questions to ask yourself when organizing your forest wilderness website:

- Have I included all the information recommended in the WIMSG guidelines?
- What types of information have I grouped together?
  - Are these groupings intuitive to visitors? (i.e. From the example above, will visitors know to find maps along with trails and trailheads?)
- In what order have I prioritized information?
  - Have I put the most important things visitors want to know about first?
- How many categories do I have?
  - Is this too many? (i.e. am I presenting visitors with too many choices of information too fast?)
  - Is this too few or too layered? (i.e. am I making visitors dig too deeply to find key information?)
Helping Visitors Navigate Through Your Forest Wilderness Website

The content outline you just created will be the basis for helping visitors navigate through your forest wilderness website. Although an entire website can consist of a single webpage, as a general rule of thumb, each main category should be its own webpage. A collection of main category webpages will make up your forest wilderness website. Navigation elements to these different webpages in your forest wilderness website can be textual links or icons; they can be listed vertically (right or left side of screen) or horizontally (top of screen). Textual links should be short, concise, intuitive, and descriptive. Icons aid in visual recognition and memory, but should be simple to be most effective (see Eagle Cap Wilderness website in Forest Wilderness Web Page Examples for an example of icon use). According to your outline, the most important elements should be listed first, largest, boldest or closest to the top, left-hand portion of the page. A consistent set of key navigation elements should appear on every page, allowing visitors to move quickly between pages without having to search for where they are, were, or want to go next (see Alpine Lakes Wilderness website in Forest Wilderness Web Page Examples for an example of consistent navigation).

Questions to ask yourself when designing your navigation elements:
- Am I using words, abbreviations or agency jargon in my key navigation elements that visitors may not understand?
- Are my key navigation elements located on every page in the same place?
- Can visitors see all of my key navigation elements at once, or do they need to scroll down or across to see the complete list?
- Once a visitor navigates further into your site, how easy is it to return to the wilderness site home page or the national forest home page?

Making Your Forest Wilderness Website Attractive and Inviting to Visitors

Headings and subheadings should be used to separate categories and sub-categories within a webpage. Font styles should be consistent for categories and sub-categories and should also be consistent across all webpages within the website. For example, all main category headings may be big and white with a green background; sub-category headings may be medium, italics, and green; sub-sub-category headings may be medium and black; and text may be regular-sized and black.

Critical information should be located toward the top of the page, or visually separated to ensure that it gets noticed. For example, recent trail closure information may be visually separated and highlighted using horizontal lines, tables containing the important content, color or animation (avoid blinking, as this is distracting and annoying to visitors) (see the Willamette National Forest wilderness areas website in Forest Wilderness Web Page Examples for an example of visual separation using color and tables). Within a category or sub-category, lengthy text blocks should be avoided by separating them into paragraphs or including photographs. All fonts should be large enough to be
legible. Contact email or phone number should appear on every page in a consistent location.

Questions to ask yourself about your website’s attractiveness:

- Am I applying styles consistently?
  - Are my headings, subheadings, and text the same on every page?
  - Are my subheadings visually subordinate to my headings? (i.e. Are they smaller or lighter?)

- How many different colors am I using on a single webpage (not including photographs or logos)?
  - Is this too many? (i.e. Does my webpage look like a rainbow?)
  - Is this too few? (i.e. Does my webpage look dull and flat?)