Oklahoma's Recreational Land Use Statute

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Recommended Citation

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OKLAHOMA’S RECREATIONAL LAND USE STATUTE

I. INTRODUCTION

The common-law duty of care owed by a landowner to an entrant on his property is based on the status of the entrant, which in turn is determined by the owner’s interest in the entrant’s presence. As a general rule, the landowner owes a duty to trespassers and licensees to refrain from willfully or intentionally injuring them. To the invitee whose presence benefits the landowner, however, the landowner owes the higher duty of ordinary care.

A new class of entrant, the recreational user of land, has been added by state legislatures to the common-law categories of trespasser, licensee, and invitee. Recreational use statutes have been enacted in forty-three states, including Oklahoma. These statutes limit a land-
owner's duty of care to people who enter his land for a recreational purpose, and generally hold him liable only for willful, intentional injury to such entrants. In effect, the entrant assumes responsibility for his own safety in return for access to and use of the land of another.

By enacting recreational use statutes, state legislatures have expressed an intent to encourage private landowners to permit the public to use and enjoy their land by limiting landowners' liability to persons entering the land for recreational purposes. This legislative intent is expressed in a policy statement: "It is hereby declared that there is a need for outdoor recreational areas in this state which are open for public use and enjoyment; that the use and maintenance of these areas will provide beauty and openness for the benefit of the population; that it is in the public interest to encourage owners of land to make such areas available to the public for non-commercial recreational purposes by limiting such owners' liability towards persons entering thereon for such purposes; that such limitation of liability would encourage owners of land to allow non-commercial public recreational use of land which would not otherwise be open to the public, thereby reducing state expenditures needed to provide such areas.

ALA. CODE § 35-15-20 (Supp. 1982) (emphasis added); see also ARK. STAT. ANN. § 50-1101


North Carolina and Utah have repealed their recreational use statutes. See N.C. GEN. STAT. §§ 113-120.5-7 (1979) (repealed 1980); UTAH CODE ANN. §§ 23-1-13 to -14 (1965) (repealed 1971).


11. The Alabama statute expresses the legislative purpose in a policy statement:

It is hereby declared that there is a need for outdoor recreational areas in this state which are open for public use and enjoyment; that the use and maintenance of these areas will provide beauty and openness for the benefit of the public and also assist in preserving the health, safety, and welfare of the population; that it is in the public interest to encourage owners of land to make such areas available to the public for non-commercial recreational purposes by limiting such owners' liability towards persons entering thereon for such purposes; that such limitation of liability would encourage owners of land to allow non-commercial public recreational use of land which would not otherwise be open to the public, thereby reducing state expenditures needed to provide such areas.
based on a desire to reduce the number of landowners who bar access by the public to their land for fear of incurring tort liability if entrants are injured on their land. In addition, the opening of private land for public recreation reduces the expenditures state governments otherwise would have to make to provide such areas.

Although the Oklahoma recreational use statute was enacted almost two decades ago, it has yet to be judicially construed. Cases involving similar legislation in other states provide a basis for predicting the problems of interpreting the Oklahoma act and the results that will be achieved thereunder. This Comment analyzes the provisions of Oklahoma's recreational use statute in light of the problems of application that have arisen under other states' statutes. In addition, it suggests the need for a partial revision of the Oklahoma statute in order to avoid interpretational problems and to better effectuate the policy that led to the statute's enactment.

II. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF OKLAHOMA'S STATUTE

A. Structure of the Act

The Oklahoma statute limits the liability of a landowner who allows other persons to use his land for recreational purposes. An "owner" may be "the possessor of a fee interest, a tenant, a lessee, . . . [or anyone] in control of the premises." The statute thus draws within the ambit of its protection all persons with any degree of control

over real property sufficient to allow the recreational use of that property by others. Although most recreational use statutes limit the application of immunity to owners who permit members of the public to use their land, the Oklahoma statute applies to any owner of land "who either directly or indirectly invites or permits" the recreational use of his land. Thus, the Oklahoma landowner may receive statutory immunity regardless of whether he specifically intended to invite or permit entry onto his land.

The Oklahoma statute applies only to recreational activities on land used primarily for farming or ranching. In this respect, the Oklahoma statute is much narrower in scope than the statutes of most other states, which apply to any "premises," "land," or "real prop-

17. Cf. COLO. REV. STAT. § 33-41-102(3) (Supp. 1983) ("‘owner’ includes . . . any person having a right to grant permission to use the land"); Smith v. Scrap Disposal Corp., 96 Cal. App. 3d 525, 529, 158 Cal. Rptr. 134, 137 (1979) (recreational use statute applies when owner has a right to bar entry).

Michigan courts have found that the holder of an easement is an owner of property within the meaning of the Michigan statute. See, e.g., Crawford v. Consumers Power Co., 108 Mich. App. 232, 236, 310 N.W. 2d 343, 345 (1981); Estate of Thomas v. Consumers Power Co., 58 Mich. App. 486, 487, 228 N.W.2d, 786, 790 (1975), aff’d in part, rev’d in part on other grounds, 394 Mich. 459, 231 N.W.2d 653 (1973). In California and Washington, however, courts have focused on right to possession as a key factor in the issue of ownership. See, e.g., Power v. Union Pac. R.R., 655 F.2d 1380, 1387 (9th Cir. 1981) (999-year lease found to give a lessee of railroad right of way the requisite possession and control to qualify as an owner under the California statute); Darr v. Lone Star Indus., 94 Cal. App. 3d 895, 900-01, 157 Cal. Rptr. 90, 93 (1979) (California statute does not apply to holders of easements since an easement is a nonpossessory interest rather than an estate in land); O’Shea v. Claude C. Wood Co., 97 Cal. App. 3d 903, 911, 159 Cal. Rptr. 125, 129-30 (1979) (immunity of the statute extends only to those who have a possessory interest, not to persons such as licensees with nonpossessory rights only). The California statute was subsequently amended to include "any estate or any other interest in real property whether possessory or nonpossessory." CAL. CIV. CODE § 846 (West 1982).


19. OKLA. STAT. tit. 76, § 12 (1981). For a discussion of possible interpretations of this language, see infra notes 87-100 and accompanying text.

20. OKLA. STAT. tit. 76, § 12 (1981). "Land" also includes "roads, water, watercourses, private ways and buildings, structures, and machinery or equipment when attached to realty which is used primarily for farming or ranching activities." Id. § 10(a).

21. The only other state that expressly limits the application of the act to farm land is South Dakota. See S.D. CODIFIED LAWS ANN. § 20-9-5 (1979) ("rural real estate used exclusively for agricultural purposes").


22. See IND. CODE ANN. § 14-2-6-3 (Burns Supp. 1983); KY. REV. STAT. ANN. § 150.645
Judicial construction of such broad terms, however, has limited the applicability of some statutes to recreational activities on rural lands.25

The Oklahoma recreational use statute limits the owner’s duty to recreational users in several ways. An owner of farm or ranch land who permits entry for recreational purposes owes no duty to others to keep the premises safe or warn of dangerous conditions.26 Further, by inviting or permitting recreational use, the owner does not extend any assurance that the premises are safe, confer upon the entrant the legal status of invitee or licensee, or incur liability for injury to persons or property caused by the user.27

Two exceptions limit this general grant of immunity. The landowner remains liable for willful or malicious failure to guard or warn of a dangerous condition on the land.28 This duty is analogous to the minimal standard of care a landowner owed to trespassers at common law.29 In addition, the immunity of the statute does not apply when the owner charges for admission to his land.30 This exception preserves the common-law duty of the landowner when he has an economic interest in the presence of another.31
B. Potential Issues of Interpretation

A key to whether Oklahoma courts will interpret the state recreational use statute broadly or narrowly may lie in whether the statute is considered a change in the common law or a codification thereof. Some courts have found their states’ laws to be in derogation of common law and public policy, and thus construe them strictly. For instance, in Boileau v. DeCecco, a New Jersey court noted that the “trend in public policy has been to expand the areas of tort liability and to eliminate islands of immunity,” and refused to interpret the New Jersey statute as protecting the owner of a private swimming pool in the city. Other courts have taken a different view of the effect of recreational use statutes, holding that they codify the common law at the time of their enactment and should be liberally interpreted.

The different approaches may be explained, in part, by the wording of the statutes involved. The earlier acts, such as the one enacted in Wisconsin, state that permission to enter land for a recreational purpose does not “constitute the person to whom permission is granted an

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33. Id. at —, 310 A.2d at 499.
35. 125 N.J. Super. at —, 310 A.2d at 500; see also Harrison v. Middlesex Water Co., 80 N.J. 391, —, 403 A.2d 910, 914 (1979) (recreational use statute must be narrowly construed because “immunity from liability for the negligent infliction of injury upon others is not favored in the law,” and will not cover residential land or rescue activity); Krevics v. Ayars, 141 N.J. Super. 511, —, 358 A.2d 844, 846-47 (Salem County Ct. Law Div. 1976) (recreational use statute which is in derogation of common law and therefore to be strictly construed does not exempt owner who stretched a cable across roadway from liability for injuries suffered by motorcyclist); Kucher v. County of Pierce, 24 Wash. App. 281, —, 600 P.2d 683, 686 (1979) (statute in derogation of common law must be strictly construed and will not cover wooded park in city); Copeland v. Larson, 46 Wis. 2d 377, —, 174 N.W.2d 745, 749 (1970) (recreational use statute changes duty toward licensees and therefore is in derogation of common law; “valuable consideration” exclusion will be broadly interpreted to include indirect economic benefit to owner).
36. See Estate of Thomas v. Consumers Power Co., 58 Mich. App. 486, —, 228 N.W.2d 786, 790 (1975) (statute restates common law duty of landowners and should be liberally construed; therefore, owner of utility easement is an owner within the statute), appeal dismissed, 36 N.Y.2d __, 329 N.E.2d 672, 368 N.Y.S.2d 841 (1975); Wight v. New York, 93 Misc. 2d 560, —, 403 N.Y.S.2d 450, 452 (Ct. Cl. 1978) (standard of care of a landowner is “nothing more than a statutory restatement of the common law duty of care owed to a licensee” and owner is not liable for injury suffered by a snowmobiler who hit a concrete dock while snowmobiling on a frozen lake). But see Cutway v. New York, 89 A.D.2d 406, —, 456 N.Y.S.2d 539, 541 (N.Y. App. Div. 1982) (although recreational use statute codifies common law and is to be liberally construed, it does not relieve liability of owner who placed a steel cable across a roadway used by motor vehicles).
invitee to whom a duty of care is owed. Other states such as Oklahoma provide that permission to enter does not confer upon the entrant the legal status of invitee or licensee. The addition of the reference to licensees effects a dramatic change in the common-law duty of a landowner. Under the traditional common-law rule, a landowner is liable to licensees only for willful or wanton injury. That standard is ameliorated, however, by specific exceptions that reflect a steadily increasing concern for human safety. For example, a landowner who conducts dangerous activities on his land must use reasonable care to protect licensees. If he is aware of dangerous conditions that would not be obvious to an entrant, the landowner has a duty to warn or to take measures to guard against injury. In addition, the landowner may be liable if he alters conditions in a way that creates a trap in a place where licensees are likely to be. A statute that denies an entrant the status of licensee withholds the protection carved out by these exceptions to the common-law rule.

Moreover, the statutes which codified common-law duties preserved those duties as they existed at the time the statutes were enacted, and since that time the common law has changed. In Rowland v. Christian, the California Supreme Court abandoned the status-based approach to premises liability and declared that a landowner owes the same duty of care, based on foreseeability of injury, to all who enter his property. Since Rowland a minority of states have adopted the foreseeability standard for premises liability. In short, the common law

39. W. Prosser, supra note 3, § 60, at 379.
40. Id.
41. Id. at 380.
42. Id. at 382.
43. Id. at 382.
44. This is particularly true in light of the strict interpretation that many courts have given the usual exception for willful and malicious behavior. See infra notes 126-31 and accompanying text.
45. 69 Cal. 2d 108, 443 P.2d 561, 70 Cal. Rptr. 97 (1968) (en banc).
46. Id. at —, 443 P.2d at 568, 70 Cal. Rptr. at 104.
has evolved, but the recreational use statutes retain the traditional common-law classifications and their underlying assumptions.

The view taken by a court on whether the recreational use statute changes or codifies the common law, however, does not always explain the result in a particular case. For instance, a New Jersey plaintiff injured when the motorbike he was riding came in contact with a cable that had been stretched across a roadway on privately owned land was allowed recovery against the landowner under a strict construction of the state's recreational use statute. On almost identical facts, a Wisconsin plaintiff was denied a remedy, despite the similar wording of the Wisconsin statute and the apparent construction of the act as being in derogation of the common law.

1. To What Land Does the Statute Apply?

Perhaps the most important question to be answered in analyzing the recreational use statute is what kinds of land the statute affects. The Oklahoma statute applies only to cases involving "land which is used primarily for farming or ranching activities." This phrase is not defined in the statute, and may pose a difficult interpretational problem for the courts.

Another issue raised by the language of the Oklahoma statute is whether it applies to activities on public as well as private land. A few states address this issue specifically. Many statutes also have pol-

48. Krevics v. Ayars, 141 N.J. Super. 511, —, 358 A.2d 844, 846-47 (Salem County Ct. Law Div. 1976) (noting that "since the act is in derogation of common law it must be strictly construed," court found that the act was not intended to eliminate but to expand the concept that foreseeability is the basis of landowner liability for injuries occurring on his land).

49. Wirth v. Ehly, 93 Wis. 2d 433, —, 287 N.W.2d 140, 143 (1980). Although the accident in Wirth took place in a public park, rather than on private land as in Krevics, this distinction was not cited in the court's reasoning.


52. Okla. Stat. tit. 76, § 10(e) (1981); see also id. §§ 11, 12.


55. See Ala. Code § 35-15-21(1) (Supp. 1983) (owner includes "[a]ny public or private or-
icy statements that express a legislative intent to encourage landowners to open private land to public use. In light of this policy, it seems that recreational use statutes should not apply to government-owned lands which are already open to the public for recreational purposes. Despite the logic of this position, many courts have held that recreational use statutes apply to public as well as private land. Applicable state recreational use statutes often control the liability of the United States in suits brought under the Federal Tort Claims Act. For example, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in Jones v. United States held that the Washington statute applied to national park land, and dismissed a claim against the federal government for injuries the plaintiff sustained while snowsliding in Olympic National Park. The plaintiff argued that the United States should be denied immunity in light of the legislative purpose to encourage landowners to allow public access to their land. The court disagreed, noting that federal regulations permit the closing of parks and therefore do not oblige the national parks to remain open.


56. See statutes cited supra note 11.
59. 693 F.2d 1299 (9th Cir. 1982).
61. 693 F.2d at 1302.
62. Id.
63. Id.
ity are subject to the state’s Recreational Area Licensing Act. In *Miller v. United States*, this act was held to render the Illinois recreational use statute applicable only to those who permit land to be used recreationally on a casual basis. The federal government was held to a standard of reasonable care under the Licensing Act and the plaintiff was allowed to recover for injuries sustained in a diving accident in a national wildlife refuge.

Although most state courts have applied recreational use statutes in suits arising out of injury on state land, there is some authority to the contrary. For instance, in *Nelsen v. City of Gridley*, a California court reasoned that it would make little sense to apply the immunity to public entities since the legislation was designed to increase access to private land. In addition, the state’s tort claims act requires public entities to exercise reasonable care to prevent injury resulting from dangerous conditions on their property. For these reasons, the court held that the California recreational use statute did not apply to governmental entities.

Until recently the question of whether the recreational use statute would apply to public land in Oklahoma was moot because of the doctrine of sovereign immunity. In *Vanderpool v. State*, however, the

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66. Id. at 561.
67. Id.
70. Id. at 91, 169 Cal. Rptr. at 759.
72. 113 Cal. App. 3d at —, 169 Cal. Rptr. at 759; see also *Cords v. Ehly*, 62 Wis. 2d 31, 214 N.W.2d 432 (1974); *Goodson v. City of Racine*, 61 Wis. 2d 554, 213 N.W.2d 16 (1973) (holding the Wisconsin recreational use statute applicable to state and municipal parks respectively); Note, *supra* note 10, at 137 (endorsing holdings of Wisconsin state courts). *Cf. McCarver v. Manson Park & Recreation Dist.*, 92 Wash. 2d 370, —, 597 P.2d 1362, 1367 (1979) (Dolliver, J., dissenting) (distinguishing between “passively allowing” public use and “actively operating” a recreational park as a “primary” and “exclusive” use of the land, arguing that public park land should not be encompassed by recreational use statute despite its applicability to “[a]ny public or private landowners.” *Wash. Rev. Code Ann. § 4.24.210* (Supp. 1983-1984)).
Oklahoma Supreme Court abrogated tort immunity for state and local governmental entities. The state legislature, in response to the Vanderpool decision, has proposed the Oklahoma Tort Claims Act which, if enacted, will generally waive the state's immunity from suit for its torts and those of its employees. While the Act would greatly expand governmental tort liability, it provides that with the removal of immunity the state will be "subject to liability . . . where the state, if a private person or entity, would be liable . . . under the laws of this state." Under this provision, it is arguable that the state is also entitled to the same degree of immunity afforded by the Oklahoma recreational use statute to private landowners. The fact that other states' courts have frequently extended landowners' immunity to public entities bolsters this contention.

It seems unlikely, however, that the recreational use statute would be applied to public land in Oklahoma. Inasmuch as it denies licensee or invitee status to recreational entrants, the statute may be strictly construed as one in derogation of common law. In addition, the provisions of the Political Subdivisions Tort Claims Act and the proposed Oklahoma Tort Claims Act which specifically exempt the state from liability for claims arising from "[n]atural conditions of unimproved property" may be construed as imposing liability for all other types of claims arising on government property.

2. Invitation or Permission to Enter

Issues of entrant status are not entirely eliminated by the Oklahoma recreational use statute, despite its language indicating that landowners have no duty to warn or to keep the premises safe for all "persons" entering for recreational purposes. A landowner who "directly or indirectly invites or permits . . . any person" to enter for a recreational purpose will not be held thereby to assure the entrant of

74. 672 P.2d 1153 (Okla. 1983).
75. Id. at 1156-57.
77. Id. § 4.
78. Id.
79. See cases cited supra note 57.
80. See supra notes 57-68 and accompanying text.
82. See supra notes 32-35, 37-44 and accompanying text.
the land’s safety, confer on him the status of invitee or licensee, or assume responsibility for the entrant’s acts or omissions.\footnote{Id. § 12.} For purposes of determining the act’s applicability, then, it may be necessary to inquire whether direct or indirect permission or invitation was given the entrant.

Courts which have considered the question have held that this description includes regular entrants whose presence is known by the landowner. For example, motorcyclists or snowmobilers who are known to use the owner’s land are generally held to have permission to enter, regardless of whether the landowner permitted or merely tolerated their entry.\footnote{See, e.g., Thone v. Nicholson, 84 Mich. App. 538, 269 N.W.2d 665 (1978) (motorcyclists); Rock v. Concrete Materials, Inc., 46 A.D.2d 300, 362 N.Y.S.2d 258 (1974) (snowmobilers), appeal dismissed, 36 N.W.2d 772, 369 N.E.2d 672, 368 N.Y.S.2d 841 (1975); Wight v. State, 93 Misc. 2d 560, 403 N.Y.S.2d 450 (1978) (snowmobilers); Wirth v. Ehly, 93 Wis. 2d 433, 287 N.W.2d 140 (1980) (motorcyclists).} Although a landowner’s social guests may be viewed as “directly invited,” it is not clear whether they are included in the class of persons protected by Oklahoma’s recreational use statute.

Several states’ recreational use statutes specifically except invited guests.\footnote{See, e.g., CAL. CIV. CODE § 846 (West 1982) (liability to those expressly invited to enter is not limited); HAWAII REV. STAT. § 520-5(3) (1976) (liability to house guests is not limited); IND. CODE ANN. § 14-2-6-3 (Bums 1981) (liability to invited guests is not limited).} Construing the California statute’s exclusion of “persons who are expressly invited rather than merely permitted to come upon the premises by the landowner,”\footnote{Id. § 14-2-6-3 (Burns 1981) (liability to invited guests is not limited).} the court in \textit{Phillips v. United States}\footnote{CAL. Crv. CODE § 846 (West 1982).} held that the promotional literature published by the United States Forest Service was not an “express invitation” to the plaintiff to use a national forest.\footnote{Id. at 300. The court reserved the question of whether promotional literature, if mailed to and read by the entrant, could constitute an express invitation. \textit{Id.} at 299; \textit{see also} Simpson v. United States, 652 F.2d 831, 834 (9th Cir. 1981) (court acknowledged that sign inviting public to enter national forest, plus provision of public facilities, could constitute express invitation).}

Even under statutes containing language similar to that of the Oklahoma statute, the weight of authority suggests that social guests are not considered statutory recreational users. In \textit{Herring v. Hauck},\footnote{118 Ga. App. 623, 165 S.E.2d 198 (1968).} the court held that in order to claim the limited liability of the Georgia statute\footnote{GA. CODE ANN. § 105-406 (1968) (“directly or indirectly invites or permits”).} an owner “must permit the free use of his . . . land by the public generally” rather than by specific individuals.\footnote{118 Ga. App. at —, 165 S.W.2d at 199.}

\textit{LePoidevin}
ex rel. Dye v. Wilson, the Wisconsin Supreme Court held that landowners remained liable to their social guests, basing its reasoning on the premise that the immunity granted by the recreational use statute should be narrowly circumscribed as in derogation of common law. The court also emphasized the distinction between allowing public access and inviting friends onto one's land.

Strong policy reasons favor this exclusion of social guests from the purview of the statute. The trend in premises liability in general is to accord social guests the higher standard of care based on foreseeability of injury traditionally accorded business invitees. Furthermore, as the court in LePoidevin noted, "Granting the protection . . . to a landowner who invites a friend of the family to the summer cottage . . . does not foster the purpose of [the act] to encourage landowners to make land . . . available to the public for recreational use." 3.

What Is a 'Charge' for the Recreational Use of Land?

All forty-four recreational use statutes provide that if the entrant confers some economic benefit on the landowner for the use of his land, the owner's liability is not limited by the statute. For example, the Oklahoma statute states, "Nothing in this act limits in any way any

Id.

liability which otherwise exists . . . where the owner of land charges the persons or persons who enter or go on the land for the recreational use thereof . . . ." The act defines “charge” as “the admission price or fee asked in return for invitation or permission to enter . . . the land.” The reason for the exclusion is apparent: landowners who charge for entry do not further the purpose of the act, which is to encourage free public enjoyment of land in exchange for tort immunity.

Some courts have given a very narrow reading to this type of exception. In Diodato v. Camden County Park Commission, the court held that the County Park Commission was entitled to immunity from liability to the plaintiff who had been injured in a county park after having paid a fee for his use of a baseball field in the park. The court noted that the fee was imposed only for the use of the field. Since the plaintiff was injured in a part of the park that was open without charge to the public, the statutory exception for “any case where permission to engage in sport . . . activity on the premises was granted for a consideration” was held inapplicable.

Other courts have interpreted the exception broadly to allow


102. Id. § 10(d).
104. Id. at —, 392 A.2d at 669-70.
105. Id.
107. 162 N.J. Super. at —, 392 A.2d at 669-70; see also Stone Mt. Mem'l Ass'n v. Herrington, 225 Ga. 746, —, 171 S.E.2d 521, 523 (1969) (parking fee for automobiles entering park was not related to admission and recreational use statute applied).
plaintiffs to recover. In *Copeland v. Larson*, the plaintiff was injured when he dived off a pier at a small lake. The pier and other facilities such as a general store, restaurant, boat launch, and lodge were owned by the defendants. Although the plaintiff had paid no fee for admission to the area or for the use of the pier, he had patronized the defendant's store on previous visits and had intended to buy food and cigarettes the day he was injured. The court held that the "valuable consideration" exception to the Wisconsin recreational use statute should apply when the recreational user's presence is of potential economic benefit to the landowner, or when some mutuality of interest between landowner and user exists. Under this test, the plaintiff's intended purchases at the defendants' store were deemed an economic benefit to the landowner, who was thus denied the protection of the recreational use statute.

In *Ducey v. United States* the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals cited the *Copeland* decision with approval and gave several policy reasons for a broad interpretation of the consideration exception. A landowner who benefits economically from public use of his land is motivated by profit potential rather than tort immunity, is in a position to "post warnings, supervise activities, and otherwise seek to prevent injuries," and is able to spread the cost of injury through liability insurance.

The approach of the Wisconsin Supreme Court and Ninth Circuit is preferable. It is contrary to the legislative purpose of a recreational use statute to extend immunity to owners who derive economic benefit

108. 46 Wis. 2d 337, 174 N.W.2d 745 (1970).
109. *Id.* at —, 174 N.W.2d at 747.
111. 46 Wis. 2d at —, 174 N.W.2d at 750.
114. *Id.* at 511.
from public use of their land—even if they do not charge for admission per se. The incentive that the legislation was designed to provide is displaced by the economic incentive of the commercial activity, and as the court in *Ducey* noted, one way to avoid extending the statute to situations it was not intended to cover is to give as broad a reading as possible to the exceptions therein.\(^\text{115}\)

A better solution is to amend the statute to define “charge” as including “indirect economic benefit” as well as fees for entry. A recent amendment of the Alabama recreational use statute is instructive. The statute does not apply to land upon which “any commercial recreational enterprise is conducted.”\(^\text{116}\) This language may be too narrow in scope, as it would still grant tort immunity to landowners who operate commercial ventures on their property which are not of a recreational nature and who derive economic benefits from the patronage of entrants who are given access to the land for recreational purposes. Thus, a statute that denies immunity where the commercial activity and recreational use are related would better serve the purpose of the legislation.

### 4. Willful or Malicious Failure to Guard or Warn

Most recreational use statutes do not provide immunity for a landowner's grossly negligent or deliberately injurious conduct. The Oklahoma statute excludes “willful or malicious failure to guard or warn against a dangerous condition, use, structure or activity” from the protection of the act.\(^\text{117}\) Twenty-two other statutes contain the same exclusion,\(^\text{118}\) and most of the others have similar provisions.\(^\text{119}\)

\(^{115}\) Id. at 510.


term “willful or malicious” behavior, however, is even more ambiguous than “charge for entry,” and has been more difficult for the courts to define.

In *Miller v. United States*, an Illinois federal district court awarded damages to the plaintiff for injuries sustained on federal park land. The decision, in part, was based on the court’s interpretation of the exception for “willful or malicious” conduct in the Illinois recreational use statute. According to the court, a landowner’s failure to warn of a dangerous condition is “willful and malicious” when he could have discovered the dangerous condition by reasonable care. The *Miller* standard in essence reimposes the landowner’s common-law duty to warn, despite the existence of the recreational use statute.

Interpreting similar language, however, an Arkansas federal court reached a different conclusion. In *Mandel v. United States*, the court held that the statutory exception for “willful or malicious failure to guard or warn” applied in cases involving “actual or deliberate intention to harm or conduct which, if not intentional, shows an utter disregard for the safety of others.” Declining to impose the higher


Only two recreational use statutes contain no such exception. See *Idaho Code* § 35-1604 (Supp. 1983); Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 1533.18-.181 (Baldwin 1980).

121. Id. at 556.
123. 442 F. Supp. at 561.
124. See supra note 5 and accompanying text.
127. 545 F. Supp. at 911.
standard of care set out in Miller,\(^{128}\) the court held that in order to recover the plaintiff must show that the landowner engaged in conduct which would naturally or probably result in injury, that he knew or reasonably should have known that his conduct would result in injury, and that he continued his course of conduct in reckless disregard of the consequences.\(^{129}\) Other courts interpreting the "willful and wanton misconduct" exception have also required either intent to cause harm,\(^{130}\) or indifference to the harmful results of one's conduct.\(^{131}\)

A test which strikes an equitable balance between landowner and recreational entrant was expressed in McGruder v. Georgia Power Company.\(^{132}\) Under the McGruder test, a finding of willful failure to guard or warn would require proof that the owner had actual knowledge that his property was being used by recreational entrants, that a latent condition involving an unreasonable risk of death or serious bodily harm existed, and that the owner chose not to guard or warn.\(^{133}\) This standard is more stringent than the Miller test in that it excludes constructive knowledge or a duty to inspect, but less harsh than the tests that require actual design or intent to injure.\(^{134}\)

\(^{128}\) Id.  
\(^{129}\) Id. at 913. An amendment of the Arkansas recreational use statute in 1983 reinforces this court's interpretation of the exception. Ark. Stat. Ann. § 50-1106(a) (Supp. 1983) (immunity does not include "malicious, but not mere negligent, failure to guard or warn against an ultra-hazardous condition, structure, personal property, use or activity actually known to such owner to be dangerous").  
\(^{130}\) See, e.g., Rushing v. State, 381 So. 2d 1250, 1252 (La. Ct. App. 1980) (willful and wanton conduct is "purposeful and knowing conduct from which one can conclude that the owners of the premises had a conscious design to injure").  
\(^{131}\) See, e.g., Ducey v. United States, 523 F. Supp. 225, 230 (D. Nev. 1981) ("though having no intent to injure, must be conscious, from his knowledge of surrounding circumstances and existing conditions, that his conduct will naturally or probably result in injury"), aff'd in part, rev'd in part on other grounds, 713 F.2d 304 (1983); Johnson v. Stryker Corp., 70 Ill. App. 3d 717, 388 N.E.2d 932, 935 (1979) (court expressly rejects the Miller standard); Burnett v. City of Adrian, 414 Mich. 448, 326 N.W.2d 810, 812 (1982) (to qualify as willful and wanton the conduct complained of must show "an intent to harm or, if not that, such indifference to whether harm will result as to be the equivalent of a willingness that it does").  
\(^{133}\) Id. at 567.  
\(^{134}\) The McGruder test has since been codified in Alabama. See Ala. Code § 35-15-24 (Supp. 1983). The revised section reads:

Nothing in this article limits in any way legal liability which otherwise might exist when such owner has actual knowledge:

1. That the outdoor recreational land is being used for non-commercial recreational purposes;
2. That a condition, use, structure, or activity exists which involves an unreasonable risk of death or serious bodily harm;
3. That the condition, use, structure, or activity is not apparent to the person or persons using the outdoor recreational land; and
5. Effect on Attractive Nuisance Doctrine

At common law a special exception to the general duty of a landowner toward trespassers was formulated to increase the standard of care owed to trespassing children. This exception, called the attractive nuisance doctrine, recognized both the vulnerability of children to injury and the interest of society in the protection of their safety and welfare. The increase in a landowner's duty was premised on his superior ability to appreciate the risk of injury inherent in conditions or structures on his land and to anticipate that children might be drawn or "attracted" to them out of curiosity and a lack of caution. The Restatement of Torts later discarded the theory of attraction, instead basing liability on the foreseeability of injury to trespassing children when a dangerous condition was known to exist. In states which have enacted recreational use statutes, however, the doctrine may no longer be dispositive of issues of owner liability when children are injured by what would have been termed an attractive nuisance at common law.

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(4) That having this knowledge, the owner chooses not to guard or warn, in disregard of the possible consequences.

136. Id.
137. The term "attractive nuisance" originated in an early case stating the doctrine. Keffe v. Milwaukee & St. P. R.R., 21 Minn. 207 (1875).

In Oklahoma a landowner is subject to liability under the attractive nuisance doctrine if the instrumentality or condition causing injury is "a sufficient allurement as likely to attract children upon the premises, and . . . fraught with such danger to young children as reasonably to require that precautions be taken to prevent children from coming in conflict therewith." J.C. Penney Co. v. Clark, 366 P.2d 637, 639 (Okla. 1961); see also Shell Petroleum Co. v. Beers, 185 Okla. 331, --, 91 P.2d 777, 780 (1939) (attractive nuisance modifies landowner's duty to trespassers); Lone Star Gas Co. v. Parsons, 159 Okla. 52, --, 14 P.2d 369, 372 (1932) (doctrine is an exception to rule denying protection to trespassers).

138. A possessor of land is subject to liability for physical harm to children trespassing thereon caused by an artificial condition upon the land if

(a) the place where the condition exists is one upon which the possessor knows . . . that children are likely to trespass, and
(b) the condition is one of which the possessor knows . . . will involve an unreasonable risk of death or serious bodily harm . . . and
(c) the children because of their youth do not discover the condition or realize the risk involved in meddling with it or in coming within the area made dangerous by it, and
(d) the utility to the possessor of maintaining the condition and the burden of eliminating the danger are slight as compared with the risk to children involved, and
(e) the possessor fails to exercise reasonable care to eliminate the danger or otherwise to protect the children.


139. Some believed that recreational use statutes would have little effect on the attractive nuisance doctrine because the chance of child trespassers being injured on artificial conditions on rural land is slight. See Note, supra note 10, at 162. However, many of the reported cases constru-
A few states explicitly except the attractive nuisance doctrine from the scope of their recreational use statutes.140 Other statutes implicitly render the attractive nuisance doctrine inapplicable by defining the recreational entrant as "any individual, regardless of age, maturity, or experience."141 Under the remaining statutes, such as Oklahoma’s, in which the age of the entrant is not mentioned,142 it is up to the courts to decide whether the recreational use statute overrides the attractive nuisance doctrine when injured children are plaintiffs.


142. See OKLA. STAT. tit. 76, § 12 (1981) (applies to “any person” invited or permitted to use the land for recreational purposes).


144. Id. at —, 291 A.2d at 388; see also Smith v. Crown Zellerbach, Inc., 638 F.2d 883, 885.
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has been taken in Michigan, where the recreational use statute has been construed as a codification of common law.145 There the courts have been liberal in applying the statute, even when the injured plaintiffs have been children.146

The uneven application of recreational use statutes to minor plaintiffs has been noted.147 It has been suggested that the age of the plaintiff be considered as a factor in determining whether the landowner has been guilty of willful and wanton misconduct and is thus outside the scope of statutory immunity.148 It seems preferable, however, to deal specifically with minors in the statute itself. The legislation is clearly intended to apply to adults: it creates a new class of entrant distinct from trespasser, licensee, or invitee. The recreational entrant is defined by his intent to enter for a recreational purpose, and a fundamental requisite of the new status is the entrant’s willingness to accept responsibility for injury in exchange for right of entry. Trespassing children, however, are already a discrete class, given special treatment in accord with their special status. As one court noted, their activities usually are recreational149 and they are not capable of forming the intent to trade tort immunity for access to land. An explicit exclusion of the attractive nuisance doctrine in the recreational use statute would preserve the higher standard of care traditionally accorded trespassing children.

III. PROPOSAL FOR REVISION OF THE OKLAHOMA STATUTE

As the previous section indicates, the language of Oklahoma’s recreational use statute creates several areas of uncertainty of application. Revision of the statute might avert some of the problems of interpretation.
tion that have plagued courts in other states. In addition, the Oklahoma legislature should consider extending the protection of the act in a way which more clearly promulgates the policy upon which it is based.

A. Unimproved Land

Not only does Oklahoma’s limitation of “land” to that used primarily for farming or ranching pose a difficult question of the statute’s scope, this narrow definition of land may restrain the applicability of the legislation to the point of denying its usefulness. The fact that the statute has never been applied in a reported case evidences its limited effect. In order to better implement the purpose of recreational land use legislation, which is the encouragement of public use of private land for recreational purposes, Oklahoma should follow the lead of other states which have broadened the class of lands encompassed by their recreational use statutes.

This is not to suggest that the Oklahoma act should be made applicable to all types of land. The purpose of the act is not advanced by extending its coverage to developed, residential, or urban areas. Instead, the statute should be drafted to include all unimproved land. Such a provision is in keeping with both the policy and the logic underlying recreational use statutes. It would include land which, though not

150. OKLA. STAT. tit. 76, § 10(a) (1981).
151. See supra notes 52-53 and accompanying text.
152. See Diodato v. Camden Cty. Park Comm’n, 162 N.J. Super. 275, —, 392 A.2d 665, 670 (1978) (New Jersey statute should be given the broadest interpretation to include all lands susceptible to use for the recreational activities enumerated therein).
153. See supra notes 11-13 and accompanying text.
155. See Harrison v. Middlesex Water Co., 80 N.J. 391, —, 403 A.2d 910, 913 (1979) (“The use of the word “premises” creates some unsureness of the statute’s intended scope. The statutory ambiguity has been witnessed by the struggles of lower courts to fashion a sensible and consistent approach in applying the Act”).
used for farming or ranching, would be ideally suited to public recreational use. The activities listed in most recreational use statutes are of a type usually pursued on large, unimproved tracts of land. 

Further, the lack of improvements warns entrants that no precautions for safety have been taken, and, as a consequence, they are on notice that they are responsible for their own well being.

The term “unimproved” should be carefully defined to avoid interpretational problems and to further the statutory purpose. Exclusion of all land which has been altered by the landowner would unnecessarily restrict the scope of immunity. An improvement should instead be defined as an addition that has a recreational use or purpose, erected by the landowner for use by the public. This definition would cover owner-placed additions such as picnic facilities, swimming pools, golf courses, and race tracks, all of which indicate to the entrant that the area is a recreational facility for which some responsibility has been taken to insure safety to those who enter. The definition should not cover “improvements” such as an impromptu football field, snowmobile trail, or motorcycle trail carved out by users of the land. It would also exclude improvements that may have a recreational use but were placed by the owner for his own use such as fishing docks, sheds, or boat ramps, or additions such as a cornfield.

157. See supra note 15.
158. See Comment, Tort Liability and Recreational Use of Land, 28 BUFFALO L. REV. 767, 791 (1979) (to deny immunity whenever an owner improves his land is “an overly harsh and restrictive approach to recreational tort immunity”).
162. See, e.g., Michalovic, 79 A.D.2d at —, 436 N.Y.S.2d at 470.
168. See, e.g., Sea Fresh Frozen Prods. v. Abdin, 411 So. 2d 218 (Fla. 1982), rev'd Abdin v. Fischer, 374 So. 2d 1379 (Fla. 1979).
stock pond, or barn that make no implicit statement to the public that
the land is safe for recreational use.

B. Failure to Warn of a Known Dangerous Latent Condition

To protect recreational users from unnecessary risk of injury, the
Oklahoma statute should also be amended to preserve the landowner's
common law duty to warn of known dangerous conditions. An own-
er who knows of a dangerous condition on his property which is not
observable by an entrant should be held responsible for posting a warn-
ing before permitting others to enter for recreation. Otherwise, the
condition acquires the nature of a trap, for which landowners have
been held liable under even the most minimal standard of care. If
this duty seems burdensome to the owner, he has the option of not
permitting entry.

IV. CONCLUSION

Recreational use legislation serves the dual purpose of making pri-
ivate land available to the public and protecting the owner who permits
public use of his land. Such legislation, however, is an exception to the
general movement of the common law toward holding landowners re-
sponsible for the safety of people who come on their land. Inasmuch as
the recreational use statute holds owner responsibility in abatement, it
should be precisely drafted to fit the purpose for which it was enacted.

This Comment is offered in hope that it will alert practitioners to
the existence of the Oklahoma recreational use statute. In addition, it
is hoped that the legislature will note that revisions need to be made in
order to increase the usefulness of the statute and to avoid some of the
problems of interpretation that have arisen in other states.

Zoe A. Bullen

other grounds, 229 Ga. 811, 194 S.E.2d 440 (1972).

170. See supra note 5 and accompanying text.