

Great Basin National Park: Public Response to the Creation of a New National Park

Richard Schreyer, Department of Forest Resources, Utah State University, Logan, Utah 84322

Martha E. Lee, College of Forestry, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon 97331

Perry J. Brown, College of Forestry, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon 97331

Donald R. Field, College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 53706

INTRODUCTION

Great Basin National Park was dedicated in August, 1987, making it the newest National Park in the United States. The Park is located in eastern Nevada close to the Utah border. Prior to its dedication, the land had been reserved as Lehman Caves National Monument and as part of the Humboldt National Forest. Within recent history, creation of new National Parks has been a relatively infrequent event. National Parks are seen as areas of superlative and unique qualities. They are highly attractive tourist destinations. Thus, such a creation may change the nature and amount of visitation to the area. This in turn may have substantial impacts on the region in which the park is located. Further, such a designation may bring substantial changes to the management of the area itself. Creation of a new National Park will likely involve the transfer of lands from agencies with mandates oriented toward multiple use resource management to one dedicated to preservation. This indicates that use of the area will likely change qualitatively as well as quantitatively. The desires and preferences of the visiting public for opportunities and services will also likely be different.

It is important to be able to track such changes to assess the impact of Park designation and the nature of visitation resulting from the creation of a National Park. This impact may be in the form of changes in the types of persons who seek to use the area, as well as impacts on persons who had previously established a history of use of the area before it became a National Park.

In order to understand such impacts more clearly, a survey of visitors to the Park subsequent to designation was carried out. The purpose of the study was to develop a profile of visitors to the new Park, their perceptions, preferences for management, and history of use of the area. A related goal was to identify patterns of behaviour which could be considered general patterns of Park visitation, or "scripts." It is hypothesized that while visitors may go to different National Parks, their patterns of visitation for any given Park will be roughly similar. Certain visitors will camp while others will prefer the comfort of lodges, some will go on guided hikes, some will backpack, and others will only stop at the visitor centre and major points of attraction.

These different "scripts" will also likely be related to social norms of appropriate behaviours, and consequently will be tied to visitor attitudes concerning management and planning activities. Rather than merely surveying the "public," this may serve as an effective means of stratifying visitor responses to current and potential management strategies.

METHOD

Two questionnaires were distributed during the Summer of 1988, the first full use season following Park designation. The two questionnaires were parallel in terms of background information, but differed in questions concerning preferences for management actions and preferences for interpretive opportunities. Both questionnaires were randomly distributed throughout the use season. Visitors were requested to fill out the questionnaire and return it by mail. The questionnaire was distributed in a variety of locations, in order to reach visitors with differing patterns of use. Overall, 1,181 questionnaires were distributed. Two follow-ups were used, and 1,040 were returned, representing an 88% response rate.

RESULTS

Over two-thirds (68%) of visitors were travelling in a family group. Their origin, as might be expected, was predominantly from surrounding states --Utah (30%), Nevada (21%), and California (27%). While visitors were from proximate regions, only 30% had visited the Park before. Of those who had visited before, only a slight majority (54%) had been there more than once. Thus, the visiting population is proximate to the Park, but visitors do not have a lot of experience with it.

Many persons commented that they decided to come to "see what it was all about". This was somewhat surprising, in that Lehman Caves National Monument had been in existence for many years, and the Wheeler Peak area, which forms the core attraction for what had been U.S. Forest Service land, has been known for its ancient forest of bristlecone pine, including trees over three thousand years old.

Of those who visited the park, 42% had included it as part of a larger vacation, while 37% had planned it as a weekend trip. As the Park is within 200 miles of the Salt Lake City metropolitan area, its use as a weekend destination is practical. Even though the entire area is established as a National Park, Lehman Caves, which are in the immediate vicinity of the visitor centre, are the major attraction. Eighty-three percent of all visitors to the Park took the cave tour. However, 82% also engaged in sightseeing by auto, and 71% of visitors surveyed were camping. The distance from other major attractions tends to encourage persons to stay over during visitation.

The development of "scripts" was performed through cluster analysis of the activities that individuals engaged in while visiting the Park. People are free to engage in a range of recreational activities, and yet there appear to be consistent patterns that emerge in the ways in which people use a given environment. People who engage in certain activities are also more likely than not to engage in certain others as well. Several activity clusters emerged which are, of course, not mutually exclusive.

One group appeared to be a "traditional" park user group that engaged in camping, nature study, and sightseeing. Another group appeared to be "adventurists," in that they sought to backpack and go mountain climbing. A third group appeared to be attracted primarily by the cave, and engaged in the cave tour and cave exploration. There was a group who engaged in "traditional" interpretive activities, by attending formal talks, the visitor centre, and guided hikes. Still another group showed a more active, though traditional pattern of behaviour, in that they hiked the interpreted bristlecone pine trail, attended campfire talks, went on the candlelight tour of the caves, and also did some spelunking on their own.

DISCUSSION

Even though an area may be known as a recreation attraction for many years, the designation as National Park can be a strong draw. In the case of Great Basin's first use season, 70% were first time visitors, even though the large majority of these people live within the region in which the Park is located. Unfortunately, comparative statistics concerning repeat visitation prior to Park designation are not available, although Park staff had the impression that previous use involved a higher proportion of repeat visitors.

While there are many different opportunities for the pursuit of recreation activities within the Park, it appears that there is a consistency in the patterns of participation people adopt while visiting. People use parks in different ways, and this will likely affect their perceptions of problems, their need for information, and their preferences for management actions. Future research should be focused on the differential responses to park environments by persons who may be visiting the same place, but may be engaged in very different park visitation scripts.

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