

Wilderness Visitors, Experiences, and Visitor Management

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Wilderness areas are managed to protect their wilderness character, but they also provide opportunities for recreation use. Decades ago, relatively few people sought wilderness experiences, and management problems were few and far between. Today, there are many places where the demand for recreation use cannot be met without significant impact to wilderness ecosystems and experiences (Cole and others 1997). Managers must seek a balance between the provision of access for visitors and protection from the problems associated with that visitation. They are challenged to find management approaches that maintain the sense of freedom, solitude, spontaneity, risk, and challenge that are considered fundamental to wilderness experiences. The ideal wilderness setting, where visitors have free access, experience minimal behavioral restrictions, and find undisturbed and uncrowded conditions is not always attainable. Managers must often choose among these desirable attributes. Resulting decisions—to deny access, restrict behavior, or allow further degradation—are always controversial.

Wilderness managers must deal with the fact that the types of people who visit wilderness come with very different expectations, motivations, desires, and abilities (Manning 1999). Some come for a few hours, while others come for weeks. Some ride horses while others hike. Some come in large groups while others come alone. In many cases, these differences result in serious conflict among user groups. Some places in wilderness, particularly unusually attractive locations close to trailheads, within close proximity to metropolitan areas, are heavily visited; other places seldom receive any visitation. One style of management simply cannot fit all these different situations.

To effectively manage wilderness recreation, managers need information that science can provide about wilderness visitors. Fortunately, there is a strong tradition of research about wilderness visitors. In fact, this is the wilderness research topic that has received the most attention from scientists since the early 1960s. Numerous studies have been conducted about who wilderness visitors are, the types of trips they take in wilderness, their behavior, knowledge, and experience and trends in these characteristics over time. Other studies have examined the motivations and

preferences of visitors about desired wilderness experiences, as well as their evaluations of wilderness conditions and factors that influence the quality of experiences. Still others have examined how visitors and experiences have responded to changing wilderness conditions, particularly changes that have resulted from various management actions.

Another research tradition has been concerned with planning for and management of wilderness visitation. In the past, considerable attention was given to the concept of carrying capacity as a model for wilderness recreation planning. More recently interest has shifted to planning frameworks, such as Limits of Acceptable Change (McCool and Cole 1997), in which management strives to minimize the discrepancy between existing conditions and objectives, defined as measurable indicators and standards. This evolution has spurred increased interest in the development of indicators and standards for wilderness conditions. Monitoring and assessment procedures have become increasingly common. Among management approaches, education and the provision of information have received considerable attention. This level of interest probably reflects the potential for information to enrich experiences while simultaneously reducing both social and ecological impact problems (Roggenbuck 1992).

This volume is devoted to wilderness visitors and visitor management research. Visitor management must be based on more than information about visitors, however. The ecological effects of recreation use in wilderness must also be considered. Papers on this topic are included in a different volume in this proceedings—Wilderness Ecosystems, Threats and their Management.

The papers in this volume are organized into five sections. The first section contains three overview papers that span virtually the entire range of wilderness visitor research. Alan Watson describes how wilderness visitors have changed over time, with particular emphasis on his work and observations on the values of wilderness visitors and why values may have changed over time. Bob Manning and Dave Lime provide a broad overview of research on visitor experiences, with special emphasis on their carrying capacity and crowding research and its application to recreation management. Ed Krumpke discusses recreation planning models, with particular emphasis on experience with the application of Limits of Acceptable Change and related planning frameworks.

The second section in the volume contains a wide array of research papers on wilderness visitors. The diversity of papers included here are suggestive of the disparate topics that can provide useful insights about wilderness visitors. Some papers discuss the motivations, benefits, knowledge, acceptability judgments, and satisfaction of visitors, while others assess use levels, visitor behavior, displacement,

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conflict, and coping mechanisms. The third section is devoted to a set of research papers that are concerned with wilderness information and education. Visitor management is the topic of research papers included in the fourth section. Finally, the fifth section includes three papers that report on dialogue sessions that were held during the conference. These sessions dealt with wilderness education, group size issues and normative approaches to recreation management.

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