

Response to Conflict Among Wilderness Visitors

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Abstract—Previous conceptual efforts suggest that response to recreational conflict should be framed within an adapted stress-coping response model. An important element in understanding response to conflict is the context of the experience. A basic underlying component of the wilderness experience is privacy, which indicates wilderness visitors are interested in releasing—rather than creating—stress and avoiding distractions; therefore, they are likely to utilize distancing and emotion-focused processes in response to conflict. To explore this idea, over 1,000 visitors to an urban-proximate wilderness area were surveyed during the 1998 season. As expected, visitors utilized emotion- and distancing-focused responses when faced with conflict during their experience. Additional research that specifically examines desires for privacy and other potential factors is suggested.

Recreation-conflict research has focused on understanding the frequency of conflict occurrence and factors affecting visitor perception of conflict. Recent efforts have examined visitor responses to crowding (Hammitt and Patterson 1991; Kuentzel and Heberlein 1992; Robertson and Regula 1994) and conflict (Miller and McCool 1998; Schneider and Hammitt 1995b). Understanding response to conflict is essential because as conflict intensifies, so may coping responses, sanctions and retaliations. Efforts to understand the spectrum of visitor responses are in their infancy, as indicated by the paucity of studies, and further exploration and refinement appears warranted. The purpose of this study was to examine wilderness-visitor responses to conflict.

Recreation research typically identifies three possible visitor responses to recreation crowding: product shift, rationalization and displacement. *Product shift* occurs when the overall definition of the experience changes. Product shift involves both a process and an outcome: a process of change in individual definitions of experiences and outcome changes in overall definition of an area (Shelby and Heberlein 1986; Shelby and others 1988). *Rationalization* involves cognitive efforts to reevaluate the situation more positively. Rooted in cognitive-dissonance theory (Festinger 1957; Heider 1958), rationalization suggests that individuals have a tendency to maintain a state of cognitive consistency. *Displacement* occurs when users leave either the site or area due to an unacceptable change in the social, managerial or resource conditions (Schreyer 1979). Displacement not only requires unacceptable changes, but settings that can be substituted.

Other specific coping responses to recreation crowding have received limited attention by researchers. Williams and others (1991) investigated four responses that visitors used to avoid boats, while Hammitt and Patterson (1991) investigated the frequency with which backcountry visitors used 12 “physical and social” coping behaviors to avoid encounters with others. Kuentzel and Heberlein (1992) explored the recreation-coping phenomena, hypothesizing that increased crowding perceptions would lead from cognitive dissonance-reduction techniques (balancing ideas about what to expect and what actually happens) to intra-site displacement (changing locales within a site) and, finally, inter-site displacement (leaving a place altogether). However, the data did not support their hypotheses. Recreation research is moving toward an enhanced understanding of visitor response to crowding beyond product shift and displacement, but more extensive investigation is warranted due to its still limited nature.

Response to stress has been suggested as particularly applicable in outdoor recreation conflict because as its definition implies obstruction or interference, leading to tension and/or stress. Previous conceptual efforts suggest that response to recreation conflict should be framed within an adapted stress-coping response model (Schneider and Hammitt 1995a), and empirical efforts suggest the framework is suitable for outdoor recreation research (Miller and McCool 1998; Schneider and Hammitt 1995b).

Psychological stress research has been dominated by Folkman and Lazarus' (1980) “ways of coping” (WOC) checklist and questionnaire (WOCQ: 1988). The WOCQ is the result of extensive theoretical effort (Lazarus 1966, 1980; Lazarus and Folkman 1984) and empirical investigations (Pearlin and Schooler 1978; Folkman and Lazarus 1980, 1988). Two major coping processes are problem- and emotion-focused. Problem-focused efforts seek to change the person-environment relationship, while emotion-focused responses manage the emotions association with the stress themselves. Problem- and emotion-focused responses are used together and support each other. The 68-item WOCQ was adapted for use in recreation research (Miller and McCool 1998; Schneider and Hammitt 1995b; Schneider 1995) and shortened to reduce respondent workload and to eliminate seemingly inappropriate items: the modified version contained 22 of the original coping items and eight additional recreation-specific items.

An important element for understanding response to conflict is the context of the experience. Unfortunately, there remains a lack of information on contextual variables in the stress-coping area, despite its critical role. Common characteristics of the wilderness experience include solitude, freedom, naturalness, aesthetic appearance, spiritual values and a mystical dimension (Hendee and others 1978; Stankey and Schreyer 1987). Four important physical properties of

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wilderness include an absence of human impact, aspects of forest and vegetation, isolation or remoteness, and solitude (Kliskey and Kearsley 1993). Privacy is a broad, basic underlying component of the wilderness experience and desired solitude (Hammit and Brown 1984). Westin (1967) defines privacy as a claim of individuals or groups to determine for themselves when, how and to what extent information is communicated, while Altman (1975) suggests that privacy is an interpersonal boundary-control process that regulates social interaction. According to Westin (1967), privacy has four functions: personal autonomy, emotional release, self-evaluation and limited and protected communication. These privacy functions, particularly personal autonomy and protected communication, may influence how wilderness visitors respond to conflict. As wilderness visitors are interested in releasing—rather than creating—stress and avoiding distractions as central to their privacy, they are likely to utilize distancing processes. Further, any sort of imposition probably would be kept to one's self rather than shared with others, due to the protected communication. Also, as wilderness visitors are typically alone or in smaller groups, seeking social support and talking with others are not likely to be used. These suggestions are based on the assumption that privacy is a goal for wilderness visitors; however, the actual achievement of solitude warrants additional measurement (Watson and Williams 1995).

Method

To explore this idea, over 1,000 visitors to an urban-proximate wilderness area (30 minutes from a major urban area) in the American Southwest were surveyed during the peak 1998 season. Approximately 25,000 people annually visit the area, based on two trailhead registers and manager experience. Approximately 80-85% of people visit January through April, with 75% of use on weekends. Approximately 90% of visitors are hikers and about 10% are stock users. The amount and type of visitation appears similar to other wilderness areas (Hall and Shelby 1998; Roggenbuck and Lucas 1987). A respondent was systematically selected from every group exiting the trailhead.

The four-page on-site survey included questions and scales focused on visitor (a) stay, (b) activity, (c) conflict perception (dichotomous yes-no measure) and response (22-item coping scale), (d) personal characteristics and (e) socioeconomic and demographic information. A modified WOCQ (Folkman and Lazarus 1980, 1988; Lazarus and Folkman 1984) assessed visitor response to a specific conflict incident. Sixteen items from the most recent version of the WOCQ, ten emotion and six problem focused, formed the base instrument. Six researcher-generated recreation-coping responses completed the 22-item response list. Following Folkman and Lazarus (1985), a four-point scale ranging from "did not use" to "used a great deal" measured response use. The instrument was modified to fit each area and pretested at each location with only minimal changes needed.

Individual coping items were analyzed descriptively to assess the type and frequency of coping response to visitor conflict. Following Folkman and Lazarus (1985), the problem- and emotion-focused items were scaled and the reliability assessed with Cronbach's alpha. Also, three of the six recreation items were combined to form a displacement scale

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Results

Conflict was experienced by 11.8% of wilderness-survey respondents, typically due to litter or inconsiderate others. Respondents who experienced conflict in the wilderness were 59.5% male, with a mean age of 38 years. The majority (51.2%) held a college degree, and 31.2% had an advanced degree. The majority of respondents (87.9%) were Caucasian with an annual household income of \$50,000 or more (58.9%). Respondents reported that they were with either family (42.4%), friends (31.8%), alone (15.2%) or with a combination of friends and family (10.6%). The mean number of adults in the group was 2.76. The majority of respondents (58.1%) stayed between one and three hours. The most popular activities for the respondents at the wilderness area were hiking (81.2%) or backpacking (15%).

In the wilderness, 75% or more of respondents indicated that they followed established rules for trail etiquette (91.3%) and didn't let the conflict get to them (79.2%) (table 1). Over 50% of respondents utilized other distancing responses, such as going on as if nothing had happened (70.9%), trying to forget the whole thing (68.4%) and wishing the situation would go away or be over (65.7%). Less than one-third of respondents used problem-solving responses to contend with the conflict experienced (table 2).

Discussion

As expected, visitors used distancing-focused responses when faced with conflict during their recreation experience. Recreation-conflict incidents experienced may not merit the effort necessary to generate problem-solving responses. Alternatively, the privacy functions related to the wilderness experience may have influenced these responses.

Given the consistency of distancing responses to conflict in past (Schneider and Hammit 1995b) and present research, managers may take solace in knowing that visitors, to a point, do not appear deeply incensed by conflict as indicated by their distancing responses. The managers, in concert with their users, need to determine what is an acceptable percentage of visitors to experience conflict and at what point responses become unacceptable. Often, management techniques are reactive rather than proactive, so monitoring should be considered. For instance, the number of visitors who were intra-site displaced and who considered total displacement as the next alternative should serve as a warning signal. Ensuring available substitutes within a recreation area is one way to keep visitors in an area. However, reducing the source and incidence of conflict is preferred. For instance, litter was a major source of conflict; research indicates keeping an area clean significantly diminishes additional litter (Cialdini and others 1990) so area maintenance may reduce conflict.

An encouraging finding is that visitors frequently resort to following established rules for the area. Thus, effectively communicated etiquette and preferred behavior information

Table 1—Coping response item means and standard deviations (S.D.) for respondents who experienced conflict at wilderness area.

Coping strategy ^a	Wilderness area (n = 133)		
	Mean	S.D.	% use
Followed established rules for water behavior/trail etiquette (R) ^b	2.41	0.91	92.5
Talked to other members of my group about the incident (R)	1.28	1.15	64.2
Wished the situation would go away or be over with (E)	1.20	1.28	54.1
Thought about why the incident occurred (E)	1.16	1.03	65.7
Didn't let it get to me; refused to think about it too much (E)	1.32	0.98	79.2
Tried to forget the whole thing (E)	1.23	1.08	68.4
Went on as if nothing had happened (E)	1.33	1.11	70.9
Refused to get too serious about it (E)	1.19	1.07	66.3
Stood my ground and fought for what I wanted (P)	0.89	1.17	43.3
I tried to keep my feelings to myself (E)	0.81	1.03	47.5
I knew what had to be done so I doubled my efforts to make things work (P)	0.60	1.00	31.9
Expressed anger to the person who caused the incident (P)	0.38	0.76	23.8
I made a plan of action and followed it (P)	0.54	1.03	25.5
Tried not to burn my bridges (E)	0.67	1.08	33.0
Made light of the situation (E)	0.83	1.03	45.9
Kept others from knowing how bad things were (E)	0.67	0.96	39.8
Talked to area personnel about the incident (R)	0.44	0.87	24.2
Came up with a couple of different solutions (P)	0.56	0.98	29.8
Planned to avoid the area on my next visit (R)	0.41	0.82	24.0
Left the area and went to a different part of the area (R)	0.53	0.90	31.9
Tried to get the person responsible to change their mind (P)	0.36	0.85	16.8
Left the area altogether (R)	0.25	0.66	14.6

^aMeasured on a four point scale where 1 = did not use, 2 = used somewhat, 3 = used quite a bit, and 4 = used a great deal.

^bR denotes recreation coping strategy developed by researcher, E denotes emotion focused strategy as identified by Folkman and Lazarus (1980), and P denotes problem focused strategy as identified by Folkman and Lazarus (1980).

appears to guide visitors and should continue to be a dominant source of information and management implementation. Also, managers may consider innovative methods to communicate with visitors prior to their visit, using the Internet or other alternative sources (Freimund and Queen 1996). Particularly in urban-proximate wilderness areas, where Internet use may be prevalent, such alternative communication mediums are appealing.

The modified ways-of-coping questionnaire is a promising alternative to the measures currently employed to ascertain visitor response to conflict. Initial Cronbach reliability tests indicate the scales are acceptable, but additional work is required for further support. Although 50% of respondents

used eight of the responses, the relatively low utilization of some may be a challenge and a consideration for further scale refinement. Also, additional empirical efforts will assess whether more pronounced response differences to conflict exist, whether differentiated by conflict-incident characteristics or personal characteristics. Ipsative investigations, those that study an individual through various situations, might focus on following visitors through a variety of recreational and non-recreational activities and environments to explore the different coping mechanisms employed. While such research will reduce the sample size, the information attained may be quite helpful in understanding the relevance and magnitude of recreational conflict compared to other types of conflict as well as the strength of individual characteristics.

This research extends the understanding of conflict among wilderness visitors and begins a path toward future work. Additional research that specifically examines desires for privacy and other potential factors is suggested. Of particular interest in wilderness research may be the influence of group size and composition to coping resources. Whether visitors seek social support or keep information to themselves response to conflict seems quite relevant in wilderness conflict research considering the privacy notion. Also relevant is the recognition that wilderness users are not homogenous, and, therefore, comparison among wilderness users by activity style or experience is of interest, as is urban-proximate and urban-distant wilderness visitor responses to conflict. Given the six-fold increase in visitation to the National Wilderness Preservation System (Cole, 1996)

Table 2—Coping response items and scales for respondents who experienced conflict at wilderness area.

Scale/item	Mean	S.D.	Cronbach's alpha
Followed rules	2.41	0.910	
Talked to group	1.28	1.15	
Wished it would go away	1.20	1.28	
Thought about why it happened	1.16	1.03	
Distancing	1.18	0.806	0.82
Confrontive coping	0.83	0.712	0.61
Planful problem solving	0.54	0.788	0.73
Self-control	0.72	0.852	0.76
Talked to management	0.44	0.870	na
Displacement	0.037	0.588	0.65

and probable problem intensification, such research seems imminently important. In addition, while it is interesting to describe response to conflict, predictive studies are perhaps more useful for managers who attempt to circumvent increasingly negative situations. In addition, knowledge of the point at which distancing responses are ineffective remains uncertain, yet pertinent for effective management.

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