

Segmenting US Forest recreationists: river users, front country users and wilderness users

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Introduction

US Forest Service managers have recognised that systematic resource monitoring and management is needed to sustain high quality recreation opportunities and respond to the increasing and dynamic demand for both river and land-based recreational resources (Donnelly et al., 1992; Drogin et al., 1986; Stankey et al., 1985). To this end, a systematic and comprehensive system of measurements was developed to gather information on visitors' opinions about existing recreation services and an understanding of the effects of use patterns. The US Forest Service (USFS) recently implemented a new policy regarding recreational outfitter/guide (OG) special permit uses. The changes to outfitter and guiding directives were made for four specific reasons. These are, the desire to provide a suitable term length for ongoing business operations; to offer the same terms and conditions to any entity conducting ongoing business operations; to facilitate greater participation by youth, educational and religious groups, and to simplify the application process and administration of temporary use permits.

Research

A comprehensive study of US Forest Service recreationists in the US western states of Oregon, Washington, and Colorado was undertaken during the 2009 Summer recreation season (n=2947). This study methodology made use of on-site, face-to-face interviews with visitors to identify perceptions of crowding, acceptable number of times to see others, acceptable time to wait before starting their activity, reasons for recreating, quality of facilities and services, and how others impact their experience. The purpose of this analysis was to understand differences in recreation use patterns across three distinct types of visitors: River users (n=1226), Front Country users (n=1220), and Wilderness users (n=488). River users showed distinctly different use patterns than the two land-based user groups, although some differences were noted across all three groups of recreationists.

- Group characteristics: River users were younger, visited in larger groups, were more likely to be first time users and least likely to be overnight visitors, and were much more likely to be participating as part of a commercially outfitted/guided trip. Wilderness users spent more days annually where they were surveyed, and Front Country users spent more days recreating in general and reported longer duration trips.
- Main motivations: all users sought a traditional outdoor experience to get away from their routine, although River users were more motivated to participate in challenge and skill building experiences.
- Crowding/Conflict: Overall, about 40% of users saw about the number of visitors they expected, and users in all three groups reported a low level of crowding on their recreation trip. Wilderness users, however, reported a slightly higher degree of crowding, and reported stronger expectations than River or Front Country users. For the most part, user expectations did not exceed performance regarding crowding, conflict or waiting times (critical to River users).

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Conclusions

Understanding differences in user groups is important to recreation managers. Results from this study will provide forest natural resource managers with a profile of their visitors and express how crowding and conflicts may impact their experience. Segmentation of forest recreationists can assist managers in determining appropriate land use. Many agencies are now focusing on understanding social impact upon the biological resources on a forest. Understanding the various motivations and differing expectations of key forest users can assist managers to improve their experiences. This information can also be used to encourage visitors to recreate in areas that may be less environmentally sensitive, or less crowded. In addition, forest managers will have knowledge about the users who are (or are not) recreating on a forest or at a specific recreation area. This can facilitate connections with key user groups to encourage recreation participation. Segmentation is not limited to these three broad categories. Socio-demographic segmentation (gender, age, first time versus repeat visitor, local versus destination users and so forth) may all be examined to better understand use patterns of visitors. In closing, monitoring of use levels and visitor needs, expectations and perceptions should be continued as an investment into existing and future social conditions in US forests.

References

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