32 The infinite visit: A unifying temporal/spatial framework for visitor management

Jeffrey Skibins, East Carolina University, USA

As they are currently conceived, visitor use management frameworks for parks and protected areas (PPAs) are built upon false dichotomies and artificial constraints which preclude them from reaching their objectives. Current frameworks create artificial constraints around the discrete on-site visit rather than considering it part of a broader temporal-spatial recreation experience, which most recreation theories advocate. Failing to temporally-spatially contextualize beyond the on-site visit artificially constrains visitor engagement and relegates visitors to being viewed as a resource to be managed rather than as partners in mission. This creates false dichotomies around the questions of when a visit begins and ends, as well as the role of a visitor.

Another false dichotomy promulgated by current frameworks is the development of socio-ecological benchmarks. These are often developed via post-experience surveys, fail to address shifting baselines, and almost always exclude non-visitors. Furthermore, the development of norm curves, developed from an artificially constrained sample, fails to address dynamic conditions and is rooted in a 'less is more' philosophy. Implementation creates artificial dichotomies as benchmarks fail to be responsive to shifting use and changing populations. At the systems level, current frameworks fail to address the geopolitical and temporal-spatial cross-boundary nature of the visitor experience. This creates false dichotomies within the visitors' understanding and ability to create meaningful mental maps and artificially constrains systems level solutions as agencies cannot integrate extra-site visitor experiences.

In order to address these issues visitor management needs to evolve beyond single framework styles and embrace a multi-theoretical multi-tiered approach. Integrating diffusion theory (to address visitor behaviors) and the recreation opportunity spectrum (to address visitor motivations) under a multi-phasic leisure paradigm would allow PPAs to overcome geopolitical and temporal-spatial constraints. Adopting a multi-phasic leisure paradigm will also empower managers to explicitly recruit non-users, thus creating more robust samples for socio-ecological benchmarks. Fuzzy logic modeling will allow managers to evaluate and adapt benchmarks in a more iterative fashion that is more reflective of the visitor experience, include non-visitors, and create more realistic forecasts. Fuzzy logic modeling incorporates qualitative and quantitative data in a cohesive method and allows for non-participant and non-visitor inclusion. At the systems level, visitor use management is best addressed via a resilience-panarchy framework. From this viewpoint, PPAs are better strategically positioned to absorb and respond to visitor use. Multi-phasic leisure and fuzzy logic are ideal approaches to nest under a resilience/panarchy framework, as they allow for iterative feedback between the visitor experience, development of benchmarks, and resilient systems.

This presentation will propose creating an iterative cycle, driven at the systems level by a panarchy scaffold, and informed by nested tiers of temporally-spatially robust management frameworks, developed using fuzzy logic modeling, recreation opportunity spectrum, diffusion theory, and multi-phasic leisure. In so doing, a more holistic and responsive approach to visitor use management is generated. One that contextualizes the experience beyond the discrete on-site visit to be broadly inclusive of visitors' collective recreation experiences, adapts to shifting baselines, and explicitly requires pro-active engagement via electronic and social media platforms.

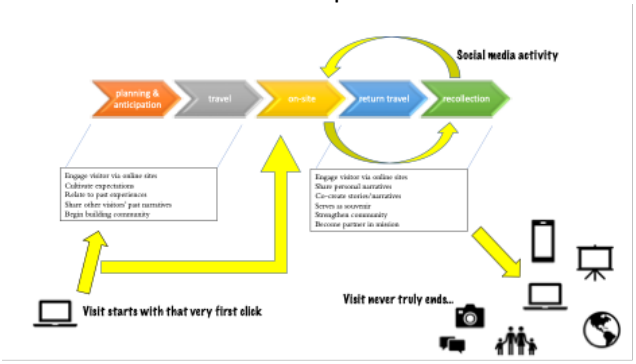

Figure 1. Iterative multi-phasic model of infinite visit

Management Implications

Many visitor management frameworks in use today are plagued by inefficiencies such as being limited to on-site visitor responses as well as being tempero-spatially static. Furthermore, they often fail to account for the role of the internet and social media. The 'Infinite Visit' paradigm may be capable of addressing these challenges, as it is a multi-dimensional, multi-theoretical framework for visitor management that is responsive to the influence of social media, inclusive of non-visitors, and able to respond to real-time changes.

The infinite visit represents a foundational shift in the role of the visitor and theoretical and practical applications of visitor management frameworks. An infinite visit framework proposes visitors become partners in mission with management agencies. In so doing, they become co-creators of conservation outcomes. This aligns with emerging data that support visitors prioritizing conservation over entertainment.

A multi-theoretical approach can better facilitate contextually appropriate visitor management interventions within a unified strategic conservation plan. This aligns with recent calls for non-linear multi-dimensional responses to visitor management. By incorporating fuzzy logic cognitive mapping, the infinite visit framework is also able to synthesize non-visitor responses, thus being responsive to future needs and shifting baselines. Finally, by scaffolding these approaches under a panarchy model, agencies will be able to create regional responses that span geo-political boundaries, thus better aligning to visitors' mental maps, and dispelling public mistrust.

References

Choe et al. (2017) state, "… that social media along with new mobile technology enables travelers to create new meanings of the tourism experience across all stages of travel" (p. 440). Social media and mobile technology also facilitate visitors sharing their meanings and immediately drawing on the experiences of others, in real time, thus blurring pre/post visit distinctions. Additionally, virtual visitation, via the internet, continues to blur the boundary of what constitutes an onsite visit. As such, visitor management paradigms need to become more responsive to these fluid boundaries. In so doing, PPAs will be better equipped to address conservation and visitation objectives.