

Understanding the recreational horseback riding experience: Motivations, conflict and response to conflict

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Recreational horseback riding is a significant and growing form of outdoor recreation both in the U.S. and Europe. Of the nearly 124,000 million miles of horse and pack stock trails in the U.S., 85% are managed at the federal level and 78% in 'natural settings' (AHC 2005). While 9 percent of the U.S. population aged 16 and older participates in horseback riding, the projected percentage growth is between 44 to 86 percent by 2060 (Cordell 2012). Given the size and potential growth of this recreational activity, attending to and understanding the horseback trail experience is important. However, despite increasing participation, little is known about recreational horseback trail riding. Thus, motivations for recreational experiences and conflicts within that experience were examined among riders in one U.S. state.

A random sample of 804 residents in one U.S. state who purchased a state horse trail pass received an eight page mail questionnaire and 60% responded. The questionnaire was developed based on previous research and included a variety of sections, including those on motivations and on conflict experiences. Specifically, respondents identified 1) the importance of 20 motivations, based on Driver's (1977) classic recreational experience preferences, and 2) how often they experienced twelve potential sources of conflict (Schneider 2000; Carothers et al. 2001). If respondents experienced conflict and if it interfered with the experience, the respondents were then asked additional questions regarding its source and how they responded to the conflict.

Mirroring national and international statistics, the majority of horseback trail riders were female, between the ages of 41-50 (55%), and white, non-Hispanic (90%). Of the 20 possible motivations provided for horseback riding, seven were important or very important to more than 75% of respondents, including to view scenery, be close to nature, get away from the usual demands of life, experience nature, explore and discover new things, relax physically, and be physically active. Conflict experiences among the majority of respondents included hearing others on the trail, litter, and evidence of off trail use. More than one-third indicated access was an issue. In response to the conflict, nearly half of the respondents talked to other members of their group about the incident and followed established rules of etiquette. Less than one-quarter of respondents cited they were displaced by the conflict.

The emphasis on the motivation to view scenery highlights the importance of visual resource management for all visitor types and eye levels. Considering the viewshed for users both walking and those elevated on horseback increases its importance with multiple-use trails. One potentially unexpected finding is that of the importance of physical activity as a motivation for the trail riders: nearly four

of five riders indicated physical activity was an important reason to ride. In the U.S., a 2002 Presidential Executive Order mandated federal land agencies promote the use of recreation for improved health (Exec. Order No. 13266) and a 2011 assessment of physical activity on forest lands has occurred (Kline et al. 2011). Both riders and managers can pay attention to this health benefit and seek resources to support it accordingly.

Half of the recreational horseback trail riders identified a conflict that interfered with their experience and indicated that it was stressful. Compared to other types of trail visitors, the reported conflict incidence and stress level is high for horseback trail riders (Schneider et al. 2009). While litter and off trail uses commonly incite conflict among recreationists, particularly unique among horseback riders was the frequency of hearing others on the trail. As such, enhancing awareness of the importance of quiet, as outlined in the Leave No Trace principles (<http://lnt.org/learn/7-principles>), and providing detailed actions how to maintain that quiet may be essential to protect and enhance horseback trail riding experiences, among other recreational experiences.

In response to conflict, one in four respondents indicated they moved within an area and planned to avoid the area during their next trip, and one in five were displaced by leaving the area altogether. Determining if the number of respondents displaced is acceptable is a management decision. Certainly adding the level of conflict and response to conflict to existing Limits of Acceptable Change processes is one management approach. Understanding visitors plan to avoid areas perhaps puts into new light the type and amount of information that can be shared about trail use. For example, providing information about regional riding opportunities can both disperse use and inform readers about alternative site choices.

This project brought forth data from one particular state to expand the limited information that currently exists about recreational horseback trail riders. Results indicate that opportunities to successfully manage for the recreational horseback trail rider include planning and developing trails with attention to viewsheds and soundscapes, providing timely and targeted educational messaging regarding the importance of trail etiquette, providing regional riding opportunities, as well as identifying and documenting physical activity as part of the experience.

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