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CHANGES IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS WITH WILDERNESS IN THE U.S.

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Background & Management Issues: Society at-large has undergone substantial changes since the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964. Humans are more removed from nature than ever before because of urbanization, a greater reliance on technology, and the switch to an “information economy.” Changes in society influence human attitudes about wild places. A better understanding of trends in wilderness visitors’ characteristics, values, and relationships with wilderness enables managers to make more informed decisions about wilderness management.

Project Objectives:

- ❖ To synthesize research conducted on trends in wilderness visitation and changes in visitor and trip characteristics.
- ❖ To further the understanding of the changing relationships visitors have with wilderness.

Project Description: Many studies of wilderness visitors have focused on a single locality for a discreet period of time. As a result, assessment of trends in visitation is not possible. Nevertheless, comparative studies exist from the Desolation, Shining Rock, Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA), and Eagle Cap Wildernesses; the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex (BMWC); and Great Smoky Mountain National Park (GSMNP). In most cases, the initial study was conducted in the 1960s or ‘70s, and the study repeated in the 1990s. The Eagle Cap studies differed substantially from the others, focusing on users’ wilderness values and attitudes instead of visitor and trip characteristics. Following is a synthesis of findings of the few comparative studies done to date.

Results:

Visitor and Trip Characteristics

Only a few clear, consistent trends were discernible. First, the average age of wilderness visitors increased, with the most common age

group at 35-40 years old in the recent studies. Second, the level of education among wilderness visitors increased more quickly than among the general population, with as many as 50% of visitors reporting some graduate level education in the later studies. Third, the proportion of female wilderness visitors also increased and showed indications of continuing to grow rapidly. Fourth, more visitors reported previous visits to other wildernesses. Fifth, visitors consistently reported litter as a less severe problem than did their predecessors in previous studies. Overall, trip characteristics showed little change. Trip quality ratings remained very high. Visitors were engaging in the same activities for the same periods of time as they did in wilderness 20 years ago.

Wilderness visitors today may be largely the same people who were wilderness visitors 20 or 30 years ago, but they are older, more educated, and more experienced. Alternatively, different people may be visiting wilderness today, but they have similar personal characteristics and take similar trips.

Potentially important differences between users with different levels of experience were observed. Users with a longer history of visiting a particular wilderness were more likely to perceive social and ecological resource impact problems. There were also differences in the extent of problems reported by day and overnight visitors.

Wilderness Values and Attitudes

The study in the Eagle Cap Wilderness showed substantial strengthening of visitors’ wilderness values and attitudes. Visitors in 1993 were far more concerned about human behavior in the wilderness than they were earlier. In 1965, 87% of the visitors surveyed thought it was okay to bury noncombustible trash in the wilderness. In 1993, only 9% expressed the same view. Similar shifts in attitude were found concerning radios in the wilderness, cutting wood for a campfire, and taking shortcuts.

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Visitors in 1993 also expressed a greater desire to let natural forces run their course in wilderness. Forty-four percent believed lightning-ignited fires should be allowed to burn in wilderness in 1993. In 1965, only 3% of visitors held the same belief. A similar change in support

for hands-off management of natural insect infestations occurred over the same time period. Visitors in 1993 showed a preference for a much more “wild” and “natural” wilderness than did visitors in 1965.

Management Implications:

- ❖ The apparent lack of consistent trends across wildernesses emphasizes the uniqueness of each and the dangers of generalizing in making management decisions.
- ❖ Managers may continue to see little shift in the sociodemographics of wilderness visitors, even as the sociodemographics of society at-large change.
- ❖ The characteristics of the user, especially experience level, and history of wilderness visitation may influence perceptions of resource and social conditions.
- ❖ Visitors' attitudes and values show greater propensity to change over time than their personal characteristics. These changes in wilderness users' values are an important consideration in determining the direction of wilderness management.
- ❖ The high standards wilderness visitors hold in regard to human behavior are in part attributable to educational efforts undertaken by land managers, such as Leave No Trace. Educational programs will be successful if formulated with visitor characteristics in mind.
- ❖ Recent societal trends (urbanization, increased reliance on technology, increased awareness of threats to the environment, the economic shift from dependence on commodity extraction) contribute to the comparatively high value recent wilderness visitors place on keeping wilderness as “natural” as possible. The primitive character of wilderness will likely become more important as these societal trends continue.

Publications / Products:

- ❖ Cole, David N.; Watson, Alan E.; Roggenbuck, Joseph W. 1995. Trends in wilderness visitors and visits: Boundary Waters Canoe Area, Shining Rock, and Desolation Wildernesses. Res. Pap. INT-RP-483. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Intermountain Forest and Range Experiment Station Res. Pap. INT-RP-483. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Intermountain Forest and Range Experiment Station. **Leopold Publication Number 273.** [Read the abstract here.](#)
- ❖ Watson, Alan E.; Cole, David N.; Roggenbuck, Joseph W. 1995. Trends in wilderness recreation use characteristics. In: Thompson, Jerrilyn Lavarre; Lime, David W.; Gartner, Bill; Sames, Wayne M., comps. Proceedings of the Fourth International Outdoor Recreation & Tourism Trends Symposium and the 1995 National Recreation Resources Planning Conference; 1995 May 14-17; St. Paul, MN. St. Paul, MN: The University of Minnesota 68-71pp. **Leopold Publication Number 275.** [Read it here!](#)
- ❖ Watson, Alan E.; Cronn, Richard. 1994. How previous experience relates to visitors' perceptions of wilderness conditions. *Trends* 31(3): 43-46. **Leopold Publication Number 256.** [Read the abstract here.](#)
- ❖ Watson, Alan E.; Hendee, John C.; Zaglauer, Hans P. 1996. Human values and codes of behavior: changes in Oregon's Eagle Cap Wilderness visitors and their attitudes. *Natural Areas Journal* 16(2): 89-93. **Leopold Publication Number 286.** [Read](#)

[the abstract here.](#)

- ❖ Watson, Alan E. 2000. Wilderness use in the year 2000: societal changes that influence human relationships with wilderness. In: Cole, David N.; McCool, Stephen F.; Borrie, William T.; O'Loughlin, Jennifer, comps. 2000. Wilderness science in a time of change conference—Volume 4: Wilderness visitors, experiences, and visitor management; 2000 May 23–27; Missoula, MT. Proceedings RMRS-P-15-VOL-4. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 53-60. **Leopold Publication Number 388.** [Read it here!](#)

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