



## ALDO LEOPOLD WILDERNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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### DAY USERS IN WILDERNESS: HOW DIFFERENT ARE THEY?



**Keywords:** day use, recreation management, visitor characteristics, visitor surveys, recreation management,

**Background & Management Issues:** Day use constitutes a large and growing share of total wilderness use. Evidence suggests that wilderness day use is increasing more rapidly than overnight use. While data are scarce, day users probably constitute a majority of the visitors to wilderness. Despite the already considerable, and increasing, importance of day use in wilderness, little attention has been paid to documenting and managing this use. For example, while the National Park Service's backcountry permit system is a reliable means of tracking overnight use, they have no means of counting day users. Day users have often been thought to be less appreciative of or knowledgeable about wilderness than are overnight users, although little empirical evidence exists to support this assertion. Clearly, more information is needed on the characteristics of wilderness day users.

#### **Project Objectives:**

- To develop a better understanding of the characteristics of wilderness day users as contrasted with overnight users.
- To explore the crowding perceptions and management preferences of day users.
- To evaluate the perception that day users are less experienced with and less attached to wilderness than are overnight users.

**Project Description:** Data analysis was completed using surveys administered in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in seven wildernesses of varying sizes and geographic locations ranging from North Carolina to California. While all but two of the surveys were conducted separately, the questionnaire content was similar among surveys. The responses of day and overnight users were compared, and the differences and similarities between the two groups reported in three general categories: trip characteristics, visitor characteristics, and visitor evaluations and preferences. It should be noted that day and overnight users were categorized according to their mode of use on the trip when they were surveyed, even though they may sometimes, or even primarily, engage in the other mode of use.

#### **Results:**

##### Trip Characteristics

Day trips are more concentrated spatially than overnight trips, and day users are more likely to be repeat visitors to a particular wilderness.

A day user is more likely to be hiking alone, in a smaller group, or with family members.

Day and overnight users do not differ in the activities they engage in or their motivation to make a trip. Both groups state that they value the "wilderness experience" they have during such trips.

##### Visitor Characteristics

The population of day users appears to be somewhat more diverse – with more females, more retirees, and fewer students – than the population of overnight users.

Day users typically consider wilderness to be important, and have as much experience with and knowledge of wilderness, as did overnight users.

Demographically day and overnight use groups are very similar – both are disproportionately highly educated, relatively well-off financially, and drawn primarily from an urban population.

The similarity in personal characteristics among day and overnight users suggests that in large

part the two groups are really one and the same - that most wilderness users engage in both day and overnight trips.

#### Visitor Evaluations and Preferences

- ✓ Day users are more supportive of trailside conveniences such as bridges and interpretive signs, impact-reducing facilities such as outhouses, and use restrictions at destination areas.
- ✓ At least in some wildernesses, overnight

- ✓ users are more likely than day users to be critical of crowded conditions and human impacts. This is attributed to a number of factors, including higher expectations, more stringent personal evaluative standards, being more likely to notice human impacts, and exposure to greater impacts.
- ✓ There is little difference between the two groups in their support for a wide range of management actions, including use limitations or restoring natural fire.

#### **Management Implications:**

- ❖ Day users and overnight users are not profoundly different, perhaps because in many cases they are the same people. This finding suggests that there is little reason to alter management specifically to target the day user.
- ❖ While most wilderness day users prefer to see fewer people, they are more tolerant of crowded conditions than overnight users. Day users prefer coping with encounters to having access restricted.
- ❖ In terms of past wilderness experience, support, and attachment, day users are not significantly different than overnight users. In some situations, however, it might be appropriate to limit day use to protect the experience of overnight users – not because day users value the wilderness experience less, but because their desired experience is less wilderness dependent than that of overnight users.

#### **Publications / Products:**

- ❖ Cole, David N. 2001. Day users in wilderness: How different are they? Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station Res. Pap. RMRS-RP-31. 29 p. **Leopold Publication Number 435.** [Read it here!](#)

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