



## ALDO LEOPOLD WILDERNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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### UNDERSTANDING WILDERNESS VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT GATES OF THE ARCTIC

**Keywords:** visitor perceptions, visitor experiences, wilderness experience, indicator-based planning

#### **Background & Management Issues:**

The quality of visitor experiences in wilderness is most often monitored through threats to experiences such as visitor density or encounter rates that commonly elicit consistent negative responses from visitors. These threats are used as surrogate measures for difficult to quantify attributes of wilderness, such as solitude, as prescribed by the Wilderness Act. Setting attributes have been widely adopted by wilderness managers as indicators of experience quality when using indicator-based planning frameworks.

However, research has often failed to uncover a predictable relationship between setting attributes and response from visitors. The “wilderness experience” is not necessarily a simple response to site attributes, but a window into visitors’ on-going constructions of how they view the world and their place in it. Specific places in wilderness have personal and cultural meanings for visitors that may not be captured in the monitoring of setting attributes. Furthermore, choosing appropriate indicators for a particular locality is problematic and indicators are often selected simply because they have been used elsewhere.

#### **Project Objectives:**

- ❖ To incorporate qualitative and quantitative approaches in an assessment of visitor experiences at Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve.
- ❖ To better understand the role of indicator-based planning frameworks with respect to protecting wilderness experience opportunities.



Photo: NWPS Database - Gates of the Arctic NP

#### **Project Description:**

This study consisted of two phases, both conducted at Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (GAAR), in Alaska. GAAR offers visitors a uniquely “pure” wilderness experience, with no maintained trails or campsites and no permanent NPS facilities on park lands. Primary access to the park is by air, and travel within the park is by foot, raft, canoe, or kayak.

During the qualitative first phase, visitors were interviewed immediately following trips in the park. Interviewees were selected to represent different combinations of exit location, guided/independent travelers, activity, and time of season, in an effort to capture a range of experiences. While addressing a standard set of topics, an open-ended interview approach allowed interviewees to describe experiences in their own words.

For Phase II, the most prevalent experience dimensions and factors of influence identified from the interviews were used to develop a questionnaire. The questionnaire was mailed to park visitors who had been previously contacted at park access points during the second summer of data collection.

During Phase II analyses, regression modeling was used to assess relationships between specific dimensions of visitor experience and potential factors of influence. Results from both phases were used to inform the discussion of potential experience indicators.

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### **Results:**

Phase I interview analyses revealed the extent to which wilderness experiences are complex, personal, subjective, and embedded in the personal context of visitors' lives. This deeper understanding of the range and depth of experiences visitors were receiving at GAAR guided Phase II.

Using terminology used by visitors in the Phase I interviews to describe their experiences at GAAR, five generalizable "experience dimensions" were identified. Three of these were experienced by over 90% of the respondents: the unique wilderness experience available at GAAR, freedom from restrictions and regulations

in the backcountry, and observing wildlife. Potential influences on these experience dimensions included encounters with other visitors, observations of behaviors of other groups, encounters with park employees, the presence of wildlife, and seeing or hearing bush planes.

Understanding the relationship between these potential influences and the defined experience dimensions can facilitate the selection of appropriate indicators of experience quality. Indicators that represent a larger group of factors of influence and have influence on important experience dimensions at GAAR would be the most relevant to use to guide monitoring and management decisions. This combination of qualitative data and the quantitative analysis allows managers to develop indicators relevant to visitor experiences at this park.

### **Management Implications:**

- ❖ Qualitative research on wilderness experiences can be used to understand the meanings that visitors associate with their experiences and how these experiences fit into the larger context of their lives.
- ❖ Quantitative assessments of wilderness experiences are useful in developing generalized, predictive knowledge for indicator-based planning frameworks.
- ❖ Experience dimensions that are important to visitors will vary depending on the wilderness and those who visit it. Indicators of experience quality relevant at one site may not be relevant at another.
- ❖ A combination of quantitative and qualitative assessments can be used to develop relevant and efficient indicators of visitor experience for a particular locality.
- ❖ The full story of a wilderness experience necessarily extends beyond the spatial and temporal

### **Publications / Products:**

- ❖ Glaspell, Brian. 2002. *Minding the Meaning of Wilderness: Investigating the Tensions and Complexities Inherent in Wilderness Visitors' Experience Narratives*. Missoula, MT: University of Montana. 249pp. Dissertation.
- ❖ Glaspell, Brian; Watson, Alan; Christensen, Neal. 2002. *Gates of the Arctic Recreation Visitor Study—Phase I*. (3 volumes). Unpublished report on file at: Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Missoula, MT. 257pp.
- ❖ Glaspell, Brian; Watson, Alan; Kneeshaw, Katie; Pendergrast, Don. 2003. *Selecting indicators and understanding their role in wilderness experience stewardship at Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve*. *George Wright Forum*. 20(3): 59-71. **Leopold Publication Number 482**.
- ❖ Kneeshaw, Katie; Watson, Alan; Christensen, Neal; Glaspell, Brian; Liljebblad, Adam. 2003. *Providing scientific input to indicators and standards: A focus on wilderness experience stewardship at Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve, Phase II Report*. Unpublished report on file at: Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Missoula, MT. 58pp.

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