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Recreation In Eastern Wilderness: Do We Know What The Visitors Expect?

by
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ABSTRACT--Increased wilderness acreage in the East means increased numbers of wilderness managers. A very relevant question is to ask what we know about the expectations of visitors to Eastern wilderness areas. While it appears that visitors to Eastern areas do not expect different physical and managerial attributes and psychological experiences, differences within the East related to unique land form and ecosystem types may need further investigation.

KEYWORDS: perceptions, expectations, motivations, physical attributes, social/psychological experiences, managerial attributes.

In 1984, there was a new surge in supply of classified wilderness. Over 8 million acres (3.2 million ha) were classified as wilderness in that one year alone (Davis 1984a). Teamed with this, there were five additions to the National Wild and Scenic River System (Davis 1984b).

These newly classified areas on the primitive end of the recreation spectrum were not confined to the West. The Au Sable/Pere Marquette National River was established in Michigan and over 500,000 acres (202,350 ha) of new wilderness were designated in the two eastern regions of the Forest Service.

Along with this sudden increase in wilderness acreage was an accompanying increase in the number of wilderness managers. The question we would like to address now is "Do we know what visitors to wilderness in the East really demand, or expect? What should we strive to be providing?" Special interest is in newly classified wilderness and newly charged wilderness managers. Managers need to know what is expected of them, and of the site, by the visitors to wilderness in the East.

MANAGERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WILDERNESS VISITORS' EXPECTATIONS

Hendee and Harris (1970) suggested that proper management of wilderness depends upon the ability of managers to perceive user preferences and to satisfy them. In their assessment of how well 56 Forest Service wilderness managers in Oregon and Washington could estimate users' opinions there appears some justification for current concerns about how accurately managers of new wilderness can anticipate visitor expectations. In this 1970 study, managers underestimated user support of "reasonable" measures of behavior control. Users also evaluated facility development (trail surfacing, fireplaces, tables, and outhouses) in the wilderness as much less desirable than managers expected them to. On many other issues, however, managers expected visitors to exhibit more purist ideals than they did. Exposure to purist philosophies of very vocal environmental groups may have contributed to managers overestimating the extent of purist ideals among typical users and underestimating those who had very neutral opinions on many management issues.

Peterson (1974) also found some differences between what wilderness managers and visitors thought were acceptable. In a comparison of responses from 17 Boundary Waters Canoe Area managers and 127 visitors it was found that managers may be more permissive of some activities that visitors reject as inappropriate. Visitors were more demanding of "natural purity" than managers were. The managers also perceived more diverse motivations for visitors coming to the BWCA than actually existed.

Wellman and others (1982) provided additional insight into how accurately managers can predict motivations of visitors to primitive recreation areas. In this case, 36 managers of Shenandoah backcountry and wilderness were relatively accurate in their estimations of visitor motivations. However, they significantly underestimated the importance of scenery and nature, physical exercise, security, meeting/observing new people, reflection on personal values, and creativity. Managers of this primitive recreation area, however, predicted visitor motivations much better than managers of a more developed recreation area (Wellman *et al.* 1982).

These findings suggest that managers of wilderness

must be very careful in assuming an understanding of what the visitors expect when they visit. While managers of some areas appear to be able to predict a substantial number of visitor motivations accurately, there remain some very important reasons for visiting that may be significantly underestimated.

EFFECTS OF WILDERNESS CLASSIFICATION ON DEMAND

It may be expected that newly classified wilderness will present a special problem to managers trying to predict visitor expectations. Recent research suggests that the commonly held belief that use and users change considerably when an area becomes designated "wilderness" may be an inaccurate belief.

Shomaker and Glasford (1982) found that roadless area and wilderness area visitors in northern Idaho and eastern Oregon were very similar in their preferences for various aspects of the primitive recreation experience. In this comparison of responses from 186 Eagle Cap Wilderness visitors and 126 Selkirk backcountry area visitors, it was found that visitors to these two areas, with somewhat different use classifications, had very similar attitudes towards appropriate development levels and interparty encounters. This suggests that what contributes to enjoyable recreation experiences for visitors of backcountry may not be significantly different from when it becomes wilderness. Or if changes occur, they may be only temporary.

McCool (1985) provided quantitative support for the premise that use may not always change as a result of a wilderness designation effect. In the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area and Wilderness Area, near Missoula, Montana, use levels and activity patterns were documented before and after wilderness designation. While not offering conclusive evidence, for at least one area in Montana, McCool has documented a lack of the suspected designation effect. Total numbers of users actually went down, though the characteristics of the users remained relatively the same with the exception of group size. After wilderness designation, average group size was significantly smaller.

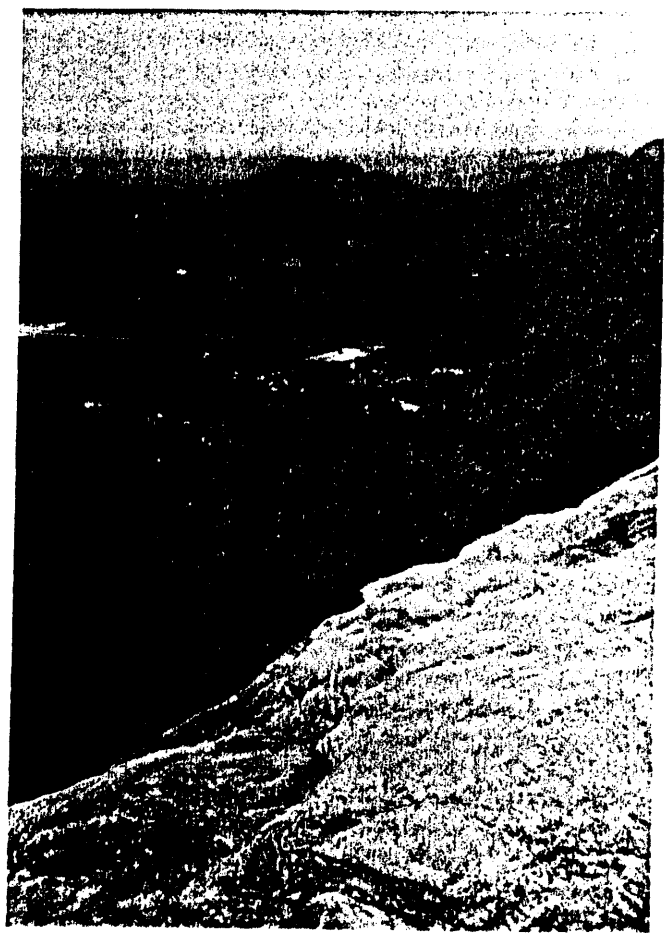
WHAT IS EXPECTED?

A substantial amount of research on what influences individuals to visit wilderness has occurred in the West. Concern about applicability of this research to perceived unique Eastern situations has led to comparable research in Eastern wilderness in recent years.

One might expect visitors of Eastern Wilderness to be in search of something somewhat different from visitors to areas in the West. These areas in the East are generally smaller, more impacted, closer to population centers, and more heavily used (Hendee 1980). Investigative work by Roggenbuck (1980) provided very convincing evidence that visitors to areas in the East are not seeking anything different than visitors to areas in the West. User preference has been investigated for both regions of the country with some consistent findings regarding preferences for physical and managerial attributes and social/psychological benefits attributed to a visit to an area.

Physical Attributes Expected

Wilderness visitors, East and West, expect, and receive satisfaction from, opportunities to view scenery (Shafer and Meitz 1969, Echelberger and Moeller 1977, Haas 1979, Lucas 1980, Roggenbuck 1980). Providing visitors to wilderness with opportunities to experience undisturbed nature, another expectation of the physical environment



(Glock and Selzynick 1962, Catton and Hendee 1968, Roggenbuck 1980), may be a difficult task for managers. Presence of litter, destruction of vegetation, and presence of fire rings detract from wilderness recreation experiences (Roggenbuck 1980). Principal elements of the physical environment which visitors value particularly high in a wilderness experience are water, wildlife, and panoramic views of nature (Roggenbuck 1980).

Social/Psychological Experiences Expected

A low number of social encounters is generally expected by wilderness visitors (Glock and Selzynick 1962,

Echelberger and Moeller 1977, Lucas 1980, Roggenbuck 1980, Roggenbuck *et al.* 1982). Social encounters at campsites have been found to be less acceptable than those along trails, for example, and encountering several small groups is more acceptable than encountering one very large group of hikers. Additional experiences commonly expected are escape (Glock and Selzynick 1962, Catton and Hendee 1968, Roggenbuck 1980) and exercise/physical fitness (Roggenbuck 1980). Risk, coping with the primitive environment, and social recognition are experiences not commonly demanded by wilderness visitors (Roggenbuck 1980).

Managerial Attributes Expected

In the past, wilderness visitors have indicated reluctance to support restrictive use or rationing of the wilderness resource (Catton and Hendee 1968, Lucas 1980, Roggenbuck *et al.* 1982). Support for low-keyed regulations and light handed approaches to solve overuse or physical impact problems, however, was apparent (Hay 1974, Lucas 1980, Roggenbuck *et al.* 1982). Visitors emphasize taking the minimum management action necessary to ensure an enduring resource.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE EAST-WEST DICHOTOMY

From these research reports it appears that across the National Wilderness Preservation System, both East and West, visitors are expecting similar physical and managerial attributes and social/psychological benefits. One note of caution surfaces in review of this literature to draw this conclusion. When we examine characteristics of the areas in which much of this previous wilderness visitor motivation research was conducted we find a predominance of a single type of study area. Of specific interest are those studies in which conclusions were made regarding a comparison of motivations of users of eastern and western "mountain wilderness" areas. Wilderness visitor motivation researchers may have unknowingly overlooked a more useful dichotomy (trichotomy?) of landform or ecosystem types in efforts to disprove the commonly discussed dichotomy of East and West.

Roggenbuck (1980) compared user expectations for visitors to Linville Gorge, Shining Rock, Joyce Kilmer/Slickrock, and Shenandoah Wilderness in the East to Indian Peaks Primitive Area in Montana, and Desolation Wilderness in California. Echelberger and Moeller (1977) cited user preferences for visitors to Cranberry Backcountry in the Appalachian region of the East. Comparing mountain wilderness visitors in the East to mountain wilderness visitors in the West to draw conclusions about similarities of preferences of Eastern and Western wilderness visitors, seems something like comparing the specific gravity of Eastern White Pine to that of Western White Pine in order to draw conclusions about similarities between all species of conifers, nationwide.

The predominance of data collection in mountain wilderness leads to hypotheses regarding similarity of expectations for visitors to mountain wilderness. Working within this particular landform, or ecosystem type, we might safely say that we have visitors desiring similar attributes and management practices in mountain wilderness in the East and the West.

Kerr (1980) pointed out the uniqueness of our wilderness units in the East by classifying them into ecosystem (landform) types. We have mountain, waterbased (lake and swamp), and island wilderness. We might even add to this new landform or ecosystem types with the new additions. There have been unique additions such as that in Texas which may not have been represented previously in the East. Previous East-West comparisons did not specifically compare expectations of visitors to all ecosystem types in the East to all ecosystem types in the West. We do not appear to even have done that locally in the East.

In the West we have mountain and desert wilderness. Beaulieu and Schreyer (1984) recently found that factors critical in selecting a specific wilderness environment for a visit are likely to vary depending upon, in part, the type of environment involved. While scenic views and escape are cited among reasons for visiting the western deserts, exploring, adventure, experiencing freedom, and just having fun are also frequently cited (Hillier 1982).

CONCLUSIONS

It appears likely that managers underestimate the acceptance by visitors for some behavior control measures. Managers may overestimate the predominance of purist ideals and they often cannot accurately anticipate visitor perception of appropriate activities in wilderness. We can also expect that designation of new wilderness will not create extreme changes in what motivates visitors to visit and activities in which they participate. In using previous research to anticipate what will be desired from specific management areas, there is some risk involved. In past comparisons of user demands from East to West, there has been a predominance of comparable areas used. Some of the unique areas which we have classified as wilderness in the East precludes the possibility of assuming we currently know what is demanded by visitors to these areas. In refuting between-region differences, Roggenbuck (1980) cited greater within-region differences than between-region differences. Comparing nonrepresentative units of a heterogeneous collection of wilderness areas provides little insight into demand for the range of wilderness areas existing in the East.

IMPLICATIONS

In contacts with key wilderness resource management personnel, previous comparisons of users of eastern and western areas are commonly cited. The belief now is that visitors to eastern and western wilderness are expecting similar types of physical and managerial attributes and personal experiences. In our efforts to explore similarities and differences along the East-West geographical location dichotomy, we may have slighted wilderness categorizations which will aid more in understanding and projecting changes in user expectations. In particular, the very unique ecosystem types and landforms of eastern wilderness may imply some differences in motivations, or demands, which we have not yet determined. A concentration on within-region differences may be a more productive pursuit in the future than between-region differences. Or, examination of between-region differences should include representation across the diversity of wilderness in the East and the West.

Current Forest Service planning philosophy is to provide diversity of recreation settings in order to meet a diversity of demands. This diversity of demands originates from recognition of very personalized definitions of recreation quality. The National Wilderness Preservation System has evolved into a set of very diverse physical settings. With this diversity of physical attributes we would expect to find a diversity of personal experiences expected and experienced and the possibility of diverse management practices. Research efforts toward a better understanding of motivations for visitation to unique eastern wilderness areas seems a necessary step in deciding upon appropriate management actions.

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