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WILDERNESS CAMPSITE CHOICES AND PERCEPTIONS OF RESOURCE IMPACTS

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Background & Management Issues:

Resource impacts from recreation are a continuing concern for wilderness managers. In addition to causing ecological damage, some studies suggest that recreation impacts detract from visitor experiences. Managers have adopted a variety of strategies to mitigate these campsite impacts, including restricting camping to designated sites. The extent to which users are bothered by recreation impacts remains largely unknown, however. Understanding visitors' perceptions of resource impacts and how those perceptions and other factors influence their campsite choices will aid managers in managing and reducing recreation impacts.

Project Objectives:

- ❖ To examine how visitor perceptions of ecological impacts affect campsite selection.
- ❖ To assess the degree to which impacted campsites affect wilderness camper experiences.
- ❖ To gauge differences in visitor and manager perceptions and evaluations of impacted campsites.

Project Description: The study took place at two forested, heavily used lakes in the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness, Oregon. Researchers conducted open-ended interviews to question groups at their chosen campsites about site selection and campsite conditions. Campsite condition was assessed quantitatively through measurements such as percent of vegetation cover loss and numbers of scarred trees. Camper evaluations were compared with data from site assessments.

Results:

Campsite Selection

Interviewees cited campsite location as the most frequent selection criteria. Of the 62% that mentioned "location" as a factor in selection, proximity to water was referenced most. Nearly as many groups (58%) said social conditions influenced their choice of a site. Most of these campers said they chose their site because it was unoccupied and offered some privacy from other campers.

Twenty-eight percent of the campers mentioned ecological impacts influencing their selection of a campsite. Most considered features that managers would interpret as negative (e.g., fire rings, lack of vegetation, trees with nails) to be site amenities. For example, some groups preferred campsites with large areas clear of vegetation for tent space. No group selected a site because it was lightly-impacted. Groups also mentioned scenic beauty (20%), such as a view of the mountains, and administration (14%), such as designated site policies, as influencing their campsite selection.

When asked directly whether the condition of the vegetation, soil, or trees at the site influenced their selection, 73% said it did not. Those who did consider the aforementioned conditions in site selection usually interpreted site impacts as amenities. Of those interviewed, 43% said they would not have picked their site if there were garbage, litter, or human waste around, and 33% said they would have looked for a different site if there were "too many people around."

Evaluation of Campsite Conditions

Site location, especially proximity to water, figured prominently in response to the question "What do you generally like about your campsite?" Other assets mentioned were scenery, privacy, and about a third of those interviewed mentioned fire rings, nails in trees, and other human-caused impacts as desirable. When asked what they didn't like about their campsite, most respondents said "nothing." The most common concern

Study Areas



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mentioned was a site's lack of privacy.

Visitor evaluations of campsite conditions showed little relationship to quantitative measurements of site conditions. Most groups did notice changes in vegetation due to impact; few respondents were aware of damage to soil or

trees. Most evaluated the condition of their campsite positively, even at heavily impacted sites. The few negative comments about recreation impacts seemed to refer to their effect on the ecosystem, not the site itself.

Management Implications:

- ❖ Location, especially a site's proximity to water, and site privacy appear to be the most important factors in site selection. Policies designed to manage impacts, such as restricting camping to designated sites, will generate higher levels of compliance if they take these desires into account.
- ❖ Comparing these results with similar research leads the authors' to speculate that campers are more likely to negatively evaluate ecological impacts in an abstract or hypothetical situation. On-site visitors are more likely to consider some of these impacts positively for their functional qualities, such as bare, un-vegetated ground.
- ❖ Visitors seem to react most adversely to impacts caused intentionally, such as litter or tree damage.
- ❖ Managers and visitors may perceive recreation-caused impacts differently. Most of the campsites chosen by surveyed campers would be considered unacceptable by managers, due to the damage to soil, trees, and/or vegetation. The visitors, however, were largely happy with the condition of these campsites.
- ❖ The survey results suggest that managers' attention to reducing impacts to enhance visitor experiences may be misplaced. There are other reasons to reduce recreation impacts, however, such as resource protection mandates, and reducing long-term costs.
- ❖ This study was conducted at two high-use destinations, only a few kilometers from trailhead parking. Visitor responses might differ substantially in a different situation, such as a remote area with lower use levels.

Publications / Products:

- ❖ Farrell, Tracy; Hall, Troy E.; White, Dave D. 2001. Wilderness campers' perception and evaluation of campsite impacts. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 33(3): 229-250. **Leopold Publication Number 459.** [Read the abstract here.](#)
- ❖ White, Dave D.; Hall, Troy E.; Farrell, Tracy A. 2001. Influence of ecological impacts and other campsite characteristics on wilderness visitors' campsite choices. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*. 19(2): 83-97. **Leopold Publication Number 441.** [Read the abstract here.](#)



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