

## OLDER ADULTS: A UNIQUE MARKET FOR THE COLUMBIA RIVER GORGE NATIONAL SCENIC AREA?

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**Abstract:** As the baby boomer cohort approaches middle age and beyond, the older population in the United States is increasing and will more than double by the year 2050. One of every five Americans will be senior citizens by then. The growing proportion of the senior population is not only a sizable potential market but also a promising target for outdoor park and recreation professionals. Previous literature has indicated that older Americans enjoy outdoor recreation activities and increasingly show interests in outdoor adventure experiences. They have the time, health and money to participate in leisure activities. This paper compares the activities, motives and attitudes of older visitors versus middle-aged and younger visitors in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Results show that senior visitors differ significantly from younger visitors in motivations for their visits and activity participation. Young visitors expressed significantly more interest in physical or social oriented activities during the visitation. Research limitations and implications for program planning and implementation are discussed.

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### Introduction

As our population ages, the number of adults age 55 and over has expanded to more than 58 million (US Bureau of Census, 2000). Moreover, the baby boomer cohort has reached middle age and

beyond. The older population in the United States is expected to more than double by the year 2050. One of every five Americans will be senior citizen by then. This cohort is healthier and better educated than previous generations. They are likely to be environmentalists and enjoy "gentle" outdoor activities (Dickinson and Edmondson, 1996). The growing proportion of the senior population is not only a sizable potential market but also a promising target for outdoor recreation and park professionals. Previous literature has indicated that older Americans enjoy outdoor recreation activities and increasingly show interests in outdoor adventure experiences (Sugerman, 2000). Compared with this cohort in the early 20th century, older adults will have the time, health and money to participate in leisure activities following their retirement (Greenberg, 1997). According to the Administration on Aging (2001), people who are 65 years old and over remaining in the labor force have dropped from sixty-seven percent in the early 1900s to sixteen percent of older adults in the 1990s. Simultaneously, their income grew for both men and women in the late 1990s, while the poverty rate for persons 65 and over dropped to a historic low of less than ten percent.

Older adults not only enjoy outdoor activities, they also tend to experience outdoor opportunities by traveling to other locations and stay away longer than other visitors (Shoemaker, 1989; Blazey, 1991). Seniors' participation patterns and unique socioeconomic characteristics have profound implications for park and recreation professionals. Understanding this demographic segment and their demands for outdoor recreational services will be beneficial to the administration of parks and recreation.

This paper compares the activities and motives of older and younger visitors in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGNSA). Our main objective is to determine what motives drive older visitors' coming to the CRGNSA and whether their needs are different from younger visitors participating in outdoor recreational activities.

### Methodology

The CRGNSA, located along the Columbia River and straddling the borders of Oregon and Washington, encompasses 80 miles of land and water, and covers about 292,500 acres (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Location of Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area

Source: USDA Forest Service, Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area

The CRGNSA features hundreds of natural wonders and attractions including 120 scenic waterfalls and trails. It is a unique and ideal place for participating in outdoor recreational activities. With its gorgeous natural wonders, CRGNSA has hosted thousands of domestic and international visitors every year, including many older adults.

Data were collected through an on-site survey in conjunction with the USDA Forest Service's National Visitor Use Monitoring program. Interviews were conducted with more than a thousand visitors at 31 recreational sites (Figure 2) within the CRGNSA during the period of January 1 to December 31, 2000. A total 1282 onsite surveys were completed, with a response rate of 95.5 percent. The ages of respondents ranged from 18 to 87, including 192 senior visitors 55 years old and over with a mean age of 64 years (SD = 6.8), 457 middle-age visitors who are 35-54 years old with a mean age of 43.8 years (SD = 5.46), and 260 younger visitors who are under 35 years old with a mean age of 27.5 years (SD = 4.16).

The survey instruments used in this study were designed by the USDA Forest Service's Southeast Research Station for nationwide application. There were three versions used to query visitors about their use patterns and demographics, satisfaction levels, and economic expenditures. In a supplemental version of the survey instrument, respondents were asked to rank a list of reasons for visiting using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important. Respondents were also asked what their primary activity was during their recreational visit and what

was the most important reason for visiting the CRGNSA (from four alternatives representing the place, activity, companions, and the special designation as a National Scenic Area).

One-way ANOVA was used to determine if differences exist among the senior visitors, the middle-aged and younger visitors in their motivations for visiting the CRGNSA and rates of using developed sites and undeveloped areas. Chi-square analysis was used to reveal if age was associated with primary activity participation and the major purpose for visiting the CRGNSA. A Geographic Information System was used to analyze and display the spatial distribution of visitors' demographic variables such as age in relation to selected recreational sites in the CRGNSA through manipulating point data and digitizing overlaid maps.

## Results

Results from the Chi-square analysis revealed significant differences among the three age groups in their major reason for visiting the CRGNSA ( $X^2=35.41, p<.001$ ). The majority of senior visitors (53%) visited the area "because it is the Columbia River Gorge," versus only 19% of younger visitors and 33% of middle-age visitors. Younger visitors were more likely to state that "it is a good place to do the outdoor activities I enjoy" (36% of younger versus 26% of middle-age visitors and only 9% of older visitors). There was relatively little difference between age segments in the proportion who reported "spending time with friends and family" and "enjoy the place itself" as their major purpose for visiting (Figure 3).

The comparison of primary activity participation in the CRGNSA followed a similar pattern. About three-fourths (74.3%) of older visitors reporting general viewing activities as their primary activity. In contrast, the majority (53.9%) of those younger than 35 years old reported some other recreation activities (e.g. hiking, biking, etc.) as their primary activity, versus 25.7% of senior visitors (Figure 4). The middle age visitors were more like the younger visitors, with a slight majority (55.1%) reporting viewing activities.

One-way analysis of variance was used to test whether statistically significant differences exist among age segments in motivations for visiting



**Table 1. — Mean Scores Comparison of Motivations, by Age Group**

Motivations	under 35	35-54 Yr. Old	55 and older	F	p
For challenge/sport	3.64	3.20	2.57	19.03	<.001
For family recreation	3.41	3.94	3.71	7.61	=.001
To be with Friends	3.81	3.64	3.44	3.03	<.05
For physical exercise	3.93	3.67	3.36	6.72	=.001
Skill development	3.24	2.89	2.51	8.11	<.001

**Table 2. — Mean Scores Comparison of Facility Use, by Age Group**

Type of Facility	under 35	35-54 Yr. Old	55 and older	F	p
Number of developed day-use sites visited	1.40	1.60	2.12	9.93	<.001
Number of days in undeveloped areas	.74	.59	.38	5.27	<.01

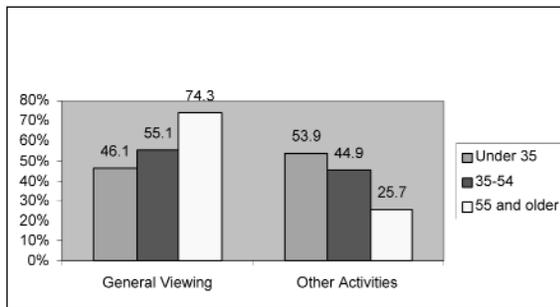


Figure 4. Primary Activity participation, by Age Group.  $\chi^2=47.45$ ,  $p < .001$

younger (1.40) visitors (Table 2). Conversely, the older visitors reported spending the least time in undeveloped areas (mean = .38 days) compared to middle-aged (.59) and younger (.74) visitors.

### Conclusions and Implications

This study compared activity participation and motivations for visiting among older, middle-aged, and younger visitors in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGNSA). There were significant age differences for most of the measured variables. Senior visitors placed less attention on physical and skill-oriented activities and motivations, compared with the younger-aged groups. Most senior visitors reported viewing or sightseeing as their primary activity while visiting. In contrast with younger visitors who favored more physical activities, senior visitors were more place-

oriented and much more likely to visit the area because of its designation as the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

The study also found that the senior visitors prefer to use developed outdoor recreational sites over undeveloped sites, which were more frequently chosen by younger visitors. Senior visitors' recreational participation patterns and facilities preferences demonstrate the need for improvement in outdoor recreation service planning.

With consideration of the increasing size of the senior market, and their growing interest in outdoor recreation, we suggest more research on marketing planning and program development for this growing outdoor recreation segment.

Appropriate recreational services provided by specifically-trained staff members for facilitating seniors' visitation are needed in the near future.

### Limitations

Limitations of the current study include that the research focused on only a few variables regarding the motivations and activity-involvement of older visitors. In practice, decision-making for travel destinations is a complicated process. Future research should examine a broader range of variables to investigate the needs and preferences of this emerging market.

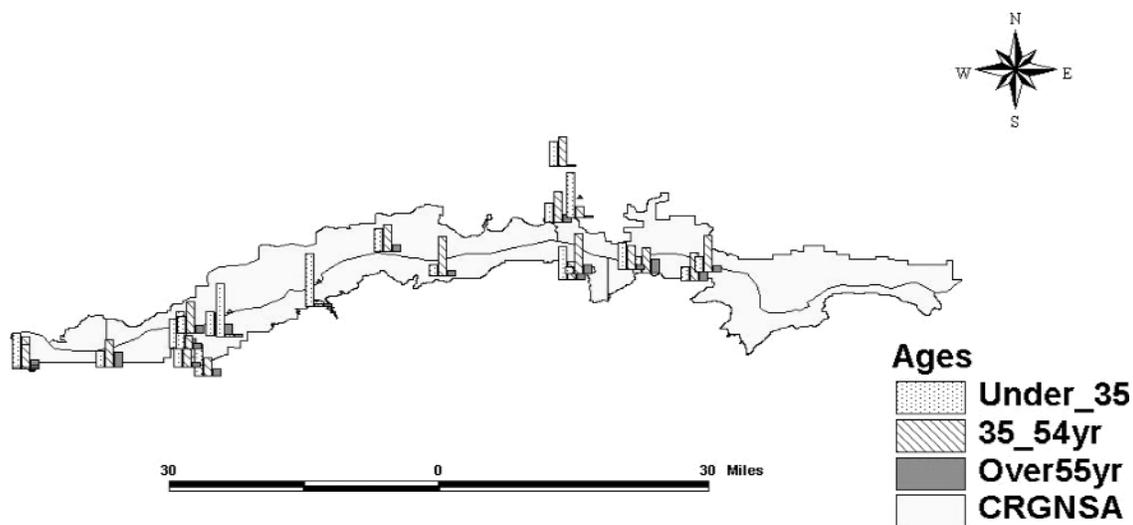


Figure 5. Geographical Distribution of Recreation Sites vs. Age Group

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