

Using Challenge Cost-Share Partnerships to Communicate with Ethnically Diverse Recreation Users in Southern California¹

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Abstract: Recreation managers have established more effective communication with dispersed recreation users of the Angeles National Forest in southern California, through the development and use of Challenge Cost-Share Partnerships with regional non-profit organizations. From 1988 to 1990, researchers conducted a series of surveys of recreation visitor populations in the heavily used dispersed recreation areas of San Gabriel Canyon, on the Mt. Baldy Ranger District. The findings revealed that most of these users only decided to come to the National Forest 24 hours or less before their arrival. This finding suggested that recreation use of the National Forest was mostly the result of spontaneous choice behavior and that communication with groups in advance would not be easy or certain. Thus, they would not have current information on changes in regulations or fire restrictions. Nearly 70 percent of the users surveyed were Hispanic, of which 81 percent listed Spanish as their primary language. The fact that many of these users were recent immigrants offered insight into their lack of familiarity with the programs and practices associated with an outdoor land ethic.

The Angeles National Forest (ANF) in southern California has become the quintessential urban National Forest. More than 15 million people reside within a 1-hour drive of the National Forest boundary--the skyscrapers of Los Angeles Civic Center are only 9 miles away. Forest managers serve an annual number of 30 to 35 million recreation visits.

Communicating complex messages about forest regulations, resource ethics, visitor safety, fire restrictions and recreation opportunities to the user population was perceived to be somewhat ineffective in the context of the tendency to use traditional information delivery strategies. This problem was particularly evident in communicating with dispersed recreation customers. In 1988, a study was begun to examine what could be done to improve the communication process between the USDA Forest Service district staff and seasonal visitors arriving in large numbers to dispersed areas of the Angeles National Forest.

This communication study had two primary objectives:

- to examine the decision-making process of the visitors in terms of planning their trip and to describe the trip characteristics of the dispersed site visitors; and
- to test the adequacy of a two-stage questionnaire in obtaining specific information about the communication networks of the new (non-traditional) visitors engaging in recreational activities at the dispersed sites.

Methods

In summer 1988 data was collected from more than 230 "non-traditional visitors" at nine sites in the Mt. Baldy Ranger District. Based upon field observations of district staff and a report by the Supervisor's Office (Hartley 1986), the data collected showed that a variety of activities and uses in specific areas were new to the lower canyon area and little was known about the customer. Data were collected from personal interviews and from the distribution of a self-administered questionnaire. The field investigators also completed a record about group characteristics and recorded comments provided by the user concerning how they each felt about the area, the facilities, and the general management. The procedures involved a stratified random sample of nine sites for the interview procedures. The dispersed sites where the visitors were contacted are shown in the sketch map of the Mt. Baldy District and the Arroyo Seco District (*fig. 1*).

Results

Only a portion of visitor responses are described herein and these results relate to their trip characteristics, trip-planning, and their preferred style of communication. Complete information pertaining to the observations that follow are reported in their entirety in Appendix A of the project technical report (Simcox and others 1989).

Trip Characteristics

The majority of the respondents (76 percent) indicated they spent approximately 1 hour or less to arrive at the area. The variation in travel time was noteworthy: the average was 62 minutes with a standard deviation of 50 minutes. This average travel time applies to an extensive area of the Los Angeles Basin; and the responses of visitors to the question of "residence" (ZIP codes) showed that the Mt. Baldy District serves a basin-wide market. The summer trips

¹ An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the Second Symposium on Social Aspects and Recreation Research, February 23-25, 1994, San Diego, California.

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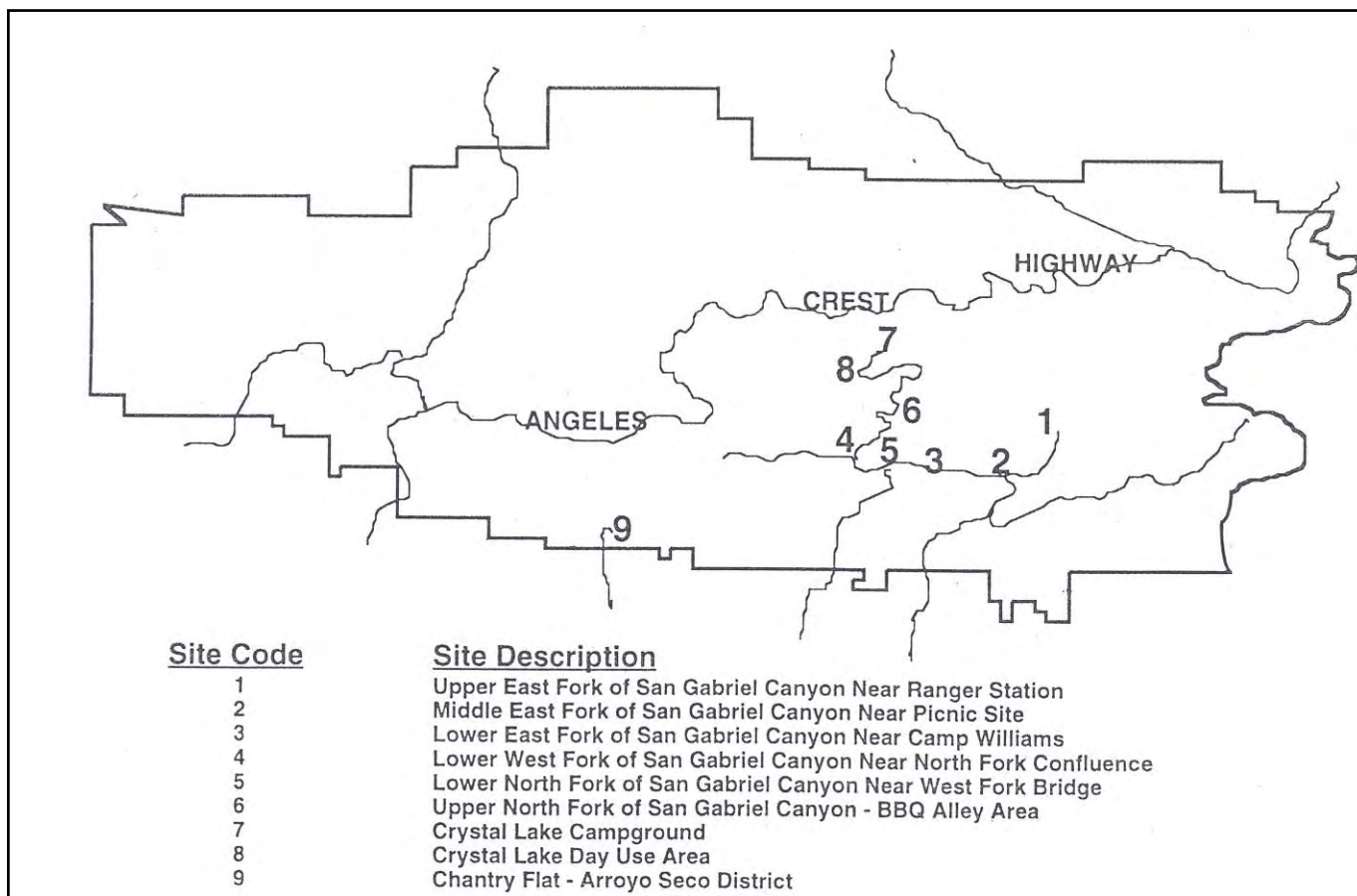


Figure 1—Angeles National Forest

involved large groups with an average size of eight individuals and a variation ranging from 1 to 50 individuals. Ten percent of the groups had from 16 to 50 individuals in their party.

Trip Planning

The results revealed very little advance planning for the trip—most of the visitors decided 24 hours or less before arriving to the area. This response was true for the majority of the respondents (70 percent) and made the task of broadcasting advance public notices more uncertain. Generally everyone in the group participated in the decision to visit the area (65 percent), but this was not a time-consuming decision because the site was the only place they considered (61 percent). The majority (76 percent) of the visitors were self-identified “new users” because they visited the recreation site either once the previous summer or perhaps the day they were interviewed.

Interpretation

The investigators concluded from these results that the new customers have different characteristics, use patterns, and preferences in comparison to the established use patterns. The new visitors were often “New Americans” in the context that they had immigrated to the United States. They tended

to prefer interpersonal oral messages to learn about the area and the opportunities available to them. The new visitors’ knowledge and perceptions were based upon communication with peers and friends and not the printed material published by the managing agency. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed first heard about San Gabriel Canyon from another person. Except for guidebooks, mass media were unimportant sources of information. This finding was consistent with previous studies that focused upon the communication networks of newly immigrated individuals. As stated by J.O. Yum (1983) “Newly immigrated individuals will seek out their own culture in a new country and will only expand their communication networks over a long period of time.” This meant that some of the visitors to the area, whose cultural experiences or values were based upon closely knit family systems, would tend to have a more limited interpersonal communication network. That is to say an interpersonal communication network which can be contrasted to what would be characteristic of a California-born Anglo; the kind of visitor who is most likely to have one of the widest range of communication networks. This difference was revealed in the responses of the U.S.-born visitors whom were more likely than other visitors to use guidebooks as a source of information about the area ($p < .03$).

Also, beyond the questions related to the communication networks, there were questions related to spatial patterns and timing of public messages. Because the socio-demographic variation was substantial among the culturally diverse visitors, targeting public announcements to specific local residential communities would be difficult—given the dispersed nature of the customer. Moreover, given the spontaneous nature of the visitors' trip-planning, the resource managers' ability to systematically contact them in advance and deliver accurate and timely messages about regulations, site closures, or use restrictions would be very limited. In addition, the recreation experience of the visitor was not tied to a specific entry point (e.g.-ORV area) nor an established check-in procedure (e.g.-wilderness permit), so the implementation of some form of on-site communication would have to be well-thought out.

Research Applications and Recommendations

The recreation leadership group on the Mt. Baldy Ranger District (MBRD) examined the research findings and recommendations generated by field investigation conducted by California State Polytechnic University-Pomona and California State University-Chico along with other reports produced by the research staff at the Pacific Southwest Research Station (PSW), USDA Forest Service.

The studies suggest that natural resource professionals need to listen more attentively to the public to clearly understand their wishes and values (Magill 1988). Listening to, and communicating with the dispersed recreation customers is a challenge. The Forest Service is effective in communicating and interpreting detailed, and sometimes complex, information to the public at "fixed" locations like information bulletin boards and Visitor Centers. The agency has no effective strategy for informing visitors in dispersed recreation settings. Mt. Baldy District staff evaluated a range of options to help educate the user audience such as:

- Use existing systems and infrastructure. The public can obtain forest information from knowledgeable staff at 15 "fixed" locations. This number could be increased to about 40 seasonally if all fire stations were staffed with information personnel.
- Design new curriculum for the public school systems. Adapt messages to existing programs such as Project Learning Tree.
- Utilize the existing news and information media networks.
- Improve information and interpretive signs, handouts, and brochures.
- Increase the use of volunteer and other human resource programs.
- Develop and expand the use of Challenge Cost-Share Partnerships.

A Thorny Problem

It was evident from the research that limiting the delivery of complex messages about regulations and environmental awareness to signs and bulletin boards was not going to be sufficient to result in compliant behaviors when the visitor profile revealed a bilingual audience with considerable variability in their literacy and their prior knowledge about the area. It was suggested that more emphasis be placed upon face-to-face interpersonal contacts in the recreational setting rather than off-site contacts. Nearly 70 percent of the users in San Gabriel Canyon made their decision to come to the forest within 24 hours of actually making their visit so that planning the outing was more a spontaneous event (Simcox and others 1989). On the other hand, it was impossible to implement face-to-face contact utilizing paid Forest Service employees for at least four reasons:

- *Bilingual Skills*—Only two employees in the field operation functions of law enforcement, fire prevention, and recreation had fluent bilingual skills (Spanish/English).
- *Shrinking Workforce*—In the early 1990's the Forest Service has downsized the workforce nationally so that few opportunities existed to fill vacant permanent or temporary positions with candidates who possessed bilingual skills.
- *Time Constraints*—Retraining existing employees to be articulate in a second language would be costly and time-consuming. Some indicated resistance to being so trained.
- *Declining Budget*—The MBRD was able to field only 14 employees at peak periods, because of budget and staffing limitations. Most of the district's time was consumed responding to critical incidents, or meeting the requirements of operations and management in developed recreation sites. Its staff was generally unavailable for work that involves public contacts with dispersed recreationists in the canyon bottoms and along streamsides and trails.

If the agency opted for training the existing workforce, the numbers of available employees were too few to effectively communicate with the numbers of users who need personal contact. An estimate of 10 to 15 bilingual employees would be needed during periods of high visitation to communicate messages about user safety, environmental awareness, and regulations. Considering the rates of returning visitor use, it was estimated that 1,000 to 2,000 contacts were needed per day during periods of high visitation.

Crafting a Solution

Because a skilled bilingual public contact staff will be slow to develop within the existing workforce, managers should consider opportunities outside the workforce.

In 1991, the MBRD began working with California Environmental Project (CEP), a regional non-profit organization that coordinates volunteer clean-up events and recycling efforts on private and public lands. CEP leaders

indicated that they were interested in expanding their relationship with the Forest Service.

We shared the research findings provided by PSW with CEP. Both CEP and the Forest Service had procedures for cleaning-up litter and graffiti on public lands. As cooperators, we recognized that cleaning-up after users was only a part of the solution. The many canyons and dispersed recreation areas of the Angeles National Forest (ANF) had been cleaned and re-cleaned hundreds of times over the past three decades. To continue this process without a more permanent objective was both endless and hopeless.

Thus, after several sessions with CEP and PSW staff, we recognized a unique opportunity to develop a strategy. CEP has also been involved in a separate cooperative relationship with the Los Angeles Conservation Corp (LACC), another regional non-profit organization, headquartered in South-Central Los Angeles. As part of the agreement, LACC provided paid crews—from the primarily Hispanic and African-American neighborhoods of the inner-city—for the conservation and clean-up efforts of CEP. Thus, LACC had an unlimited supply of enrollees readily available, offering a variety of linguistic skills from several ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

In addition, because the cooperative volunteer relationship between CEP and the MBRD was formalized as a Challenge Cost-Share Partnership, a new source for funding became available to the Forest Service through a separate agreement with the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation (LACPR). A portion of those funds have been made available for support to the partnership with CEP. Thus, as the Challenge partner, CEP could assume the role of clearinghouse for recruiting, training, equipping, organizing, scheduling, and supervision of volunteers and LACC members.

Genesis of the Eco-Teams

The first step was to acknowledge the premise that interpersonal communication appeared to be the most efficient solution to contact and educate dispersed users. From there, focus was placed upon the opportunity presented by the relationship between CEP and LACC.

In concept, we were creating a highly mobile group of environmental educators, who would individually possess the following capabilities and attributes:

- Broad knowledge and understanding of general forest information, rules and regulations, fire prevention, outdoor safety precautions, and ecological systems.
- Ability to relate to and communicate with the user groups predominant in a particular dispersed recreation area, by using bilingual skills.
- The desire to learn and train others.

A major emphasis for these contact teams would be to educate users about their individual and collective role in protecting the quality of the environment. The complex relationships between organisms (in this case, humans) and

the forest environment form a community, termed an *ecosystem*, from which the name *Eco-Teams* was derived.

The Results - A Success Story

The first *Eco-Teams* were recruited by CEP in the spring 1992 from the ranks of seasoned LACC crews. The Forest Service assisted CEP with the training and equipment. The recruits received 16 hours of intensive classroom training that included practice public contact scenarios. The trainees were then paired with experienced public contact staff to observe and assist with actual public contact work.

Beginning in late May 1992, as many as eight two-person *Eco-Teams* (ET) were deployed in San Gabriel Canyon. The ET's contacted thousands of recreationists, distributed various forms of bilingual information and passed out litter bags. The following is a partial list of the accomplishments of the ET's from May 1992 to October 1993:

- Over 40,000 public contacts made on three National Forest Ranger Districts.
- During 1992, a 48 percent increase in voluntary compliance with the San Gabriel Canyon Parking Fee Program.
- Forest users packing out an estimated five hundred Eco-Team supplied trash bags.
- A positive response from forest users, canyon businesses, residents and Forest Service staff.
- A visibly more attractive, less littered National Forest.

The Challenge Cost-Share Partnership between the Forest Service and CEP has been expanded to include LACC and every Ranger District of the Angeles National Forest. The total net value of the Partnership was \$57,000 in 1992, increasing to more than \$433,000 in 1993. Challenge contributions to the partnership are about 5:1 in comparison to those by the Forest Service.

The MBRD sought, and obtained, funding support for the ET's from other grant programs including the Natural Resource Conservation and Education Program, and the Urban Forest Demonstration Project.

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