

ASSESSING THE PUBLIC'S ATTITUDE TOWARD FEES AT WILDLAND RECREATION SITES

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Abstract

This study was conducted to assess the current attitudes of wildland recreation participants toward user fee programs and to identify social variables that could predict attitudes. A survey of 124 respondents was conducted in southern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia. Regression analysis indicated that most social and demographic variables are poor predictors of attitudes toward fees. Respondents held mixed attitudes toward fee programs but indicated increasing support as fees are identified as specific to a purpose or site.

1.0 Introduction

The Recreation Fee Demonstration Program was established in 1996 to “improve recreation opportunities to the American public” (Watson 1999). Since the program’s implementation, approximately 104 recreation areas in 34 states including West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee have taken part in the Fee Demo program as an effort to better their facilities. Managers charge user fees for things such as entry to the recreation area, parking, and day use of trails and facilities as a means to maintain or improve the existing condition of the recreation site. However since the Fee Demo program was applied, there has been an ongoing debate among researchers and the public as to the more appropriate reason why the Fee Demo program was established.

Research completed on the Recreation Fee Demonstration program suggests that recreation users are polarized regarding the program. Users who support the Fee Demo program feel that the fees can mean better facilities, while those who oppose the program feel that people who already live on a limited budget will not be able

to participate in the outdoor recreation activities that they enjoy the best. Users who oppose the Fee Demo program also believe that the program is double taxation and that the Fee Demo program is just a plan by the government to restrict land that rightfully belongs to the public.

2.0 Purpose Statement

The purpose of our research is to explore public acceptance of the Fee Demonstration Program in southern West Virginia and Southwest Virginia using different variables to measure overall acceptance to the fee program. The variables include, age, income, years of experience, and the distance an individual lives from a recreation area. Our theory is that older, lower income, more experienced people, and people who live close to a recreation area are less accepting of fees than people who have the opposite characteristics.

3.0 History of Recreation Fees

In the early development of parks and recreation, outdoor recreation was thought of as a public good, a good that everyone should be able to enjoy at no cost. However, as the amount of visitors increased and the funds allocated for outdoor recreation began to decrease (Krannich et. al 1999), many of the recreational facilities began to deteriorate due to overuse and lack of funding to make the appropriate repairs. In 1996, Congress passed the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program that enabled the National Parks Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (FS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service (FWS) to “test a variety new recreation user fees including general use fees and access and use fees for specific sites, facilities, and programs” (Krannich, et. al 1999). Under the Fee Demo program, land managers can use the fees as a means to make necessary repairs in their facility so that they meet the expectations of the visitor. Since the Fee Demo program was implemented, there have been mixed responses among the public as to who should pay and who should not.

4.0 Age and Years of Experience's Influence on Customary Pricing

In the book, *Financing, Managing and Marketing Recreation and Park Resources*, authors Dennis Howard and John Crompton, define customary pricing as “client groups expecting a certain price to be charged for particular services” (Howard and Crompton 1980), in which instance “people expect parks to be free” (Howard and Crompton, 1980). Howard and Crompton go on to say that during periods of rising costs, customary prices become problematic due to the fact that it becomes more difficult to keep the costs low enough to offer the same product at the regular prices (Howard and Crompton 1980). Therefore, if an individual in an older demographic accustomed to paying nothing when visiting a recreational site suddenly has to pay user fees, it is very likely that the individual will not be as accepting toward paying user fees as an individual of a younger demographic who is accustomed to paying fees for various reasons.

Individuals with a lower income will not be able to participate as much in outdoor recreation as opposed to individuals with a higher income. At national parks in the Pacific Coastal region, 62 percent of all visits are by people with a high to very high income (More 1999), while only six percent of visitors at the parks had a low income (More 1999).

Martin (1999) points out those local users who visit the recreation site more frequently will end up paying more fees than other users because the local users utilize the resources more often. This leads them to be less supportive of the Fee Demo program than other users (Williams, Vogt, and Vitterso 1999). Additional fees tend to reduce recreational visits among frequent users who live nearby the recreation site (Williams, Vogt, and Vitterso 1999). At the Desolation Wilderness Area in California, recreation users who live near the wilderness area are less supportive of the Fee Demo program than users who live farther away (Williams, Vogt, and Vitterso 1999). A possible reason for this is because local users are less likely to see positive benefits from the Fee Demo program (Williams Vogt and Vitterso 1999), and local users are the ones who “mainly suffer from living a tourist area” (Lee and Pearce 2002). Local recreation users also

believe that they should not have to pay user fees because they pay property taxes and many of them volunteer in the recreation areas, therefore doing their deed to better the recreation area.

5.0 Methods

We collected 124 surveys from individuals at Cascades falls in Pembroke, VA, part of the Washington-Jefferson National Forest, which is the closest Fee Demonstration program in this area, and, from faculty, staff, and students at Concord University. Once the surveys were collected, the data was entered into SPSS and analyzed.

6.0 Sample Description

For the sample, 124 surveys were collected and out of the 124 surveys, 46 respondents were male and 76 were female and two respondents did not reply. As for age, 64.5 percent were between the ages of 18-24, 4.8 percent were ages 25-31, 6.5 percent of respondents were 32-38 years of age, 5.6 percent were between the ages of 39-45, 9.7 percent were between the ages of 46-52 years, and 8.1 percent of respondents were ages 53 years or older. One participant, however, did not respond.

The one activity that respondents most commonly enjoyed in the outdoors was walking/hiking with 52.4 percent, the second popular choice was camping with 12.9 percent, and both fishing and scenic drives were selected by 7.3 percent as their most enjoyable activity. Respondents were also asked how many times per month they participated in outdoor activities. The average number of times participated was 6.1, with the numbers ranging from zero times per month to 30 times per month. Respondents were also asked how many years they have participated in outdoor activities. The average number of years they participated was 21.1 years, with the numbers ranging from one year to 60 years.

When respondents were asked how far they lived from an outdoor recreation area, most, about 58.9 percent stated they lived between zero to 10 miles away from an outdoor recreation area. In an ethnic breakdown, 7.3 percent were African American (black), 84.7 percent were Caucasian American (white), 0.8 percent were Native American, 4.8 percent selected other, and 2.4 percent did not respond.

Table 1.—Descriptives for fee attitudes

Question	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Do you support fees at public recreation sites	1.00	10.00	5.71	2.48
Would support fees more if they were for specific projects	3.00	10.00	7.45	1.90
Believe fees may be necessary to improve trails & facilities	1.00	10.00	7.66	1.94

7.0 Results

All of the attitude questions were based on a Likert scale with “1” representing no support of the position and “10” representing the strongest support for the position. In response to a global fee support question the sample mean was 5.71 with a standard deviation of 2.48. We had initially expected a more polarized distribution in this attitude. Consistent with previous studies, the public was more supportive of dedicated fees – in response to a question of supporting fees for specific projects the mean was 7.45 with a standard deviation of 1.9 (Table 1).

8.0 Discussion

The people who responded to this survey were generally young and considered outdoor recreation opportunities to be important. The sample population was not supportive of fees in general but became more supportive of fees dedicated to specific projects. Results indicate that respondents tend to believe that fees may often be necessary if improvements are to be made at recreation facilities. This seems to be consistent with attitudes found in other studies of recreation site fees. The regression model initially proposed was tested using stepwise multiple regression (Table 2). The goodness of fit between the model and the data was poor – the model predicting only 11 percent of the variance in attitudes toward fees. Three of the proposed independent variables (years of participation, income and proximity to the site) had no significant ability to predict attitudes toward fees. One independent variable (age) was a significant predictor, however, not in the way that we had initially

assumed. During the development of the model it was assumed that individuals who were older would remember when recreation site use was traditionally free and would be less supportive of fees. In fact, older participants proved to be more supportive of fees than younger participants. One of the purposes of this study was to examine some easily assessed demographic variables which could be used by site managers to predict public response to new or altered fee systems at recreation sites. The variables examined in this study are not good predictors of the public’s response to fees and the assumption that attitudes toward fees may be predicted well with demographic variables is, at best, questionable. Undoubtedly more complex instruments measuring a variety of demographic variables in conjunction with attitudinal measures would provide more satisfactory results. It would not, however, achieve our initial purpose of finding a simple tool for assessing the public’s attitude toward fees.

9.0 Citations

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Table 2.—Analysis of the regression model

Dependent Variable: Do you support charging user fees at recreation sites on public land?

Model 1	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of Estimate		
	.340	.116	.108	2.354		
ANOVA	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Regression
	78.52	1	78.52	14.16	.000	
Residual	598.96	108	5.56			
Total	677.49	109				
Significant Variable	B	Standard Error	Beta	t	Sig.	
Constant	4.66	.353	13.22	.000		
Age	.497	.132	.340	3.76	.000	
Excluded Variable	Beta In	t	Sig.			
Years of participation	.085	.615	.540			
Yearly income	-.001	-.009	.993			
Distance	-.037	-.401	.689			

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