

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN PARKS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Research dating back to the 1960s has reported under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in outdoor recreation. There are three hypotheses as to why racial and ethnic minorities are under-represented in parks and outdoor recreation areas. The marginality hypothesis purports that historic discrimination has left minorities without economic or educational resources to visit parks and related areas. The subculture hypothesis suggests that traditional recreation areas maybe outside the cultural value system of racial and ethnic minorities. The discrimination hypothesis suggests that overt and/or institutional discrimination may discourage minorities from visiting recreation areas. The discrimination hypothesis has been advanced relatively recently and has received little empirical testing. This study explores the discrimination hypothesis by measuring 1) how visitor perceptions of crowding are affected by the racial composition of other visitors encountered; and 2) visitor attitudes toward management actions designed to address under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in parks and recreation areas.

The research objectives outlined above were addressed through design of a survey questionnaire and a pilot administration of the survey to a sample of undergraduate students at the University of Vermont. The survey questionnaire included a series of 10 photographs illustrating a range of use densities along a

trail at Grand Canyon National Park. The photographs showed a varying a mix of white and black hikers. Respondents were asked to rate the acceptability of each photograph, and the resulting data were used to test for existence of racial discrimination. Other components of the questionnaire included respondent attitudes toward management actions designed to address under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in parks, and broader racially related attitudes and experiences. Study findings provide preliminary insight into the issue of racial discrimination in parks and outdoor recreation and provide a base for refining the study questionnaire in preparation for its administration to visitors at selected parks and outdoor recreation areas.

1.0 Introduction

According to the Census Bureau (2000), the United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Moreover, it is projected that by 2050, racial and ethnic minorities will account for almost half the U.S. population and nine out of every 10 people added to the population (Murdock 1995). This growing minority population has potentially important implications for national parks. Racial and ethnic minorities have traditionally been under-represented as visitors to national parks. For example, a recent survey of a representative sample of Americans found that 32 percent of whites had visited a national park in the last 2 years compared to only 13 percent of blacks (Solop et al. 2003). If racial/ethnic minority groups continue to be substantially underrepresented in the national parks, it will perpetuate an issue of social/environmental injustice and may threaten long term support for the national park system.

This report examines results from a study concerning racial and ethnic discrimination/bias among national park visitors. The study consisted of a survey that was administered in a class at the University of Vermont. This was a pilot test of the survey and the data collected will be used to refine the survey instrument and provide baseline data in preparation for administration of the survey to park and outdoor recreation area visitors.

2.0 Literature

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement increased visibility of and societal concern for injustices in traditional American institutions such as housing and education (Washburne 1978). Outdoor recreation also became an area of concern. Initial studies done by the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission found differences among black and white outdoor recreation patterns (Mueller and Gurin 1962). More recent research has continued to document such patterns, including under-representation of racial/ethnic minorities in national parks (Floyd 1999; Solop et al. 2003; West 1989).

Various studies have been conducted to explore potential reasons for under-representation of racial/ethnic minorities in national parks as well as determine barriers to racial/ethnic minority under-representation (Dwyer 1990; Dwyer 1992; Dwyer 1993; Hutchison 1987; West 1989). Research in the field has led to the development of three main hypotheses.

The first hypothesis is commonly referred to as the marginality hypothesis. This hypothesis attributes differences in racial/ethnic minority representation to socioeconomic factors such as limited resources and historical discrimination. The U.S. Census taken in 2000 examined income differences between blacks and whites. Whites make \$9,481 more per capita than blacks (U.S. Census 2000). This difference in per capita income can contribute to under-representation of blacks in national parks because they may have less discretionary income than whites. Socioeconomic differences can be attributed to lack of opportunity due to discrimination stemming from the United States' long-standing struggle with racial equality.

The second hypothesis is referred to as either the subcultural or ethnicity hypothesis. This hypothesis attributes differences in national park visitation to cultural norms, value systems, and social practices. For example, it is theorized that since African American culture is rooted in servitude to the land, blacks do not find refuge in parks and wilderness to the same extent as do whites (Meeker 1973). Furthermore, a survey of

Chicago residents found differences in preferences for developed sites and social interaction between blacks and whites that tends to support the subcultural/ethnicity hypothesis (Dwyer 1990).

The third hypothesis is referred to as the discrimination hypothesis. This hypothesis places importance on contemporary discrimination. Feeling discriminated against or fear of discrimination in a national park may cause racial/ethnic minorities to avoid visiting these areas (Dwyer 1992). This hypothesis needs more research on the types and ranges of discrimination and how discrimination affects recreation choices.

Related studies have been done to examine barriers to visitation to national parks among visitors and non-visitors for different racial/ethnic groups. For example, the recent survey of Americans conducted by Solop et al. (2003) found that the most common barriers to visitation among blacks and whites were expense of hotels, other costs of visiting parks, and lack of knowledge about parks. However, blacks reported these barriers in higher percentages than whites. Distance and transportation have also been suggested as important barriers in black visitation to national parks (Floyd 1999). Studies have shown that African Americans are less likely than whites to travel long distances and that the lack of accessible public transportation to national parks plays an important role in limiting visitation rates of racial/ethnic minorities (Dwyer 1990; Solop et al. 2003).

3.0 Objectives

The study examined in this paper consisted of a survey that was administered to undergraduate students in a class from the University of Vermont's Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources. This survey was administered as one step in a larger research project. The purpose of this step was to collect baseline data and to refine the survey instrument. The next step in the study is to administer the questionnaire to sample visitors in a variety of parks and outdoor recreation areas. This paper briefly describes the study methodology, selected study findings, and potential limitations and implications of the study.

4.0 Methodology

The study used two research techniques, visual research methods and survey research to determine respondents' feelings on the racial composition of park visitors and respondent characteristics that may have an affect on racial and ethnic discrimination. The questionnaire contained a set of photographs depicting a range of use levels and different racial compositions of visitors on a portion of trail in Grand Canyon National Park. The photographs were digitally altered to allow control over numbers and racial composition of visitors. The research design for constructing the series of study photographs is shown in Table 1. Visual research methods such as this have been used in crowding research (Manning & Freimund 2004 & Manning et al. 1996). Perceptions of crowding are influenced by many factors, one of which is characteristics of those encountered (Manning 1999). Characteristics of those encountered include a visitor's "perceptions of likeness". Perceptions of likeness can be influenced by group size, group type, mode of travel, and may include the race/ethnicity of those encountered. The survey was administered to students in a course on race and culture conducted in the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources. Seventy-three completed questionnaires were obtained.

5.0 Results

The survey asked respondents various questions about themselves. Given that the respondents were college students at the University of Vermont, there was relatively little diversity among them regarding characteristics potentially important to this study. There were no Hispanic or Latino respondents and they were predominantly white. Respondents were asked the racial makeup of their neighborhoods, schools, work and place of worship. Ninety-three percent of the respondents grew up in mostly to all-white neighborhoods and 99 percent currently live in mostly to all-white neighborhoods. A majority of respondents, 86 to 91 percent, attended mostly to all white junior high and high schools. None of the respondents live, attend church, or work in mostly to all-black environments.

The first question in the survey asked respondents to examine and evaluate each of the 10 study photographs

Table 1.—Research design for study photographs

Number of Visitors	Racial Mix of Visitors (White/Black)		
0	(0/0)		
4	(0/4)	(2/2)	(4/0)
8	(0/8)	(4/4)	(8/0)
12	(0/12)	(6/6)	(12/0)

and rate their "acceptability" on a scale of -4 (very unacceptable) to +4 (very acceptable). Figure 1 plots aggregate acceptability of each study photograph. Results indicate that respondents find photographs with increasing numbers of visitors to be less acceptable. However, there are virtually no differences in acceptability among the photographs that have the same number of visitors but different racial compositions. Later in the survey, respondents were asked to rate their "comfort level" with each study photograph on a scale of -4 (uncomfortable) to +4 (comfortable). Figure 2 shows the respondents' comfort level for all the study photographs. Results again indicate that respondents feel less comfortable with photographs that show increasing numbers of visitors. However, there are also some apparent differences in comfort level with photographs showing alternative racial compositions of visitors. For example, for the three photographs showing alternative racial composition of four visitors, respondents reported being less comfortable with the photograph showing all black visitors than with the photograph showing all white visitors. This pattern was consistent over all three sets of photographs showing a range of visitors. While some of the differences were not statistically significant, that outcome may be due to the relatively small sample size.

A second part of the questionnaire asked a series of questions about respondent knowledge of racial/ethnic minority under-representation in the national parks, the reasons for this under-representation, and support for or opposition to management actions designed to address this issue. The first question asked respondents if they thought racial/ethnic minority groups visited national parks more or less frequently than whites. Most respondents (58.3%) correctly thought that racial/ethnic minority groups visited national parks less frequently than whites. However, 19.4 percent of respondents thought that there was no difference in visitation rates

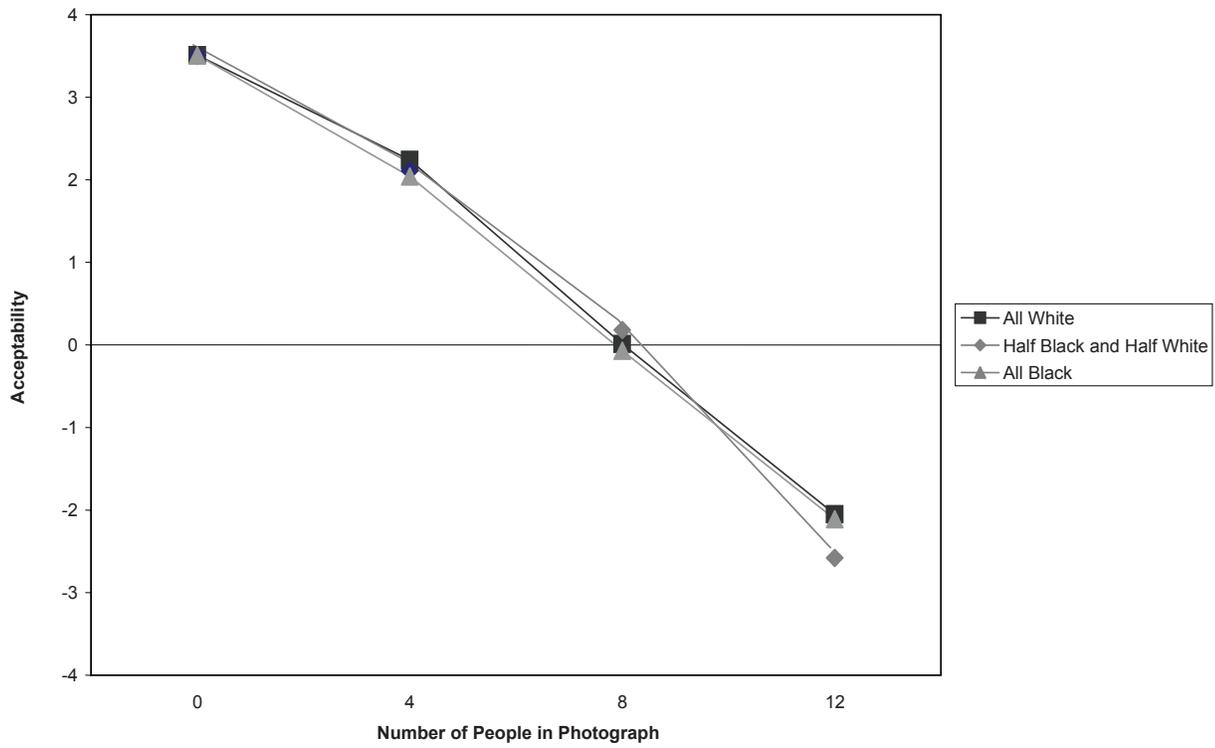


Figure 1.—Social norm curve depicting respondents' acceptability rating for each study photograph.

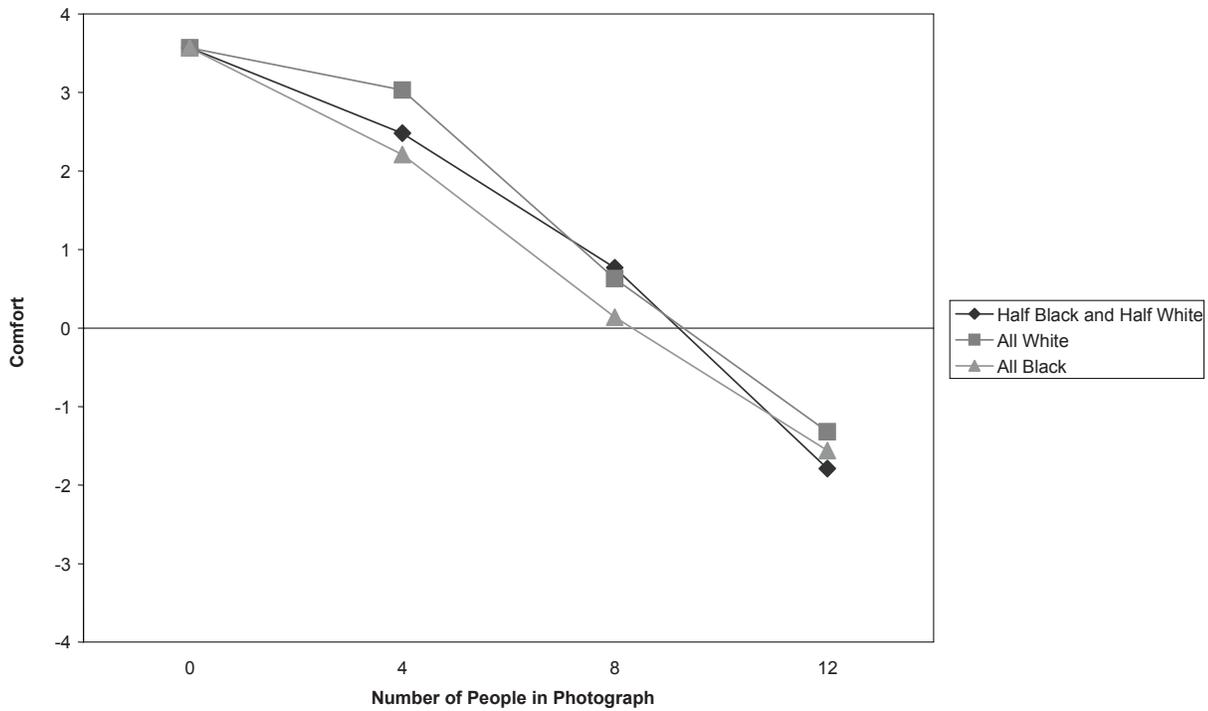


Figure 2.—Social norm curve depicting respondents' comfort level for each study photograph.

Table 2.—The extent to which respondents agree or disagreed with reasons for why racial/ethnic minorities may not visit national parks.

	Disagree (-2)	Somewhat disagree (-1)	Don't know/not sure (0)	Somewhat agree (1)	Agree (2)	Mean
a. National parks are located too far from racial/ethnic minority populations	26.4	15.3	22.2	29.2	6.9	-0.3
b. Entrance fees are too high and tend to discriminate against racial/ethnic minorities	55.6	18.1	16.7	9.7	0.0	-1.2
c. Visiting national parks is too expensive for racial/ethnic minorities	48.6	22.2	15.3	11.1	2.8	-1.0
d. Racial/ethnic minorities do not feel comfortable in national parks because of discrimination	29.2	18.1	38.9	12.5	1.4	-0.6
e. National parks do not address the history and culture of racial/ethnic minorities	26.4	18.1	30.6	16.7	8.3	-0.4

and an additional 22.2 percent reported that they simply did not know.

Respondents were also asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with reasons why racial/ethnic minorities may not visit national parks. A five-point response scale was used that ranged from -2 (disagree) to +2 (agree). The questionnaire provided five reasons: 1) national parks are located too far from racial/ethnic minority populations; 2) entrance fees are too high and tend to discriminate against racial/ethnic minorities; 3) visiting national parks is too expensive for racial/ethnic minorities; 4) racial/ethnic minorities do not feel comfortable in national parks because of discrimination; and 5) national parks do not address the history and culture of racial/ethnic minorities. Table 2 shows the study responses. A majority of respondents disagreed that entrance fees discouraged racial/ethnic minorities from visiting national parks and that visiting national parks is too expensive for racial/ethnic minorities. A plurality of respondents disagreed with the other three reasons included in the questionnaire.

Respondents were also asked the extent to which they supported potential management actions to attract more visitors from minority racial/ethnic groups. The survey included the following management actions: 1) establish national parks closer to minority racial/ethnic group populations; 2) lower entrance fees to national parks; 3) lower the costs of visiting national parks (e.g., lower prices for campgrounds, hotels); 4) hire more rangers/employees representing racial/ethnic minority groups; and 5) establish more parks that address the history and culture of racial/ethnic minority groups. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they supported or opposed each management action using a response scale of -2 (strongly oppose) to +2 (strongly support). Table 3 shows the responses to each management action. A majority of respondents supported all of the management actions with the exception of establishing national parks closer to racial/ethnic minority populations. However, there was a large degree of uncertainty over these management actions with a relatively substantial percentage of respondents reporting being “neutral” about all five management actions.

Table 3.—The extent to which respondents support potential management actions to attract more visitors from minority racial/ethnic groups.

	Strongly oppose (-2)	Oppose (-1)	Neutral (0)	Support (1)	Strongly support (2)	Mean
a. Establish national parks closer to minority racial/ethnic group populations	4.3	10.0	41.4	27.1	17.1	0.43
b. Lower entrance fees to national parks	5.7	15.7	21.4	34.3	22.9	0.53
c. Lower the costs of visiting national parks (e.g., lower prices for campgrounds, hotels)	5.7	8.6	27.1	44.3	14.3	0.53
d. Hire more rangers/employees representing racial/ethnic minority groups	1.4	2.9	30.0	47.1	18.6	0.79
e. Establish more parks that address the history and culture of racial/ethnic minority groups	1.4	5.7	20.0	41.4	31.4	0.96

6.0 Discussion

Study findings suggest some potential evidence of racial bias or discrimination in national parks. While there were no differences in the “acceptability” of study photographs based on the racial composition of visitors shown, there were some apparent differences in “comfort” ratings based on racial composition of visitors. In the case of the latter, study photographs showing all black visitors were rated lower than study photographs showing all white visitors. It is important to note that all respondents to the survey were white.

Study findings also suggest that most respondents were aware of the fact that national parks are visited less often by racial/ethnic minorities than by whites. However, a large minority of respondents were unaware of this issue. Many respondents were skeptical about the reasons presented in the questionnaire (and derived from the literature) to explain why racial/ethnic minorities are substantially under-represented in the national parks,

but most respondents generally supported proposed management actions designed to remedy this issue.

It should be emphasized that administration of this survey is considered a pilot project. The sample size is quite low which inhibits our ability to conduct appropriate statistical tests. Moreover, the sample is comprised of students, not park visitors. All respondents were white. Furthermore, respondents were students in a course focused on race and culture as it applies to environmental and natural resource issues which may have sensitized respondents to the issues explored in this study.

Clearly, more research is warranted on this topic. Our intention is to work with colleagues at the University of Florida and Arizona State University to arrange for administration of the survey to a more racially diverse group of students. After this initial phase of research, we would like to administer the survey to visitors at selected national parks.

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