

VISITORS

Wilderness Visitors in the 21st Century Diversity, Day Use, Perceptions and Preferences

BY DEBORAH J. CHAVEZ

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Two of the most important questions wilderness managers ask are: Has recreational use of individual wilderness areas increased in the past, and is it likely to increase in the future? According to Cole (1996), the answer to both questions appears to be “yes.” Other questions that managers should ask are: Who will visit wilderness areas in the 21st century? What will their recreation patterns be? And will their perceptions and preferences for wilderness be different from current visitors?

Diversity

Despite population growth in urban areas and increasing diversity nationwide, there appears to be little diversity among wilderness visitors in the United States. Frequent users are almost exclusively white (Chavez 1993a; Ewert 1998; Hendon 1991; Parker and Winter 1998), male (Chavez 1993a, 1993b; Ewert 1998), between 30 and 40 years of age on average (Chavez 1993a; Cole et al. 1997; Ewert 1998), well educated (Chavez 1993a, 1993b; Hendon 1991; Parker and Winter 1998; Roggenbuck and Watson 1989), and from urban areas (Roggenbuck and Watson 1989). According to Walker and Kiecolt (1995), the “semi-autonomous class” (educated white males) predominantly defines the meaning of wilderness, works to obtain designated wilderness,

and uses wilderness. However, they suggest that social class may not be the sole or even primary determinant of wilderness use, that gender, life-cycle stage, and ethnicity may affect wilderness use even more.

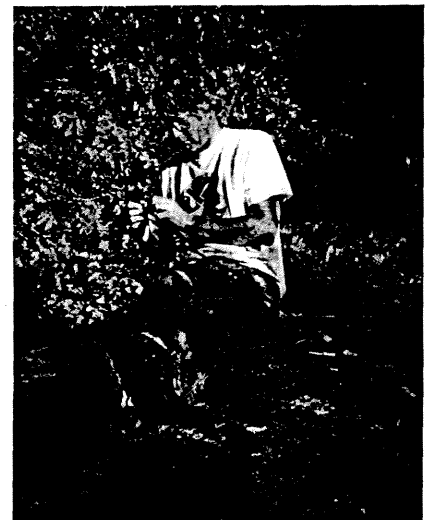
We know very little about wilderness visitors outside this “semi-autonomous class.” To learn more we need to examine what is known from other studies about racial and ethnic groups, people with disabilities, older people, women, and at-risk youth and apply those findings to wilderness use. For example, Hispanics (one of the fastest growing groups in the U.S.) prefer the social aspects of recreation (Hutchison 1987), tend to travel with family and friends (Chavez 1993b; Parker and Winter 1998), and wish to participate in more outdoor recreation activities (Chavez 1999), including those appropriate to wilderness such as horseback riding, camera safaris, and natural history hiking. However, there is no indication of demand for use of designated wilderness by people from diverse groups, thus use of wilderness could decrease in the future as demographics shift.

Day Use

While backpacking is expected to grow 155% by 2040 (Cordell et al. 1990), it is day-hiking that may define wilderness use in the 21st century. Several studies

noted a significant amount of day use (Chavez 1993b; Cole 1996; Cole et al. 1997; Cordell and others 1990; Ewert 1998; Roggenbuck and Watson 1989; Watson, Cole, and Roggenbuck 1995). But, will it continue? The literature suggests that time is a factor (Lucas and Stankey 1988). People want recreational destinations that are accessible and close to home (Chavez 1993b, 1999; Cole et al. 1997; Ewert 1998), so it appears we can expect this day-use trend to continue.

Why is this important? Day users are more likely to be repeat visitors than overnight campers (Chavez 1993b; Cole et al. 1997). They typically have visited more wilderness areas in their life, spent more days in wilderness during the past



Preparing to catch big northern pike in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Photo courtesy of John Roggenbuck.

year, and make more wilderness visits per year (Cole et al. 1997).

Perceptions and Preferences

Studies indicate that current wilderness visitors go backpacking, observe wildlife (Chavez 1993a), day-hike, and go sightseeing (Chavez 1993b). They prefer pristine areas with beautiful scenery, want to be close to nature, and desire an absence of human-made objects (Chavez 1993a; Ewert 1998). They want to slow down the mind, escape the routine, and have freedom from rules (Ewert 1998). Will this continue? As Noah benShea notes, "People climb mountains because mountains are there. As long as there are mountains, folks will want to climb them" (1999, p. 12).

Some visitors say they would like to have more information about nearby areas and other recreation sites (Chavez 1993b). Where do people get their information? Some seek family and friends, others may use secondary sources, including malls and the Internet. People may use resources like the American Wilderness Experience (located in the Ontario Mills Mall in Ontario, California) where they can "hike the redwood forest, trek the high Sierras, and come 'whisker to whisker' with native critters in the re-creation of their natural ecosystems" (American Wilderness Experience brochure 1996), all within the mall boundaries. They may "travel" to an electronic wilderness in cyberspace (Walker and Kiecolt 1995). However, "virtual reality may soon be a fact of life and still have nothing to do with the facts of life" (benShea 1999, p. 10).

We need to educate the country's diverse population about wilderness. Managers should provide staff training on diversity (Henderson 1997) and involve diverse participants in decisionmaking. The future of wilderness depends on it. **IJW**

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Many people prefer to travel to nearby destinations with family and friends. USDA Forest Service photo.