

RECREATION IN URBAN-PROXIMATE NATURAL AREAS

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Recreation in urban proximate wildland and wilderness areas and resulting management concerns and challenges have proven a fertile ground for social science research. As the demand for recreation opportunities adjacent to large urban centers has increased, so has the variety of recreational interests, patterns, and preferences, a reflection of the diverse recreationists visiting such areas.

Diversity of Recreationists

Of interest is the degree to which ethnic and racial diversity in the United States is reflected among recreationists, particularly in urban-proximate recreation areas. Studies of day use on the San Bernardino, Angeles, and Los Padres National Forests, each within a one- to two-hour drive for over one million people, provide an opportunity to examine this question. On-site, self-administered questionnaires were provided to recreationists at day-use areas on each of the forests. Of the 168 respondents on the Angeles National Forest, 51 percent identified themselves as Anglo American, 15 percent as Mexican American, 15 percent as Hispanic American, nine percent as Asian American, and fewer than five percent each identified themselves as Central American, African American, or Native American (Chavez, Winter, & Mainieri, 1994). The second most diverse group was found on the Los Padres National Forest where, of the 159 respondents, 64 percent were Anglo, 22 percent were Hispanic, and fewer than five percent each identified themselves as either Asian American, African American, Native American or European (Chavez, et al., 1995). The San Bernardino National Forest had slightly less diversity of recreationists with 65 percent Anglo, 10 percent Mexican American, 10 percent Hispanic American, and fewer than five percent each of Central American, Asian American, African American, and American Indian descent (Chavez & Mainieri, 1994).

1999. In *Outdoor Recreation in American Life: A National Assessment of Demand and Supply Trends*. H. Ken Cordell (ed.). Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing, p. 268-271.

Site Variations

Ethnic and racial diversity across the urban-proximate forests varies greatly between sites within a single forest. For example, at the Applewhite picnic area on the San Bernardino National Forest, more than three-quarters (78 percent) of the visitors were of Hispanic descent, while only seven percent were Anglo (Chavez & Winter, 1993). In contrast, respondents contacted at the Children's Forest were mostly Anglo (87 percent) (Chavez & Mainieri, 1994).

Similar types of sites may have a pattern of diversity, such as riparian or water-based recreation studied by Chavez (1992, 1993b), Chavez and Mainieri (1994), and Simcox and Pfister (1990). There is also some suggested variability around accessibility or proximity to the urban center, as seen in trailhead variations on the Angeles National Forest in Parker and Winter (1996). Less accessible wildernesses show very little ethnic and racial diversity (Chavez, 1993a; Winter, 1996). Recreation areas within the urban setting may offer even more ethnic and racial diversity, such as that found by Winter's study of recreationists' land ethics at state park, city park, and Forest Service sites. In this study, Anglos represented approximately 45 percent of the visitor population across all three site types. However, African Americans were only encountered at the city parks, and not at state park and Forest Service sites. Hispanics were the second largest majority at all three site types (Winter, 1996).

Variations can also be seasonal. At the Mecca Hills Recreation Area in the southern California desert, non-holiday visitors were primarily Anglo (64.1 percent), while holiday weekend visitors were primarily Hispanic (76.4 percent) (Chavez, Baas, & Winter, 1993). Each of these variations serves as a demonstration of the complexity of resource management and customer service. This complexity has importance in its implications for differences in perceptions of place, recreational activities, communication patterns and preferences, development preferences, and spill-over of city-based problems into the recreation setting. Each of these is addressed in the following sections. It is important to note, however, that variations in ethnicity and race are not the only socio-demographic considerations in customer service. Culture has a strong linkage to ethnicity and race, and many differences may be explained by culture rather than ethnicity or race. Geographic variation is another important consideration, in that recreation and its many corresponding variables may differ by region, state, or larger community. Finally, level of attachment or identification with culture and community may also serve to explain some of the variability seen within a specific subgroup. Degree of acculturation has been shown to be an important covariate in many ethnic and racial inquiries within the field of recreation (Baas, Ewert, & Chavez, 1993; Caro & Ewert, 1995; Simcox & Pfister, 1990).

Perceptions of Place

Two studies revealed the special meaning that recreational places can have to individuals from Central America (Carr & Chavez, 1993) and Mexico (Chavez, 1996b), wherein an area was cited as reminding recreationists of their homeland. A single place may be viewed in many different ways and have varying expectations for activities that should be acceptable there, as well as services that might be offered. For example, Taylor and Winter (1994) found that respondents to a mailed recreation survey disagreed about whether an area was wilderness, national park, national forest, or city park. These place perceptions were correlated with expected degrees of development, perceptions of acceptable on-site activities, and perceptions of acceptable penalties for depreciative acts. Race and ethnicity were important covariates in these place perception interactions. Variations in place perceptions were also reported by Absher and Winter (1997), although in-depth analyses of these data remain incomplete.

Place perceptions may have some shared meanings when it comes to behavioral conventions or norms, as discussed by Heywood (1993). In his exploration of behavioral expectations at the Applewhite picnic area on the San Bernardino National Forest, people passing through someone's immediate picnic area, playing loud music, and the number of times such potential intrusions could occur before being perceived as bothersome varied by acculturation level of the respondent. Overall, Spanish-speaking recreationists appeared more tolerant of people passing through their picnic site, for example, but if they were English speaking their attitudes more closely emulated Anglo respondents.

Recreational Activities

Recreational activity patterns and interests show similarities and differences among ethnic groups. While the majority of visitors to the Applewhite picnic area were there to picnic (79 percent) or relax (78 percent), how those activities were actually carried out varied (Chavez & Winter, 1993). An indicated interest

in group activities, reflecting the larger group sizes within which they have been found to recreate, was expressed at the Mecca Hills and at Applewhite (Chavez, et al., 1993; Chavez & Winter, 1993). Larger group size may be a reflection of cultural differences focusing greater importance on family and extended family (Chavez, 1996b; Chavez & Winter, 1994). While there are some significant differences in types of activities undertaken and those of interest, there are also many similarities (Chavez, 1995). An examination of the meaning of recreation itself reveals significant differences contrasting Anglos with Native Americans (McDonald & McAvoy, 1996).

Communication Patterns and Preferences

Diversity among recreation site visitors is represented in the primary languages they read and speak. While approximately half of the visitors to the Applewhite picnic area read English most of the time, approximately one third reported speaking English, Spanish, or English and Spanish each (Chavez & Winter, 1993). Such variations affect management approaches to communication through signing and face-to-face contacts. Cultural differences add further challenges to the agency-visitor interaction, and are more critical than basic translation issues (Magill, 1995). While a majority of visitors to an area tend to learn about it through informal sources, such as family or friends, this trend is even more true for Hispanics than Anglos (Chavez, et al., 1993, Parker & Winter, 1996), and Anglos are more likely to contact the managing agency for information than are Hispanics (Parker & Winter, 1996). Hispanics have demonstrated a greater interest in information than Anglos (Parker & Winter, 1996), particularly in printed form. Topics of information that the agency deems most important, such as area rules, regulations, and safety messages, appear to be of less interest than other topics. On the Los Padres National Forest, respondents were much more interested in the forest's natural features (79 percent), other sites that were similar (74 percent), and things to see and do at the site (71 percent) than they were in area rules and regulations (48 percent) or safety messages (51 percent) (Chavez, Winter, & Mainieri, 1995). Hispanic visitors may have more interest in information about area rules and regulations (Parker & Winter, 1996). The type of site where recreation is occurring may have some influence on information interest levels, however. At the Imperial Sand Dunes in the southern California desert, OHVs were more interested in safety (50.7 percent) and area rules and regulations (44.6 percent) than they were in things to see and do (30.5 percent) (Chavez, Winter, & Bass, 1993b).

Development Preferences

Variations in recreational patterns and activities, with Hispanics typically recreating in larger family groups, also play out in expressed preferences for degree of site development. At the Mecca Hills recreation area, Anglos indicated significantly greater importance of 10 of the 17 site items listed, including a picnic area, parking spaces, and toilets (Chavez, et al., 1993). A similar finding was revealed in the Applewhite study conducted by Chavez and Winter (1993), where the majority of recreationists were Hispanic and expressed a clear preference for the site rendering the most site development, approximating the characteristics of a regional park. A query of development preferences along the Sacramento River and Shasta Lake Recreation Areas (Winter, 1995) showed that very few additional site amenities were desired, and the majority visitor to these areas was Anglo (approximately 70 to 75 percent). When few additions are desired, water may still be listed as a desirable amenity, even by those expecting little else in site development (Chavez, et al., 1993b; Winter, 1995).

The Spill-Over of Urban Problems into the Recreational Setting

Urban-proximate recreation areas show signs of urban-spillover, affecting recreationists' experience on-site. In one study conducted by Taylor and Winter (1994), a majority of visitors to day use areas reported seeing or experiencing litter (83 percent), carvings on trees (75 percent), other people making loud noises (71 percent), or playing loud music (68 percent) and seeing graffiti on natural or built features (66 percent). The majority of visitors were most bothered by spray paint and litter (between 86 to 90 percent). Although many reported picking up litter, very few reported taking any other intervention steps to end depreciative activities on-site.

Conflict between groups is rarely reported (Chavez, 1993b; Winter, 1995), although multiple use of trails presents an exception, as in the case of conflicts between mountain bikers and other users (Chavez, 1996a). It may be that norms for an area, or behavioral conventions, preclude many of the potential conflicts

that could occur in an area (Heywood, 1993), or that individuals have already excluded themselves from recreating in an area because of the fear of conflict (McDonald & McAvoy, 1997).

Resulting Management Strategies

The diversity in ethnic, cultural, and recreational interest revealed in urban-proximate wildland areas has led to innovative management strategies. Forest Service managers are beginning to rely on collaborative efforts, or bridge-building methods, to ameliorate conflicts between various user groups (Chavez, 1996a). Communication complexities, as well as the desire to decrease environmentally depreciative acts, led resource managers to partner with the California Environmental Project to establish an on-site, face-to-face program involving urban youth as the messengers (Absher & Winter, 1997). Areas have been renovated, based on user interests and preferences collected through on-site studies (Chavez, Winter, & Larson, 1995). Diversity may add complexity to understanding the recreational experience and how to best serve customers, but it also provides an incredible learning environment that challenges us to take care in understanding the differences, similarities, and interests of our present and future customers.