

Project Summary

Rocky Mountains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit

Project Title: An Examination of Yellowstone National Park's Visitor Segments and a Predictive Analysis of National Park Support

Type of Project: Research
Discipline: Social
Funding Agency: National Park Service
Cooperators: University of Montana
Effective Dates: 7/1/2014 - 10/31/2016
Funding Amount: \$120,750

Investigators and Agency Representative:

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Project Abstract: Under the proposed agreement, the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research will work cooperatively with YNP Management and the Yellowstone Center for Resources to conduct a Visitor Use Study (VUS) to generate new and more focused information about Yellowstone's unique visitor populations and their levels of park support. Using visitor surveys to inform a visitor segmentation approach, which will divide visitors into sub-groups that share similar characteristics, this foundational study will provide a more complex and complete picture of dynamism and variation among Yellowstone visitors, and what they expect from the park experience. Based on a comprehensive literature review, 4 approaches will be used to segment Yellowstone visitors: place attachment, geotraveler tendencies, motivations, and recreation involvement.

The proposed visitor use study (VUS) will provide valuable new science-based information to Yellowstone managers in three keys ways. The survey will:

1. Provide a more sophisticated understanding of Yellowstone National Park's changing and dynamic visitor population by identifying and estimating the size of key visitor subgroups or audiences. This project will collect baseline data on the characteristics of Yellowstone's key visitor subgroups - recognizing that not all Yellowstone visitors are the same - so that Yellowstone can better tailor park experiences, facilities and programs to its diverse audiences.
2. Document why and how visitors and visitor groups support Yellowstone National Park. Attitudes toward national parks have been researched, but a visitor's intention to directly or indirectly support national parks through increased in-park spending, entrance pass purchases, donations to partner organizations, or volunteerism is not yet well understood. Researching why visitors decide to support Yellowstone and what their behaviors of support are is an important piece of understanding the YNP visitor, and enhancing visitor support for Yellowstone National Park and the National Park System.
3. Enhance national park relevancy over the long-term. In its 2012 strategy document, "A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Education," the National Park Service asserts that it must focus on connecting people to parks during its second century. An important dimension of fostering the important connection between people and national parks is ensuring that parks remain relevant to diverse and rapidly changing American and international publics (NPS Advisory Board 2012). The proposed research will provide Yellowstone National Park with more detailed socio-demographic profiles of its key audiences (segments) of visitors, and this information will give Yellowstone better demographic and scientific tools to become and remain more relevant to these diverse publics.

Outcomes with Completion Dates: October 31, 2016

Keywords: visitor study, Yellowstone National Park, University of Montana, Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research