

Project Summary

Rocky Mountains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit

Project Title: Evaluate the Effectiveness of Wildlife Safety Messaging for Visitors

Type of Project: Research
Discipline: Social Science
Funding Agency: National Park Service
Other Partners/Cooperators: University of Montana
Effective Dates: 1/1/2015 - 7/31/2016
Funding Amount: \$72,354

Investigators and Agency Representative:

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Project Abstract: Wildlife-watching attracts millions of visitors to Yellowstone NP each year because the park hosts abundant and easily viewed large mammals from elk and bison to grizzly bears and wolves. Yet many visitors arrive at the park unprepared for safe wildlife viewing, especially when involved in day hikes in the park's extensive backcountry.

To assure visitor safety and wildlife protection, Yellowstone National Park's Division of Resource Education and Youth Programs provides in-park and virtual visitors with a wide array of in-depth details concerning safe behavior in the presence of wildlife, especially safety in bear country. Sources of wildlife safety regulations and safe behavior include the park's website (more than 28 million hits annually), park newspaper, and hiking and other free handouts. Safe behavior around wildlife is also specifically conveyed during ranger-led programs.

Because inappropriate visitor behavior in the presence of wildlife poses serious human risks, this project is designed to gauge the effectiveness of the park's current communication of wildlife safety messages, including the sources, content and timing, and to determine how to influence and improve visitor practices where deficiencies are detected.

This project will involve a detailed analysis and evaluation of the park's existing wildlife safety communication methods along with evaluating how the park's social media (Facebook has about 500,000 friends) has affected visitor experience and behavior. The project will also determine the appropriate persuasive techniques in visitor management that will correct deficiencies in visitors' understanding and practice of safe behavior around wildlife.

Outcomes with Completion Dates: July 31, 2016

Keywords: social science, visitors, wildlife, safety, messaging, Yellowstone National Park, University of Montana