

Project Summary

Rocky Mountains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit

Project Title: Visitor Experience and Social Science Indicators of NPS-Alaska coastal resources

Type of Project: Research
Discipline: Social Science
Funding Agency: National Park Service
Other Partners/Cooperators: Utah State University
Effective Dates: 7/20/2009 - 8/1/2014
Funding Amount: \$37,231 [FY12: \$7,427; FY10: \$17,804; FY09: \$12,000]

Investigators and Agency Representative:

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Project Abstract: Kenai Fjords NP seeks to proactively address resource protection and management issues for coastal areas of the park through the collection and analysis of baseline social science data, inform the refinement of management objectives, and the development of indicators and standards for resource condition and visitor experience. Social science research results will also facilitate local and regional economic activity, specifically tourism, through explicit identification of visitor expectations and perceptions.

The National Park Service Social Science program identifies six critical questions which drive social science work in NPS areas:

1. Who visits national parks? When do they come; where do they come from, and what do they look for? Who doesn't visit, and why?
2. How do these visitors affect national park resources? How does park management affect the visitor experience?
3. How do national parks relate to their surrounding communities? How do they affect local, regional, and national economies?
4. How can threats to national parks be minimized or reduced?
5. How effective are NPS educational efforts--such as museum exhibits, guided hikes, and ranger-led talks--and how they can be improved?
6. How can the parks' natural and cultural resources be managed more effectively?

This effort will integrate the importance of these six topic areas with the recently released Pacific Ocean Parks strategy

(http://www.nature.nps.gov/water/Marine/Pacific_Ocean_Parks_Strategic_Plan_April-2008.pdf), allowing Kenai Fjords NP the opportunity to better serve its constituents, improve management practices, and align these efforts with larger policy initiatives. Impacts associated with backcountry camping represent the most significant threat to coastal resources and the visitor experience that Kenai Fjords NP manages directly. The park includes approximately 500 miles of remote coastline accessible only by boat or floatplane. The availability of suitable landing beaches and camping areas is limited by the steep fjord topography, thus overnight use occurs at a higher density than in many dispersed recreational settings elsewhere in Alaska. This higher use density yields the potential for more rapid and severe resource impacts. Due to the limited availability of suitable camping areas, backcountry visitor use is concentrated in areas that also contain sensitive coastal resources such as intertidal communities, brown and black bears, colonial nesting seabirds, ground-nesting shorebirds, sea otters, harbor seals, freshwater streams, wetlands, sensitive plant communities, and cultural and archeological sites. While the park has been able to gather baseline data on the condition of park natural and cultural resources and backcountry visitor use sites in the fjords, no studies have been conducted to determine the quality of the visitor experience in coastal backcountry areas of the park. Scientifically and technically sound resource information is essential for policy and management decisions and backcountry management planning efforts. This project will provide the park with information needed to address a critical visitor use management need. This project directly addresses Strategy 3 of the Pacific Ocean Parks Strategic Plan, "Demonstrate a commitment to ocean stewardship through adoption of sustainable tourism and recreational opportunities, operations, and practices at ocean parks." The establishment of a valid, rigorous monitoring program for coastal backcountry areas of KEFJ will address the following Action Items from this strategic plan:

- 1) identify public infrastructure in the greatest need of maintenance, repair, or protection;
- 2) identify ocean and recreational conflicts; and

3) develop information on marine recreational visitor use patterns. Information gained from monitoring will be utilized in outreach and education materials to encourage ocean stewardship among boaters, campers, and other recreational users.

Outcomes with Completion Dates: Draft Final Report for NPS review: January 2013; Final Report: June 30 2013

Keywords: Visitor Experience, Social Science Indicators, coastal resources, Kenai Fjords National Park, Utah State University