

Rocky Mountains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit
Project Summary

Project Title: Rocky Mountain National Park Visitor Use and Transportation Management Study

Task Agreement #: P17AC00708

Modification(s): 1

Discipline: Social

Type of Project: Research

Funding Agency: National Park Service

Other Partners/Cooperators: Utah State University

Student Participation: Yes

Effective Dates: May 1, 2017 – December 31, 2020

Funding Amount: \$82,566

Investigators and Agency Representative:

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Project Abstract: Rocky Mountain National Park (ROMO) has an extensive history of conducting visitor use, resource impact and visitor experience research in order to develop and inform park management strategies. Recent work includes an extensive examination of transportation and associated experience and resource impacts in the Bear Lake Road (BLR) area (Newman et al., 2010), examining visitor use and experience issues (D’Antonio et al., 2013; D’Antonio and Monz 2016); visitor use patterns on Longs Peak (Kidd et al., 2016); visitor transportation choices (Pettebone et al., 2011) and transportation experience dimensions (Taff et al., 2013). While this work forms an important baseline of resource and experiential conditions, it does not fully inform current management as recent trends of use in ROMO have been exceptional. For example, ROMO visitation levels were consistently at approximately 3 million per year from 1998 to 2013 but have recently spiked to over 4.5 million in 2016—a 50% increase over 2013 levels. Consequently, many popular areas of the Park, especially the BLR area, are experiencing visitation demand not anticipated just a few years ago. ROMO has responded with various management actions on the BLR that encourage changes in the spatial and temporal distribution of use, but little is known about the efficacy or consequences of these actions.

The above points demonstrate the importance of a renewed effort at understanding the dynamics of visitor use, and associated experiential and resource consequences in ROMO. In this project we propose to conduct an initial effort at understanding changes in spatial use patterns as a consequence of current management actions along the BLR. Subsequent phases of work could address this issue more comprehensively from an experience and resource impact perspective, with this initial, descriptive phase as a basis for identifying use “hot spots” and describing overall spatial patterns.

The proposed project will:

- 1) Describe overall visitor use patterns along select roadways that may be affected by current management on the Bear Lake Road. This component will identify visitor travel patterns when they are unable to access the Bear Lake area by private vehicle in comparison to a “control” or relatively unmanaged condition. [1]
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- 2) Evaluate how traffic flow patterns are changing at key intersections when traffic is diverted away from the Bear Lake road