

Project Summary

Rocky Mountains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit

Project Title: Exploring Feasibility Study to assess the Impact of a Documentary on Public Interest in Parks

Discipline: Social Science

Type of Project: Research

Funding Agency: National Park Service

Other Partners/Cooperators: University of Wyoming

Effective Dates: 8/1/2009 – 12/31/2010

Funding Amount: \$7,026

Investigators and Agency Representative:

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Project Abstract: Over the past seven years, the noted documentarians Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan have been preparing a multi-part documentary about national parks and the National Park Service (NPS). The product will be shown on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) under the title "The National Parks: America's Best Idea" in six two-hour episodes during the fall of 2009.

The series is expected to have a considerable viewing audience and may substantially impact viewers. It can also be expected to generate a media "buzz" that will extend its impact well beyond its actual viewership. It seems likely that this fall's series premier segment will be viewed in upwards of 10% of U.S. households, while also generating discussion on other television networks, in the press, and on the Internet.

Therefore, an increase in the number of American viewers who are aware of the national parks and the NPS should be detectable as a direct consequence of the documentary, and as an indirect consequence of the attendant "buzz." Quantifying the impact of this series on the public awareness would be useful to NPS and the research community.

This project proposes to test an alternative approach to assessing the impact of the series "The National Parks." A new research resource that is gaining increasing attention is the Google Trends database. Using this technology to assess the impact of the Burns documentary on public interest in national parks has the great advantage of producing, for very low-cost, a real-time tracking of the public's interest in a specific topic.

Outcomes with Completion Dates: March, 2010

Keywords: Google Trends database, public interest, media impact, NPS-Social Science Program, University of Wyoming