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### Understanding Visitor Experiences at the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument

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**UNDERSTANDING VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT THE UPPER MISSOURI RIVER**

**BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT**

**By**

**JESSICA ANN BROWN**

**Undergraduate Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the University Scholar distinction**

**Davidson Honors College  
University of Montana  
Missoula, MT**

**May 2015**

**Approved by:**

**Elizabeth Covelli Metcalf, Faculty Mentor  
College of Forestry and Conservation**

## **ABSTRACT**

**Brown, Jessica, B.S., May 2015  
Management**

**Conservation**

**Parks, Tourism, & Recreation  
and Resource**

**Understanding Visitor Experiences at the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument**

**Faculty Mentor: Elizabeth Metcalf**

The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (UMRBNM) is known for unique recreation opportunities on a wild and scenic river. Visitor's experiences are complex and can be influenced by new management regulations, perceived conflict, and crowding, which can impact overall user satisfaction. This study examines the breadth of visitor experiences on the UMRBNM and assesses stakeholders' satisfaction of BLM management. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth phone interviews were conducted with Key Informants. Those interviewed represent a diverse group of stakeholders including advisory council members, non-profits and friends groups, outfitters and guides, and local officials. Interviews explored visitor experiences, satisfaction with management, and recreation use restrictions. In this paper, responses were summarized and emerging themes were discussed. The results will provide managers with baseline data to help inform future management decisions.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

**This project was made possible by a partnership between the University of Montana's College of Forestry and Conservation and the Bureau of Land Management.**

**I am grateful to my advisor and mentor, Dr. Libby Metcalf whose expertise, guidance, and support made my work on this project possible. You have been an inspiration during my time at the University of Montana and I am thankful for all of your help over the past four years.**

**I would also like to thank Dr. Alex Metcalf for his help and support during the project.**

**I would like to give special thanks to Fred Lauer for the early meetings and many emails, your patience and humor helped me tremendously throughout this whole process.**

# **Understanding Visitor Experiences at the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument**

## **Introduction**

The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument was established in 2001 and is made up of 375,000 acres of public land administered by the BLM. It is located in central Montana, and is marked by a remote, expansive, and dramatic landscape. The land is entrenched in history. It is a place where American Indians made their homes for centuries and was an important pathway for Lewis and Clark. The remote area attracts visitors looking for “a place where time seems to move a little slower, and history and adventure greet you around each bend of the river” (BLM, 2011).

In 1976, a 149-mile segment of the Upper Missouri was designated as a National Wild and Scenic River. This river and portions of the adjacent uplands now make up the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. The BLM works under a mandate to manage recreation resources for primitive and natural landscapes. Managing the monument is complex due to its multiple designations. With many recreationists on the river seeking a wide range of experiences, BLM managers must deal with issues like user conflict, crowding, and degradation of resources.

The BLM updated its management plan in 2009, which included guidelines for the BLM to manage recreation resources on the river. In response to concerns from recreation groups, the BLM introduced motorized boating regulations. The regulations were created to manage a growing demand for opportunities and conflict that may be occurring between user groups. BLM managers have received comments on the new management plan, but they were concerned that the responses did not represent a wide range of users (Metcalf, 2014).

This study will examine a variety of recreation variables to address overall recreation experience for visitors to the Breaks. Since the 1960's, outdoor recreation managers have been concerned with high-quality outdoor recreation experiences (Manning, 2011). Researchers can understand 'quality experiences' through measures of satisfaction, crowding, benefits to recreation, and conflict. The preferred method for evaluation for outdoor recreation managers has been experience-based management (Manfredo et al., 1996). Managers do not have to depend just on visitor numbers, they can look at multiple factors that can facilitate or constrain experiences. Understanding what motivates a person to participate in activities and benefits they can receive can help guide management frameworks (Metcalf, 2014).

This study was designed and led by two University of Montana professors, Elizabeth Metcalf and Alex Metcalf, and was funded through a competitive grant from the BLM. The research team met with BLM managers in December 2014 to discuss management challenges facing the Breaks. A goal of this study is to examine how the 2009 management plan has changed visitor experiences, understand if and how perceptions of conflict have changed, and gather feedback regarding potential future management approaches (Metcalf, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

- 1) How has the experience of recreation users changed since the adoption of the 2009 UMRBNM management plan?
- 2) What are the components of the plan that are favorable or unfavorable to recreation users?
- 3) How has recreation user conflict changed since the management plan was introduced?
- 4) What changes in management might help increase recreation satisfaction and/or reduce conflict?

### **Methods**

The study area included Montana counties of interest with significant BLM ownership: Blain, Choteau, Fergus, and Phillips. Key Informant interviews (KIs) were used to capture diverse perspectives regarding complex issues at the

**Breaks. Key Informants are qualitative in design and useful for generating insights about emerging phenomenon or characterizing dimensions of complex issues (Metcalf, 2014). KIs were conducted with members of the BLM Resource Advisory Council (RAC) and others about the recreation issues, impacts of management decisions, sources or conflict, and future direction for BLM management.**

**Sixteen in-depth phone interviews were conducted with KIs. In this study, KIs included a wide range of people because BLM managers wanted a wide range of diverse responses. The people interviewed were outfitters and guides, ranchers, members of non-profits, community leaders, business owners, environmentalists, and state government officials. The interviews typically lasted from 30 to 45 minutes and were audio recorded. The interview guide was IRB approved and interviewers were IRB certified.**

## **Results**

**As more people were interviewed, responses gave rise to similar underlying themes. Here are short summaries of what was found during the interviews.**

### **Sense of Place**

**When asked about a meaningful or important place to them at the Breaks, respondents had many different answers. But when asked the thoughts, feelings, memories, or associations that come to mind when they think about the place, then the answers became very similar.**

**Here is a list of words and phrases people used:**

- Serenity
- Isolation
- Wildness
- Unspoiled
- Remote
- Untrammelled
- Time with friends
- Place for hunting and fishing
- Natural habitat
- Rugged
- Childhood
- Time before man
- History
- Lewis and Clark

- Connection to land
- Discovery
- Primitive
- Adventure
- Tranquility
- Calm

These feelings show how deeply people are connected to the monument. It gives insight into the ways people like to recreate and what they get out of their experiences. The BLM has to manage recreation resources for primitive and natural landscapes. The feelings people have are often the foundation of their beliefs on the regulations and management of the place. These feelings of remoteness and serenity impact the KIs views of the place and how they want to see it managed.

### Land Use Changes

In response to if and how the land around the Breaks is changing, many respondents felt that they are losing access to the land. Some people have the perception that “billionaires are buying up the land” and “out of state hunters buy hunts at ranches and then roads are blocked to make sure they get something.” Some stated that the uplands are selling off to oil and changing from cattle to hobby ranches.

One person explained the problem like this, some hunters in the past have hunted on open private land in ways the owner did not agree with, and have caused destruction using ATV’s and other things. Now many private landowners have closed their land to everyone except trusted outfitters and guides. One man described his loss of Goat Cliff, his favorite hunting spot that he cannot reach any more because of private land closure. These are all perceptions however, since no formal study has been done about private land being closed for recreationists near the Breaks. There was also an opinion given during an interview that they think the perception of impacts of land use changes is greater than the actual changes that are happening.

### Interpretation

The interview guide asked about people's experience with the cultural and natural resource interpretation at the UMRBNM. It also asked what additional interpretation they would like to see. Overwhelmingly the responses to these questions were that the KIs were not interested in more interpretive signs. Many talked about the need to update the signs that were currently on the landscape, but they did not want to see any more added.

The outfitters and guides seemed the most invested in the historical aspects and interpretation of the Breaks, but they had their own interpretive components of trips. They did not rely on or want interpretive help from the BLM. Only one out of state guide company said that they used the interpretive signs and would stop to look at them along their trips.

A few people mentioned the "Undaunted Stewardship" signs put up by BLM, MSU, and MT Stockgrowers association a while ago. These signs recognized the stewardship of private landowners that has resulted in many areas to remain undeveloped and close to Lewis and Clark times. While a few people brought up the signs, only one respondent interviewed had a lot to say about them. "It's propaganda," he declared, stating that the BLM use the signs to justify letting the cows tear up the riparian areas. This was the only account of real offense taken to interpretation offered at the Breaks.

There were mixed reviews on the question of adding a roving interpretive offering, like a campfire program, in the summer. Some respondents thought it might be nice for other summer visitors, but not for them. A few people said there just aren't enough visitors coming and they are too transient for it to be successful or meaningful. If there was going to be roving interpretation, then respondents say it would have to be at Coal Banks Landing and Judith Landing.

### Cattle Grazing

By far the biggest problems people had with the management of the monument was on the subject of cattle grazing. There was a clear division between people who didn't mind the cows along the riverbanks and those who thought cows shouldn't be anywhere near the river. However most people

thought that the BLM was doing a great job in managing the cattle. People said they have seen great success with the upland water sources and campsite exclosures.

Cattle grazing is still one of the biggest sources of conflict. One outfitter pointed out that the cows are only in conflict if they want to be in the same place as you. Others say cattle grazing around the river cause negative effects for non-motorized recreationists the most, and it is bad for tourism. Some outfitters are worried about safety in the overgrown grass in the exclosure campgrounds, because it gives more places for rattlesnakes to hide. But one out-of-state outfitter enjoys the campgrounds more because of that aspect; his visitors get to see more wildlife.

One of the biggest concerns from the cows being on the river is the effect on cottonwood trees. People say the cows eat and trample the saplings so there are no cottonwoods growing to replace the older, 50+ year old cottonwood trees. These trees provide the only shade along the river in most parts, and having less and less of them causes other problems. The cows will stand in the only shady parts, and cause conflict with recreationists who want to use the shade too. Some people say the BLM's efforts to have volunteers plant cottonwoods along the river just do not work. They say the only way to keep the riparian area healthy is to keep cows out of the river. One outfitter thinks the upland rim should be fenced and the cows kept away.

Most KIs that live in the area are used to the cows and do not see a problem with them. Outfitters explain to their visitors about the history of the area and the generations of ranchers that have lived and worked the land before the monument existed. The 2011 BLM Boaters' Guide tell visitors that livestock grazing is allowed on public land within the monument, and to not be surprised if they see cattle by the river, even in the sections designated as Wild (BLM, 2011). Most people interviewed are fine with the cattle grazing and those opposed to it seem resigned to the fact that there will be cattle seen on their river trips.

### Boating Restrictions

When asked about the boating restrictions implemented in the 2009 management plan, there were clearly mixed responses. Some people thought that the restrictions were appropriate because it keeps the area “wild and untrammled.” Those opposed to the restrictions were mostly opposed to having any boating restrictions, but agreed they were appropriate if they had to have them.

Some outfitters felt that the restrictions did not change things, because at that time of the year no boats can go down those stretches of the river anyway with such low water. Most people said the boating restrictions impacted motorized users the most by essentially prohibiting them. They also thought that it probably positively impacted non-motorized users. Only a few people stated that bow hunters were negatively affected by the restrictions, but some said there are ways to get around it and still hunt if they really wanted to.

A few people disagree with the restrictions because of how complex they are. They are described as too complicated and hard to look up. For the most part, those who don't run motorized outfitting trips did not know the boating restrictions. A land manager near the monument, who likes taking his boat on the river, said he does not support any regulations so complicated that it makes you take a book with you to keep track of them. He would rather have it more clear cut, either the restrictions are on or they are off.

Overall, the KIs thought the boating restrictions were appropriate or they were at least resigned to following them. No one seemed eager to change the restrictions since many of them were involved in the process of creating them. They witnessed first hand the effort and collaboration that went into the process and are not ready to try and change what was decided.

### Decline in Visitors

An overall perception of those interviewed is that there are declining numbers of visitors to the Breaks. One respondent says the BLM visitor counts are wrong, and there is no way the number is that high. There was a common story told during interviews of why this was occurring. There was increasing

interest and a surge of visitors that were inspired to come when Stephen Ambrose's book *Undaunted Courage* was published in 1996 and then again during the height of the Lewis and Clark bicentennial in 2003, but ever since then visitor numbers have been declining. Some point to the 2009 management plan as an overreaction to the fear of future increasing amounts of visitors, when in reality there just aren't enough people to make the regulations worthwhile.

Those interviewed gave a few reasons why there are less visitors coming to the Breaks. People just do not have the time any more, and visitors can't take four or five day river trips. Outfitters are seeing less young families visiting the area, and say it is mostly elderly people who come. This may be because they are retired and have the time to take an extended trip. The only large groups that come to the Breaks now are the Boy Scouts. Some cite the reason for fewer visitors are the regulations of the area, like rules on human waste management and the need to carry potable water. People do not want to deal with things like that and find other places to recreate. The overall perception of the KIs is that less people are coming to the area, but more research must be done to discover if this is true and why it is happening.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Based on these Key Informant interviews, the BLM now has baseline data to inform future management decisions. Most people have a connection to the land because of its wilderness character, with its isolated and primitive qualities. As seen from this study, the area is changing and the land use around the Breaks is being altered over the years. Future BLM policy to keep up with these changes will affect those coming for wild experiences. It will be essential to include a variety of stakeholders in the planning process to make sure these views are considered.

In the case of the land use changes, people are seeing private landowners closing off access to important recreation sites. BLM managers have thought about buying private land around the Breaks in order to keep public access

open. Further study must be done on exactly how much land is being closed off and what land it would be prudent for the BLM to acquire for the monument.

Managers should be careful when heeding the words of the KIs when it comes to interpretation. This study is helpful because those interviewed know so much about the UMRBNM. When discussing interpretation however, these people know the area too well to provide perspectives that could apply to all visitors. Most respondents are heavily invested in the historical and cultural interpretation at the Breaks and already know everything that could be posted on a sign or said at a campfire program. More research needs to be done with non-resident and out-of-state visitors who are not stakeholders of the area. KIs suggestions of updating the existing signs with current information are definitely something the BLM could take care of now. For any future interpretation, the BLM staff and outfitters could work together to meet interpretive demands.

Allowing cattle grazing at the monument is not necessarily something the BLM should, or could, change in the future. One thing they can change is how experiences at the Breaks are described to visitors. If river trips are framed as wild, rugged, and unspoiled, then visitors will be expecting just that when they arrive in Fort Benton. There needs to be an honest representation of what visitors will be experiencing on the river. Although they won't want to use cattle grazing on the Breaks as a selling point, the BLM should examine how they are representing the monument to the public and adjust to make sure people know what they are getting in to before they come.

Even though responses to the 2009 boating restrictions were a major concern for BLM, the interviews seem to suggest there is no call for changes. Most people are satisfied with the restrictions, and some even say they don't effect how they experience the river. One area the BLM could work on is making sure everyone can understand and remember the restrictions easily. They could work together with outfitters and boat owners to come up with a way for the public to understand the restrictions without having to carry books around.

To see if the Breaks are actually experiencing a decline in visitors, the BLM needs to conduct more research into visitor numbers. With outfitters

doubting them and saying their numbers are way to high, the BLM should include stakeholders in the process. This would make sure everyone is on the same page and the results could be more consistent and accurate. If visitors are indeed declining, management should evaluate and decide if they want to encourage more visitors, or perhaps make changes to their existing management plan.

It is important to note that these results just provide a snapshot of recreation user perspectives. They cannot be generalized to a larger population, but they do help inform BLM management decisions and future research in the area. Future quantitative study should be considered to provide results that can be generalized to the larger population.

This study allowed for a focus on values, opinions, attitudes, concerns, and behaviors of different stakeholders at the UMRBNM. This will allow BLM managers to create collaborative strategies for managing recreation along the Breaks, increase visitor satisfaction, and reduce conflict. These KI interviews brought forward and touched on many concerns from stakeholders. The BLM need to explore these issues further and continue conversations in the future to inform updates to the UMRBNM management plan.

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