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Apr 18th, 11:10 AM - 11:30 AM

Managing complex park systems: Trail use and visitor experiences at Glacier National Park

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Miller, Zachary, "Managing complex park systems: Trail use and visitor experiences at Glacier National Park" (2015). *UM Graduate Student Research Conference (GradCon)*. 4.
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14th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference

ABSTRACT

Title: Managing complex park systems: Trail use and visitor experience at Glacier National Park

Glacier National Park is one of the “crown jewels” of the national park system in the United States. The park provides outstanding driving, fishing, wildlife-viewing, and hiking opportunities for visitors of all ages and abilities. However, with increasing numbers of visitors every year, the park is faced with a classic challenge: how do we allow people to use and recreate in this place without degrading the very things that make it spectacular? This research examines 9 years of research in Glacier National Park to highlight some of the findings and challenges associated with managing this complex park. Specifically this research will examine the relationship between overall park use and the trail conditions in the Going-to-the-Sun Road Corridor in relation to visitor experiences.

A variety of research methods have been used to help the park plan for visitor use, including trail and road monitoring, intercept surveys, and observations of human-wildlife interactions. Using data from 2014, road and trail monitoring systems are used in conjunction with data collected through intercept surveys of hikers to explore the relationship between use in the park and conditions on select trails in the Going-to-the-Sun Road Corridor. Specifically, trail counter data is used to run regression models on different aspects of visitors’ experiences while hiking.

Results from the models indicate that although a negative relationship exists between trail conditions (independent variable) and visitors’ experience of solitude (dependent variable), it is not as strong as would be assumed. In other words, just because more people are using these areas doesn’t mean the trail users are less satisfied with their experience. This finding highlights the difficulties of managing protected areas. Using previous research and empirical findings from the data collected, several possible suggestions are offered for why this relationship isn’t as strong as assumed. Additionally, the conclusion of this research will focus on suggestions of how to address these complexities when planning for visitor use in the future.