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The Role of Social Science in Predicting Support for Yellowstone National Park

Jake Jorgenson & Dr. Norma Nickerson

As an enduring icon in American history, Yellowstone National Park remains a unique and popular destination for travelers. Even today, visitation numbers continue to grow with over 3 million guests in 2014. However, public funding is decreasing and the changing demographics within the United States place the relevancy of national parks at risk in American society. *Revisiting Leopold* (2012), prepared by the National Park Service Advisory Board Science Committee, stated:

“Cultural and socioeconomic changes confronting the National Park Service are difficult to overstate. These include an increasingly diversified, urbanized, and aging population, a transforming US economy, and constrained public funding for parks.”

Without much debate, anecdotal correlations can be drawn between public support and funding for national parks. As support increases, hopefully public funding should follow suit. But, what influences someone to become an advocate for national parks?

Researchers from the University of Montana Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) used the ITRR travel panel along with email lists from the Yellowstone Association (YA), Yellowstone Park Foundation (YPF), and Xanterra Parks and Resorts to investigate pre-

vious visitors' current and future likelihood to support Yellowstone. Emails were sent out in June 2014 to the four email lists, as well as a post on the YPF Facebook page with a link to the online questionnaire. In total, 2,854 responses were gathered for analysis. Five key psychological and behavioral characteristics were investigated to explore if these constructs had a role in predicting park support.

Support for Yellowstone was measured through two dimensions: direct and indirect measures. Direct measures included donating to YPF, becoming a YA member, spending nights camping or in hotels within park boundaries, and volunteering in Yellowstone. Indirect measures included sharing experiences with others, bringing new visitors to Yellowstone, visiting the park's facebook page, spending nights in gateway communities, and donating to other conservation organizations. These ten variables were rated on a 5-point scale and summated to obtain a 'current park support' and a 'future likelihood' score that ranged from 10-50 points. Finally, five psychological and behavioral concepts were measured, including place attachment (personal connection to Yellowstone), recreation involvement (the importance of recreation to one's life), visitor motivations, geotouristic tendencies (environmentally, culturally, socially-responsible behaviors that aim to preserve authenticity), and autobiographical memory (or memory of the 'self') (figure 1).

The initial results showed moderate support towards Yellowstone with a summated park score of 27.37 out of 50.00 from all survey groups. For the psychological and behavioral traits, visitors who were highly attached, strongly involved in specific outdoor activities, likely to participate in geotouristic behaviors, and possessed high-impact memories from past experiences in Yellowstone were more likely to have higher support. Respondents who were both YA members and YPF contributors were significantly higher in their support and all other dimensions than other respondents. Essentially, the type of experience visitors had at Yellowstone (engaging and memorable) tends to lead to a higher degree of park support by visitors.

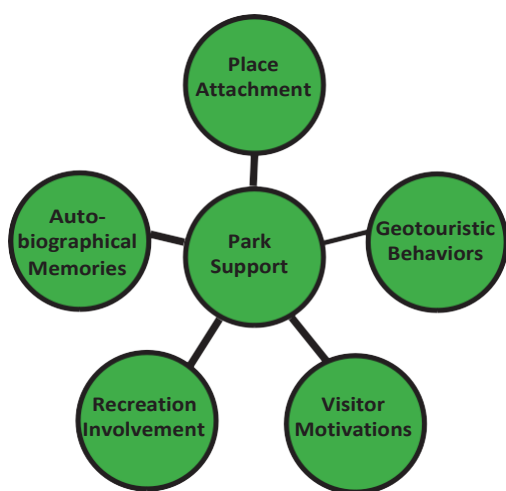


Figure 1. Five psychological and behavioral concepts measured to gauge park support.



Photo by Seth Ward ©

Results point to a strong connection between past experiences and a visitor's willingness to support the park. Park managers may be able to elicit more support for Yellowstone by encouraging experiences that engage visitors outside of their personal vehicle. In fact, *Revisiting Leopold* stressed providing 'transformative experiences' to visitors which is in line with our findings that an engaged visitor will prove to become a supportive visitor of the park. While not yet defined, it appears these experiences are memorable, high-impact, and closely resemble some of the sentiments shared by park supporters. Attaching visitors to the park through meaningful experiences may be the best technique to increased support. These meaningful experiences include the unexpected wildlife viewing opportunities, a first time visit to the park, sharing new experiences with family members, and reliving Yellowstone through the eyes of someone who hasn't been there before. Therefore, understanding these experiences

is even more critical and will be the focus of additional sociological research in the park during 2015.

Literature Cited

National Park System Advisory Board Science Committee. 2012. *Revisiting Leopold: Resource stewardship in the national parks*. Washington, DC.

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Jake Jorgenson is a PhD candidate in the College of Forestry and Conservation at the University of Montana. He is also a research assistant at the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research. His research interests are in tourism and protected area management, social psychology, and decision-making processes of travelers.

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