Yellowstone Wildlife Watching: A Survey of Visitor Attitudes and Desires

Alice Wondrak Biel, Yellowstone Center for Resources, P.O. Box 168, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming 82190; alice_wondrak_biel@nps.gov

Background

For 60 years or so, Yellowstone was the place where visitors came to feed the bears. People got hurt, bears got killed, and the National Park Service (NPS) got sued, but still the park's managers failed to see how it would ever be possible, or even desirable, to end the roadside feeding that was at once so desired and so detrimental. In 1968, Yellowstone's rangers finally started enforcing the no-feeding regulations that had existed in the park since 1902, and roadside feeding was ended within a couple of years. By 1971 or so it was uncommon to see a roadside bear, and unhappy visitors were demanding to know where they had all gone. The park generally provided a prescriptive response to these queries, informing visitors that seeing fewer bears leading natural lives was a preferable experience to seeing many bears being denigrated by begging. Did visitors believe it? Some did, some didn't; the process of convincing visitors to "think like an ecosystem" in the wake of the vast policy changes of the past 35 years has been a long one, and the goal of this work was to gauge how far we've come, and catch a glimpse of how far we might have to go.

The Survey

Over the course of 13 days during the period May–August 2001, I administered a 15-question survey to a random sample of 150 visitors in the Old Faithful viewing area. The survey assessed attitudes and desires in regard to a number of issues related to wildlife watching in Yellowstone. Responses were coded and recorded using qualitative analysis software.

Expectations

Question: What do you most hope to see while in Yellowstone? If you could name three things.

There were a fairly wide range of desired sights, but most could be categorized in terms of either wildlife, thermal features, or natural scenic features. Figure 1 shows responses that occurred at least 10% of the time, demonstrating that among those interviewed for this proj-

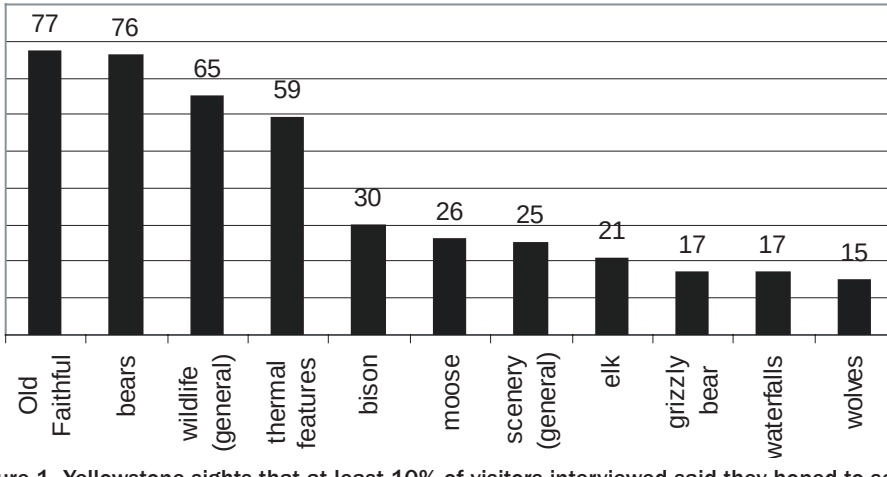

Figure 1. Yellowstone sights that at least 10% of visitors interviewed said they hoped to see.

ect, Yellowstone's most desired sights were Old Faithful, bears, wildlife, thermal features, bison, moose, scenery, elk, grizzly bears, waterfalls, and wolves, respectively. Old Faithful and bears appear to remain the park's most popular sights by far, with a little more than half of all respondents naming them as one of the three things they most wanted to see while in the park.

Question: On a scale of 1–5, with 1 being "not very important" and 5 being "very important," how important is it to you to see a bear during your visit?

In spite of the fact that an impressive one-half of the visitors interviewed had stated, unprompted, that a bear was one of the three sights they most wanted to see, it was not crucial to most people that they see one. The overall average answer to this question was 3.29—somewhere in the middle. Overall, it appears that visitors come to Yellowstone today to see the things they have always come to see: extraordinary thermal features, wildlife—bears in particular—and beautiful scenery. The only average importance of seeing a bear to the overall quality of one's trip would seem to indicate that although visitors still commonly associate bears with Yellowstone, seeing a bear is no longer a driving reason for making the trip, in spite of the fact that they still appear to be one of the park's main attractions in the visitor mind.

Collared Wildlife

The debate over whether wild animals living in national parks and wilderness areas should be collared for scientific monitoring purposes has raged almost since the Craighead brothers pioneered the technique in Yellowstone during the 1960s. Collars and other markers have gotten smaller and less conspicuous over the years, but some people maintain that any visible marking is deleterious to the viewing experience and makes the marked animal seem "less than wild" because it is an indication of interaction with humanity. In this way, collaring shakes the façade of untouched nature that many people attribute to national parks and wilderness areas.

Proponents of collaring maintain that the amount and quality of knowledge that can be obtained from monitoring certain members of an animal population far outweighs the negative visual effects. Among other things, researchers can now learn the extent of an animal's range, measure its length of life, discover what sorts of food sources might hold it in a certain place for extended periods of time, track its reproductive history, and find out how it uses land throughout the day and night—all of which is valuable information for managers charged with making land use decisions within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Question: (a) Have you seen any park animals wearing radio collars or ear tags?

Roughly 23% of the visitors interviewed believed that they had seen an animal wearing a radio collar or an ear tag (Figure 2).

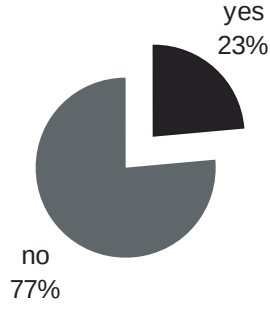

Figure 2. Percentage of visitors interviewed who said they had seen a park animal wearing a radio collar or ear tag.

Question: (b) If yes (or "if you did see that"), did that affect (or "do you think that it would affect") your experience of viewing that animal, one way or the other? Make it better or worse?

Of the 23% who believed that they had seen an animal wearing a radio collar or an ear tag, 77% said that seeing the marking had had no adverse impact on their experience of viewing that animal. Visitors who had not seen any animals wearing radio collars or ear tags were asked to imagine their reaction to seeing such an animal. Of those, 86% believed that seeing an animal wearing a collar or a tag would have no impact on their experience of viewing that animal (Figure 3). Although those who said

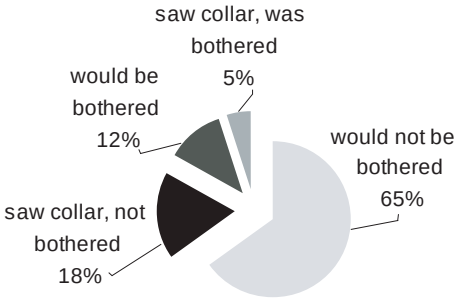

Figure 3. Percentage of people who had been, or imagined that they would be, bothered by seeing a park animal wearing a radio collar or ear tag.

that seeing a collared animal would not depreciate their experience were not generally prompted to explain why not, 17% volunteered that they wouldn't be bothered because they knew why collaring was done and believed it to be a positive thing. One man went so far as to say that seeing a collar would actually enhance his viewing experience for that reason.

Twenty-three percent of visitors who had seen a marked animal said that seeing the marking had adversely impacted their experience of viewing that animal. Of those visitors who had not seen a marked animal but were asked to imagine their reaction, 14% said they thought that their viewing experience would be adversely impacted by the marking. Half of the people who said that they had been or would be bothered by seeing collared wildlife said that it was because it seemed "unnatural," with one adding that collared wildlife were unsuitable for wildlife photography for this reason. Three people said that they thought the collar would be uncomfortable for the animal to wear, and two each said that "wildlife should be left alone" and that "animals should be free." Two people said that they would be bothered by seeing traces that the animal had interacted with humans, and two people said that they would be bothered because they wouldn't know why the animal was wearing a collar.

Overall, this research shows that more than four out of five visitors surveyed said that seeing an animal marked for scientific purposes either had had or would have had no impact on their experience of viewing that animal. In some instances, the long-held contention by some scientists that far from being a bad thing, visitors' seeing marked animals was a positive byproduct of research because it generated public interest in science and wildlife conservation, proved to be true.

Awareness of Bear Feeding

Question: Are you aware that several decades ago, it was common for people to see many bears along Yellowstone's roadsides, begging for food?

About three-quarters of visitors surveyed (76%) answered that yes, they were aware that people used to feed bears at the roadsides. Overall, 37% of those who were not aware of roadside feeding were aged 18–29 (this age group comprised 28% of the total sample), 28% were 30–45 (27% of the total sample), 19% were 46–55 (22% of the total sample), 5% were 56–65, and none were over 65 (combined, 23% of the total sample). Awareness was low among those from outside the U.S., especially among the younger age groups.

Would You Want to Feed a Yellowstone Bear?

Because enforcement appears to have been the driving force behind ending bear feeding in Yellowstone, and I was interested in finding out whether visitors still had any desire to feed the bears, I asked them whether they would want to feed a Yellowstone bear if they did not have to fear being caught or punished for doing so.

Question: Today, the rules against feeding bears are strictly enforced. But during the years of the roadside bears that I just mentioned, they weren't. If we existed in a kind of vacuum here today, and you could feed bears in Yellowstone today without being afraid of getting caught or punished, do you think that's something you would want to do?

Although there are, of course, gaps between what people will say they might do when queried out of context and what they might actually do when placed in the midst of a situation, the results were overwhelming;

95% of visitors surveyed said that no, they would not want to feed Yellowstone's bears, even if they would suffer no legal consequences for doing so. Eight people (5%) stated that yes, if they could do it without fear of reprisal, they would want to feed a bear in Yellowstone.

Question: Why not?

"That's unsafe." Asking these people "why not" frequently earned me incredulous looks. In sum, 43% of all those who answered "no" cited safety reasons (see Figure 4). Notable responses falling into this category included, "A bear can attack me," "It might kill me or scratch my car," "You don't mess with bears," "I'm chicken," and "You can't have people going around getting themselves killed." It seems clear that 21st-century visitors to Yellowstone are fairly well aware of the risks associated with bear feeding. Ten percent of all people interviewed said that they would not want to feed the bears for safety reasons alone. Eighty-nine percent of people who said they would not want to feed a bear provided more than one reason why not.

"That's bad for the bears." The second-most popular explanation for not wanting to feed the bears related to the idea that bear-feeding is bad for bears. Concerns cited in this category included, accurately, the popular adage that "a fed bear is a dead bear;" ten people explained that bears that gain access to human foods have to be either relocated or killed, because they will invariably return in search for more and then become hazardous nuisances. Others knew that bears that were fed would become dependent upon human foods, and some worried that they would be unable to survive in the winter, "when there's no one there to feed them." Eleven percent mentioned the possibility that they might even lose their natural instincts and skills for foraging altogether. A third supposition was that human foods would be unhealthy for bears; that they are "not the right food." In all, 32% of the people who said they would not want to feed bears alluded to the fact that to do so would be to the detriment of the bears.

"That's unnatural." Sixteen percent of those who would not feed said they were opposed to the idea because it was "unnatural" in some way. Thirteen percent said they would not feed the bears because they were "wild," and eight percent said that they wouldn't feed because the bears would cease to be wild if they were fed.

"That's bad for people." Fifteen percent indicated that feeding had negative effects on

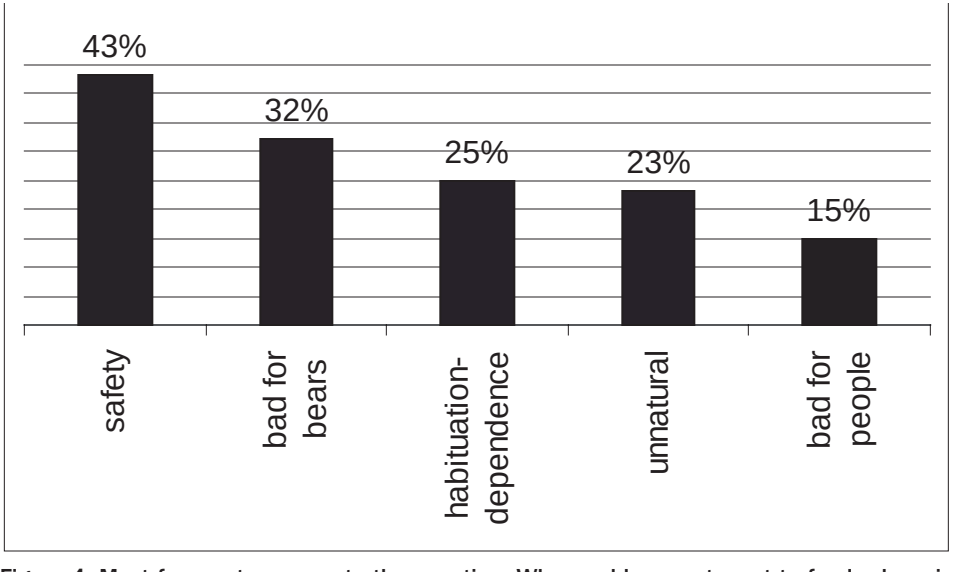

Figure 4. Most frequent answers to the question, Why would you not want to feed a bear in Yellowstone?

people. The most common responses here had to do with the idea that people feeding the bears today will cause trouble for those who visit tomorrow, in that they will leave behind a habituated bear who may cause property damage or bodily injury in its search for human foodstuffs.

Other reasons for not feeding included "We just want to look, not to touch;" "Wildlife should not be fed;" a desire to follow the rules; "That's stupid" (once accompanied by, "If I saw someone doing that, I would hit them"); "That would make it like a zoo;" a concern that human feeding would disrupt the cycle of nature; an overall feeling that feeding is "just not right;" and a simple lack of desire to feed.

As with the question of collaring, there was some ambivalence among those who said that they would not feed. In a clear case either of conflicting internal philosophies or of saying what one thinks one should say and then what one really feels, one woman commented, "I know human food is not appropriate for wildlife—wildlife needs to be with the ecosystem as it is ... have they ever thought about selling food that could be used for that?"

Question: Why?

Of the eight people who said they would want to feed a bear in Yellowstone, five said that they would do it in order to be able to get close to a bear. The remaining three said that they would feed because "They're hungry," "It seems like the humane thing to do," and "I've just always fed animals. Like squirrels." Four were men and four were women, and half were in the 18–29 age group. Two were 30–45, and one each was 45–55 and 56–65. Three of these visitors lived in Idaho, with the others hailing from Colorado, South Dakota, Wisconsin, New Jersey, and Georgia.

At least 95% of those interviewed agreed that there are legitimate reasons why people should not feed bears in Yellowstone, and were aware of what some of those reasons are. This conclusion, however, should be taken with the earlier caveat telling us to mind the gap between decontextualized statements and contextualized action, and keeping in mind a 1953 visitor survey by researcher Donald Bock, in which almost everyone claimed to have seen someone else feeding a bear but almost no one would admit to having done it themselves.

It also does not bespeak any need to reduce either the numbers of staff available to patrol bear jams, nor the wildlife warnings that are conveyed via interpretive materials, as this question did not address whether people would approach a bear without the intent to feed. In fact, two people, in the course of emphatically stating that they would want to stay far away from bears, named "50 feet" as being the proper distance—a full 250 feet closer than the 100-yard distance required by law. The continuing need for both education and vigilance is shown by the fact that half of those who wanted to feed the bears were in the lowest age group and by the decrease in awareness of past feeding as age increases. In other words, the practical management implications of my results for this question are minimal, except for the fact that we have learned that people are generally aware, at this point, of at least some of the reasons why they shouldn't feed bears. What is more important here are the indications for changing visitor expectations, experience, and attitudes that these results show, as well as the fact that residual desire for bear feeding still exists.