

Permanently Protected Parks for a Dynamic Society: An Examination of Race and Ethnicity in National Park Visitation and Participation

Megan Brokaw, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, P.O. Box 439, Copper Center, Alaska 99573; Megan_Brokaw@nps.gov

The United States has the oldest and perhaps most well-respected National Park System in the world. It represents, in principle, the finest the country has to offer in scenery, history, and culture. Stewardship of the national parks is a tremendous responsibility entrusted to the National Park Service (NPS) and the American people, through the action of their elected representatives and civil society (including nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]). NPS and associated NGOs have observed that, as the American public has become more racially and ethnically diverse, the national parks' constituency has not followed the same pattern. Recent studies indicate that minorities are represented in national park visitation in percentages lower than their population percentages in all types of National Park System units all across the country (Machlis 1993; Machlis 1999; Floyd 1999; Wilkinson 2000). NPS and associated NGOs have become concerned and some individuals and groups have attempted to address this as a threat to the future of the National Park System.

Race, Ethnicity, and Minority Americans

This paper uses the terms "race," "ethnicity," and "minority" to describe components of the American population. "Race" refers to "a social group distinguished or set apart, by others or by itself, primarily on the basis of real or perceived physical characteristics" (Floyd 1999:23). For the purpose of this paper, "African American," "Asian American," "Native American," and "White" are used as racial categories. "Ethnicity" refers to "a social group set apart on the basis of cultural or nationality characteristics" (Floyd 1999:23). Members of an ethnic group may be of any race. For the purposes of this paper, "Hispanic" is used as an ethnic category. The term "minority" refers to a racial or ethnic

group comprising a numerical minority of the total population; in the U.S. context, it usually refers to African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans (Floyd 1999).

The American public is now more racially and ethnically diverse than at any other time in the history of the country. The 1990 and 2000 censuses indicate the continuing trend towards diversity (Table 1).

National Park Visitation

Studies examining racial and ethnic demographics of national park visitation show that minorities visit national parks in percentages lower than their percentage contribution to the American public. NPS, in conjunction with the Cooperative Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho, annually produces ten

Table 1. U.S. race and ethnicity data, 1990 and 2000

Race/Ethnicity	1990	2000
White	80.2%	77.1%
African American	12%	12.9%
Hispanic	9.0%	12.5%
Asian American	2.8%	4.2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2001a (White), 2001b (African American), 2001c (Hispanic), 2001d (Asian American).

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survey studies of visitors to individual parks. While the vast majority of these studies do not include information on ethnicity or race, the few that do can provide insight into minority-use patterns in specific national parks. The race and ethnicity data in these studies were not collected for individual visitors; rather, visitor groups were asked to indicate the races and ethnicities represented in their group (Floyd 1999). What has been learned about minority visitation through this research is indicated by the following examples (Table 2).

Other studies also indicate that minorities

visited a national park site in the two years prior to being interviewed (1998 and 1999). Although this study serves to give a relative idea of park visitation by segments of the American population, it was designed such that representative sample sizes were not obtained for all populations. The sample sizes were as follows: n=2631 for Whites; n=406 for African Americans; n=379 for Hispanics; n=90 for Asian Americans; n=34 for Native Hawaiians; n=28 for Native Americans. While the data provided may give an idea of visitation within those groups, many of the sample

Table 2. Visitation by race and ethnicity at selected National Park System units, 1990s

Sources: Rock Creek (Machlis 1993); Santa Monica Mountains (Machlis 1993; Floyd 1999); Bent's Old Fort,

	White	African American	Asian American	Hispanic American	Native American	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	Other
Rock Creek	74%	24%	3%	2%	1%	1%	—
Santa Monica Mountains	95%	4%	—	8%	—	—	10%
Bent's Old Fort	94%	—	—	5%	—	—	7%
Whitman Mission	93%	0%	—	1%	—	—	7%
Booker T. Washington	85%	17%	—	4%	—	—	4%
Bandelier	90%	1%	—	8%	2%	—	1%
Yellowstone	90%	1.5%	4.1%	1%	0.5%	—	—

Whitman Mission, Booker T. Washington, and Bandelier (Floyd 1999), Yellowstone (Wilkinson 2000).

are under-represented in national park visitation when compared with nationwide population percentages. In 2000, Nina Roberts conducted a survey study at Rocky Mountain National Park. She found that visitation was as follows: 94.2% White, 2.2% Bicultural/Multiracial, 1.4% Hispanic, 1.1% Pacific Islander, 0.7% African American, and 0.4% Native American (Erickson 2001).

A report commissioned by NPS, *The National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public* (NPS 2001), provides information on individual racial and ethnic groups' visitation rates. This study claims to have found that 35% of the White population, 32% of the American Indian / Alaska Native population, 27% of the Hispanic population, 18% of the Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander, and 14% of the African American population

sizes are insufficient to allow extrapolation to the entire population of a racial or ethnic group. The study also produced unpublished data correlating ethnicity with sites visited (Brian Forist, NPS assistant social scientist, Washington Area Service Office, personal communication, 4 January 2002). This may be useful to park managers in further identifying which sites are used by particular groups.

These studies indicate that, on a national scale, members of minority groups have significantly lower visitation rates to areas of the National Park System than does the White majority. They also show that minorities are under-represented across the spectrum of NPS-run sites and in NPS visitation as a whole. Including race and ethnicity in such studies on a regular basis would allow NPS to understand, in depth, the use patterns by spe-

cific park, by type of park unit, and by region. This would help NPS make informed management decisions on an individual site, regional, or site-type basis.

Defining the Problem

NPS and associated NGOs have both recognized low visitation rates by minority groups and they perceive it as a problem in two ways. First, it represents a failure of NPS to implement its mission, and second, it poses a political threat to the future integrity of the National Park System. These problems are, of course, intimately connected. It is the mission of NPS to provide for the enjoyment of the parks and to protect them for future generations. The future generations of the U.S. will be racially and ethnically diverse. Therefore, in order to protect the parks for those generations and to ensure that they enjoy the parks, NPS must develop a demographically representative political constituency, visitation, and participation base.

The lack of a diverse visitor group reflects an agency that is not serving a representative cross-section of the American population but rather only a segment thereof. It is the mandate of the federal government to serve the American public and each agency of the U.S. government must carry out its mission with that purpose in mind. The implication is that NPS is serving the White population at the expense of serving minority populations for reasons that are not inherent to park protection.

The NPS mission is defined in terms of acting on behalf of the future. "As a people, our quality of life—our very health and well-being—depends in the most basic way on the protection of nature, the accessibility of open spaces, and recreation opportunities, and the preservation of landmarks that illustrate our historic continuity.... The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth [sic]" (National Park System Advisory Board 2001:13). In order to fulfill the further defined purpose of this mission, it will be vital that the entire cross-section of the American population participates. A citizenry

comprises the entire population, and cannot be built through partial representation. For NPS, the design and management of the parks is only negotiable within certain limits. Essential park values and resources must be preserved. Those limits take the form of laws and rules that govern park use and ensure park protection. NPS and associated NGOs must convince a representative cross-section of the population that the natural, historical, and cultural values of the parks should be protected.

Both the NGOs and NPS have also defined the lack of diversity in NPS visitation and participation as a potential political problem. It is recognized that, "national parks exist because the people want them to exist. They were created by an act of Congress and they can be done away with by an act of Congress. The parks have to be relevant to the people.... If the parks aren't reality to a portion of the population, then they won't be something to vote for either" (Shelton Johnson, interpretive park ranger, Yosemite National Park, personal communication, 20 January 2002). The lack of diversity in national park visitation has been identified as a potential political problem for NPS if it persists in the face of an increasingly diverse and politically active American population.

In discussing the changing demographics of the American population in the *National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda*, the National Parks Steering Committee states: "[O]urs is a nation and world that is rapidly changing, and any public service agency that is not adapting will eventually create its own crisis. Hence the National Park Service must act" (NPS Vail Steering Committee 1992:64). Furthermore, it states that "effective leadership requires an understanding of the changing political environment in which an agency operates. Policies and goals must fit into this dynamic context. In a democracy, an agency that ignores its political environment does so at its own peril" (NPS Vail Steering Committee 1992:104). NPS does not operate in a vacuum; it must operate within and conform to the larger political context of the nation.

NGOs also have determined that a broad-

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based and diverse constituency is imperative to the NPS' political viability. The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) states:

If the Park Service continues its current trend, the agency runs the serious risk of becoming irrelevant to and out of touch with a large and increasing segment of the United States population.... If people of color remain strangers to the park system and the Park Service, it will be unfair and unrealistic to expect them to serve as advocates when the parks face future threats.... This pronounced gap between the national parks and communities of color will come right at the time when a large portion of the responsibility for protection of our natural and cultural resources will fall to Native, Asian, Latino, and African Americans. As taxpayers, voters, and citizens, it is both our right and our obligation to play a more prominent role in park advocacy. Enhancing cultural diversity throughout the National Park Service is a crucial first step towards making that happen (National Parks Conservation Association 2001:1).

NPCA and NPS are in agreement on the need to diversify the national park constituency in order to remain relevant to the diverse and changing American population and to maintain the political viability the agency has enjoyed in the past.

While both mission-oriented and political reasons for addressing diversity in the National Park System have been articulated separately, they have also been described as inextricably intertwined. Jonathan Jarvis, NPS Pacific West regional director, described his reasoning in this way:

Our mission is to preserve and protect for the enjoyment of *future* generations. Those future generations are very diverse. The National Park System and all public lands in America are part of [future generations'] birthright or citi-

zenship right. They are something they get by either having been born or becoming a citizen. It's one of the American values. They need to know what they have received and what responsibility it carries. [The national parks are] not just going to take care of themselves. They need a constituency. They need love and care. Therefore, if we, as the stewards of this land now, take our mission to heart, we need to be looking out there to those future generations and making a monetary and programmatic staffing commitment to teaching the next generation about that responsibility.... We have a responsibility to the future to make sure [these national parks] persist (personal communication, 24 January 2002).

Stated in this way, the assurance of a diverse constituency for the future is part of the mission of NPS. The development of that constituency is part of protecting the national parks for future generations.

Conclusion

It is generally agreed that diversifying the NPS visitation base and constituency is important in order to maintain the integrity and quality of the National Park System that we know today and to ensure that the enjoyment of that system is equitably distributed throughout the population. This will be important to the development and implementation of effective, system-wide national policies and programs to promote racial and ethnic diversity in our national parks.

NPS and associated NGOs concerned with protecting the national parks are at the beginning of what must become a widespread effort to reach each corner of America and every nook of NPS, to make fundamental changes in the way national parks are perceived, used, and managed. If NPS and associated NGOs hope to ensure the perpetual integrity of the national parks, they must become valuable to the broad-based American public for reasons specific to and consistent with their environmental and cultural integri-

ty. We, as a society, must eliminate the socially constructed components of the national parks that are divisive to members of American society, at the same time that we promote the components that protect the ecological and cultural integrity of the parks and their associated ecosystems and historic sites. It is imperative that the divisive practices of NPS and those that associate themselves with national parks (and thus contribute to their image) end, in order to continue to protect the essential components of the parks and allow NPS to fulfill its mission in the service of the American public.

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