The Wilderness Experience as Purported by Planning Compared with that of Visitors to Zion National Park

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Introduction

Zion National Park, located in southwestern Utah, was established in 1909. It was enlarged in 1918 and again in 1937. Two areas of the park were merged in 1956 into what now constitutes 148,016 acres of picturesque canyon country. The purpose of Zion is to preserve dynamic natural processes of the extraordinary canyon erosion, scenic beauty, archeological features, scientific potential, and opportunities for the enjoyment and enlightenment of the public. Zion is particularly significant because of its unique scenery, geological showcasing, free-flowing Virgin River, biodiversity, and cultural history (NPS 2001).

Zion is a unique place that has a long history of issues associated with its popularity. Currently, a mandatory mass transportation system has been placed in the valley bottom to alleviate an enormous congestion problem. Additionally, many of the backcountry canyons have been permitted to maintain the use level in those areas. In many places within the park, camping is restricted to designated sites, which in turn results in the need for itineraries for overnight use. Popularity continues to increase: the number of permits issued increased by 97% between 1998 and 2002. Thus, it is not surprising that among the mission goals agreed upon in the recently adopted general management plan (GMP) were to:

- Provide park visitors educational and recreational opportunities that foster an appreciation for Zion and its resources; and
- Ensure that visitor impacts do not impair the resources.

In these mission goals, there is an inherent tension between the desire to provide recreational access to this significant and unique place, while assuring that access does not degrade the environmental or social resources over time. The context for the integration of these values is further framed by the fact that approximately 90% of Zion is proposed wilderness. Thus, the recreational opportunities are additionally focused on the concepts of solitude and primitive or unconfined types of recreation.

Background

Zion managers are now engaged in a backcountry management plan that was called for by the GMP. In the GMP, a strategy was designed to develop carrying capacities for the park through use of the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) framework. Within that framework, managers committed to using "park staff, with public input" to determine "desired resource conditions and visitor experiences in different areas of the park" (NPS 2001:35). This procedure calls for a process of zoning, identifying indicators of quality, setting standards for those indicators, and monitoring to maintain desired conditions.

Solitude, encounters, and Zion's backcountry experience. Solitude is a common feature of backcountry experience studies (Manning 1999). Guided by the language of the Wilderness Act and widespread adoption of planning frameworks such as VERP or Limits of Acceptable Change, solitude is often measured as a function of the number of encounters a visitor has with other people or

groups while in the backcountry (Manning and Lime 2000). Indeed, encounters with other people have been established as a correlate with levels of setting acceptability (Manning et al. 1996) and as an experience variable that people are able to conceptualize in relationship to visitor access (Manning 2001; Manning and Lawson, 2002) or the quality of biophysical settings (White et al. 2001).

However, there is also a concern that focusing management on standards for solitude can deny the visitor opportunities for unconfined forms of recreation or dismiss the fact that experiences are dynamic, that the importance of encounters may change throughout the experience (Borrie and Roggenbuck 2001), and that people will, given the choice, be able to cope with settings in ways to ensure they experience the solitude, privacy, or naturalness they seek (Shafer and Hammitt 1995). Finally, while is it established that people can and will make trade-offs to ensure they get a high-quality experience, they may be less receptive to reducing their freedom or access if they do not see, understand, or appreciate a clear problem (Borrie et al. 2001). There has also been recent concern that the common forms of quantitative social research that have been prevalent in the study of backcountry experiences can be misinterpreted due to an absence of clear descriptions about why visitors respond as they do to framed questions (Davenport et al. 2002; McCool, this volume).

To assist with gaining visitors' input on the integrity of social and biophysical resource conditions (including perceptions of solitude and primitiveness), a two-year study of Zion's summer visitors was developed. The first year's goal was to develop an understanding of how Zion's day users and overnight visitors to the backcountry are defining and evaluating the setting and experience. The second phase of the study will narrow the questions to gain visitor responses to standards for social and resource indicators.

The focus of this paper is a comparison of how the language used in the plan relates to visitor responses to quantitative questionnaire and qualitative interviews.

Study Methods

Quantitative surveys were conducted with several groups of backcountry visitors during the summer and fall of 2002. Surveys addressed baseline data on visitor use and users and potential indicators of the quality of the visitor experience. Visitor questionnaires were administered to day-use hikers in three areas through an on-site questionnaire. A total of 357 completed questionnaires were attained, a response rate of 80%.

Day-use hikers to canyons requiring a permit were administered a mail-back questionnaire. A total of 133 completed questionnaires were attained, a response rate of 74%. Overnight backcountry hikers were administered a mail-back questionnaire. A total of 204 completed questionnaires were attained, a response rate of 78%.

Seventy visitors participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews about their park experience during three one-week blocks during that same summer and fall. Forty-five of the visitors were on day trips and 25 spent at least one night in the backcountry. Visitors were asked about their experience, including the importance of solitude, encounters with other people, whether their expectations were met, and suggestions they may have for the management of the park. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed via the content analysis program Nudist*.

The findings of these interviews provide a contextual foundation for the results of the quantitative studies described above.

Selected Results

In this section selected results for the two forms of data collection are reported. These results were selected in an attempt to link the kinds of language used in the management plan to visitor impressions and the language they used to describe the same concepts. While the two forms of data are reported in such a way as to complement one another, it is important to note that each research method has distinct advantages and disadvantages. The quantitative studies generalize out to the

visitors within the sample universe they were selected within. Qualitative interviews do not generalize but are intended to describe some dimensions of why visitors may feel as they do. Together, these data sources assist researchers in refining our questions as inquiry into the Zion experience proceeds.

Day visitors. Zion National Park is popular and busy. Non-permitted day visitors are dominantly traveling with family (64%) and in small groups (median 2, mean 4). The visitors in our sample came from 37 states and 21 foreign countries. For 65% of the visitors, it was their first visit to the park. Scenery and being outdoors in natural surroundings were the highlights of the experience for 75% of the respondents. Non-permitted day visitors encountered an average of 13.2 other groups and 103 other people during their visit. This was more than expected for 28% of the visitors and fewer or about as many as the remaining visitors expected. It was more than about 50% of the respondents preferred to encounter.

When asked about the importance of solitude to their visit, 81% of the visitors said it was very important or important to their experience. When asked about their opportunity to attain solitude, only 11% identified their opportunity to be poor or very poor.

Overnight visitors. Overnight visitor groups are somewhat smaller (median 2, mean 2) and more likely to travel with friends (40%). They were much more domestic, with only three foreign countries represented in our sample. They most often identified scenery as the best part of their trip with solitude as the second most commented-upon feature. Visitors generally did not encounter anyone while in their campsite, but while hiking encountered a range of 3–19 groups per day. Fifty percent of the respondents encountered fewer people than expected while hiking, while only 13% encountered more groups then they expected to. Ninety-six percent of the visitors identified solitude as very important or important to their experience. Only 2.5% suggested their ability to find solitude was less than satisfactory, while 56% suggested it was excellent.

Varying definitions of solitude. As described earlier, the park should be providing "outstanding opportunities for solitude." Our quantitative research indicates that both non-permitted and overnight backcountry visitors to Zion are encountering many people while in Zion's proposed wilderness, yet are still seeking and gaining solitude. Thus, we have a need to better define the relationship between encounters and solitude if indicators relative to encounters are going to be useful for managing that experience.

Results from the interviews suggest that visitors defined solitude as "being by ourselves" where one does not "hear anything else but water"; "[I]t was so quiet. It was very peaceful, and no sign of other people." These definitions are consistent with conventional notions of solitude. The incongruity, however, may be explained by the temporal qualifiers that were often apparent in the responses. Examples would include "were alone most of the time," "there was a lot of time," "in general, we were able to keep to ourselves, for the most part."

Similarly with encounters, the descriptions suggested that encounters occurred at anticipated times, especially at the end of the trip: "[A]t the end, it got busy"; "[W]hat we expected, I guess. Coming down there was a big group of people." People also demonstrated that they were using various coping mechanisms to avoid encounters: "We planned on going early to beat the heat and probably beat some of the crowds." And finally, the behavior of the people encountered had an important influence on the nature of the encounter: "They were respectful. Everyone we met seemed to be pretty well mannered and polite."

Thus, it is not necessarily the fact that visitors to Zion may have low standards for encounters in their definition of solitude, but that they are able to manipulate either their expectations or behaviors to work within the set of conditions that are there to still achieve the solitude they desire.

Zion as wilderness. It is also plausible to consider the possibility that Zion may not be considered a wilderness by the visitors, and

thus solitude may have a different meaning for them. When asked about their perception of Zion as wilderness, there was general agreement by day users that Zion's backcountry was a wilderness setting, sometimes exclusively, sometimes qualified: "All of it." "Oh yeah. The whole time almost." *Quiet* was an important variable in defining wilderness: "You don't hear the road until you get right up somewhere in here [indicating trail below]. I stopped to listen for it. I didn't hear a thing." But the size of the area was less important for at least one visitor: "[I]t's nice to have this little section back here that the people that want to do this can do it." But in some cases, the concept of wilderness was quite widely defined. "Q. Would you consider this wilderness then, back in here? To sum it all up. A: Yeah, well I mean even in the main park, some of that is kind of wilderness-type area. But it sees a lot more traffic than it does up here."

A qualified criticism of wilderness was related to the degree of regulation. "Well, there [were] … regulations. But I guess the main thing is that the campsites were designated. Um, but that's the only part of it that feels developed. The place itself is primitive." But the need for regulation was acknowledged: "[A]gain, I don't look at that as a negative. It's just … it's just the way it is … to keep the, you know, to keep it as nice as it is."

"We went backpacking this summer at the trailhead next to our subdivision, within a half-mile it turns into wilderness. And, I mean it's alpine; it's high. I guess I'd have to say that you definitely don't run into as many people." "Well, and there's not designated camps. It's not as regulated … you don't have to purchase a permit." "I guess it feels more wilderness to me, because there's not the designated campsites." "But I guess because of the place we live, we definitely have a different idea of what wilderness is."

And for some visitors, Zion is too overdeveloped to be wilderness "The perception of, 'Well, I'm in the wilderness, but the fact that I'm on the trail means I'm not.' That I can only get into wilderness if I go off trail. I don't think everybody thinks that way." "But, you know, over in the main part of the park, on those trails, I've never been on a trail like that before, that, you know, gets so much use." "And I mean I understood that, just for erosion, going up to Angels Landing. But then, even when you continue past that, it stays paved."

Conclusion

The connection of the guiding language for Zion's backcountry and the evaluation visitors have of the social and natural conditions in that backcountry are filled with contradictions. Visitors generally see Zion's backcountry as a form of wilderness and seek the kinds of experiences that are consistent with wilderness (solitude and primitive conditions in natural areas). They are also finding that solitude while meeting as many as 19 groups a day while hiking on overnight trips, and often meeting over 100 people on a backcountry day hike.

It appears from these data that people are coming into their experience with a relatively accurate set of expectations about Zion as a popular and busy park. They are often using coping mechanisms that relate to both their expectations and their behavior to manage the encounters they have. They also have a definition of solitude that is not absolute and consider the acquisition of solitude to be something that is important but only needs to happen for portions of the experience.

While they are aware of the effect of backcountry regulations on their experience, they are generally accepting of it to maintain the park's integrity. Thus, it appears that backcountry visitors to Zion have accepted a version of wilderness in which opportunities for solitude and a primitive or unconfined type of recreation can exist in a busy, highly regulated park. In this case it seems that the solitude is acquired through coping and the regulation is accepted to safeguard the area's primitive qualities.

These data should help managers understand the limitations associated with boiling their management down to an indicator-standard monitoring approach. To get specific information on indicators and standards, managers and researchers will need to appreciate that the environment is novel to many

visitors and that impact may need to be demonstrated to get meaningful information evaluations of it from visitors. Additionally, current conditions are highly desirable to the existing visitors. Visitors were pleased with their experiences and supportive of the existing management regimes. Thus visitors expect to see many visitors at Zion, and define solitude in terms of quiet, spending periods of time alone, and the absence of roads.

Acknowledgments

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