

Managing Wildlife and Human Behavior to Address Human–Wildlife Interactions

Shane Whiting

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE IS CONSTANTLY ADAPTING to providing a good experience for their visitors as well as allowing the local wildlife to thrive. As the human visitation numbers rise, the NPS adapts to the desire to provide a pleasurable experience for the visitors, while educating them to an extent sufficient enough to deter them from harming the environment that they are visiting. As we learn more about the importance of our protected areas, park staff is faced with new information that changes the motives of their work.

The first speaker, Keith Benson, from the Redwood National and State Parks, has worked in effort to protect a rare species of ocean bird, the marbled murrelet, which has recently been found to nest exclusively in the old growth redwood forests that he protects. He was involved in costly research that studied the threats to the unique nesting bird. They concluded that the eggs were being poached by invasive birds, consisting of mostly Steller’s jays. The birds are attracted to the area by extra food brought in by the campers that visit the area. After the research was conducted, and they found out that this was the issue, they pushed for informing the visitors about how the threats that the marbled murrelet face should be significant to them. Unfortunately change was not occurring, so they knew that they needed to change their approach. They changed the way of protecting the marbled murrelet, they created the slogan, “Keep it Crumb Clean” in order to inform people that by leaving their food out attracted the Steller’s jays that threatened the endangered marbled murrelet. The more direct education was proven to be much more effective.

The second speaker, Kristen Leong, from the Biological Resources Division of the NPS, spoke about “Managing Human-Wildlife Interactions: The Principles of Animal Behavior Change and Learning.” She stated that “in the absence of active management, wildlife may learn that people are not a threat.” She made it clear that there is a difference between habituation and conditioning. Conditioning stimulates a positive or negative consequence for the animal, causing a response is usually intensified over time is nothing changes. She suggested that while attempting to manage a behavior, first you select the behavior, and then you identify the attractants and deterrents, followed by developing a strategy, plotting a strategy, implementing it broadly, then finally evaluating thoroughly.

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2016. *Engagement, Education, and Expectations—The Future of Parks and Protected Areas: Proceedings of the 2015 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites.*

Hancock, Michigan: George Wright Society.

© 2016 George Wright Society. All rights reserved. Please direct all permission requests to info@georgewright.org.

The final speaker, Sara Melena, from the NPS in Colorado, also spoke about managing human-wildlife interactions, with a focus on the principles of human behavior change and learning. She stated that “Wildlife management is 10% managing wildlife and 90% managing people.” She touched on community-based social marketing to educate the public. She also talked about the benefits and barriers that have been found to have a strong effect on the public’s opinion and how much they understand the importance of being gentle when entering our protected areas and adapting practices that promote the wellbeing of visitors and wildlife for generations.

Reflection

Speakers discussed that in the last 50 years, the total population has risen in the United States from just under 195 million people, to just shy of 320 million in 2015. This growth in population has caused a heightened demand for visitors to enjoy the parks and protected areas that we cherish. As we continue to study these areas and evolve with them, we learn more about how important they are, how fragile and important the environment is, as well as how fragile the relationship is between the wildlife and the ever increasing influence of humans. We also face the issues of not creating a negatively-conditioned relationship between the wildlife and the humans because it can be bad for both. For example, when bears become conditionally trained to eating garbage and food from campsites and dumpsters in protected areas, actions often have to be taken, and there are instances where the bear has to be killed because it becomes an issue of safety for the human visitors. It is a constant battle with the desire to maintain a civil relationship with wildlife, while offering a way for park visitors to enjoy the areas as much as possible.