

## Managing National Parks in a Multicultural Society: Searching for Common Ground

**T**he people of the USA love their national parks. Approximately 300 million visits were recorded at national parks in 2000, the vast majority being domestic visitors. The love affair between U.S. citizens and national parks is so intense, in fact, that it is often stated that the parks are “being loved to death.” Of the many challenges facing the National Park Service (NPS) in the 21st century, engendering support for its programs from an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse society may be the most critical. Will the love affair between the people and their parks endure as Americans change in hue and heritage? In order for NPS to continue to enjoy the benefits of this relationship, it will need a better social scientific understanding of the factors underlying patterns of national park visitation among diverse ethnic minority groups. This paper reviews the major theoretical explanations employed to study racial and ethnic variation in national park visitation. Stated differently, the paper addresses the question of “Who has access to national parks, and why?”

Racial and ethnic minorities are largely absent among visitors to national parks (Goldsmith 1994). Several visitor surveys at parks throughout the country support this observation. The NPS Visitor Services Project (VSP) at the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit conducted surveys at more than a dozen parks in which data on ethnicity were collected. One report stated that at nine NPS units (including Grand Teton National Park, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and Gettysburg National Military Park) only 7% of visitor groups were ethnic minorities (Clifford 1994). A review of other VSP studies at other national

park units revealed that 90% of visitor groups were largely whites of European descent (Floyd 1999). Without understanding the factors that may inhibit visitation among minority groups, it will be difficult to develop strategies to engender support for national park programs among a broader and more diverse segment of the population.

### **The Future is Now**

The disparity in national park visitation between the majority and minority populations should be a major concern among NPS managers and policy-makers for at least two

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important reasons. First, racial and ethnic minority populations, particularly Hispanic populations, have dramatically increased their share of the U.S. population and will continue to increase over the next several decades (Figure 1). By the middle of this century the percentage of non-Hispanic whites in the population could be less than 50%, down from approximately 71% in 2000. Just recently, reports from the 2000 census indicated that non-Hispanic whites constitute less than 50% of the California population. In Texas, the

population currently characterized as “minority” will become the majority population by 2020 under a variety of population-growth scenarios (Murdock et al. 1997). The composition of the minority population has also been transformed. For the first time in history, the Hispanic population will soon supplant African Americans as the largest minority group in the U.S. population. Currently, these two populations are roughly even in number; Hispanics number 35.3 million, while African Americans number 34.6 million.

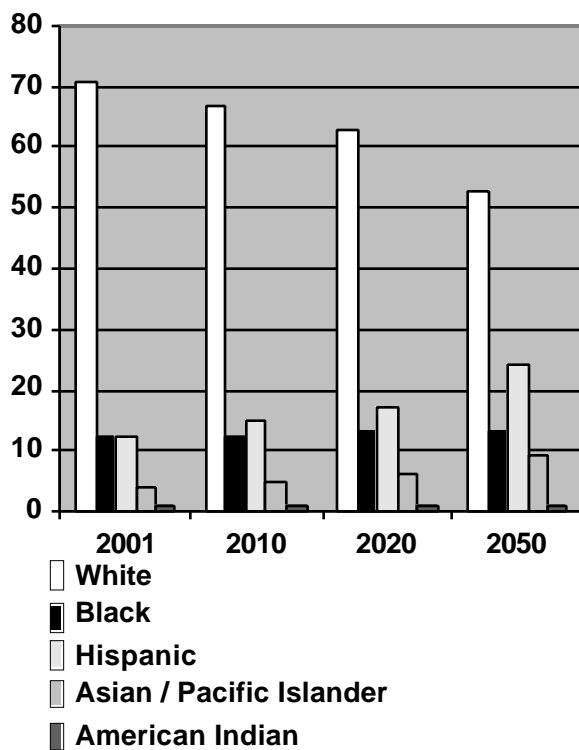


Figure 1. Percentage change in race and ethnic composition of the U.S. population, 2001-2050.

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Second, if current patterns of visitation persist into the future, along with current demographic trends, the probability of lower demand for national park experiences increases. If this should result, where will national park programs rank among other public policy priorities in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society? Without greater visitation and interest from among those populations that are growing most rapidly, national park programs over time are likely to be supported by a smaller and shrinking segment of the U.S. population. The major challenge for NPS, in light of these trends, is to make the national parks more accessible and appealing to an increasingly multicultural society. This necessarily involves understanding reasons for the disparity in rates of national park visitation between whites of European descent and people of color.

### Who Has Access to Nature and Why?

Since the 1960s social scientists have developed five hypotheses that speak to the question of minority access to the national parks. While these hypotheses are not completely independent, they are presented separately here for clarity. Each hypothesis carries with it a key assumption and suggests a policy implication that might inform strategies to increase diversity in park visitation. The discussion below draws heavily on the social science literature on ethnic patterns in recreation

behavior.

**Marginality hypothesis.** This hypothesis was developed to explain low participation in wildland recreation areas among African Americans (Washburne 1978). It holds that low rates of participation among African Americans result from limited access to socioeconomic resources which, in turn, are a consequence of historical patterns of racial discrimination. Stated differently, historical barriers in education and the labor market have negatively affected earnings, which in turn continues to affect disposable income available for recreation expenditures. Further, this hypothesis recognizes that past sanctioned and *de facto* discrimination prevented African Americans and other minority groups from full participation in the major social and cultural institutions of society.

A key assumption of this hypothesis is that majority- and minority-group members have an equal propensity to participate in wildland recreation. Thus, the removal of socioeconomic barriers should result in more "equal" rates of participation and more equal access. Moreover, in the long run, as minority groups experience greater social mobility, the disparity in national park visitation will decrease. The policy implication associated with this view suggests that programs that reduce or minimize socioeconomic barriers to park use would be effective in increasing access.

**The subcultural hypothesis.** This

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hypothesis directs research attention to the cultural factors associated with the formation of outdoor recreation preferences. It suggests that racial and ethnic differences in national park visitation can be attributed to divergent norms, value systems, and socialization practices adhered to by different racial and ethnic groups, independent of socioeconomic factors. On one hand, it has been argued that the values underpinning the attraction of European Americans to national parks engender indifference and antipathy toward parks among people of color. For example, Meeker (1991) argued that while European Americans view parks as places for refuge and escape from urban stress, African Americans and Native Americans display little enthusiasm for parks and wilderness because these places are reminders of their violent subjugation and oppression. Similarly, Taylor (2000) suggested that the 19th-century frontier experience and the Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions in which the national park idea emerged evoke contrasting images for whites of European descent and people of color. For the latter, slavery, sharecropping, forced relocations, and genocide are the images associated with the advancement of the national park idea. On the other hand, subcultural influences have also been interpreted as social-psychological processes leading to the preservation or maintenance of one's ethnic identity. For example, Washburne and Wall (1980) have

speculated on possible ethnic boundary maintenance functions of leisure activities. They suggested that the activities themselves, as well as the sites chosen for them, may be used by one ethnic group as a way to demarcate and contrast it from other groups. Some activities and sites might be defined by members of an ethnic minority group as inappropriate because the activities or sites do not reinforce the group's collective identity. More recently, other researchers have argued that leisure may play a critical role in maintaining subcultural identity in a multicultural society (Floyd and Gramann 1993). Because decisions about leisure activities are made in relative freedom and are less subject to conformity pressures associated with workplace, educational, and other settings (Kelly 1987), ethnic differences are more likely to be reflected in choices of leisure activities and settings. In light of Meeker's and Taylor's sociohistorical argument, the national parks historically have not reflected the collective identity of ethnic minority groups. Therefore, national parks may lie beyond the range of activities and settings that reinforce their collective identities.

Where the marginality hypothesis might assume that different racial and ethnic groups have an equal propensity to utilize national parks, the subcultural hypothesis suggests different groups have *unique* but not *inherent* cultural preferences. The policy implications of the subcultural hypothe-

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**Figure 2. Minority populations are underrepresented in the national parks.**

sis suggests that programs should be designed to meet the diverse needs of different racial and ethnic groups. It also suggests that regardless of increasing social mobility, minority-group members may not visit national parks at the same rate as whites of European descent. Of the 30-plus empirical studies on racial and ethnic patterns in recreation behavior reviewed by Manning (1999), over one-half reported evidence consistent with the subcultural hypothesis. Although these studies did not examine national park visitation, their findings are consistent with regional and statewide survey data showing that factors beyond income and education account

for racial and ethnic differences in national park visitation (e.g., Dwyer 1994; Gramann and Floyd 1991).

**Assimilation hypothesis.** Several studies have used assimilation theory to understand the role of ethnicity in recreation behavior. Assimilation refers to “the process of boundary reduction that can occur when members of two or more societies meet” (Yinger 1981, 249). Two types of assimilation have been examined in recreation research: cultural assimilation (also known as “acculturation”) and structural assimilation. These concepts have provided better insight into subcultural factors.

“Cultural assimilation” refers to

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minority-group acquisition of cultural characteristics of the majority group (or host society), such as language, diet, and religion (Gordon 1964). A commonly used indicator of cultural assimilation in social science research is language use: to what extent do minority-group members use their native language versus English (e.g., speaking, reading, or writing). "Structural assimilation" refers to the extent of social interaction between majority and minority groups in primary (e.g., family and friendships) and secondary (e.g., school, work, etc.) groups. Researchers have found these concepts particularly useful in studying the recreation behavior of Hispanic and Asian-origin populations (e.g., Floyd and Gramann 1993; Carr and Williams 1993).

The key assumption associated with this perspective is that greater assimilation leads to similarity between majority- and minority-group members. In the case of national park visits, the assimilation hypothesis suggests that as members of different ethnic groups interact in primary social groups, they will exhibit similar patterns of park visitation. In general, studies of Mexican Americans' use of national forests suggest that cultural assimilation is more important in predicting choices of activities, while primary-group assimilation is more important in understanding site choices (Floyd and Gramann 1993). An important implication demonstrated by this type of research is that

the Hispanic population is not a monolithic bloc. It can be differentiated according to language use, social group affiliation, nativity, and other characteristics. Thus, effective outreach or management activities designed for these populations must recognize this "internal" diversity.

The assimilation hypothesis may be particularly relevant to immigration trends. New immigrants and their descendants are projected to account for "approximately three-fifths" of the U.S. population growth through 2050 (Murdock 1995). Asia and Latin America account for 84% of immigrants to the USA; just 10% originate in Europe (Murdock 1995). This contrasts sharply with the massive European immigration of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, the vast majority of "new Americans" come from countries where English is not the primary language and where Western European traditions do not form the foundation of societal culture. Two potential implications of this trend are worth noting. First, continual immigration flows sustain ethnic identity and slow the process of assimilation. Thus, recreation preferences of ethnic groups experiencing immigration will continue to be influenced by ethnicity or subcultural factors. Second, this trend may likely pose a challenge to resource interpretation and stewardship education.

Stewardship activities in the USA are based primarily on European American views of nature. Tradition-

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ally, such views make a sharp separation between humans and nature (Cronon 1996). In the case of wilderness, parks, and other protected areas, stewardship activities aim to limit, if not remove, the influence of humans. This orientation is far from universal. A number of writers have shown that Native Americans, Latinos, and some African tribal groups do not compartmentalize nature and human communities in separate domains (Burnett and Conover 1989; Lynch 1993; McDonald and McAvoy 1997). At the same time, there has been no research on attitudes and perceptions of recent immigrant populations toward park management practices.

**Interpersonal discrimination.** This term refers to actions carried out by members of dominant racial or ethnic groups that have differential and negative impacts on members of minority groups (Feagin 1991). Such actions take place between individuals or in small-group situations. It is generally assumed that perceived discrimination exerts a negative effect on park visitation. How much of a factor is it? While researchers and park managers often cite discrimination as a constraint on park use, documented evidence on the subject is limited. Anecdotal evidence suggests that members of ethnic minority groups may not feel welcome at remote na-



**Figure 3. The national parks must become more personally and culturally meaningful to populations that have traditionally been in the minority.**

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tional park settings. For example, in a *Los Angeles Times* article, an African American NPS superintendent suggested that the reasons blacks do not visit national parks in larger numbers ranged from “bugs to snakes to dirt to the idea that you might have to travel through rural America, where you might not be made to feel welcome” (Clifford 1994). In the same article, a Latina physician from Los Angeles who frequently visits parks in the Southwest expressed apprehension about visiting national parks outside the region:

I look Indian. When I go to one of the parks in Arizona, I'll stay at a hotel on the Navajo Reservation where I know people are going to think I am one of them. But I haven't gone to any of the parks in Wyoming or Montana, and I guess that has something to do with the feeling of apprehension about going into unknown territory (Clifford 1995).

Research conducted in other outdoor recreation areas offers additional insight on the nature of interpersonal discrimination in park settings. For example, in a study of Chicago's Lincoln park, Gobster and Delgado (1993, 78) reported that discrimination “has affected 1 in 10 minority users.” African Americans, followed by Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans, were most likely to report acts of discrimination. These acts included verbal harassment, physical gestures, assaults, nonverbal cues, and harassment from law enforcement

officers. A focus group conducted by Wallace and Witter (1992) revealed that a significant number of African Americans in the St. Louis metropolitan area did not camp because they felt vulnerable to racial intimidation. Floyd, Gramann, and Saenz (1993) found that perceptions of discrimination among Hispanics in Phoenix tended to decrease visits to 8 of 13 sites on the nearby Tonto National Forest. Finally, a study set in the Detroit area found that African American visits to regional parks were negatively affected by interracial conflicts with white park users (West 1989). The extent to which interpersonal discrimination carries over to national park visitation is not known. There is enough empirical evidence from other settings to suggest that it could be a factor.

Where interpersonal discrimination becomes an issue, managers must be sensitive to the social climate their park settings engender. Do they make members of different ethnic groups feel welcome? Settings with racially and ethnically diverse participants and staffs may provide a more comfortable setting and may attract diverse visitor groups.

**Institutional discrimination.** The final hypothesis to introduce is institutional discrimination. Rather than drawing attention to individual and interpersonal interactions, institutional discrimination focuses on the “behavior” of organizations, bureaucracies, or corporate entities. This



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hypothesis assumes discriminatory practices are embedded in the structure, policies, or procedures of organizations. Of the major hypotheses advanced to explain the disparity in national park visitation between whites of European descent and people of color, institutional discrimination (historical or otherwise) has not been addressed in empirical studies. As a result, there have been no attempts to identify parameters for measuring the institutional discrimination in national park programs. Hypothetical examples of such parameters might include discriminatory pricing policies (Manning 1999), hiring practices, systematic exclusion of ethnic minorities in park media, or disparities in funding programs that have ethnic themes.

Historically, sanctioned segregation was practiced in national parks as units were designated in the South. According to Barry Mackintosh, an NPS historian:

The NPS had little presence in the South until the 1930s, when it received a number of historic battlefields and forts from the War Department and acquired land to establish Shenandoah, Great Smoky Mountains, and Mammoth Cave national parks. Following local custom, there were some segregated rest room facilities in the historical areas, and one of the campgrounds at Shenandoah was initially reserved for blacks. There were also black and white golf courses in the National Capital Parks in Washington, adminis-

tered by the NPS after 1933. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes (1933-46) moved to abolish what segregation existed in the parks, and it was largely if not totally eliminated by the mid-1940s (personal communication).

Research has not examined whether such historical practices are salient in the minds of actual or potential African American park visitors.

### Searching for Common Ground

While these hypotheses were presented separately, the relationships among the various ethnic factors and national park visitation is complex and not easily reduced to "single causes" with clear policy and management implications. Despite more than 30 years of research on racial and ethnic differences in recreation behavior, it is surprising that very few empirical studies of racial and ethnic variation in national park use appear in the literature. Clearly, in view of the present and future racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population, a new program of research will be needed to inform park management decisions in the 21st century. Specifically, research which continues to explain established racial and ethnic patterns while exploring the implications of new sources of ethnic and cultural diversity for park visitation should receive greater attention.

A philosophical tenet implicit in the national park idea is that parks should be a "pleasuring ground" for people of today and tomorrow. However,

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research results from a number of visitor surveys around the country point to a considerable gap between this ideal and the reality of who actually derives pleasure from these national resources. That nearly one-third of the U.S. population (soon to be close to one-half of the population) are largely invisible in the national parks raises questions about the parks' future relevance, meaning, and protection in

an increasingly multicultural society. The disparity in national park use also raises questions about equity, fairness, and the ability of the NPS to find common ground with the people it is mandated to serve. Moreover, as this century unfolds, an equal burden falls on members of the research community to help create ways to transcend the boundaries that retard access to America's national parks.

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