

Managers' Perceptions of Issues in Serving Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Urban Parks

Michael A. Schuett and Gillian Bowser

Introduction

One of the key recommendations in *The National Park Service in the 21st Century* (2004), a report compiled by the National Park System Advisory Board, concerns diverse populations. According to this document, NPS should “tell America’s story as one of diverse cultures interacting with and depending upon the natural world.” They suggest “that all parks should be interpreted in terms of both their natural and cultural values, including their values to all Americans” (National Park System Advisory Board 2004:12). Basically, the reports stresses that parks and their management should reflect an understanding of the significance of each landscape as a culturally formed montage of habitat and human behavior, an interaction between changing natural processes and people.

In considering this statement, how can NPS incorporate the values of all Americans in its various park units? How is this story being told? Do Americans feel they have a connection (physical or psychological) to the national parks, especially those parks in or near changing, diverse urban populations? Is this an issue of environmental justice or marketing? What future strategies should be considered to make the visitor experience more inclusive and integrate those individuals who have traditionally been under-represented (Hispanics, African Americans) as visitors in NPS park units? These questions raise important issues about the continued challenge the NPS faces as it strives to preserve many social, cultural, and natural resource treasures for a changing American population.

Some researchers would argue that the record of accomplishment for our natural resource agencies and its relationship with

certain under-represented populations is problematic. It is a challenge that could be discussed through the lens of environmental justice. Bryner (2002) discusses several frameworks that have been used and agreed upon by scholars to explore the causes and characteristics of this type of environmental justice. One of these frameworks is social justice, which discusses a lack of access to natural resources and their benefits. In referring to specific benefits, one that is important is to have the ability to experience the social and cultural history contained in our national parks. As increases in minority populations change the face of population centers across the nation, park managers in or near urban settings are confronted with new ways to figure out how to attract and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and eclectic customer base.

In a review of the literature on under-represented groups and the use of U.S.

national parks, Floyd (1999) points out that national park visitation by racial and ethnic minorities, especially African Americans, is lower compared with that of whites. (See also Rodriguez and Roberts 2002, as well as Gomez 2003, for comprehensive literature reviews on ethnicity and recreation.) In highlighting several specific studies, a brief overview of research on minority park visitation, Northern Arizona University's nationwide study *Survey of the American Public* (2003), found that 36% of white non-Hispanic Americans, 33% of Asian Americans, and 27 % of Hispanic Americans reported visiting a national park in the last two years, while visitation for African Americans was comparatively low at 13%. In examining reasons for some of these visitation differences by various under-represented groups, Roberts (2003) studied visitation by Latinos and African Americans at Rocky Mountain National Park. She found that individuals experienced several types of constraints to park visitation, including the culture of NPS; perceived discrimination, discomfort, and safety; and lack of knowledge or awareness. In urban parks, Gobster (2001) investigated visitor usage and found that racial and ethnic minorities and whites participated in similar activities, yet minorities still feel a sense of discrimination by police and park staff in the park setting. In a related study that assessed social science needs of urban park managers, Harris and Lorenzo (2000) found that managers expressed a need for more social science research (e.g., research on visitor expectations), technical assistance, and training opportunities to serve their clientele in urban park settings.

Given the body of research on minority park visitation and a growing need for park managers to serve all visitors, more

information is needed from those who interact with customers on a regular basis. Several questions need to be explored: Are racial and ethnic minorities aware of national parks in or near urban areas? How can the visitor experiences become more "relevant" for racial and ethnic minorities? What strategies could be used to make under-represented visitors feel more welcome, or at least a part of the park experience? Therefore, the purpose of this study was to obtain preliminary feedback from NPS urban park managers and administrators on serving racial and ethnic minorities.

Methods

Between November and December 2003, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted in three one-hour-long focus group/conference calls with thirteen individuals. Participants included managers in urban-proximate national park units and administrators. As used in this study, the definitions of race and ethnicity followed those of Floyd (1999:2):

- *Race*: a social group distinguished or set apart, by others or by itself, primarily on the basis of real or perceived physical characteristics.
- *Ethnicity*: a social group set apart on the basis of culture or nationality characteristics.

The following criteria were used to choose study participants: (1) experience as a manager in an urban park unit, (2) expertise in program delivery or administration with urban park units, and (3) availability for the study. Managers represented the following NPS units: Martin Luther King National Historic Site, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Santa Monica

Mountains National Recreation Area, New York Harbor Parks, Gateway National Recreation Area, Death Valley National Park, and Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Administrators represented the following NPS offices and programs: the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, the WASO (Washington headquarters office) Natural Resource and Education divisions, the Pacific West Regional Office, and the Midwest Regional Office. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each phone call utilized the same interviewer, asking the questions in about the same order. The conference call questions were based on the current literature as well as input from managers and a team of academic researchers. The following questions and areas related to serving racial and ethnic minorities were explored:

- What are the critical issues facing park and recreation managers?
- What are current visitation levels at your park?
- Describe design/programs/planning features made to attract visitors.
- Explain the factors that prevent agencies from better serving visitors.
- Elaborate on strategies colleges and universities can use to better recruit and train potential employees.
- What are your research needs?

Findings

Thirteen individuals participated in the calls. The transcripts yielded approximately 120 pages of data. These data were analyzed using content analysis, and all data were aggregated. In order to secure reliability and validity, four independent researchers examined the transcripts for frequency of word usage and common words

and phrases. The following themes emerged from the analysis.

Interaction and connection with local communities. The issue of improving relationships with communities was a repeated observation that surfaced in several of the respondents' comments. The point was driven home many times: NPS managers felt that they must do a better job of connecting with local schools, citizens, and partners. NPS managers agreed that they should obtain more input on programs, establish local advisory boards (if feasible), develop more partnerships, and constantly be aware of whether local citizens have been exposed to—and if they care about—what the park has to offer.

NPS personnel felt that they must work with specific groups that have not previously participated in planning and program development so that they can modify programs and displays to appeal to diverse groups. Managers felt more support is needed for community-based programs so that these programs remain a high priority for the entire park unit, and not just the site manager.

Managers stressed the fact that relationship-building is a long-term process and takes a great deal of time and effort. Communities are eager for results and want to see them in a tangible format. Still others felt that greater interaction with communities, although nothing new, needs to be reinforced. Several comments stressed the need to obtain information from the community on the programs and services they desire by strengthening current relationships:

... communicate a job vacancy, to communicate activities that are going on in the park. And even on top of communicating their activities, to finding out from those folks in the community

what type of activities that they might even be interested in to help them prioritize even their time.... We have to make that connection with our population to show that ... you put a rainbow of color across the U.S.

Lastly, the interaction between the communities and NPS is a goal that pays off over time and reaps benefits into the future:

... and that's some of what I have seen in other parks as well, as I've traveled and talked with other park managers and community leaders.... [H]aving that liaison to that community group, has provided the opportunity to establish a longer-term relationship and ... gives the community an opportunity to get to know other park's staff or other resources within the park....

Commitment to a diverse workforce.

NPS managers were adamant that the agency must demonstrate a stronger commitment to diversity recruitment and retention in all aspects, i.e., from policy to resources. Seasonal and veteran NPS employees may need new skills, requiring cultural sensitivity training, to relate better with diverse employees, visitors, and communities. Managers also felt that employees, programs and initiatives that effectively deliver results in enhancing employment diversity through local communities must be supported. Managers and administrators felt it was desirable to work toward establishing a more diverse workforce, reflecting the demographics of local communities. Park staff will need to help create policies and an infrastructure that will make employment diversity and retention a staple within the system. Respondents also felt that there is an additional need for more resources to support efforts in recruitment and retention. These programs will require

additional funding and time from park superintendents.

One did feel that this desired goal was quite a challenge:

... [W]e're not going to be truly relevant unless ... our own organization reflects a diversity of the community and people who really understand how to connect the park to those communities. The second part, which we're all struggling with, is that we have so many well-intentioned employees in the Park Service who want to try to answer that question of relevancy, and in their own way, they took a launch here and launch there ... there's really not a strategic sort of strategy in place or the infrastructure to sustain it.

Another closely related problem relating to a diverse workforce was commitment. Managers felt support was lacking from within the agency and among the administrators as well:

I think the most critical issue is commitment. Lack of or whatever there might be, by staff in parks and also by this administration. And it goes as far back as some of us on this phone conversation, [who have] been with the National Park Service for over 30 years. It's, you know, certain individuals or the organization itself unwilling to dedicate the time, the staff, and the ability to even use non-traditional ways of recruiting and hiring methods to even go out and make any effort. You know, this is the sort of a thing that we have been talking about forever.

Recruitment and employment programs. In a closely related issue, NPS managers agreed that they should work cooperatively with schools, community leaders, and businesses to create programs that will

make a diverse workforce a reality. NPS must use the educational system as a direct pipeline to accomplish this goal and start these initiatives early in one's educational career. They realize recruitment programs with local elementary and high schools should be enhanced so under-represented students are aware of what NPS offers. Participants agreed that high school students should have opportunities to become part of the agency through specific programs designed to expose them to all aspects of employment within the system. Everyone felt that students should be able to volunteer, obtain academic credit, and, with adequate training, move into positions as NPS professionals. Partnerships should be established and maintained with historically black and Hispanic colleges so that pertinent academic programs, such as in history, recreation and parks, and so on, become a conduit for students to feed into the NPS system.

Having the ability to recruit students into future positions was a theme that emerged several times:

When minority students, middle school students ... are exposed to a park staff member of their ethnic background ... [then] we have had far more success in reaching out to the community... [a]nd [strengthening] their relationship with local universities and making them aware of the Park Service in the community and the opportunities that the Park Service offers. Many of our minority staff members were recruited through the student temporary or student

career employment programs and they didn't really have a good sense of what they were getting into, when they started it, but it's been very successful and then they reach out to their local communities ... and it really serves as a role model to the student.

Even though workforce programs and policies currently exist in the agency, most felt that more could be done to get administrators to "buy in" to these directives.

Identification of visitor needs/program delivery. Participants agreed that administrators and staff need to identify their audience and provide programs that are more relevant for diverse groups.

According to one respondent, programs should be created that provide a "threshold experience" for first-time visitors. These initial experiences are critical to attracting repeat visitors to the park. A connection with the visitor should be sought out by meet-

ing the needs of the entire community through relevant programming. It is not necessarily about more people in the parks but about the quality of the experience and its impact on future generations:

We're not trying to get new visitors. We're trying to get people to develop a relationship with parks and open spaces and cultural areas, so that it becomes a part of their life. So it becomes something that they pass on to their children, and it is always going to be hard.... [W]e're trying to evaluate this rather quickly, and this is a glacial movement.



As for getting this message out, information on park programs should be targeted for diverse audiences and placed in appropriate venues to reach these groups, e.g., Hispanic newspapers. It is advisable that the agency coordinate its promotional efforts and make sure the appropriate message is being delivered to the target audience. Those who create effective programs and initiatives should share this information *internally* as well as externally so other staff can benefit.

Enhancement of current research endeavors. The final theme that emerged focused on research. Managers sensed that they needed more ammunition to make their arguments and more information to make decisions. They felt that more research studies are needed on racial and ethnic minorities and urban parks. In particular, they expressed a need for more data to identify many important predictor and explanatory variables, including reasons for visiting parks, barriers to visitation, program and activity preferences, customer satisfaction, media choices, attitudes about the park experience, etc. They also expressed a desire to see more in-depth research methods (such as focus groups) being used, so more detailed information can be collected and analyzed. One manager evidenced the need for more research:

Our fundamental problem is we don't have access to data outside of what we're doing.... [I]f you could find something ... or [someone] to act as a consistent clearinghouse of relevant data that would give a manager ... up-to-date information.... [T]here was just no way for our people, or any of us, to get that kind of study input of new and relevant information....

It was suggested that a national clearinghouse be created that would contain research results on under-represented groups by park managers, scientists, and academic researchers. NPS managers should also seek out and collaborate with experts from colleges and universities to identify and conduct relevant research.

In summary, respondents reinforced several key issues throughout the interviews.

- NPS park personnel and administrators may need to learn more about what customers desire;
- Links to communities and educational institutions are a critical source for future employees, research partnerships, social science; and
- Additional efforts should be made beyond what is currently being done to meet the two previous issues.

Just how future suggestions or feedback are integrated into the NPS visitor experience is not for academics to decide, but one that managers and citizens must come to terms with as our changing nation embarks on the preservation and sustainability of the nation's parks by *all* Americans. As Floyd aptly states: "That nearly one-third of the U.S. population is 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" (2001:11). On the other hand, we must also be sensitive to the fact that fluctuations in park visitation may also be a result of current societal fac-

tors, including a rise in electronic entertainment media, which may represent a shift in recreation choices (Pergams and Zaradic 2006).

Future suggestions

The purpose of this study was to obtain preliminary feedback from NPS urban park managers and administrators serving traditionally under-represented visitors from racial and ethnic minority groups. The scope of the results is limited due to the size and composition of the study sample. These results should not be generalized to all urban park units. However, the depth of the interviews unveiled a plethora of information that is worthy of future exploration from a practical and theoretical perspective.

Theoretically, much more work is needed in exploring the relationship between racial and ethnic minorities and the visitor experience. Have minorities been given equal access to our nation's national parks? Do social and cultural barriers need to be removed to improve this situation? If so, what are they and how can they be understood? Is the perception of a lack of access to national parks an environmental justice issue, or could it just be poorly trained staff?

From a practical side, several suggestions were given that can assist managers and administrators in making the access to national parks more fulfilling and more "relevant." Initially, a follow-up study to explore this research question is needed with a more representative sample, not only of managers but of a host of visitors. Given this limitation, several suggestions regarding outreach, which summarize and expand upon the managers' needs and concerns, are proposed in the next section of this paper.

Although time and resources are limiting, these types of ideas and suggestions are those expressed by the managers, so administrators need to seek out innovative strategies and incentives to encourage this type of work to become part of park culture.

Based on the comments of the managers and consistent with themes that have emerged from the literature, these research objectives should be honed through individual discussions with managers and be consistent with the organizational mandates of NPS.

Outreach

- Provide incentives for park managers to become more engaged with local communities through neighborhood associations, church groups, civic groups, etc., so they can better interact with and serve racial and ethnic minorities.
- Initiate programs to recruit a more diverse student body from higher education, as well as from secondary schools. Establish a recruitment pipeline with high schools and historically black and Hispanic colleges and community colleges. Increase funding for undergraduate and graduate student scholarships and post-doctoral fellowships.
- Management should seek and identify individuals that are willing to work within communities to recruit minority staff. Employees may need special training to interact at a community level. Managers must receive support and incentives from administration to do this type of outreach.
- Managers may want to consider getting more involved in career fairs and spend some time and resources to provide

field experiences for students via internships. They should encourage the addition of more courses to university and high school curricula that discuss racial and ethnic differences.

- Managers could become knowledgeable about multi-ethnic marketing and seek out publications that may be more effective in getting the word out to potential users.

Research

- Encourage more research, using more in-depth data collection methods, about racial and ethnic minorities, focusing on perceptions of the natural environment; preferences for specific sites, activities, and programs in urban areas; and barriers to park visitation.
- Identify the strategies that are most effective in procuring input and delivering information messages to and from minority group members for planning and program development.
- Learn why racial and ethnic minorities do not often choose recreation and

parks as a major and career. In turn, develop programs to educate recruit minority youth about NPS careers and determine the best practices for managing a diverse work force.

- Seek out additional sources and partnerships for funding to conduct more research. Current funding levels for research from NPS administration and at the park level seem problematic, so new partnerships with nonprofits, higher education, private foundations, and industry are needed to fulfill manager needs.
- Create a clearinghouse of information that contains current articles, data, and other sources on under-represented groups and national parks. A university could be the setting for this type of library.

Acknowledgments

Funding for this research was provided through the Renewable Resources Extension Act.

References

- Bryner, G.C. 2002. Assessing claims of environmental justice: Conceptual frameworks. In *Justice and Natural Resources: Concepts, Strategies, and Applications*. K. Mutz, G.C. Bryner, and D.S. Kenney, eds. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 31–56.
- Floyd, M.F. 1999. Race, ethnicity, and use of the National Park System. *Social Science Research Review* 1:2, 1–24.
- . 2001. Managing national parks in a multicultural society: Searching for common ground. *The George Wright Forum* 18:3, 41–51.
- Gobster, P.H. 2002. Managing urban parks for a racially and ethnically diverse clientele. *Leisure Sciences* 24:2, 143–159.
- Gomez, E. 2003. *Ethnicity and Recreation: An Abridged Annotated Bibliography*. Riverside, Calif.: U.S. Department of Agriculture–Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station.
- Harris, R.A., and A.B. Lorenzo. 2000. Social science needs assessment: A survey of urban park managers. *Park Science* 20:1, 42–44.
- National Park System Advisory Board. 2004. *The National Park Service in the 21st Century*:

Recommendations Concerning Future Directions for Science and Scientific Resource Management in the National Parks. Washington, D.C.: National Park System Advisory Board.

- Pergams, O.R.W., and P.A. Zaradic. 2006. Is love of nature in the U.S. becoming love of electronic media? 16-year downtrend in national park visits explained by watching movies, playing video games, Internet use, and oil prices? *Journal of Environmental Management*, 80:4, 387–393.
- Roberts, N.S. 2003. Ethnic minority visitors and non-visitors: An examination of constraints regarding outdoor recreation participation in Rocky Mountain Park. Ph.D., dissertation, Colorado State University, Ft. Collins.
- Rodriguez, D.A., and N.S. Roberts 2002. The association of race/ethnicity, gender and social class in outdoor recreation experiences: State of the knowledge. On-line at www.nature.nps.gov/socialscience/docs/RodriguezRobertsRep.pdf.
-

Michael A. Schuett, Texas Cooperative Extension, Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University, TAMU 2261, College Station, TX 77843-2261; mschuett@tamu.edu

Gillian Bowser, Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University, 2261 TAMU, 210 Francis Hall, College Station, Texas 77843-2261; gbowser@tamu.edu