

People of Color and Their Constraints to National Parks Visitation

David Scott and KangJae Jerry Lee

Introduction

THE UNITED STATES POPULATION is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse than in the past. More than one-third of all Americans can be classified as a person of color (Black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American), and the proportion of ethnic and racial minorities is projected to increase in the future (US Census Bureau 2012). Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the United States, followed by African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. Demographers predict that the White population will become a numerical minority by 2050 (Colby and Ortman 2015).

Despite this population change, existing data suggests that people of color visit national parks far less than Whites. Using data from a national survey, Taylor, Grandjean, and Anatkova (2011) reported that 53% of non-Hispanic Whites polled could name a national park they had visited in the last two years. In contrast, only 32% of Hispanics and 28% of Blacks reported they could do so. Data collected by the National Park Service (NPS) Visitor Services Project (VSP) substantiate that people of color represent a comparatively small fraction of national park visitors.¹ Hispanics and Asian Americans each comprised less than 5% of visitors to national park sites surveyed, while less than 2% of visitors were African Americans. Critics within and outside NPS recognize that its long-term survival depends on making its parks more welcoming and relevant to constituents and a changing population (Wilkinson 2000).

Our goal in the remainder of this paper is to identify key factors that constrain national park visitation among people of color. We believe a constraints perspective will illuminate why people of color do not make greater use of NPS areas, particularly those parks that are remote and where outdoor recreation and scenery are major attractions. This brief review

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will aid NPS staff and its partners as they continue to diversify the park service and create programs and offerings that are relevant to a broader spectrum of Americans.

Leisure constraints

We begin by defining *leisure constraints* and provide some principles about how constraints operate. Leisure constraints are those factors that limit people's participation in leisure activities, people's use of leisure services (e.g., visitation of national parks), and/or people's enjoyment of current activities or services (Scott 2005). This definition casts a wide net and suggests that constraints impact different facets of leisure participation and outdoor recreation. A key principle to understand is that leisure constraints influence both participation *and* preferences. Historically, most constraints studies have sought to explain non-participation in leisure activities or non-use of leisure services. The underlying assumption in these studies is that people have leisure preferences, but various factors (e.g., lack of time, access, resources) constrain their ability to act upon those preferences. These constraints were defined by Crawford and Godbey (1987) as *structural* and are assumed to be external and outside people's control. Crawford and Godbey advanced our understanding of leisure constraints when they postulated that there are also various factors that *inhibit the development of leisure preferences*. They defined these constraints as *intrapersonal*; they include personality needs, religiosity, reference group attitudes, prior socialization, and perceived skills and abilities (Scott 2005). Importantly, intrapersonal constraints result in people defining some leisure activities, services, and locales as inappropriate, uninteresting, or unavailable. It is highly likely that both structural and intrapersonal constraints figure prominently as to why people of color do not visit national parks as often as do Whites.

Another important principle is that leisure constraints are not insurmountable. Research indicates that many people participate in leisure activities or visit parks despite encountering constraints. Hubbard and Mannell (2001) documented that the presence of a constraint may trigger negotiation efforts. Research also shows that individuals who are highly motivated to participate in outdoor recreation activities are likely to work hard at negotiating constraints (White 2008). An important implication of this line of inquiry is that national park employees and their allies can create strategies to assist would-be visitors in their efforts to negotiate constraints.

Although a great deal of research has been conducted on constraints to leisure and outdoor recreation, relatively little has been done on factors that prevent people's use of national parks. Nevertheless, we believe that the corpus of knowledge on leisure constraints is readily applicable as to why people of color are less likely than other Americans to visit national parks. We argue that non-visitation can be boiled down to three sets of factors, discussed below: (1) limited socioeconomic resources, (2) cultural factors and boundary maintenance, and (3) discrimination and White racial frames. Scholars have explained that these factors are related to people's use of national parks (e.g., Weber and Sultana 2013), but they stop short of explaining *how* they actually constrain participation and the development of leisure preferences. By understanding leisure constraints, park managers will be in a better position to develop strategies for allaying the conditions that inhibit visitation (Scott 2013). Doing so

will mean that the benefits of visiting national parks will accrue to a broader cross-section of Americans.

There seems little doubt that these three factors work separately or in tandem to stymie national park visitation among people of color who express interest in national parks. They also impair the acquisition of early formative experiences that carry over into adulthood. White Americans, particularly those who are affluent, routinely pass on to their children skills, knowledge, and appreciation of the outdoors. They do this by providing them encouragement, instruction and equipment, and vacationing with them in national parks and other exotic destinations. Without formative experiences, people lack skills, knowledge, and appreciation of the great outdoors in general and national parks specifically. The absence of these skills often means that many people of color come to equate national parks and other outdoor areas as White spaces and off limits to them. Parenthetically, the last few decades have seen a general societal trend wherein children are increasingly disconnected from nature (Louv 2005). This situation is fueled, in part, by growing parental fears of strangers and the rise of electronic media. This growing trend may hit people of color the hardest as constraints to outdoor recreation have been most acute among them.

Limited socioeconomic resources. Low national park visitation and constraints to visitation among people of color in the United States can be attributed, in part, to limited access to socioeconomic resources (Floyd and Stodolska 2014). According to Taylor et al. (2011), affluent Americans are three times more likely to visit national parks compared with poor Americans. They also reported that 69% of Americans with household incomes of over \$150,000 said they visited one or more national parks in the past two years, compared with only 22% of Americans with household incomes of less than \$10,000. Studies also show that regardless of race or ethnicity, low-income Americans are far more constrained in their leisure compared with other Americans (Scott 2013). They are more likely to lack information about park resources, worry about safety, lack reliable transportation, and lack sufficient discretionary income to travel. Simultaneously, poorer Americans are often made to feel loathsome and inadequate by more affluent citizens and park and recreation employees (McCarville 2008).

Racial and ethnic discrepancies in income, education, and employment persist in the US (Shinew and Floyd 2005). Blacks earn far less income than Whites, even when two groups have the same educational level (Bowser 2007). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011) showed that Blacks have the lowest labor force participation rate (68%) and the highest unemployment rate (16%) among any racial groups in 2010. Similar patterns are evident among Latino Americans (Stodolska and Shinew 2014). In sum, constraints to national park visitation among people of color stem in part from comparatively limited economic resources at their disposal.

Despite the presence of affirmative action efforts and antidiscrimination policies, the last few decades have actually witnessed increased economic inequality between Whites and people of color (Scott 2013). Moreover, many people of color, particularly African Americans and Hispanics, now live in chronic poverty and tend to reside in central cities and poorer suburbs where mobility is restricted (Massey 2007). Leisure and recreation opportunities in these areas are not only limited, but crime is a pervasive threat. Parents often confine and

restrict their children's freedom of movement and play to protect them from crime and negative peer influences (Outley and Floyd 2002). Not surprisingly, children who grow up in persistent poverty are often unable to acquire skills, knowledge, and appreciation of outdoor recreation activities and national parks (Erickson, Johnson, and Kivel 2009).

Cultural factors and boundary maintenance. Cultural factors also account for lower levels of national park visitation among people of color. Sometimes called the *ethnicity hypothesis*, the idea here is that differences in leisure participation and outdoor recreation preferences among ethnic and racial groups stem from differences in cultural norms, value systems, and socialization practices (Floyd and Stodolska 2014). Cultural factors provide group members a template about the kinds of leisure and outdoor recreation behaviors to which they ought to conform. In this regard, cultural factors both facilitate *and* constrain participation in different leisure activities. Indeed, outdoor recreation activities and environments have varying cultural relevance to different groups of Americans. Washburne (1978) is credited with introducing the ethnicity hypothesis to the literature in an effort to explain what he called "under-utilization" of outdoor recreation areas among African Americans. He observed that there may be "powerful forces within the community that discourage participation in 'white' activities" (p. 178). Central to this thesis is the idea that people participate in leisure activities, at least in part, to sustain their ethnic and racial identity. To the extent that members adhere to cultural norms, they engage in *boundary maintenance*, which is the process of actively constructing and highlighting ethnic and/or racial differences (Gramann and Allison 1999). Boundary maintenance insulates group members *and* prescribes which leisure activities and venues are *culturally relevant*. People of color might not participate in some outdoor recreation activities and avoid outdoor settings "because they do not reinforce an ethnic group's collective identity" (Floyd and Stodolska 2014: 13). Johnson and Bowker (2004) noted that, unlike Whites, many African Americans do not view wildlands as "therapeutic landscapes" that provide a respite from society ills. They went on to note, "for African Americans these same terrains may be what cultural geographers refer to as 'sick places' which evoke horrible memories of toil, torture, and death" (p. 60). In sum, while cultural factors provide opportunities for action, they also constrain outdoor recreation participation and national park visitation by thwarting the development of leisure preferences that define national park areas as relevant, appropriate, interesting, or available.

Discrimination and White racial frames. Lack of formative experience with outdoor recreation activities and national parks reinforces the belief that these recreation amenities and destinations are culturally irrelevant to people of color. The procurement of this belief is linked to discriminatory and exclusionary practices in the past and present. Indeed, members of dominant groups engage in boundary maintenance of their own which often results in their resisting the inclusion or assimilation of outsiders.

Discriminatory and exclusionary practices go back generations and have long constrained people of color in their efforts to visit parks or engage in various forms of public recreation. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many people of color were legally barred from, or segregated at, public recreational sites, including national and state parks (Shumaker 2009; Lee and Scott 2016). Efforts to integrate recreation areas often resulted in physical

violence. Simultaneously, many conservationists who were instrumental in the establishment of national parks expressed little interest in encouraging minority citizens' visitation (Jordan and Snow 1992).

The impact of racial discrimination on leisure and outdoor recreation participation in contemporary America is well documented. Many people of color have noted that they routinely encounter acts of discrimination onsite or during their travels, which negatively impact their enjoyment and subsequent behavior (Lee and Scott 2017). Discrimination by other visitors is among the most frequently cited form of mistreatment, and may range from hostile stares to physical attacks (Sharaievska, Stodolska, and Floyd 2014). People of color also note that they have been the victims of discrimination from park and recreation workers. Professional staff may simply be inattentive to the needs and interests of people of color, which may embolden other visitors to engage in acts of hostility (Fernandez and Witt 2013).

Other researchers have acknowledged a more nuanced relationship between discrimination and outdoor recreation among people of color. Discrimination may actually stem from a variety of everyday interactions and unconscious assumptions (Young 1990) that are regarded by employees and stakeholders as legitimate and fair. Inequality is perpetuated over time, according to Scott (2014), by a variety of "practices and beliefs that are firmly embedded in the normal, everyday functioning" of how park and recreation services do business (p. 47). Although these practices are outwardly neutral, they "systematically reflect or perpetuate the effects of preferential treatment in the past" (p. 48). For example, researchers have documented that White managers of parks, forests, and wilderness areas often assume that the majority of visitors are Whites, so interpretive exhibits and stories in these areas tend to predominantly celebrate White Americans' history and heritages (Taylor 2000). Stories and contributions of people of color are often ignored or distorted (Loewen 1999; Lockhart 2006).

Central to the perpetuation of institutional bias is what Feagin (2013) called a *White racial frame*, which he defined as "an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate" (p. 3). The idea here is that Americans routinely and often unconsciously view White people and their behavior positively and represent *the* standard for evaluating what is good and moral. In contrast, people of color and their behavior are regarded with suspicion, stereotypes, and notoriety. A White racial frame permeates how Americans institutions operate, including park and recreation delivery. Since its inception, the NPS has codified appropriate behavior and ways of experiencing national parks that are rooted in 19th-century White middle- and upper-class ideas about respectability and decorum (Cosgrove 1995; Byrne and Wolch 2009). In a nutshell, national parks are to be used for education and inspiration. This view is reinforced by the media, including nature documentaries. Among staff and many visitors, this translates into a form of enjoyment that gives primacy to quiet contemplation of nature rather than noisy, active use of nature.

Throughout the United States, many public spaces are equated as White spaces. Despite civil rights laws that legally forbid the exclusion of people of color from public facilities, many parks and public areas remain the province of Whites and off-limits, at least unoffi-

cially, to people of color. Austin (1997–1998) observed that many White Americans have a *proprietary* attitude about the public places they occupy and rules for appropriate behavior. People of color who venture into White spaces, including national parks, may be treated rather coolly and, not surprisingly, feel unwelcome and remain on their guard (Carter 2008). Moreover, their behavior in White spaces often comes under severe scrutiny. Leisure among young African American males, in particular, is often viewed as pathological, disruptive, and a major source of disturbance in public settings (Austin 1997–1998). This has led to no small amount of racial profiling and monitoring in public parks and recreation areas. It can be surmised that many people of color in the United States are constrained from more fully accessing a wider range of outdoor recreation activities and NPS areas because of the existence of a firmly entrenched White racial frame.

A White racial frame makes it daunting for people of color to participate in outdoor recreation activities and visit parks where they are in the minority. Mikhail Martin, a young African American from Queens and co-founder of Brothers of Climbing, explained why so few Blacks participate in rock climbing: “In the black community, there’s this misconception that, ‘Oh, Black people don’t do that. Only White people do this.’ And they have every right to believe that, because their outlet to the world is what you see on the TV and internet, and if you don’t see any Black people, or any people of color climbing, you’re not going to think you can do it” (REI 2017). J. Drew Lanham (2013), a serious birdwatcher and African American, offered nine “rules” for African American birdwatchers. An abbreviated list is as follows:

- Be prepared to be confused with the other black birdwatcher.
- Carry your binoculars—and three forms of identification—at all times.
- Don’t bird in a hoodie.
- Nocturnal birding is a no-no.

Some White visitors are vociferous in their opposition to the NPS’s efforts to promote ethnic and racial diversity in the national parks. The following letter to the editor, published in *National Parks* magazine, blasted the NPS for what the writer regarded as a misguided initiative: “Your recent article . . . was way off target. To modify the National Park System to lure ethnic minorities would be a disaster and one more facet of our country that would be changed to please a few, ignoring the desires of the majority. . . . If minorities do not like going to the parks, it is their loss. But please don’t let us be duped into thinking it is our loss. Many of us look to the parks as an escape from the problems ethnic minorities create. Please don’t modify our parks to destroy our oasis” (Lucier 1994: 6). Three other letters were published along with this one and they too were critical of the NPS in its diversity efforts.

Conclusions

Despite NPS’s efforts to diversify its staff and create sites that reflect the history of all Americans, people of color are far less likely to visit many national parks compared with Whites and they face formidable constraints to visitation. We have argued that non-visitation can be boiled down to limited socioeconomic resources, cultural factors and boundary maintenance,

and discrimination and a White racial frame. These constraints limit visitation *and* the acquisition of leisure preferences that define outdoor recreation and NPS destinations as culturally relevant and appropriate. Is there anything the NPS can do to alleviate these constraints? We believe that service provision for people of color can be improved by ensuring that programs and facilities are affordable, accessible, culturally relevant, safe, and welcoming.

More specifically, we suggest that NPS initiatives and programs work toward ensuring that younger generations of Americans, particularly youth of color, establish a long-term relationship and gain in-depth experiences with national parks (Stanfield McCown 2011). Moreover, NPS must work harder at recruiting individuals from more diverse backgrounds, as nearly 80% of the NPS workforce is White (Partnership for Public Service 2018). Simultaneously, the agency needs to dissipate the conservative organizational culture that discourages new ideas and creates barriers for promoting diversity and inclusion (Santucci et al. 2014). A more inclusive workforce would give voice to the needs and constraints of people of color.

The biggest challenge facing NPS may be political. It is noteworthy that people of color are far more likely to visit parks that are relevant to their historical and/or cultural heritage. For example, data collected by VSP showed that Asian Americans comprised one-third of all visitors to Manzanar National Historic Site, a unit that interprets the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II (US Department of the Interior 2005). Likewise, Blacks made up 17% of all visitors to Booker T. Washington National Monument, a historical park established to honor the birthplace of one of the United States' most prominent African American educators and orators (National Park Service 1996). However, as we have noted, many Whites regard national parks and other recreation areas as White spaces. They might not want NPS and other agencies to highlight non-White legacies or reach out to minority communities. Given the widespread antipathy many people of color encounter in everyday life, NPS will need strong and influential allies and partners as they continue to seek to make the agency relevant to more Americans. Without allies and political support, NPS's effort to diversity will stall, and many people of color will continue to encounter formidable constraints to visitation.

Endnote

1. VSP studies were conducted on site at National Park Service units. Some VSP studies collected information about the ethnic and racial background of visitors. We examined hundreds of reports from 1982 to 2016 and found that 76 studies collected race/ethnicity data. VSP reports can be obtained at <https://sesrc.wsu.edu/national-park-service-projects>.

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David Scott, Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843; dscott@exchange.tamu.edu

KangJae Jerry Lee, Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management, North Carolina State University, 4004B Biltmore Hall, Raleigh, NC 27513; klee24@ncsu.edu