Youth Visitor Dynamics in Pacific Coast National Parks

John Crowell
University of North Alabama, jcrowell@una.edu

Michael Pretes
University of North Alabama

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.una.edu/geography_studentpresentations
Part of the Human Geography Commons

Recommended Citation
Youth Visitor Dynamics in Four Pacific Coast National Parks

John Crowell and Michael Pretes
Department of Geography
University of North Alabama
jcrowell@una.edu
mjpretes@una.edu

Research Question
Is the number of youth visitors to national parks declining? According to popular media, younger people are less interested in visiting national parks in the United States, compared to past generations. The Economist (2013) noted that “America’s national parks struggle to attract young visitors.” And CNN (2015) observed, “In 2014, America’s national parks attracted a record-setting 292.8 million visits, but the typical visitor to the country’s biggest parks is edging closer to retirement age.” These and similar media reports are largely based on anecdotal data. Moreover, scholars such as Pergams and Zaradic (2006, 2008) have suggested that younger people are more inclined to play video games or pursue other indoor activities rather than visiting national parks. For this research, we set out to investigate whether or not these reports are correct in stating that younger people are increasingly less inclined to visit national parks, as well as what factors might account for changing visitation patterns.

Methods
We selected four national parks (Olympic, Mount Rainier, Crater Lake, and Redwood—see map) and used three methods:

1. Head-counts at national park visitor centers and on selected trails, estimating ages of visitors. Visitors were identified in three age categories: Generation Z (born after 1997), Millennials (born 1981–1997), and Older (born before 1981).

2. Interviews with 20 park rangers, 1 park superintendent, and 7 local business owners to gain an historical perspective, as the National Park Service does not normally collect visitor age data.

3. Online surveys of mostly younger visitors using Qualtrics and distributed through social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) with 15 questions about visitation patterns and reasons for visiting or not visiting national parks. We had 140 survey responses.

Findings and Conclusions

- Visitor counts (Figure 1), interviews with park rangers and local business owners, and survey responses (Figure 2) indicate that younger people continue to visit national parks in large numbers.
- Most park rangers noted that there appeared to be a “perfect balance” of younger and older visitors and that this has not changed over time.
- Video games and online activities do not seem to be a big deterrent to national park visitation.
- The largest deterrents to younger people visiting national parks were lack of time and lack of proximity.
- Disaggregated data suggest that proximity to a large city was not a factor in the number of youth visitors to national parks.
- Some park rangers and survey data suggest that visitors may be bypassing park visitor centers and using only online resources for park information. A future research project will investigate this issue.

References


Acknowledgements
We thank the University of North Alabama Department of Geography, College of Arts and Sciences, and College of Business and College of Education for financial support. We are grateful to Oliver Pergams and Patricia Zaradic for making their research available. And we thank the National Park Service, the Association for Pacific Coast Geographers (APCG), and our graduate assistants who helped collect data and conduct surveys in the parks. We also thank the local national park employees and local business owners who answered our questions about their experiences with younger visitors.