Youth Visitor Dynamics in Four Pacific Coast National Parks

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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


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