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# Managing Outdoor Recreation in California: Visitor Contact Studies 1989-1998

**Deborah J. Chavez**



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### **Abstract**

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Findings from 30 outdoor recreation visitor contact studies that were conducted in California between 1989 and 1998 are summarized. Analyses focus on recreationist profiles, patterns of participation, beliefs and opinions, communication patterns, and depreciative behaviors. Although the "typical" respondent to the survey sites was white, there were many sites where significant numbers of racial and ethnic minorities were recreating. Visitors chose the areas because the mountains and deserts are important to them. Some sites had moderately sized visitor groups; others had large groups, though the sites they were visiting did not necessarily have the facilities and amenities needed to serve them. Management guidelines and future research needs for outdoor recreation are highlighted.

*Retrieval Terms:* adaptive management, cultural diversity, outdoor recreation, recreation management, recreation participation, California

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## **In Brief...**

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In 1989 a research program was designed that measured outdoor recreation visitor profiles, recreation patterns, beliefs, development preferences, communication tools and preferences, and beliefs about depreciative behaviors.

This compilation presents generalizations about outdoor recreationists based on a series of recreationist contact studies conducted at various outdoor recreation venues (i.e., forests) in California (mostly southern California) between 1989 and 1998. Each of these studies was funded by the USDA Forest Service or jointly funded by the Forest Service and the USDI Bureau of Land Management. This information can be used by managers to enhance customer service to these visitors.

Although the "typical" respondent to the survey sites was white, there were many sites where significant numbers of racial and ethnic minorities were recreating. Current management techniques may need to be changed to serve these diverse visitor groups. For example, some sites may need to be redesigned for large groups, or some family oriented programs can be added. Also, cultural sensitivity training may be needed for all visitor contact employees, including seasonal employees. It is expected that visitations to outdoor recreation sites will increase for Hispanic and Asian groups.

The typical visitors, as measured by these site-specific studies, and based on these respondent opinions, chose the areas because the mountains and deserts are important to them. They may have many conflicting opinions about recreation site management, such as "set it aside" but "leave it open to me."

Not only do respondents report the importance of the various sites to them, but results indicate that most sites are repeatedly visited, with some being so crowded that managers are searching for ways to relieve the amount of use. Any attempts to relocate some people to other areas probably should incorporate locations in the mountains (especially where there is water) and desert sites where people can picnic in natural resource-based surroundings that can accommodate large groups of people, and sites where managers will feel comfortable visiting with and serving visitor groups who may not be English speakers. Managers have an array of tools from which to choose, such as indirect tools like signs and brochures, which are relatively inexpensive, but the tool used should fit the situation.

Many respondents came from urban areas, looking for a place to relieve stress. They went to particular outdoor recreation sites because they had been there before and knew that it was a good family experience. Some sites had moderately sized visitor groups; others had large groups, though the sites they were visiting did not necessarily have the facilities and amenities needed to serve them. It may be necessary to develop new sites or redesign old ones to serve family and large group configurations. This is particularly salient for areas where Hispanics recreate; they tend to recreate in large groups, and they prefer developed sites (i.e., picnic tables, barbecue grills, parking lots, etc.). Managers should consider the best environmental design practice when making these decisions.

The respondents were aware of some site problems (spraypaint on rocks and litter) yet found many pieces of the experience to be appealing (water, scenery, and quiet). They liked to tell others about their experiences and enjoyed contacts with local area managers. The communication tools respondents said would be

good were not necessarily the ones they actually used. Managers should consider the communications patterns and techniques of their visitors and use them. It might be useful to take information into the sites, directly to the site visitors, rather than expecting visitors to seek out information for themselves. There should be more emphasis on interpersonal on-site contacts, and on-site written communications should be in English and Spanish (or Korean, Japanese, or other languages as appropriate to site use).

Return visitors and people who say they plan to return to a favorite place offer a great opportunity to managers. These visitors have more reason to get involved in the management of sites and could serve as site hosts or get involved in public meetings.

Future research can address the following questions: Is California a bellwether state for predicting outdoor recreation use patterns in other states? Have redeveloped or redesigned sites achieved their purpose of serving larger, and often racially and ethnically diverse, visitor groups? How have outdoor recreation visitors been included in decision-making? What is the best process to include visitors in decision-making? Should site-proximate or site-distant people have the greater influence on management decisions? Is day use a southern California phenomenon? What are the impacts of the focus on day use for site management? How does perceived discrimination influence decision-making by outdoor recreationists? Do site factors influence perceived discrimination? Which visitor perceptions and differences are culturally based and which are racially/ethnically based? Is the ECO-Team (environmental education) model a good one for visitor communication? Which types of messages are best when utilizing the ECO-Team model? Which tools are best to ensure that outdoor recreation visitors do not engage in depreciative behaviors? Is there a "stadium effect" (expectation that others will clean the area) in urban proximate outdoor recreation areas? If there is a "stadium effect," then what can managers do to counteract it?

The research program began in 1989 has provided valuable information for outdoor recreation resource managers. This information can be used to serve various urban publics.

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