



## Activity selection among baby boomer national park visitors: The search for a sense of adventure



Dustin L. Wilson<sup>a,1</sup>, Jeffrey C. Hallo<sup>a,\*</sup>, Julia L. Sharp<sup>b</sup>, Hon. Fran P. Mainella<sup>a</sup>, Francis A. McGuire<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Statistics, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA

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### ABSTRACT

The U.S. population continues to age, and the large baby boomer cohort is a major influencer. The activity selection of baby boomer visitors to national parks is therefore explored. The literature suggests baby boomers are a group with diverse outdoor interests. Some are interested in adventurous pursuits, while others are interested in more tame forms of recreation. A quantitative study was conducted in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks (SEKI) in California to see if this cohort is unique in terms of outdoor activity interests. In-person surveys collected at SEKI were used to obtain a sample of 403 individuals within the baby boomer age range. The findings suggest that a majority of baby boomers prefer to participate in outdoor activities in SEKI. They see themselves as healthy and active, and enjoy participating in moderate to strenuous, somewhat risky outdoor activities.

*Management implications:* For park managers, this research identifies the activities in which baby boomers choose to participate. This research will allow for informed decisions to be made, such as whether to modify existing signage, educate the cohort on the potential resource issues of entering the backcountry with little to no training or experience, and determine whether some resources near developed areas should be made more accessible. Baby boomer visitors are more active than the typical visitor; they engage in many outdoor recreation activities. At the same time, they are aging and may be less prepared for some of the activities they seek out. Overall, this research may enable park managers to adapt by tailoring communication and perhaps facilities and offerings to the large baby boomer cohort.

### 1. Introduction

Leisure is a fundamental part of life (Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Kleiber, Larson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1986). Leisure emerges in childhood when children are relaxed and unconcerned with the past or future, so long as their basic needs are met (Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011). Leisure is used in adulthood as a coping mechanism to deal with work-related stress (Trenberth & Dewe, 2002). And, leisure is an important contributing factor associated with life satisfaction while in retirement (Nimrod, 2007). Leisure changes as we age. Growing children and aging adults typically change their leisure interests and activities. During adulthood, role responsibilities such as being a parent or worker affect leisure behavior (Kleiber et al., 2011). Increased age historically corresponded with a decrease in participation in outdoor recreation, despite the abundance of free time older people generally have (Kelly, 1980). The National Recreation Survey report (Outdoor

Recreation Resources Review Commission, 1962) focused on the social correlates of recreation. Age was found to be statistically, negatively related to general participation in outdoor recreational activities.

Aging is associated with loss, be it loss of capacity, loss of companions, or loss of role identity. For example, the decline of visual acuity could result in the loss of the ability to play a sport such as baseball. The first physical signs of aging are likely to lead to an awareness of one's mortality and create a sense of urgency about life (Irwin & Simons, 1994). Because of these losses, the number and impact of leisure constraints increase as people age (McGuire & Norman, 2005; McGuire, Boyd, Janke, & Aybar-Damali, 2013). The U.S. population is aging (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). America now possesses not only the largest and fastest-growing population of older adults in history but also the healthiest, most vigorous, and best educated (Freedman, 1999). Less than four percent of the population was 65 or over in 1900. By 2000 this had increased to 12.4%, and by 2010 13.0% of the population was

\* Correspondence to: Clemson University, 280B Lehotsky Hall, Clemson, SC 29634, United States.

E-mail address: [jhallo@clemson.edu](mailto:jhallo@clemson.edu) (J.C. Hallo).

<sup>1</sup> Permanent address: Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, 888 First Street NE Suite 63-16, Washington, DC 20426.

65 or over (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). On average, life expectancy has increased by 2.5 years per decade for the past 160 years, and since 1950 the number of people celebrating their 100th birthday has doubled each decade (Vaupel & Kistowski, 2005). A 65 year old male in 2015 can expect to live 19.4 more years (Social Security Administration, 2015), which allows for a potentially longer time for leisure. Lifespans have been lengthened and some barriers to leisure have been removed due to changes in public health efforts, medicine, technology, and healthier lifestyles (Vaupel, 2010). A major factor influencing the aging of the U.S. population is the baby boomer cohort. There are now 75 million baby boomers in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The baby boomer generation came about mainly as a result of the increased social and economic prosperity of the post-World War II era (Cleaver & Muller, 2002). It thus became the norm to have more, and the baby boomer generation was fully exposed to those conditions. Air and car transportation became affordable, enabling travel to far-away places. As a result, baby boomers have been described as a lucky and privileged cohort (Roberts, 2012). This group contains children who came of political age with Sputnik and the civil rights movement, others who grew up with Vietnam and Earth Day, and still others who saw Watergate and the OPEC oil embargo unfold (Light, 1988). This is an important issue when studying leisure participation because aging is affected by societal changes (Agahi, Ahacic, & Parker, 2006). For example, those growing up in the 1930's depression era were shown to place less value on leisure than did other cohorts and are more associated with remaining busy (Elder, 1999; Kleiber et al., 2011). An aging effect is a change in variable values which occurs among all cohorts independent of time, as each cohort ages. However, a cohort effect is a change which characterizes populations born at a particular point of time, and is independent of the aging process (Uhlenberg & Miner, 1996).

Baby boomers are an important group to study within a national park context because they are a large group which enjoys visiting national parks (Nagourney, 2013). Perhaps baby boomers differ from the generalized literature findings in their desires for travel and leisure activities due to the life events they have witnessed. Baby boomers have become more active than the generation before them (Fitzpatrick & McCabe, 2009). Baby boomers see themselves as a youthful generation (Fitzpatrick, King, & Davey, 2013) and pride themselves on being youthful and more active than their parents. Baby boomers are also a group seeking to learn new things when traveling (Cleaver & Muller, 2002). Sometimes called Zoomers – ‘baby boomers with zip’ – active baby boomers have no intention of giving up their youthful pursuits as they age and are looking for more active travel pursuits where health and fitness play prominent roles (Hudson, 2010). Baby boomers may also differ from the literature findings of general-age visitors, which have suggested a decline in outdoor activity participation, in their desire for risk and adventure in leisure pursuits. In the US, 56% of baby boomers had taken an adventure-travel holiday or trip in the past five years (versus 49.6% of all 198 million American adults) (Muller & Cleaver, 2000). Adventure has been described as “voluntary engagement in novel, uncertain and most often emotionally intense recreational activity” (Holyfield, Jonas, & Zajicek, 2005, p. 174). Exploration and discovery are core components of adventure, and hunger to learn from new situations has been associated with the definition of adventure (Addison, 1999). Risk is sometimes mentioned in the literature related to adventure. Risk has been defined as the potential to lose something which holds value, and people may choose to risk the loss of health, money, self-esteem, and even life (Tholkes, 1998).

Baby boomers may visit national parks because they are places to explore, discover, take risks, and seek adventure. Perhaps leisure and recreational activities in national parks are unique for this cohort due to the life events they have thus far witnessed. While people recreate throughout the world, this study sought to find whether baby boomer visitors to a national park in the U.S. are participating in adventurous pursuits more so than the early literature findings suggest, and in which activities they participate. Motivations for adventure and risk will be

explored for baby boomers visiting national parks. Further, we compared activity participation rates with a 2012 study of general visitors and examined life events and health measures to determine any relation with activity selection.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Leisure and aging

There has been relatively little research on older people engaged in leisure activities (Gibson, 2006; McGuire, Samdahl, Scott, & Weissinger, 2000). However, engagement in an activity earlier on in life is a strong predictor of participation in leisure activities in late life (Agahi et al., 2006; Verbrugge, Gruber-Baldini, & Fozard, 1996). A major planning document released in 2001 found that those over 50 had for the most part not adopted physically active lifestyles (Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2005). Visitors to outdoor recreation areas, especially more natural resource-oriented areas such as national forests, national parks, and wilderness, tend to be young to middle-age and of relatively high socioeconomic status (Cole, Watson, & Roggenbuck, 1995; Manning, 2011). A large-scale analysis of a nationwide survey of recreation participation was conducted and found strong relationships in terms of demography and socioeconomic status (Kelly, 1980; Manning, 2011). Age was found to be strongly and inversely related to those recreation activities that require physical strength and endurance. Also, the stage of family cycle was found to be highly inter-correlated with age so that its effects on recreation activities are similar to those of age. Based on findings from hundreds of studies, four main changes have been found in leisure behavior as people age: a decline in participation, a shift from active to more passive leisure, a shift from outdoor leisure to indoor activities, and a decline in the search for novelty (Gibson & Singleton, 2012). Middle age brings along many changes, with some being more free time and greater financial security. Erik Erikson, one of the most influential psychoanalysts of the 20th century is known for his lifespan framework, which includes extensive detail on middle age and later life. Erikson (1963) claims that productivity and contributions to society become priorities in middle adulthood. The failure to act results in stagnation, and becoming productive versus becoming stagnant is the psychosocial conflict associated with this stage of development (Erikson, 1963). Enjoyable activities are thus discontinued to make societal contributions and increase productivity. With respect to Erikson's lifespan research, several theorists have posited that there is an early aging transition that differs in character from the issues of advanced age he espoused (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1990; Vaillant, 2002). Specifically, researchers have noted the continuance of activities rather than a change in interests. Erikson's framework seems more rigid when compared to the more recent research findings. Perhaps this is because people are living longer than they were when Erikson developed his framework, and they are also more healthy (Agahi & Parker, 2005).

### 2.2. Successful aging

As people get older, the chronological age of the individual may be a less reliable indicator of behavior, perhaps because aging is a developmental process (Carstensen, 2006). In a study of middle-aged and older-aged adults, participants were found to want to be younger than they were (Kotter-Grühn & Hess, 2012). A successful later life typically includes a component of leisure (Vaillant, 2002). The aging and leisure literature cites many instances of the term *successful aging* (Depp, Vahia, & Jeste, 2010). A meta-analysis of 28 quantitative studies with 29 different definitions showed the most frequent correlates of the various definitions of successful aging included: a younger age (i.e., closer to age 60), being a non-smoker, absence of chronic disease, having more social contacts, a better self-rated health, an absence of depression, absence of cognitive impairment, fewer medical conditions, and exhibiting higher levels of physical activity/exercise (Depp et al., 2010).

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