



## Outdoor recreation motivation and site preferences across diverse racial/ethnic groups: A case study of Georgia state parks



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### ABSTRACT

As the demographic composition of the United States changes, racial and ethnic minorities constitute a larger proportion of the overall population. Understanding the nature-based outdoor recreation behavior of these groups has therefore become increasingly important to public land managers. This study examined racial and ethnic differences in motivations and site preferences of diverse Georgia state park visitors. Data were collected via intercept surveys of visitors to three state parks in northern Georgia (n=1207). Analyses revealed four broad motivational categories: social interaction, physical health and fitness, relaxation and restoration, and nature interaction. Setting preferences focused on three types of park environments: natural areas, maintained outdoor areas, and developed outdoor areas and facilities. Visitors rated all motivation categories as important; however, social interaction motivations were most popular across all groups. Latinos were more socially motivated in their visitation than all other groups, highlighting the potential value of state park settings in meeting activity needs unique to the Latino community. African American and Asian visitors were generally less likely than other groups to rate nature interaction as an important motivation. Associations between specific motivations and site preferences were observed, with social interaction motivations strongly associated with developed and maintained areas, and physical health and fitness motivations more strongly associated with natural areas. All groups of state park users reported a stronger preference for developed and maintained outdoor areas relative to natural areas.

*Management implications:* Efforts to understand and capitalize on diverse recreation motivations and preferences can help park managers accommodate the needs and desires of constituents from different racial and ethnic groups. Results of this study highlight the strong link between motivations and site preferences, illustrating how park design and management can facilitate or impede different types of experiences for visitors from all cultural backgrounds.

### 1. Introduction

The demographic characteristics of the United States population is changing rapidly. The U.S. Census projections indicate that, by 2050, current racial/ethnic minority groups will compose a majority of the population (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011; US Census Bureau, 2010). Over the same period, the Latino population is expected to double in size, accounting for more than 30% of the total population (Brown & Patten, 2014). The Asian population in the U.S. is also significantly increasing (US Census Bureau, 2014). These population trends are important to recreation managers seeking to understand and address the motivations and needs of their constituents. Previous

research has explored racial/ethnic differences in nature-based outdoor recreation behavior (Floyd, 1999; Floyd, Bocarro, & Thompson, 2008; Hrymkowski, Manning, & Valliere, 2014). However, recent demographic shifts and changing recreation patterns suggest the topic should be revisited (Stodolska, Shinew, Floyd, & Walker, 2014).

Historically, recreation managers were primarily interested in understanding the reasons people choose one recreational setting over another. As population diversity increases, however, managers are interested in accounting for more than just the recreation patterns of their constituents; they are also striving to ensure that parks are meeting the needs of visitors from all cultural backgrounds. This is particularly true of state park managers and planners, whose parks

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support roughly one-third of all nature-based outdoor recreation in the United States (Siikamäki, 2012). Consequently, state parks have received an increase in attention from researchers attempting to understand the impacts of demographic diversity on multiple aspects of visitor behavior (Bradley, Liu, Wu, & Chalkidou, 2013; Sotomayor, Barbieri, Stanis, Aguilar, & Smith, 2014; Whiting, Larson, & Green, 2012). Despite this increased focus on state park visitation, few studies have examined racial/ethnic diversity and how it affects recreation preferences in state parks. Of particular importance is the need to move beyond simple documentation of visitor demographics and spatial use patterns to examine the motives that drive activity choices and recreation settings preferences. This study provides insight into the motivations and preferences of Georgia state parks users and how those factors vary by race/ethnicity.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Nature-based outdoor recreation motivations & site preferences

Substantial research has explored different aspects of motivation in recreational pursuits (e.g., challenge, exploration, experiencing nature, relaxation, and social contact) (Graefe, Thapa, Confer, & Absher, 2000). Motivation can be seen as an internal force that influences an individual to act in a way that helps them achieve a certain desired experience or outcome (Driver, 1977; Kauffman & Graefe, 1984; Knopf, Peterson, & Leatherberry, 1983; Lee, Graefe, & Li, 2007; Williams, Schreyer, & Knopf, 1990). Driver and Tocher (1970) proposed an “experiential approach” linking settings and leisure activities to outcomes, suggesting that recreation should be understood as an experience in which activities are undertaken in an appropriate setting with the aim of achieving certain psychological and physical goals (Manfredo, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996). The experiential approach to recreation research offered insight into how recreation participation could benefit individuals, and how this information “could be used in a wide array of planning and management tasks such as clarifying supply and demand, developing management objectives, avoiding conflict, and identifying recreation substitutes” (Manfredo et al., 1996 p. 190). Driver (1977) body of research identified 21 unique domains of desired experiences that were commonly sought by individuals participating in outdoor recreation. The preference domains, which accounted for certain user types, settings, and activities, were quantified using Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scales (Driver & Brown, 1975). Driver (1977) found significant differences in motivations for different types of outdoor activities, each occurring within different settings. Since that time a great deal of studies have used REP scales and shown its reliability in measuring individual recreation preferences (Manfredo et al., 1996).

More recently, REP scales have been used to examine motivations for recreating on a variety of public lands. Kyle, Absher, and Hammitt (2005) encouraged use of these scales to guide programming and management as a way to meet certain physical and psychological needs. For example, studies examining motivations have indicated that “enjoying and being close to nature” were important reasons people participate in outdoor recreation in natural settings (Graefe et al., 2000). A study in Missouri corroborated these findings, suggesting that two of the three most important reasons for visiting farms, forests, and state or national parks were viewing the scenic beauty and enjoying the smells and sounds of nature (Sotomayor et al., 2014). For many people, outdoor recreation may provide rare opportunities to interact directly with the natural world. Such interactions have become increasing important amidst growing concerns about Americans diminishing contact with nature. Richard Louv (2008) coined the phrase “nature-deficit disorder” to describe the physical and psychological consequences associated with this absence of authentic outdoor experiences during childhood, asserting that “the child in nature is an endangered species” (p. 355). Other researchers have also expressed concern about

children's diminishing contact with nature and the effects of nature deprivation on child development (Kellert, 2005; Larson, 2000; Zaradic & Pergams, 2007). Similar consequences affect adults. For instance, Ulrich (1984) seminal research highlighting the benefits of connection with nature showed that patients recovering from surgery recovered more quickly if their hospital room had a window overlooking natural environments than others who lacked nature contact. Such psychological connections underscore humans' inherent affinity for nature, which often drives recreation behavior (Van den Berg, Hartig, & Staats, 2007). As urbanization across the U.S. continues, parks and open space may provide the only opportunities for many Americans to experience nature and nature-related benefits.

Motivations to recreate to improve personal health and fitness are also prominent for those participating in outdoor recreation (Dustin, Bricker, & Schwab, 2010; Irvine, Warber, Devine-Wright, & Gaston, 2013). Previous studies have identified connections between park-based recreation, physical activity (Kaczynski & Henderson, 2007; Kaczynski, Potwarka, & Saelens, 2008; Larson, Whiting, Green, & Bowker, 2014), and a correspondingly lower likelihood of obesity (Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St Leger, 2006; Nielsen & Hansen, 2007). Other research has demonstrated that park proximity and the percentage of park area in communities are significant predictors of physical activity for children and adolescents (Cohen et al., 2007; Epstein et al., 2006). Overall, evidence suggests that people spending time in and engaging with natural environments such as parks report better health and overall well-being. These relationships are especially true for children in low-income, minority families that are at an increased risk of obesity (Kumanyika & Grier, 2006), but they also hold for adults who frequent close-to-home urban recreation settings (Godbey, 2009). Because of these findings, many park and recreation researchers and professionals are working to understand and respond to the personal motivations that drive people to visit parks and public green spaces, thereby fostering healthy lifestyles (Kellert, 2005).

Many people also participate in nature-based outdoor recreation to relax and enjoy the restorative aspects nature provides. Kaplan (1995) Attention Restoration Theory (ART) posits that interacting with natural environments full of inherently fascinating stimuli (e.g., sunsets) invokes involuntary attention, allowing directed attention the ability to replenish and restore itself. Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan (2008) built upon ART by examining the cognitive processes of individuals in natural and urban environments. They found that urban environments were filled with stimuli that dramatically captured directed attention (e.g., to avoid being hit by car), making them less restorative, whereas recreation in natural environments gave directed attention faculties the chance to replenish. Increases in direct attention have been shown to improve academic success and increase short-term memory (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007), as well as reduce mental fatigue (Kuo, 2001). Recreationists may recognize these benefits. Madsen, Radel, and Endter-Wada (2014) explored the motivations and geography involved with Latino recreation in Cache Valley, Utah. Latino respondents in their study conceptualized recreation as many things including rest/relaxation in the outdoors. In fact, 30% of Latino respondents defined rest or relaxation in recreation as a way to help de-stress. Other research has shown that a desire to rest and relax consistently drives park visitation across diverse populations (Chavez & Olson, 2009).

Social interactions represent another important motivation for engaging in nature-based outdoor recreation. These interactions may be a key underlying mechanism driving the relationship between park use, health and happiness. For example, people residing in areas with limited parks and natural areas experience greater feelings of loneliness, perceived shortage of social support, and perceived poor mental health (Maas, Van Dillen, Verheij, & Groenewegen, 2009; Maas, Van Dillen, Verheij, de Vries et al., 2009). Studies also suggest that the presence of parks can impact multiple domains of well-being (Larson,

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