



# 'Seeing red' in national parks: How visitors' values affect perceptions and park experiences



Sebastian Dario Rossi <sup>a,\*</sup>, Jason A. Byrne <sup>a</sup>, Catherine M. Pickering <sup>a</sup>, Joseph Reser <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Environmental Futures Research Institute, School of Environment, Griffith University, Gold Coast, QLD, Australia

<sup>b</sup> School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Gold Coast, QLD, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

People's reasons for visiting national parks have been well researched. So too have their park activities and how diverse activities potentially affect visitors' park experiences (e.g. perceptions of overcrowding). Far less research has examined how park users' environmental values might affect their perceptions of other users and the appropriateness of different activities – a potential source of conflict. Relationships between personal environmental values and environmental and social perceptions are complex and interactive in the context of park visitation. Visitors' encounters with other users can powerfully affect their experience and enjoyment of parks, in turn reflecting such factors as values-related expectations and judgments in the context of national parks. Personal and social values may also play an important role in influencing whether different activities are perceived as 'out of place' in the context of national park place meaning, yet the conceptualization of values within geographic literature on parks remains comparatively weak.

This paper utilizes a definition of values, derived from a concise review of the geography and social psychology literatures, to explain the results of survey research we undertook within national parks in Queensland, Australia. We use a 'values-behavior hierarchy' conceptual framework to consider how the personal environmental values of a sample of park visitors ( $n = 404$ ) potentially affected patterns of park visitation, user activities, and user conflicts. Findings suggest that visitors' environmental values shaped how they perceived other park users and the appropriateness of their activities. This has international implications for geographic research and other disciplines and professions involved in national park visitation, park use, and human impacts, *on* and *of* these powerful places.

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## 1. Introduction

Rapid urbanization has been accompanied by a reduction in green space in many cities worldwide (Goddard et al., 2010; Wolch et al., 2014; Zhou and Wang, 2011). As accessible urban green space decreases, residents have begun to turn to alternative areas for their recreational needs (Rupprecht and Byrne, 2014). Accessible national parks are an example, and there is a growing literature reporting increased demand for recreational experiences in national parks (Arnberger and Brandenburg, 2007; Frick et al., 2007; Lundgren, 1974). This trend has also been accompanied by changing societal values about the appropriate use of national parks and other protected areas, such as the privatization of nature (Castree, 2010; Ernstson and Sorlin, 2009). Increased demand and changing values are generating a spectrum of social and environmental impacts in national parks globally, with repercus-

sions for park users and non-users alike (Frick et al., 2007). Peri-urban national parks are a good example.

Peri-urban national parks are located at the urban–rural fringe of cities (and/or the urban–wildland interface) (Ewert et al., 1993). The term peri-urban refers to the area between the outer edge of the continuous built-up residential parts of a city or town and the rural-production space (or wildland interface), irrespective of density of people per unit area (Lawton and Weaver, 2008; Nelson, 1992; Taylor, 2011). Research suggests that the activities of some visitors to peri-urban parks can potentially affect the psychological and social benefits derived by other visitors, with implications for health, wellbeing, environmental quality and social equity (Byrne et al., 2009; Hartig et al., 1991; Low Choy and Prineas, 2006; Maller et al., 2006).

Visitors' experiences in national parks can influence their level of support for nature conservation. Poor experiences may result in lower levels of support for protected areas (Coghlan, 2011; McCool, 2006). Researchers have found that a visitors' experiences are usually shaped by three interrelated cognitive processes: (i)

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [sebastian.rossi@griffithuni.edu.au](mailto:sebastian.rossi@griffithuni.edu.au) (S.D. Rossi).

their perceptions of adverse environmental impacts in parks (Dorwart et al., 2010; Lynn and Brown, 2003; Noe et al., 1997); (ii) their perceptions of the appropriateness of the behavior and activities of other users; and (iii) their appraisals of the efficacy of park management (Floyd et al., 1997). The experiences of visitors may also explain how and why some users express affinity for, or a sense of place toward, some parks but not others. In the longer term, this has potential repercussions for political commitment to establishing and maintaining protected areas such as national parks (Stedman, 2002). If people do not believe that a national park meets their needs, or if they feel unwelcome in – or excluded from these parks, they may be unlikely to support such parks, with potential ramifications for biodiversity conservation and social equity (Byrne, 2012).

Contemporary geographic debates about park use have highlighted theoretical tensions with respect to the roles of distance, sense of place, landscape and the cultural politics of nature in shaping park access and use (Byrne, 2012; Byrne and Wolch, 2009). A growing body of research is illuminating how visitors' values, broader social and cultural values, as well as the values that inhere in landscapes can reflect and (re)produce social and environmental inequalities (Byrne, 2012; Byrne et al., 2009). How a potential visitor perceives a park space and the people and activities that are deemed appropriate in those spaces affects their park-use choices, with flow on impacts upon quality of life, livelihood and even local ecologies (Wolch et al., 2014).

In this paper we present the results of research examining the personal values of visitors to peri-urban national parks in Queensland, Australia. We sought to further a geographic understanding of the role of values in park use and park management by answering two interrelated questions: (1) do the environmental values of park visitors vary according to their socio-demographic characteristics and the recreational activities they engage in?; and (2) do park visitors' environmental values affect their perception of the appropriateness of other users' behaviors and activities, and if so, how? The paper is structured into 6 sections. Following the introduction, we review the values literature and develop a conceptual model to explain the interaction of values, perceptions, park experiences and park user conflict. Here we note the tension between personal values and socially constructed value systems. Next we describe how we used an intercept survey (on-site, respondent completed survey) to examine park visitors' personal values and recreational activities (Veal, 2011). We then report our findings, noting that visitors' environmental values appear to shape how they perceived other park users and their activities (e.g. motorized activities were perceived more negatively than other activities). In our discussion and conclusions we draw attention to the policy implication of these findings, and their implications for national parks in Australia and internationally. We suggest that park managers need to better understand the environmental values of visitors if they want to improve visitor's experiences and visitor's perceptions of the inclusiveness (or otherwise) of park spaces.<sup>1</sup> We conclude by highlighting some directions for future research.

## 2. Perceptions, attitudes and values: utility for geographic research on parks

It is important to examine collectively held and individual values in protected areas such as national parks because values can undergird support for such environmental planning policies and

places. Moreover, different values may lead to inter-user and/or place-based conflict, presenting challenges for park managers (Clement and Cheng, 2011; Ford et al., 2009; Kouzakova et al., 2012; López-Mosquera and Sánchez, 2014; McIntyre et al., 2008) (Fig. 2). Research suggests that values can predict visitors' levels of enjoyment and satisfaction with their park experience, as well as their affinity for parks in general. There is a well-established literature demonstrating relationships between the values that people hold and their pro-environmental behavior (Bolderdijk et al., 2013; Karp, 1996; Schultz and Zelezny, 1998; Stern et al., 1999). However, the role of values is often poorly understood in geographic research addressing protected areas, such as national parks. This is partly because constructs such as values, attitudes, beliefs, and perception have been loosely defined, and partly because the constructs have often been used interchangeably. It is therefore important to clearly specify how these constructs are used in this paper and to briefly review their (inter)relationships for the purpose of conceptual and underlying construct clarity. More recent environmental research suggests that these constructs are nested in a hierarchical fashion, as shown in Fig. 1 (Papagiannakis and Lioukas, 2012).

### 2.1. What are values?

The construct of values has been used by a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, economics, leisure studies, landscape architecture, environmental science and geography (Reser and Bentrupperbäumer, 2005). Generally this construct refers to one of two distinct but interrelated ideas. First, values are seen as *guiding principles* that can filter information about the world, shape people's attitudes and indirectly influence their behavior (Bardi and Schwartz, 2003). Second, values have been conceptualized as a *measure of worth* of the utility of an object, of actions or goals (Papagiannakis and Lioukas, 2012). It is the first construct that we are interested in here, though we recognize that the two constructs are related.

For the purpose of this paper, values are defined as deep and enduring principles that inform and influence peoples' behavior (Dietz et al., 2005; Gregory et al., 2009; Knafo et al., 2011; Reser and Bentrupperbäumer, 2005; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1994; Stern and Dietz, 1994). Lee et al. (2007, 1043) note that values help us 'determine what is important' because they shape personal and collective preferences about desired 'modes of conduct or end state [s] of existence'. They are a 'type of social cognition that function[s] to facilitate adaptation to one's environment...[for the] preservation of optimal [conditions]...[and] serve as prototypes from which attitudes and behaviors' are generated (Homer and Kahle, 1988, 638). In other words, values guide individuals and societies about what to do and how to act in particular situations, because they provide 'criteria for judgment, preferences and choice' (op. cit.).

Research by social and environmental psychologists strongly suggests that as guiding principles, values are relatively stable over time and have an appreciable and 'measurable influence on behavior' (Karp, 1996: 113; Kouzakova et al., 2012; Stern and Dietz, 1994) but do not directly regulate human behavior (Bardi and Schwartz, 2003; Schwartz, 1994) (see Fig. 1). In the context of park visitation and use, it should be noted that other salient factors come into play when visitors perceive and judge other visitors, their behaviors, park management, the park environment itself, or their own levels of enjoyment (i.e. person perception and social perception). These include motivations, expectations, whether they are alone or with others, demographic differences, comfort levels and the like (Virden and Knopf, 1989). While important, a discussion of all these factors is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> We recognize of course that park-users' differing motivations, understandings of national parks and park regulations, differing demographic and cultural factors, and the dynamics of the multifaceted interactions associated with differing recreational activities can all influence the efficacy of park management and visitors' levels of park enjoyment, but here we specifically focus on users' values.

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