



A new visitation paradigm for protected areas

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Three generations of protected area visitor management paradigms proposed.
- Limitations of current (second generation) model identified.
- Third generation model augments current model with motivation and mobilisation.
- Third generation model fills visitor gap in people-focused park management approach.

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ABSTRACT

Current “second generation” approaches to visitation in higher order protected areas are based on biocentric management and monitoring that positions visitors as an inherent threat. The result is sub-optimal sustainability outcomes of coexistence and possibly increased conflict in an era of escalating demand, reduced public funding and growing threats to global and local biodiversity. A “third generation” model is therefore required that repositions visitors as an inherent opportunity, and augments management and monitoring accordingly with visitor motivation and mobilisation for mass participation in on-site park enhancement activities. Strategies and issues for implementation - including the model's dialectical underpinnings and its relationship to a broader context of people-focused park management - are considered, toward achieving optimal sustainability outcomes of park/visitation symbiosis.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary protected area systems are experiencing a deepening crisis associated with four converging factors. First, relatively undisturbed natural habitats around the world continue to be degraded and converted to other uses as human populations expand, become more prosperous, and consume more natural resources (Balmford, Green, & Jenkins, 2003). Most of what remains as relatively natural habitat, accordingly, is accounted for by protected areas, and the latter may be expected to account for almost all remaining relatively undisturbed habitat within the next few decades as unprotected habitat succumbs to development. An added risk is the de-listing, downgrading or illegal degradation of some parks to enable exploitative access to more resources (Watson, Dudley, Segan, & Hockings, 2014). Second, even while

protected areas grow in importance as oases of biodiversity, reduced government funding world-wide erodes their capacity to fulfil critical ecological functions and mandates (Eagles, 2003; Watson et al., 2014). This chronic underfunding leads, thirdly, to increased operational reliance on visitor-based revenue despite the potential of increased visitation to further undermine the vital ecological functions of protected areas (Eagles, 2003). Much of this revenue, as a result, is allocated to the management and satisfaction of visitors rather than environmental stewardship. These three supply-side considerations, combined with the fourth factor - parallel growth in demand for rural outdoor and nature-based recreation from increasingly urbanised societies (Frost, Laing, & Beeton, 2014; Tribe, 2016) - suggest that visitation pressures will intensify, particularly in protected areas close to major population centres, transportation corridors and hubs, and/or areas of concentrated tourist activity.

Confronted with this reality of large-scale and increasing visitation - estimated at over eight billion visits per year for all terrestrial protected areas (Balmford et al., 2015) - we argue that

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current approaches to visitation in protected areas, constituting a “second generation” model focused on *management* and *monitoring* of visitors and their environmental impacts, are suboptimal. We then contend the need for a “third generation” model in which the inherent strengths of such management and monitoring are retained but augmented and modified by considerations of visitor *motivation* and *mobilisation* to inspire and realise satisfying mass participation in activities which enhance protected area biodiversity and foster place loyalty. “Visitors” are defined here as tourists and local residents temporarily visiting the protected area for recreational and educational purposes. While residents within parks, those present for other purposes (legal or illegal), and non-visiting local residents are not included in our current framework, we acknowledge that all such stakeholder groups must be accommodated in any subsequent ‘macro-framework’ for park planning and management. The term “protected area” (or “park”) embraces highly diverse entities ranging under the nomenclature of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (Dudley, 2003; IUCN, 2016) from highly restrictive Strict Nature Reserves (Category Ia) and Wilderness Areas (Ib) to highly modified Protected Landscapes/Seascapes (V) and Protected areas with sustainable use of natural resources (VI). Our present working emphasis is on National Parks (II) and Natural Monuments or Features (III), which are characterised by high value natural ecosystems and sites as well as dual mandates to safeguard these assets while accommodating “complementary” recreational and educational activity. We focus, moreover, on those numerous Category II and III parks which owing to sufficient accessibility and amenity attract high levels of visitation. Lamington National Park, in the hinterland of Australia's Gold Coast, and Shenandoah National Park, in the US state of Virginia, exemplify such entities.

2. Historical first generation: parks for visitors

Protected areas, understood in their modern Western sense, had their genesis in the late 19th century as entities focused on meeting diverse *human* wants and needs. A US protected area official stated in 1915 that the three main purposes of the incipient American National Park system were to stimulate patriotism, advance knowledge and health, and attract tourists, all of which depend on the physical presence of visitors (Gunn, 2004). More overtly commercial were the motivations that accompanied the creation of National Parks in the Canadian Rockies and other parts of Canada, where revenue from tourists was sought by corporate syndicates to reduce the heavy debt loads and high operational costs associated with the construction of the cross-country railway system (Bella, 1987; Eagles & McCool, 2002; Hart, 1983). Consequently, iconic parks such as Banff and Jasper began as foci of economic development rather than respites therefrom (Bella, 1987), embodied in the construction of obtrusive resort and town complexes and their associated infrastructure. Accompanying manipulations of the natural environment, inspired by urban park design (Gunn, 2004), aspired to create beautiful scenery that suited visitor sensibilities and provided enjoyment even while inadvertently disrupting the local ecology through widespread but now discredited practices such as fire suppression, introductions of exotic vegetation, and predator eradication (Parsons, Graber, Agee, & Van Wagtenonk, 1986; Ripple & Larsen, 2000). A variant of this “harnessing nature” or “parks for visitors” approach is found in Sub-Saharan African entities established and managed during the colonial era primarily to accommodate big game hunters, with similarly scant consideration of any broader attendant ecological implications (Akama, 1996; MacKenzie, 1988).

In a classic paper, Budowski (1976) describes the three basic relationships of *conflict*, *coexistence* and *symbiosis* that can transpire

between protected areas and their visitors, which coincide sequentially with our proposed three generations. This early or “first generation” model reflects the least desirable scenario of conflict, whereby the presence of visitors induces direct and indirect environmental degradation. An important qualifier, however, was that it was only members of the wealthier “high yield, low volume” and presumably well-behaved elite who were initially regarded as the most appropriate visitor type. Accordingly, degradation was often subtle and deceptively disguised within aesthetically pleasing settings populated by abundant charismatic megafauna but relatively small visitor numbers (Bella, 1987; Hart, 1983). As increased accessibility and demand inevitably gave way to higher visitation from a broader array of social classes, conflict became more overt. According to Gunn (2004, p. 26), “the environmental mess that tourists were creating was beginning to be recognized as early as 1916 in Grand Canyon National Park [by] when the ugly sounds, sites, and odors of trash, steam engines, mules, and offal had become offensive.”

3. Contemporary second generation: parks with visitors

Since generational shifts tend to be gradual and subtle, and negative effects as described above unevenly distributed and discerned, it would not be appropriate to designate a specific date on which the first mode of thinking gave way to the second mode. In our protected area narrative, the first generation model of parks for visitors was still discernible as an approach in the 1960s with the continued dominance of entrepreneurs and resort developers in countries such as Canada (Bella, 1987). Growing support for a more biocentric approach, however, was also evident in response to the growing localised evidence of degradation caused by increased visitor numbers (Hammit & Cole, 1998), and parallel realisations that relatively undisturbed habitat was becoming increasingly scarce beyond protected area boundaries. Temperate broadleaf forests and Mediterranean ecosystems have been especially implicated in this regard (Hannah, Carr, & Lankerani, 1995). By the 1970s ecologists and environmentalists, abetted by the articulation of ecology and environmentalism as reputable fields of scientific study, were becoming more prevalent and influential within protected area management regimes. One important result for higher order protected areas was the elevation of the ecological or biodiversity mandate over the recreational mandate. In Canada, amendments to the National Parks Act in 1988 gave precedence to preservation over usage, with the scope for recreation becoming more restricted as the principle of leaving such areas “unimpaired” for future generations became established (Dearden & Berg, 1993; Eagles, 1993, pp. 57–74). By the early 1990s, McNamee (1993, pp. 17–44) would tellingly describe Canadian National Parks as venues for conservation *rather* than recreation.

That McNamee's contention exaggerates is borne out by continued increases in visitation to protected areas in Canada, USA, Australia and elsewhere during the late twentieth century, suggesting the persistence of important anthropocentric tendencies. What is clearer, however, is that the relationship between park managers and these visitors was indeed becoming more ambivalent as the potential for serious environmental damage within parks increased in tandem with growing demand and assorted external non-visitation pressures. Positioned as an inherent threat but a necessary evil given growing reliance on user fees and public demands for park access, an ethos of strict supervision became increasingly prevalent, embodied in the application of scientific management and monitoring principles and practices which have become cornerstones of the visitor-park relationship. Authoritative statements on their primacy include Worboys, Lockwood, and De Lacy (2001) who state that “visitor management is vitally linked

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