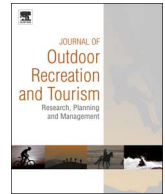




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A cognitive hierarchy approach to understanding fee increases in the national parks of the United States



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ABSTRACT

The National Park Service recently announced fee increases at many sites across the USA. Fee increases are likely a part of the future for public lands and will be a lingering issue for public land agencies. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship of national park value orientations, attitudes towards fee increase, and intentions to visit national parks. This includes an analysis of value orientations, attitudes, and behavioral intentions within the theoretical framework of the cognitive hierarchy. An exploratory panel of travelers was used to sample national park visitors. Results indicate that there were significant differences among value orientation regarding attitudes towards fee increases. Furthermore, results indicated that attitudes towards fee increases predict intentions to visit national parks. Future research should expand this line of research to include additional regions and varying travelers across the U.S.

Management implications: This study provides findings for park and conservation area management, including:

- Managers should be aware of value orientations when communication with the public about fee increases.
- “Eco-centric” messages may be more effective for promoting positive attitudes about fee increases for visitors.
- The analysis suggests there is also a small, but real, potential for visitors to not visit US national parks if they perceive fee increases as negative. However, park demand is rather inelastic, and fee increases should not be thought of as a visitor use management tool.

1. Introduction

Since the early conceptualization of national parks, philosophical and practical debates have raged about how these special places should be funded. The result has been a mix of congressional funding and defunding, changing revenue streams, and fees that are imposed, removed, banned, changed, and increased. This funding model has proved woefully inadequate, as the National Park Service (NPS) has nearly \$12 billion USD in deferred maintenance, leading to unsatisfactory and sometimes unsafe conditions in the national parks (NPS, 2017a). For instance, half of all paved roads are in fair to poor condition in the national parks, a full third of hiking trails need repair (6700 miles of trails), and more than two dozen bridges need repair (Rein, 2015). Record-breaking visitation in some NPS units is further highlighting the need to better fund the NPS (NPS, 2017b).

In response to increased management needs related to visitor use and deteriorating conditions from lack of funding, the NPS has

proposed fee increases across the system (NPS, 2017c). User fees represent a supplemental funding mechanism that has been applied since before the founding of the NPS in 1916, and are now a solidified piece of the overall NPS funding strategy. In many national park units in the United States (including parks like Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Glacier, Yosemite, and Grand Canyon National Parks) entrance fees would nearly double to a cost of \$70 under the proposal (NPS, 2017c). However, there is a dearth of research on how current visitors to national parks feel about raising fees. Limited previous research on fees in national parks indicated that value orientations may be an important consideration when evaluating issues regarding fees in national parks, but it has never been explicitly explored (Kyle, Absher, & Graefe, 2003).

Collectively, the purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the relationship between park value orientations, attitudes about national park fee increases, and behavioral intention to visit national parks through a sample of travelers to the state of Montana who visit national parks at least one time per year. This line of research fits

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within the cognitive hierarchy as a study of value orientations, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Manfredo, 2008; Rokeach, 1979). According to this theoretical framework, people possess multiple, interacting levels of cognition. Previous research found that park visitors have different patterns of beliefs about the purpose of parks (Borrie, Freimund, & Davenport, 2002; Manfredo, 2008). The pattern and direction of these beliefs is considered a value orientation. Thus, this research posits that these value orientations influence an individual's attitudes about national park fee increase and their intentions to visit national parks. To address the purpose of the study, a broad research question was developed:

R₁: What is the relationship between park value orientations, attitudes about fee increases, and intentions to visit national parks?

2. Literature review

2.1. Fees in the National Park Service

Fees charged to visitors have been a part of national parks since before the creation of the National Park Service (NPS) in 1916. During these early years of fees, the revenue from the national parks were held in a treasury account that was separate from general treasury funds and were to be used only for national park purposes (Mackintosh, 1983). However, the fees were soon directed into the general treasury fund (Mackintosh, 1983). The result of this was a national park system that was dependent on federal appropriations. Since then, there has been a philosophical debate around charging fees to visitors at national parks in the U.S. Should people who are already paying taxes for national parks be paying more money to access them (an anti-fee stance)? Alternatively, should people who may never visit national parks be paying the same amount as those who do use national parks (a pro-fee stance)?

The answer to this debate came in the first fee schedule that was proposed in 1937 (Mackintosh, 1983). Parks were allowed to charge fees, but the fees were specifically for park roads (Mackintosh, 1983). This lasted until the 1940s when a philosophical shift began to take hold. This shift represented a belief that people using parks should be paying more than the general tax payer. Accompanying this was the reality that parks needed to charge fees for things beyond roads, like comfort stations (Mackintosh, 1983). When the next major fee increase occurred in 1953, fees were generally accepted as entrance fees as opposed to road fees (Mackintosh, 1983). Although there were concerns about higher fees excluding some people from national parks due to financial constraints, the common tone that parks were being loved to death and a decrease in visitation may have been a welcomed reality (Mackintosh, 1983).

Since 1972, revenue generated by NPS fees went into a separate fund that could be used for any reason by the agency (Mackintosh, 1983). This fund was supposed to encourage national parks to collect fees and use them as a supplement to augment their federal appropriations (Mackintosh, 1983). However, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) did not agree with this interpretation, and began to take fee collections into consideration when evaluating budget requests, ultimately leading OMB to actively encourage fee increases by reducing appropriations to the NPS (Mackintosh, 1983). For instance, in 1980, OMB reduced the NPS's budget request by \$12 million and suggested fee increases to make up the difference. From this, 14 parks would raise entrance fees, and 9 parks would implement entrance fees where they did not previously exist. However, there was disagreement between the White House and Congress regarding these fee increases, and in 1981 things reversed course again when revenues generated by the NPS were directed into a general fund. This act removed whatever incentive existed in collecting fees for national park units (Mackintosh, 1983).

The Recreation Fee Demonstration Program (Fee-demo) (Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions & Appropriation Act of, 1996) was a major turning point in this debate as it allowed numerous federal land recreation sites (including national parks) to charge a multitude of

different fees. Ultimately, individual NPS units were incentivized to charge fees, as the Fee-demo allowed park units to keep about 80% of the revenue generated by an individual park to be reinvested back into the park unit that collected the fee. The Fee-demo program was originally designed to be experimental, but amendments ensured its continued existence. In 2004, through an omnibus bill, Congress established the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA), ostensibly preserving the same types of incentives to charge fees as the original Fee-demo, which is still enacted today.

2.1.1. Research on NPS fees

Although research regarding visitor fees on public lands is somewhat limited, there are some important insights into this area. One of the first studies to evaluate fees on public lands was conducted by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (1976). Results indicated that the majority of respondents believed recreation should be provided on a "pay-as-you-go" (PAYG) system (i.e. fee for service). This was true across a variety of different sociodemographic and geographic variables, including region of the country, income, age, level of education, rural or urban locations, and households with and without children. However, several differences in support among demographic variables are notable. Support for the PAYG system was highest among older people, especially those 55 and older (76.1%). Support was *lowest* among those with the *highest* level of income, and *highest* among those with the *lowest* level of income. Rural residents were also more supportive of PAYG systems, as were families without children and those with lower levels of education. Additionally, 70% of respondents in this research stated that fees should be lower in public recreation areas than in private ones. Respondents also reported willingness to pay significantly higher user fees than they were currently paying for recreation services on public lands, and lower willingness to pay higher fees than they were currently paying on private lands (BOR, 1976).

To better inform congressional decision making, the Office of Programming and Budget (OPB) conducted an analysis of the fee system specifically for the NPS in 1976. This analysis was mostly a summary of which units were charging fees, for what services they were charging fees, and how much revenue they were generating. Of most interest, this research concluded that less than half of the national park units were charging fees (OPB, 1977). Of the 66 national park units charging fees at the time, 10 of them collected two-thirds of all the revenue (OPB, 1977). Additionally, the report concluded that charging entrance fees was more profitable than charging user fees (e.g. camping fees, picnic fees, etc.) (Mackintosh, 1983).

More recent research evaluated the relationship between declining national park visitation and a variety of economic factors, including entrance fees to national parks (Stevens, More, & Markowski-Lindsay, 2014). This research found a small negative effect of entrance fees and level of income on park visitation. However, the effect is likely from people in surrounding communities visiting the parks in their local areas. The is because of the price of an entrance fee compared to the price of the total trip. For overnight visitors, the price of the entrance fee was only 4.6% of their daily costs. For local visitors, however, the entrance fee represented 32% of their daily costs. In essence, entrance fee increases could be imposed and total park visitation would be unchanged, but the parks may be disproportionately burdening local communities in doing so (Stevens et al., 2014).

Research has also incorporated social psychological theories into fee research. For instance, one study looked at the relationship between support for spending, fee attitudes, and place attachment (Kyle et al., 2003). In this research, Kyle et al. (2003) hypothesized that the relationship between fee attitudes and spending support would be moderated by place attachment. Their hypothesis was partially supported; place identity did indeed partially moderate the relationship between attitudes and spending preference. This relationship was the strongest and most consistent when predicting spending on environmental protection. One of the conclusions they reached from this research is that

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