



## Transportation mode choice among baby boomer visitors in national parks: Exploring the concept of freedom



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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines factors influencing shuttle bus ridership, with a particular focus on transportation freedom, among older visitors to Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks (SEKI). It focuses on people born between 1946 and 1964, termed the baby boomer cohort. The national parks have looked to shuttle buses to provide greater visitors access while reducing traffic congestion, enhancing visitors' experiences, and protecting park resources. Yet, older people are generally shown to be less likely to ride shuttle buses. Semi-structured qualitative interviews and rigorous content analysis of related transcripts resulted in insights and explanations for this among baby boomer park visitors. In contrast to existing literature, this study found that a relatively high number of baby boomers were utilizing the shuttle system. Many respondents noted how they appreciated the shuttle as an alternative to using their car, or simply walking. However, some respondents stated the reason they choose to use their own car in SEKI was to maintain freedom – the ability to stop wherever and whenever they liked. Some respondents mentioned how the shuttle bus system actually adds freedom by giving more possible ways to get around in the park. Parks could likely gain ridership from the baby boomer cohort, and others as well, by better communicating and marketing the benefits of using the shuttle. By using shuttle bus systems there is the potential for riders to hike more, see more, be more active, save money, be safer, and to focus more on the enjoyment of the parks themselves.

### 1. Introduction

Managing automobile traffic is a large concern for the U.S. National Park Service (NPS). As early as 1920, NPS director Stephen Mather wrote of the need for more and better roads as one of the most important issues the NPS faced (Hall, 1921). Nearly 283 million visits to NPS units occur annually (NPS, 2017) and the automobile is the primary means of transportation to and through most national parks (Hallo and Manning, 2009; Manning et al., 2014). This is one reason the NPS has, and continues to look to Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS). Many national parks are implementing ATS in the form of shuttle buses to relieve the parks of traffic congestion. There are now 147 ATS in 72 park units across the nation (NPS, 2014).

Shuttle buses have been implemented in national parks such as Acadia and Glacier to mitigate congestion and other problems resulting from high private vehicle usage. The benefits of shuttle bus ridership are numerous (Mace et al., 2013) with potentially drastic reductions in levels of automobile traffic, crowding, and air pollution. Denali National Park went so far as to ban private vehicles from entering the

interior of the park in 1972 (Harrison, 1975; Mace et al., 2013). The park's mandatory shuttle system continues to report positive experiences, with visitors stating that their visit had been enhanced as a result of the ability to see more of the park (Mace et al., 2013; Manning and Hallo, 2010; Miller and Wright, 1999).

Automobile use dominates the way people move inside and outside cities (Grava, 2003). Thus, the challenge in national parks and elsewhere is how to transition from automobile usage to ATS. National park visitors have a long history of traveling to and within national parks by vehicle; a major part of the experience of visiting a park is driving through it (Hallo and Manning, 2009; Manning et al., 2014; Turnbull, 2003). For example, driving for pleasure within Acadia National Park was found to be important for a majority of survey respondents (Hallo and Manning, 2009). Further, personal vehicle use played an important role in the development of many parks. The Blue Ridge Parkway was conceived and designed "as a linear park containing a road meant for pleasure driving and scenic appreciation" (Myers, 2006, p. 38). Going-to-the-Sun Road, which bisects Glacier National Park is in fact a U.S. National Historic Landmark (NPS, 2013).

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A related problem is that the average park visitor is older, and older visitors tend not to ride shuttle buses as frequently as younger visitors (Manning et al., 2014; Wilson, 2015). In Rocky Mountain National Park a relatively higher preference was found for visitors age 40 and over for driving personal vehicles when compared to riding shuttle buses (Pettebone et al., 2011). Also, elderly or disabled visitors may find it difficult to use public transportation as compared to personal vehicles (Holly et al., 2010). Finally, older visitors to Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks were found to be much less interested in a mandatory park shuttle when compared with an optional one (Dilworth, 2003).

Freedom, including freedom of transportation choice, is highly valued in most societies. A major reason that some visitors do not ride shuttle buses in parks is due to a perceived loss of freedom (Dilworth, 2003; Manning and Hallo, 2010; Sims et al., 2005; Taff et al., 2013; White, 2007). Maintaining individual freedom was the most important factor for visitors to Acadia National Park when considering whether or not to ride the shuttle bus there (Holly et al., 2010). Also, visitors riding ATS in Yosemite and Rocky Mountain National Parks expressed a desire to experience a sense of freedom while at both parks (Taff et al., 2013).

A sense of freedom may be related to increased age. The freedom to drive a personal vehicle while visiting a national park could be due to the autonomy that a vehicle brings. Perhaps there are reasons related to maintaining autonomy, such as declining physical health or physical disability, for older travelers to use private vehicles more so in national parks. The use of an automobile provides high levels of independence, especially for the elderly. Automobiles allow older persons to continue on with their lives by fulfilling their needs to shop, attend religious services, and continue living in their own homes. The revocation of a driver's license typically results in a loss of freedom, loss of social contact, and a significant reduction in activities (Fain, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to find what factors are inhibiting ATS ridership among older park visitors. Specifically, people born between 1946 and 1964, termed the baby boomer cohort, were the focus of this study. The concept of transportation freedom as related to this age group was examined. Also, specific aspects of freedom that may be preventing more baby boomers from using buses were explored.

### 1.1. Research questions

- 1) What mode of travel are baby boomers using in a national park? Are they willing to change their mode?
- 2) What influences transportation mode choice among baby boomers in a national park?
- 3) What specific factors are inhibiting shuttle bus ridership?
- 4) How can buses or services be changed to better promote a sense of freedom and increase shuttle ridership by the baby boomer generation in national parks?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Baby boomers

The baby boomer generational cohort is comprised of those born between 1946 and 1964. The baby boomer generation came about as a result of the increased social and economic prosperity of the post-World War II era (Cleaver and Muller, 2002). According to the United States Census Bureau (2015) there are 75 million baby boomers in the United States. The U.S. population is projected to become older in the coming decades largely as a result of the sheer number of baby boomers. The aging of the baby boomers is expected to increase the median age of the U.S. population from 36 to 39 by 2040 and increase the percentage of older adults from 12 to over 20 percent (Kinsella and He, 2009). The first of the baby boomers reached age 65 in 2011. By 2050, the number of Americans aged 65 and older is projected to double to 88.5 million (Vincent and Velkoff, 2010).

Baby boomers visit national parks in earnest and the group may

continue visiting for some time to come (Nagourney, 2013). Baby boomers have an abundance of leisure time and fewer social and family obligations as compared to younger people (Higgs and Quirk, 2007; Tate et al., 2006). The impending retirement of many baby boomers will create more time for them to visit national parks. Also, this group stands to inherit some \$10.4 trillion in stock market gains and real estate assets, which will allow for increased travel (Howe et al., 1997). Finally, many park-based activities, including ones that include a sense of adventure or risk, are highly participated in by baby boomers (Wilson et al., 2017). In *The Future of America's National Parks*, a report to the President of the U.S. by the Secretary of the Interior, national parks were told to prepare for a larger, older, and more diverse population (Kempthorne, 2007).

### 2.2. Aging in parks, tourism, and transportation

Americans are living longer than ever before. On average, life expectancy has increased by 2.5 years per decade for the past 160 years. Since 1950 the number of people celebrating their 100th birthday has doubled each decade (Vaupel and Kistowski, 2005). In 1935, the typical 65-year-old could expect to live approximately 4.5 more years in the U.S. In 2015, the typical 65-year-old can expect to live another 19.4 years (Social Security Administration, 2015). By 1970, the average life expectancy at birth was 70.8 years; in 2008, it had risen to 78.0 years (National Institute on Aging, 2013). It is projected that life expectancy will reach 79.5 years by 2020 (United States Census Bureau, 2013). 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).

Older Americans use their personal vehicles 89% of the time when travelling according to the 2001 national household travel survey (Collia et al., 2003). Older adults tend to be less mobile in their trip behavior in that they take fewer trips, travel shorter distances, and travel for shorter times. For men and women who have to give up driving, alternative means of transportation become a necessity. Yet overall use of alternative transportation is relatively low, accounting for about 2% of daily travel (Collia et al., 2003).

Urban public transport has been shown to be supported more by older adults (Gilhooly et al., 2002). This runs counter to the literature on public transport use by older adults in the national parks which states that older adults would rather drive their personal vehicles (Pettebone et al., 2011). A number of barriers to the use of public transport have been identified for older adults, including concerns about personal safety at night, difficulties carrying heavy loads, public transport running late, the behavior of some passengers, poor cleanliness, and a lack of toilets (Gilhooly et al., 2002). While bus travel is not the most popular mode of transportation for taking pleasure trips, it has been found to increase in importance as a person ages (Javalgi et al., 1992).

### 2.3. Mode choice and freedom

The NPS has looked to ATS to provide visitors access to the national parks in a manner that potentially reduces traffic congestion, enhances visitors' experiences, reduces noise levels, improves air quality, accommodates increasing visitor demands and more effectively protects park resources (Freitas, 1999; Manning et al., 2014; Pettebone et al., 2011; Turnbull, 2003). Denali National Park was the first NPS unit to have an ATS, a shuttle bus that began in 1972 (Singer and Beattie, 1986). This system has been successful, with ridership increasing quickly in its first few years of use (Harrison, 1975). Rocky Mountain National Park has seen success with their ATS service. Before 2001, approximately 156,000 people rode the park's ATS annually. Rocky Mountain expanded their ATS service, and also expanded the size of a park and ride lot. In 2006, ridership increased to approximately 270,000 riders (Lawson et al., 2017). Maine's Acadia National Park has

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