

On the Prescriptive Utility of Visitor Survey Research: A Rejoinder to Manning

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Manning's commentary frames our position as questioning the value of both visitor survey research and policies that restrict use. This is a profound misstatement of our position. Our disagreement with Manning revolves around a narrow issue—the utility of empirical data from visitor surveys as a foundation for making prescriptive decisions about what ought to be, about standards and appropriate park management strategies, such as use limitation. By championing user-based “normative” data as a scientific foundation for carrying capacity decisions, Manning confuses descriptive data with prescriptive policies. Visitor surveys describe visitors, what motivates them, the experiences they seek, and ways in which different visitor groups are likely to be affected by alternative management actions. However, such descriptive data provide little basis for prescriptive decisions about how a park ought to be managed. The fundamental basis for any prescriptive decision (e.g., whether or not to limit use and what that limit ought to be) lies in decisions about park purposes and the kind of experiences, setting attributes, and visitor groups to which management is directed. Such decisions must be based on information from many sources, most notably from legal mandates, agency policy, stakeholder dialogue processes, and analyses of regional supply and demand. The primary contribution of visitor survey data to management planning lies in working-out the technical details to best meet specific management objectives.

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Introduction

Manning (this issue), in his reply to our paper on the relationship between encounters and experience quality (Stewart & Cole 2001), contends that we “dismiss encounters and crowding/solitude as potential rationales

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Author Note: The ideas of this rejoinder were initially developed at the Ninth International Symposium on Society and Resource Management, Bloomington, IN, June, 2002 as part of a panel discussion on using normative data for natural resource management. The authors appreciate the helpful comments on a previous draft by Troy Hall, Steve McCool, Thomas More, and Joe Roggenbuck. Their insights and counter-points helped improve the clarity of our argument.

for limiting use” and that we discount the “potential usefulness of research on crowding and related norms.” He states that we are more concerned about inappropriately limiting public access to parks than we are about the importance of making sure that the quality of visitor experiences is not diminished. His reply contains several arguments for the need to establish use limits in parks and wilderness areas. He reminds us of important cultural and personal values that will be compromised if we allow visitor numbers to go unchecked and warns of the potential disappearance of recreation opportunities with low levels of encounters. He champions the utility of planning frameworks, such as Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP), as means of insuring that standards for a high quality recreation experience are not violated. He gives many examples of visitor survey research that he and his associates have conducted in various parks, which include assessments of preferences for number of encounters, trade-off analysis and stated choice modeling, and argues extensively that this research is useful.

We share these same concerns with Manning, are quick to support him on these issues, and value the research that he and his associates have conducted. The three of us have collaborated on research projects and have had numerous spirited discussions regarding research strategies that might contribute to maintenance of high quality recreation experiences. Manning’s response encapsulates many of the ideas and mutual value orientations that the three of us have in common. However, by framing our paper as an argument against use limits, as insensitive to the need to protect opportunities for solitude, and as an argument that “park and wilderness experiences should go unmanaged” is a gross misunderstanding of our paper. We are strong advocates of the need to protect a diversity of opportunities for recreation experiences, including outstanding opportunities for solitude, that often require limitations on use. In addition, our paper does not argue against the usefulness of visitor survey research on crowding and related norms. In fact we have argued elsewhere (Cole & Stewart, 2002) that such data has “the potential to inform managerial decisions about encounter standards” (p. 323). Given Manning’s profound misstatement of our position and conclusions we welcome the opportunity to clarify.

What We Found and What We Concluded

Our empirical research showed that as number of encounters increased, most Grand Canyon backpackers felt more crowded, were less likely to achieve a sense of solitude/privacy, and reported that this adversely affected the overall quality of their experience. However, the magnitude of effect of number of encounters, perceived crowding, and solitude/privacy achieved on overall experience quality was weak. That is, most participants reported generally high quality experiences even when they had numerous encounters. This is neither an unexpected nor a completely new finding. What is different—beyond our research design—is our interpretation of this finding.

Since researchers first substantiated that the quality of visitors' experiences (originally measured by asking them how satisfied they were with their trip) was weakly affected by encounters or crowding, this finding typically has been explained as the unfortunate result of a methodological problem (e.g. Shelby & Heberlein, 1986). Following in this tradition, Manning devotes several pages to the problems of "overall visitor satisfaction" as an evaluative construct. He is careful to use the term "overall visitor satisfaction", despite the fact that we are equally careful to refer to the construct as "overall experience quality" and do not use the word satisfaction in our multiple-item scale. Nevertheless, the gist of the argument is that experiences are multi-dimensional and, therefore, we should not expect any single attribute, such as number of encounters, to have a significant effect on the overall quality of visitors' experiences. This is precisely our point and something upon which we agree wholeheartedly with Manning.

But instead of considering this to be a methodological problem, we view this as a significant conclusion. Empirical data from visitor surveys, the type of research that Manning argues is contributing to better decisions about use limits, show that the quality of visitors' experiences is not significantly affected by the number of other people encountered. Hence the primary management implication of our paper is that *empirical studies of current visitors do not provide a strong rationale for making prescriptive decisions about whether or not use should be limited and what those limits should be. Justifications for limiting use and the criteria for establishing a particular use limit must be sought elsewhere.*

Asking Users More Than They Can Tell

Manning offers several arguments supportive of our own position that there are problems with relying on visitor opinions to justify decisions about use limitations. We could not agree more with the list of concerns he has with visitor surveys—from the self-selected nature of recreation activities, to the implications of coping behavior and potential displacement, to the problems with subjectivity and relativism inherent in measuring such constructs as experience quality. Although he only mentions these as problems with assessments of overall experience quality, these concerns apply equally to assessments of visitor evaluations of crowding or their preferences for management.

For example, Manning criticizes the use of a "relative, subjective concept" like "overall satisfaction" and argues that being relative and subjective decreases its usefulness to management. Since Driver and his colleagues (e.g., Driver et al., 1991) moved outdoor recreation research into experientially-based frameworks in the 1970s, most contemporary concepts in leisure research have become relative and subjective, including other favored concepts in outdoor recreation such as "perceived crowding," "solitude," "privacy achieved," "acceptable" number of encounters, to name a few. All of these concepts are categorically subjective due to reliance on self-report and the influence of perceptual filters on their assessment. If visitor expe-