

## American and Canadian National Park Agency Responses to Declining Visitation

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### Abstract

Recent research has suggested a decline in visits to national parks in both the United States and Canada. We analyzed contemporary (2000 to 2009) national policy documents (e.g., annual reports, strategic plans, commission findings) in both countries to assess national park agency reactions to recent changes in visitation patterns. Neither the Parks Canada Agency nor the National Park Service directly mentioned declines in visitation in these high level documents, focusing instead on identifying major external “challenges” related to building visitation. In response to these challenges, both agencies moved to bolster and redefine their educational efforts to reach new audiences, particularly youth and minority/immigrant groups in urban areas. Both agencies also shared four key assumptions, most significantly the belief that decreased visitation will lead to decreased public and political support for parks. They also ignored potential benefits of decreasing use, such as decreased environmental or social impacts. We suggest that the growing focus on increasing use, in tandem with the contemporary neoliberal political environment, leads these national park agencies to systematically emphasize use values while de-emphasizing preservation values. The park agencies are becoming increasingly focused on “re-engaging” with the public to increase political support for the bureaucracies.

*KEYWORDS: Declining visitation, neoliberalism, national parks, preservation versus use*

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## Introduction

In 1911 and 1916, James Harkin and Stephen Mather, directors of the new national parks agencies in Canada and the United States (U.S.) respectively, faced the common challenge of guiding the development of their fledgling park systems. Two key issues seemed to almost immediately appear in both agencies. First, both leaders assumed public and political support for protected areas was essential for the new park agencies to survive and flourish (Lee, 1968; Mackintosh, 1991; McNamee, 2009). Consequently, both aggressively sought to attract the public to the parks, assuming public appreciation would follow, which would ultimately lead to increased political support through increased funding and expansion of the fledgling park systems and bureaucracies (Sellars, 1997). Over time, this assumed relationship between use, appreciation and support was institutionalized into a fundamental truth for the Parks Canada Agency (PCA) and the National Park Service (NPS). As Warner (2006, p. 13) noted in reference to the PCA, "Visits were designed to foster appreciation for the need to preserve wilderness, and therefore create the conditions for a popular support base to maintain parks."

The second issue was a result of the shared legislative terminology used to create the two agencies. The dual mandate (aka "preservation versus use" debate) embedded within park legislation demanded that the agencies both provide for public use of the parks as well as protect the parks in perpetuity. However, conflict between the dual mandates simmered in the background for decades while successive administrators focused on the more immediate task of building visitation. Pritchard (1999, p. 59) suggested that, "To Mather and his associates, there was no conflict between preservation of natural resources and human use of the parks. ... Mather and Albright predisposed the NPS toward emphasizing tourism first and placing other ideas and agendas further down their list of priorities." The preservation versus use debate would not become a primary concern until after the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s, when environmental groups and a nascent scientific analysis of the ecological and social impacts of increasing park use challenged park agencies to address this issue.

By the 1970s, the political environment in which the park systems and agencies operated was also changing. Government policies in the U.S. and Canada were increasingly affected by the global political movement toward neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2005). Neo-liberalism, often called "Reaganomics" in the U.S. or "Thatcherism" in Britain, was the major shift in political thinking that replaced the Progressive Era philosophy under which national park systems were established. Rather than relying on government like the progressives, neo-liberals advocated maximizing individual freedom through the unfettered operation of the free market. They argued that government should simply provide an institutional framework that ensured strong property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey 2005). Under neo-liberalism, national parks were viewed as services and "marketized"; that is, moved from full public funding to a market-based operating system that involved greater reliance on user fees, marketing, outsourcing, and public-private partnerships (Crompton & Lamb, 1986; Lehmann, 1995; Crompton 1998; Shultis 2005). Government bureaucracies like the NPS and the PCA were

seen as economically inefficient; neo-liberals believed that increasing their market-orientation could help deliver services more in tune with public tastes and preferences (Rosenthal, Loomis & Peterson, 1984; Crompton & Lamb, 1986). As customer satisfaction became the arbiter of successful park management, neo-liberalism shifted management's emphasis toward current use, and the 1980's saw significant expansion of visitor services and commercial opportunities within national parks (Lowry, 1994).

Despite these political and bureaucratic changes, the pervasive assumption of ever increasing demand for parks remained intact within both agencies. The NPS had coined the phrase "The parks are being loved to death!" in 1958 to dramatize the need for funding (Wirth, 1980), and increasing visitation has provided the single most important factor in agency budget justification ever since (More, 2002). The agencies seemed caught off guard when anxieties about a disconnect between people and nature appeared in Richard Louv's (2005) *Last Child in the Woods*. Louv's concerns were followed by Pergams and Zaradic's (2006) assertion that the per capita use of U.S. national parks had actually declined since the late 1980's. The two latter authors later expanded their analysis to park systems across the world (where data were available) and concluded interest in parks and nature had declined worldwide (Pergams & Zaradic, 2008).

The widespread concern about the future of people's relationship to nature in general, particularly its potential relationship to visiting national parks, forced the park agencies into action. The basic use→appreciation→support mantra remained the same, but its direction had reversed: if park use was declining, then people's interest in and involvement with national parks could also be waning, leading eventually to declining public and political support for parks and park agencies. What were the agencies to do?

The park agencies' response to declining visitation in national parks in both the U.S. and Canada is the subject of this paper. After reviewing recent trends in national park visitation, we provide an interpretive analysis of major agency policy documents (e.g., annual reports, commission findings, strategic plans). Specifically, we sought out high level, public documents and statements made by the professional administrators and/or political appointees who actually determine national park policy: those at the interface between the professional bureaucracy and elected officials. These documents comprise the current public face of agency policy.

Three research questions guided our analysis: 1) what have the NPS and PCA identified as causes of these recent changes in visitor use; 2) how have the agencies responded to declining visitation; and 3) what assumptions underlie their perceptions and responses? We use the answers to these questions to compare contemporary national park policies and political ideology in Canada and the U.S., and close with observations about the continuing policy debate on preservation versus use.

## Methods

The documents for our qualitative analysis included over 40 strategic plans, corporate plans, annual reports, and long-term planning documents, particularly from the national park agencies themselves but also from their overarching departments (i.e., Ministry of Environment [PCA] and Department of the Interior [NPS]) and related advisory boards (e.g., Parks Canada Ecological Integrity Panel, National Parks System Advisory Board). The reports were published from 2000 to 2009. While we tried to be as inclusive as possible in our pursuit of agency documents, there is no fixed list of national policy documents; directors and undersecretaries also speak to many groups in many situations and it is impossible to have a full sample of the entire public record. Rather, we suggest that readers view our analysis as the initial phase of a policy history. Over time, internal agency documents will become public, providing a more detailed analysis of why and how the agencies arrived at their policy conclusions, while diaries and memoirs (e.g., Wirth, 1980; Hartzog, 1988) will supply insight into the motives of individual players. In the meantime, our analysis focuses on publicly acknowledged, national responses to a perceived decline in visitation at the agency level. We believe existing public agency documents provide a substantial public record of contemporary national park policy and practice in Canada and the U.S.

To analyze the documents, we used interpretive analysis, which “seeks to discover associations, relationships and patterns” that honor the inherent complexities of social phenomena not easily illuminated by other methods (Thorne, 2008, p. 50). Interpretive analysis is a qualitative research technique that recognizes the socially constructed nature of human experience and attempts to document how these social experiences are generated and made meaningful. Research in the qualitative paradigm does not attempt to demonstrate causation, prediction or control, but seeks to create a rich description of social phenomenon and consider the contextual basis of social experience.

Morse’s (1994) four-stage model of qualitative data analysis was followed. Comprehending is the first stage, where information related to the topic is collected and assessed. Initial patterns of common themes (i.e., shared perceptions of and responses to declining visitation) were identified during the synthesis phase using constant comparative analysis, an inductive technique that generates theory from the data rather than testing an existing hypothesis. In constant comparative analysis, the “method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence, etc. The goal is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns” (Tesch, 1990, p. 96). We made comparisons at three levels: between text 1) within each document, 2) in different documents within the same agency/organization, and 3) documents provided by the two different agencies.

Theorizing, the third phase of interpretive analysis, occurs when latent similarities and differences become evident. External information sources (e.g. academic sources, background literature) helped explain the patterns identified in

the synthesizing phase. We hypothesized that the shared neoliberal political climate in both these nations had a major impact on shaping the common discourses provided by the PCA and NPS. Finally, recontextualizing brings the theoretical back into the practical, suggesting how research findings relate to a broader social realm, setting or context (Morse, 1994; see also Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). Consistent with the principles and practice of interpretive inquiry (Thorne, 2008), results from the analysis are interwoven with literature in the discussion of the findings in order to form linkages between the data, related literature and theory. This approach reflects the inductive, iterative nature of interpretive analysis.

Before we undertake this analysis, a brief description of the recent decline in national park visits is provided to assess changing use levels in the American and Canadian national park systems. When did these declines begin, and how extensive were they? We base our analysis on official agency statistics.

### **Visitation Patterns in American and Canadian National Parks**

As previously noted, both the NPS and PCA quickly acknowledged the political importance of documenting increased visitation to the national parks. Yet despite the importance of maintaining a valid, reliable data set, few agencies have attained these standards due to the financial and logistical requirements of maintaining a long term count of visitation (Hornback & Eagles, 1999). Visitation statistics are sometimes used as political statements, and are subject to distortion when hinged to agency budgets (Hendee, Stankey & Lucas, 1978; Kaczynski, Crompton & Emerson, 2003). Official figures are also affected by historical changes in the parks themselves (e.g., new access points and expanding park systems) and by changes in counting technologies and procedures. As a general rule, the older the data, the more unreliable they are. Consequently, visitation figures for many park systems, including the PCA and NPS should be characterized as rough estimates rather than exact figures, and readers are advised to accept them cautiously. However, both the NPS and the PCA have devoted substantial effort to obtaining visitor use data and we believe their data sets are among the world's best.

National park visitation rose rapidly over much of the 20th century in both the U.S. and Canada. In 1915, there were 335,299 visitors to the U.S. national park system; this climbed to 2.75 million in 1929, 22 million in 1946, and 133 million in 1966 (Lee, 1968; McCormick, 1989). If the specific figures themselves are not overly reliable, the trend of significant, sustained growth seems clear: for most of the 20th century, growth in national park visitation exceeded the rate of population growth. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, per capita visitation peaked and began falling (Pergams & Zaradic 2006). By the late 1990s, a decline in actual use (as opposed to per capita use) emerged in both countries (see Tables 1 and 2). Visits to Canadian national parks fell nearly 15.2 percent from 1995 to 2007, while actual visits to the U.S. national parks system peaked in 1997 (Table 1).

Other protected area systems experienced similar declines: available data for U.S. state parks, Spanish and Japanese national parks, U.S. national forests and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands suggest declines equivalent to those U.S. national parks (Pergams & Zaradic, 2008). Between 2000 and 2008, recreation visits to U.S. national forests also declined 18 percent (see <http://www>.

Table 1

*Recreation Visits to the U.S. National Parks System\*: 1979-2008*

Year	U.S. Population Estimate (millions)	National Park Recreation Visits (millions)**	Visits Per Capita
1979	225.1	205	.91
1980	226.6	220	.97
1981	229.5	238	1.04
1982	231.8	245	1.06
1983	233.8	245	1.05
1984	235.8	249	1.06
1985	237.9	263	1.10
1986	240.1	281	1.17
1987	242.3	287	1.18
1988	244.5	282	1.15
1989	246.8	269	1.09
1990	249.6	256	1.02
1991	253.0	268	1.06
1992	256.5	275	1.07
1993	259.9	273	1.05
1994	263.1	269	1.02
1995	266.3	270	1.01
1996	269.4	266	.99
1997	272.6	275	1.01
1998	275.9	287	1.04
1999	279.0	287	1.03
2000	282.2	286	1.01
2001	285.2	280	.98
2002	288.1	277	.96
2003	290.8	266	.91
2004	293.6	277	.94
2005	296.5	273	.92
2006	299.4	273	.91
2007	301.3	276	.92
2008	304.0	275	.90

Source: Statistical Abstract of the US; National Park Service, <http://www.nature.nps.gov/stats/park.cfm>

\* National park system visits include visits to all units managed by the NPS, including national parks, historical parks, memorials, battlefields, etc.

\*\* Recreation visits: The entry of a person onto lands or waters administered by the NPS for recreational purposes, excluding government personnel, through traffic (commuters), trades-person, and a person residing within park boundaries.

Table 2

*Parks Canada Attendance, 1988-2007*

Year	Canadian Population	Number of Person-Visits*	Visits Per Capita
1988/1989**	26,795,383	12,390,775	.46
1989/1990	27,281,795	12,703,666	.47
1990/1991	27,697,530	12,516,778	.45
1991/1992	28,031,394	13,693,354	.49
1992/1993	28,366,737	13,693,354	.48
1993/1994	28,681,676	14,169,843	.49
1994/1995	28,999,006	15,319,761	.53
1995/1996	29,302,091	15,385,828	.53
1996/1997	29,610,757	14,684,145	.50
1997/1998	29,907,172	14,904,140	.50
1998/1999	30,157,082	15,696,158	.52
1999/2000	30,403,878	16,260,557	.53
2000-2001	30,689,035	n/a	-
2002/2003	31,021,251	12,576,695	.40
2003/2004	31,676,077	11,967,806	.38
2004/2005	31,989,454	12,355,521	.39
2005/2006	32,299,496	12,911,531	.40
2006/2007	32,623,490	13,050,538	.40
2007/2008	32,976,026	13,141,831	.40
2008/2009	33,311,389	11,921,251	.36

Source: Unpublished Parks Canada data; Parks Canada Statistics: <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection/R62-332-2000E.pdf>; <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/docs/pc/attend/table1.aspx?m=1>; Statistics Canada data, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/98-187-x/4151287-eng.htm>.

\* Person-Visits: Each time a person enters the land or marine part of a national park for recreational, educational or cultural purposes during business hours. Through, local and commercial traffic are excluded. Same day re-entries and re-entries by overnight visitors do not constitute new person-visits.

\*\* Attendance figures prior to 1988 are not directly comparable with figures after this time period, as the person-visit definition was changed and additional locations reported data.

fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/nvum/). In 2006, the Minister of the New Zealand Department of Conservation suggested

the proportion of New Zealanders regularly tramping and overnighting in the back country appears to have dropped since the 1970s and 80s, despite population growth, better health in old age and tourism increasing the overall number of people on tracks. The studies we have suggest this drop may be in the region of 30 percent. (Carter, 2006, p. 13-14)

In other parts of the world, the data seem to be mixed. Balmford et al. (2009) reviewed data from 20 developed and developing nations around the world, concluding that declines were primarily evident in North America (the U.S. and Canada) and Australasia, while parks in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa

experienced largely positive growth between 1992 and 2006. Unfortunately, these data are difficult to evaluate given the uncertainties surrounding data collection cited above.

In sum, the agencies' own figures strongly suggest that per capita visitation to national park systems in Canada and the U.S. declined significantly over the last 20 years. The mid-1980s to 1990s saw stagnant visitation levels, with total and per capita declines dropping in both countries from 2000. Day, frontcountry, and backcountry use all seem to be declining (Outdoor Industry Association, 2006). We turn now to the qualitative analysis of the response of the NPS and PCA to these declines: what did the agencies perceive as the cause of these declines, and how did they react?

### **Agency Assessments of Changing Visitation**

There were striking similarities in the PCA and NPS assessments of declining visitation. First, the documents we reviewed never directly mentioned declining visitation. In the U.S., for example, the 2007 NPS Director's report noted: "Visits to national parks are on the *rebound* despite rising gas prices and the lure of electronic entertainment" (U.S. Department of the Interior, NPS, 2007, p. 2, emphasis added). In 2009, the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLERA) Second Triennial Report to Congress suggested that visitation had fallen 7.6% from 2005-2006, but had since remained relatively constant (USDI and USDA, 2009). For the national parks, they noted a 1.1% rise from 2006 to 2008, and suggested that "*Recent fluctuations* in visitation can be attributed to a variety of factors including: higher gasoline prices, downturns in the economy, new recreational pursuits of visitors, natural disasters ... that caused park closures ... airline bankruptcy, and increased international travel as a result of the value of the Euro" (USDI & USDA, 2009, p. 29-30, emphasis added).

In Canada, the 2008 Performance Report acknowledged that changing travel patterns were "a contributing factor to the decline in attendance at many of Parks Canada's administered places" (PCA, 2008, p. 13). In 2009, the PCA stated that "Visitation to Canada's national parks and national historic sites is variable from year to year" and noted that visitor increases were a priority of the current corporate plan (PCA, 2009, p. 17). These relatively oblique references were the only instances in which we found declining visitation mentioned by either agency in the high level documents we reviewed.

Another strong theme that emerged from the data was the institutionalization of the use→appreciation→support discourse in both agencies. The potential negative impact of decreasing visitation on lessened political support for the park agencies seemed to be the central concern. Thus, it is not surprising that the agencies downplayed the declines. Instead, both agencies highlighted broader "critical issues" they faced in the early 21st century. Compare these reviews of the primary challenges facing the PCA and NPS respectively:

A rapidly growing number of visible minority citizens have made Canada their home. They need to see their experiences reflected in the spirit and presentation of our national historic sites. Canada is also an



increasingly urban country, where most Canadians live some distance from the stunning beauty and ecological richness of our national parks. Young Canadians now live in a world of text messaging, MP3 players and advanced technological skills, and we need to reach them in ways that appeal to them. The coming retirement of the baby boom generation means we need to rethink and reshape our facilities and programs to meet the needs of more seniors." (PCA, 2006, p. 4)

America's population is growing, aging, becoming more diverse, and more urbanized. Children are increasingly disconnected from the outdoors. Urban sprawl has affected the woods and fields where many of today's parents and grandparents played as children. Modern technology and virtual experiences compete with authentic learning adventures and personal exploration of our nation's nature and history." (Kempthorne, 2007, unpaginated)

Thus, rather than discuss the visitation declines directly, both the PCA and the NPS highlighted the same four perceived "challenges": 1) declines in visits by children, primarily due to the increased use of electronic media; 2) the lack of minority and immigrant use of national parks; 3) an aging population; and 4) increasing urbanization and the concomitant loss of green/open space. These challenges undoubtedly reflect the public concern that crystallized around issues raised by both Louv (2005) and Pergams and Zaradic (2006); indeed, these four "challenges" appeared only after the publication of these studies.

A decline in children visiting national parks, especially from urban areas, was most often and clearly identified. Typically, the agencies blamed children's declining interest on growing attachment to electronic media. These, in turn, were perceived to decrease participation rates in outdoor recreation generally and national park visits particularly. Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (2005) was particularly influential in popularizing the impact of children's increasingly technological pastimes on decreasing environmental awareness and natural area visitation; his arguments, and those of his colleagues in the Children and Nature Network (<http://www.childrenandnature.org/>) (see <http://www.naturechildreunion.ca/> for the Canadian equivalent) have been a catalyst for popular and governmental awareness of "nature deficit disorder" (e.g., Meyer, 2006; Koch, 2006; Cox, 2008; Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives, 2007; U.S. Department of the Interior, NPS, 2008a). Two trends concerning children were identified as critical by the NPS (Kempthorne, 2007). For example, in the trend "Children disconnected from the outdoors", the NPS claimed that recent research indicated:

that 70 percent of mothers [in the past] played outdoors every day compared with 31 percent of their children. Without concerted effort, children will continue to spend less and less time in direct contact with nature. This adversely affects children's physical and mental health. (Kempthorne, 2007, unpaginated)

Similarities also exist in the reasons *not* identified by the two national park agencies as influencing visitation levels. While the agencies clearly called for outreach to new audiences (i.e., immigrants and minority groups), they made no effort to examine the needs of their core constituents. Particularly notable is the lack of concern for adults in general, and for families in particular. After all, if children's visitation to national parks is declining, then it is probably because adults do not bring them, so factors that affect adult visitation are critically important to explaining the downturn. Price is one obvious adult concern, but no mention was made in public documents that higher user fees might affect visitation. However, a recent study suggested that 24% of visitors and 27% of non-visitors to national parks felt user fees were a barrier to visitation (Ostergren, Solop & Hagen, 2005). Other research has shown that raising prices increasingly affects low- and middle-income users (More & Stevens, 2000; More, Uradonta, & Onadonta, 2008). Park agencies are well aware of populist resistance to fees; legislation before the Congress in 2009 attempted to repeal fees for many U.S. agencies. But financial self-sufficiency and shifting the burden of payment directly to service users are pillars of the neoliberal commitment to smaller government, lower taxes and market mechanisms (Shultis, 2005), and some agency-sponsored research still downplays the effects of user fees on visitation (e.g., Solop, Hagen, & Ostergren, 2003; Le, Littlejohn, Russell, Hollenhorst, & Gramann, 2006; see also Martin, 1999).

The possibility that crowding may also be partly to blame for declining visitation is also ignored, despite research indicating crowding and displacement occur in many parks, especially in peak seasons (e.g., Gramann, 2002; Buckley, 2009). Pergams and Zaradic (2006) examined graphs of physical capacity in major U.S. parks and concluded that capacity was not a significant factor in declining visitation. However, the subjective expectation of crowding may prove a much greater constraint to visitation than actual physical capacity. In one study using a combined visitor and non-visitor population, 39% cited crowding and 49% cited travel costs as barriers to visitation, the fourth and third most cited barriers respectively (Solop et al., 2003). Lack of time, information, interest, and transportation are other constraints that have received greater attention in the academic literature (e.g., Solop & Hagen, 2001), but research has not yet gone beyond a relatively superficial understanding of what these barriers mean for actual management and policy.

### **Agency Responses to Visitation Declines**

To respond to these common challenges, both the NPS and PCA initiated educational outreach efforts to reach "new" or problematic audiences, again focusing on children, minorities, and recent immigrants, especially in urban areas. The PCA made significant organizational and policy changes to promote off-site educational programs in contrast to traditional park-based interpretation (Hveenagaard, Shultis, & Butler, 2009). Its "Engaging Canadians" strategy, introduced in 2001, sought to strengthen communication to increase Canadians' attachment to and understanding of national parks and other protected areas (Bronson, 2004): "the more Canadians know about these special places, the more likely they will be

to appreciate their significance, become involved in helping preserve them, and support the measures necessary to sustain them” (PCA, 2001, p. 77). In 2005, the PCA created an External Relations and Visitor Experience Directorate in Ottawa to “make heritage areas relevant to Canadians and representative of today’s Canadians” using a “renewed emphasis on public information, education and social science” (Centre for Excellence in Communications, 2006, unpaginated; [http://www.clmhc.gc.ca/docs/pc/rpts/rve-par/37/8\\_easp](http://www.clmhc.gc.ca/docs/pc/rpts/rve-par/37/8_easp)), including “a national awareness campaign, clear brand identity, and a proactive approach to media relations” (PCA, 2009, 24). Recently developed programs include a School Curriculum Program, a teacher resource section on the PCA website, the Parks and People Program, and partnerships with the Canadian Tourism Commission, the National History Society of Canada, Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, and the *Canadian Geographic* magazine (Minister’s Round Table on Parks Canada, 2005). The effort is ongoing: according to the PCA “connecting with, engaging and responding to new Canadians and youth are among the most significant challenges and opportunities facing the Agency”; enhanced visitor experiences will “lead to the strengthening of a sense of connection between visitors and heritage places and an increased sense of stewardship” (PCA, 2007, p. 13).

The NPS has also started using environmental education to target off-site audiences. While the NPS—like the PCA—traditionally focused on park-based interpretation, the report *Rethinking National Parks for the 21st Century* (National Park System Advisory Board, 2001) called for the NPS to re-focus itself as an educational institution. It suggested the NPS “re-examine the ‘enjoyment equals support’ equation ... embrac[ing] its mission, as educator, to become a more significant part of America’s educational system by providing formal and informal programs for students and learners of all ages inside and outside park boundaries” (National Park System Advisory Board, 2001, p. 9). As in the PCA, education was seen as a way to reach new audiences, bolstering park use and public support:

The goal of National Park Service (NPS) interpretive and educational programs is to provide memorable and meaningful learning and recreational experiences, foster development of a personal stewardship ethic, and broaden public support for preserving park resources. Such programs will be successful when they forge emotional and intellectual connections among park resources, visitors, the community, and park management. ... In a world of rapidly changing demographics, it is essential that interpretive and educational programs reach beyond park boundaries to schools and the wider general public. (NPS, 2005a)

The advisory board report produced an initial flurry of activity, with an official response including the report *Renewing Our Education Mission*, the formation of the NPS National Education Council, a service-wide “business plan” for interpretation and education, and an Interpretation and Education Evaluation Summit (Washburn, 2007).

As in Canada, “engagement” and “connection to the public”—particularly urban youth, minorities, and immigrants—are key NPS strategies. In 2006,

incoming NPS Director Mary Bomar identified “a ‘trifecta’ of goals: to re-engage all Americans with their parks; to increase the system’s capacity; and to develop the next generation of leaders for our parks” (U.S. Department of the Interior, NPS, 2008b, unpaginated). Similarly, Interior Secretary Kempthorne noted that “a crucial part of ensuring the relevancy of the NPS in the next century is raising awareness about the system to attract new interest, while retaining current supporters” (U.S. Department of the Interior, NPS, 2008c, p. 15). According to the current Strategic Plan of the U.S. Department of the Interior, “The more the Department can empower people as stewards of the land, the more effective we can be in our conservation mission” (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2007, p. 32).

The National Parks Second Century Commission, an independent body underwritten by the National Parks Conservation Association, provided its final recommendations in 2009 (see National Parks Second Century Commission, <http://www.visionfortheparks.org/>). Two of its six committees dealt with “Education and Learning” and “Connecting People and Parks,” suggesting that educating and engaging the public continued to be a concern for the agency. The Education and Learning Committee final report suggested strengthening commitments to education in the NPS would allow “more Americans, and a more diverse group of Americans, [to] achieve a greater level of engagement with the national parks, recognize their value, and become stewards and active supporters of the parks” (National Parks Second Century Commission, 2009, unpaginated).

Despite the new importance attached to off-site education and outreach, neither the PCA nor the NPS has the budget or infrastructure necessary to expand these areas directly, so they must rely on partnerships. Partnerships are central to neoliberal theory (Crompton, 1998; Shultis, 2005; More, 2006). Under the neoliberal network theory of government (Goldsmith & Eggars, 2004), public agencies pass functions to private sector partners, shifting the agency’s role to one of providing funding to the private (or other public) groups in the network. The agency then manages the network. In fact, building external partnership programs is now one of the four NPS mission goals (U.S. Department of the Interior, NPS, 2000). Many reports acknowledge the lack of NPS agency capacity and its crumbling, dated education and interpretation infrastructure (e.g., Pitcaithley, 2007; PCA, 2009; National Parks Second Century Commission, 2009). Typically, they recommend enhanced partnerships as the best or only way forward, and call for increased funding for education efforts to target urban, youth and minority groups to increase public engagement and thus political support for parks.

### **Assumptions Underlying Visitation Policy**

As intimated above, the documents we reviewed from both agencies shared four key assumptions: 1) decreased visitation leads to decreased public and political support for parks; 2) children’s use of national parks is decreasing, mainly due to increasing use of electronic media, and reversing this trend is critical to the park agencies; 3) minority and immigrant visitors are under-represented; and 4) off-site education using updated educational media is the best way to “re-engage” and “re-connect” citizens for their required support. Each assumption warrants further examination.

The assumed relationship between visitation and support was clearly evident in the documents; while the agencies seldom discussed declining visitation directly, their concern was evident in their aggressive push to reach current non-users and “re-engage” the public. Yet decades of public opinion polling has noted strong support for parks in both user and non-user populations. While non-user support may be lower than user support, it is still very high overall (e.g., Kniivilä, 2006). Surveys also indicate that the preservation values (e.g., wilderness preservation and the protection of wildlife) are always rated more highly than use values (i.e., recreational and tourism values) by both users and non-users. For example, a recent nationwide poll in the U.S. suggested that 79% thought protecting natural habitats and wildlife should be the priority in national parks compared to 13% who felt public access for recreational use should be the priority; however, 34% felt that park management currently emphasized protection, compared to 56% who believed the agencies emphasized use (Washington Post-ABC News, 2007). In other words, despite the lack of clear evidence that the public has become “disengaged” or unsupportive of national parks, there is a clear, often repeated discourse within the agencies that public support for parks is decreasing and needs to be re-engaged if national parks are to be publicly supported. Decreased visitation was always equated with decreased public “engagement” with or “connection” to the parks.

There was no indication that the agencies saw anything positive about the declines in park use. For example, although visitation declines might lead to decreasing social (e.g., crowding, conflict) and environmental impacts (e.g., crowding, conflict, negative wildlife-human interactions, pollution), and planning and managing parks is made much more difficult by ever-increasing use levels, the agencies focused almost exclusively on the potential loss of public and political support. That is, the agencies’ focus on declining visitation was on its assumed negative political impacts rather than potentially positive preservation values.

The assumption that children’s use of national parks is declining, primarily due to increased electronic media use was consistently noted by both agencies. However, NPS research suggests that the proportion of children using U.S. national parks has not changed:

Data from 135 VSP [Visitor Service Project] studies from 1992 to 2005 show that the proportion of children ... among park visitors remained relatively constant over time. The average proportion of visitors aged 17 and under was 20.5%. (NPS, 2005b, p. 13)

While VSP studies are not conducted annually for all NPS parks, these figures suggest that the proportion (if not the actual number) of visitors under 18 years of age in the national parks has remained steady rather than declining. Data on actual visits or equivalent PCA trends are not available. Again, despite the lack of despite direct supporting evidence, both agencies continue to assume that fewer children are visiting national parks, primarily as a result of increased use of electronic media.

Research directly examining the impact of electronic media use on outdoor recreation patterns is extremely limited, and we found no empirical research on

electronic media use that included park visitation as a distinct variable. Media use is obviously widespread, with up to 97% of children playing computer or video games (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, & Vitak, 2008). Contemporary children spend many hours in front of electronic media, with high use levels enabled by multitasking of multiple electronic media (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). However, as noted by Marshall, Gorely, and Biddle (2006), the weekly use of electronic media has remained remarkably consistent at approximately 50 hours since the 1950s (the advent of television). Moreover, despite speculative commentaries, there is no clear link between the amount of media use and youth's participation in physical activity, including outdoor recreation (Chia, Wang, Miang, Jong, & Gosian, 2002; Attewell, Suazo-Garcia, & Battle, 2003; Biddle, Gorely, Marshall, Murdey, & Cameron, 2004; Marshall, Biddle, Gorely, Cameron, & Murdey, 2004; Roberts et al., 2005; Lenhart et al., 2008). An exception may be a small proportion of "extreme" computer users who spend less time on sports and outdoor recreation, but not on reading or television viewing (Attewell et al., 2003). But there is little doubt that home-based leisure activities, especially among boys, obviously have increased in the last 20-30 years, largely due to increased media use, safety concerns of parents, and loss of green space (Gaster, 1991; Sweeting & West, 2003; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Thompson, Aspinall, & Montarzinbo, 2008).

Losing unstructured, direct outdoor play also may affect future generations' environmental awareness and concern (e.g., Cobb, 1977; Chawla, 1998; Chawla, 2001; Bixler, Floyd, & Hammitt, 2002; Wells & Lekies, 2006; Evans, Brauchle, Haq, Stecker, Wong, & Shapiro, 2007; Dutcher, Finley, Luloff, & Johnson, 2007). Yet outdoor experiences in youth do not necessarily lead to environmental concern in adulthood (Valada, Bixler, & James, 2007): most of this research has assessed childhood experiences among environmentalists and is correlational rather than causal.

Agency concern about minority and immigrant use of national parks is better founded (Washburne, 1978; Goldsmith, 1994; Floyd, 1999; Rodriguez & Roberts, 2002; Thompson, 2008). Early studies of wilderness and backcountry users found most were white, young, professional, and highly educated (e.g., Hendee, Stankey, & Lucas, 1978); although less extreme now, the bias remains (Hendee & Dawson, 2002; Solop et al., 2003). The agencies are well aware of the problem and, with decreasing use, there is concern that "Without greater visitation and interest from among those populations that are growing most rapidly [i.e., minority and immigrant populations], national park programs over time are likely to be supported by a smaller and shrinking segment of the U.S. population" (Floyd, 2001, p. 43). Both agencies are attempting to create a more diverse group of employees as well as targeting minority groups for off site education efforts (e.g., PCA, 2008; PCA, 2009; National Parks Second Century Commission, 2009).

While the move to increase education efforts seems to satisfy the agencies' need to "do something," it too is problematic. At present, park agencies acknowledge they continue to use outdated technologies and have limited fiscal and personnel capacity to undertake significant educational efforts without much greater funding and partnerships to leverage internal efforts. Moreover, the impact of on-

site interpretation efforts, to which both agencies gave considerable attention over the last 70 years, has been spotty at best (Hveenagaard et al., 2009). Moving to off-site education outside national parks will be difficult, expensive, and possibly ineffective. For example, one study found that outdoor education programs were the least mentioned reason why youth aged 6-18 started participating in outdoor recreation (parents were by far the most important factor) (Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2008). Off-site education to improve youth, immigrant and minority group attitudes towards parks and park agencies, or influence park-related behaviors is untested, and may prove difficult for cash-strapped park agencies with decreasing capacity, even with improved educational partnerships.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

There were striking commonalities in the PCA and NPS perceptions and responses to decreasing visitation. Public documents from both agencies reflect the discourse that park visitation engages public support, which then generates political support. Consequently, neither agency seemed anxious to admit that there had been a decline in visitors; the references we found were generally oblique, and focused on external “challenges” beyond agency control or “fluctuating” visitor numbers. Such explanations come easily, especially in agencies that anticipated ever-increasing visitation, linked it to budget justification, and claimed it as an indicator of agency success. But a sustained 20-year trend is difficult to dismiss, and tacit recognition is implied in both agencies’ promotion of vigorous outreach efforts, and, in the PCA, corresponding administrative reorganization. Indeed, the national documents we assessed clearly suggested that concern over declining visitation is a major driver of policy change. While the preservation versus use issue has been the dominant internal and external debate since the 1970s, the goal of building use to enhance political support may again take center stage, as it did in the first few decades of the 20th century.

Neither agency considered its own internal policies as potential causes of the decline, preferring to blame declines on factors like natural disasters, weather patterns, airline bankruptcies, gas prices and exchange rates beyond the control of agency administrators. Both agencies assumed that the public had become “disconnected” from national parks and turned to off-site education through partnerships to “re-engage” them by focusing on the problematic audiences of urban youth, immigrants, and minorities. For both the PCA and NPS, the potential of decreasing public and political support for parks seemed to completely outweigh any possible preservation benefits of declining visitation. Our review suggests that the critical criterion for judging success in both agencies continues to tilt toward use, as this park function (unlike preservation) is thought to directly engage public and political support.

We believe these contemporary policy directions are best understood within the context of the current political environment. National parks were originally products of the Progressive Era. Led by people like Theodore Roosevelt and Frederick Law Olmsted, the Progressives believed they could transform society through government action including public parks. The agencies they built



reflected the value they placed the direct provision of public services through a professional bureaucracy. But the progressive view faded in the 1970s as neoliberal policies and practices took root. The new emphasis was on the individual rather than the society. The agencies were seen as inefficient, and the parks themselves were transformed from instruments to accomplish the public good to burdens on the public purse. The new ideal was the private sector, and its mechanism was the free market, not the government (Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberal policies attained hegemony by the 1980s. Pro-preservation advocates, hoping for national park policy changes during the 1990s, were disappointed when the American and Canadian governments institutionalized many neoliberal policies including the “business model” of park management with its emphasis on user fees, outsourcing, and public/private partnerships (Diamond, 2002). Canada backtracked somewhat from its business model approach (PCA, 2000), and changed its legislation and policies to more clearly establish ecological integrity as the primary management directive, but the preservation vs use debate still exists (Searle, 2000).

The new neoliberal philosophy was accompanied by structural shifts in the agencies themselves: the PCA decentralized authority from the central government in Ottawa to individual field units, while the NPS began concentrating power in Washington (Lowry, 1994). These shifts, Lowry argued, enhanced the preservation commitment in Canadian parks by shifting decision making to a preservation-minded professional bureaucracy. The opposite occurred in the U.S., where political control increased with centralization and appointed officials focused on short-term gains benefiting particular constituencies. The PCA also created a new External Relations and Visitor Experience Directorate in their head office, and designed the “Engaging Canadians” program to “re-engage” the Canadian public via educational programs—targeting youth and minority groups in particular—to increase public support for national parks and the PCA.

Can education efforts restore visitation? Both agencies were quick to blame children’s growing attachment to media as a cause of stagnant or falling visitation, but this attachment is unlikely to decrease. The arguments espoused by Louv (2005) and Pergams and Zaradic (2006) were almost immediately adopted by the two park agencies, who appeared eager to use these arguments to explain the declines in visitation. However, we suspect media use will prove irrelevant for several reasons: first, the decision to use national parks is made by adults rather than children. If use has been declining for 20 years, and if childhood socialization is the cause, we would need to examine the generation of adults raised in the 1960s and 1970s—a time before the media transformation—to discover why *they* are not coming. Second, similar claims that media use causes obesity or physical inactivity in children have been largely unsupported by research, and, as yet, no direct empirical connection between children’s media use and outdoor recreation or park visitation has been identified.

As Machlis (2008, p. 2) noted in a report to the National Parks Second Century Commission, “Single cause explanations (such as the suggestion that the decline is due to video-gaming) are unlikely to be accurate.” We agree that multiple variables, including changing sociodemographics (e.g., urbanization, income



change and distribution, aging populations) as well as changing travel patterns (Buckley, 2009; Balmford et al., 2009) provide a more plausible explanation for decreasing visitation. Visitation increases evolved under a particular set of circumstances, especially increased income and transportation advances that enhanced leisure and mobility among the middle class. Those circumstances changed in the 1970's as immigration, globalization, and technological changes placed growing pressures on the North American middle class (More, 1999; 2002). The income gap accelerated during the 1980s as neoliberal changes deregulated financial markets and other industries, and as travel costs rose (Harvey, 2005). Market-based, neoliberal policies were initiated in the national parks in the mid-1990s, and systematic pricing of park access in the U.S. began in 1997 with the implementation of the federal Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. Since then, reflecting neoliberal ideology that required parks to be operated like businesses according to free market principles, the agencies have added new fees and increased existing fees multiple times. This has continued even in the face of the worst financial recession since the Great Depression. This combination of increasing fees and growing travel costs, coupled with declining income and leisure time seems more likely to have affected visitor behavior than children's use of video games.

Interestingly, the neoliberal ideology that supported market-based agency policies was initially welcomed across the political spectrum (Crompton, 1998). The move to financial sustainability was supported by those on the left who hoped for better park funding. Those on the right viewed it as an opportunity for reduced government, lower taxes, and more economically efficient, market-based operations. The park agencies themselves favored the changes, believing it would lead to increased funding and freedom from the annual appropriations process. Apparently no one foresaw the possibility that, faced with higher fees, greater travel costs, and reduced incomes, people would reduce their participation. In the summer of 2009, while the PCA marketed a two year price freeze in Canadian national parks (i.e., no fee increases in 2009 and 2010), and some national parks in the U.S. dropped entrance fees for three weekends, these small gestures were the only change in the status quo.

This contested vision of national parks highlights a final reflection from the analysis. As other researchers have suggested (Larner, 2003; Peck, 2004), neoliberalism is not a unidimensional, unchallenged force. Depending on initial conditions, differences in societal goals, and in this case, the amount of political influence on the bureaucracy, different nations will provide different responses to neoliberalism. The PCA, for example, has been partially able to contest the neoliberal agenda of their elected officials, and backtrack from plans to further implement a business model (PCA, 2000). They have also moved faster to implement plans to deal with declining visitation, and in late 2009, began asking many individual national park managers to increase visitation by at least 2% each year for the next three years through, in part, allowing new forms of recreation activities in national parks (e.g., music festivals, zip-lines) (Fenton, 2009). The American bureaucracy, by contrast, seemed less shielded from high level political appointees who reflected the neoliberal positions of each president, whether

republican or democrat, and have not yet made significant changes to existing administrative structure or policies.

While differences existed between these two countries, it was the similarities between the two agencies' perceptions, responses, and assumptions toward declining use that was highlighted in our study. Both the PCA and NPS see decreasing visitation as one of the most critical issues facing the agencies at the turn of the 21st century. The PCA agency in particular has begun to realign its organizational structure and create new internal policies and procedures (e.g., the Engaging Canadians strategy, and the 2% target to increase national park visits for each of the next three years in some parks) to address declining visitation.

There was no mention of any positive implications of the decrease in visitors to national parks. Two interrelated negative ramifications were identified: both agencies were convinced that decreased use would lead to lessened public support for parks, which would then lead to diminished political support (i.e., funding) for park agencies. Both ideological and bureaucratic considerations were documented. Neoliberal principles limited and directed agency response by its emphasis on "small government" (i.e., budget cuts) and user fees to generate lost revenue for the agencies, and bureaucratic self interest appeared to be behind the push to "re-engage" both public and political support. Both agencies also identified (and ignored) equivalent causes for visitation declines, focusing on the impact of electronic media use on children's use of parks, and identified educational efforts to "re-engage" the public as the only way to address these declines.

The primary criterion for judging success in both agencies was public use, as only this park function—not preservation—was perceived as directly engaging public and political support for national parks. This re-focusing on the use function of national parks seems to echo the early 20th century agency predilection to concentrate on increasing use to ensure public and political support for parks. Indeed, recent declines in visitation seem to have "reset" agency focus from the preservation back to the original use function. This return to early-20th century concerns suggests that the impact of use levels on national park agency policy continues to be significant; decades of growth in use levels may have hidden its influence, but declines over the last 20 years seem to have provided a reminder of the impact of the use→appreciation→support blueprint.

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