

YOUTH'S PERCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL
PARK SERVICE RANGERS

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In this study, a middle class sample of youth were questioned to determine what kind of attributes they associate with park rangers. Because a significant number of youth in the United States pursue intensive outdoor recreational activities by penetrating more deeply into wilderness areas, they are more frequently coming in contact with park rangers. The under-25 age group is reported to be "the most active, energetic outdoor recreationists, have the widest span of interests and enjoy the broadest range of activities" (U.S. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, 1974:54). As for youth's involvement in natural areas, they are steadily becoming an important user of back-country designated as wilderness areas (Lucas, 1971). Because of the participation and interest shown by youth in recreational and ecological experiences offered by a national park, a common sense policy mandates that public relations with youth be based on a sound management philosophy. Through interpretive programs, in particular through the National Environmental Education Development Program, ranger contacts with youth have increased both in the park and in outside educational settings. However, not all contacts with youth by national park personnel have occurred under affable circumstances.

With youth's increasing usage of parks and programs directed toward their involvement, incidents of deviance have targeted young people as being potential liabilities. A confrontation between rangers and youth on July 4, 1970, in Yosemite National Park received national coverage. Since then, other cases have been cited. At Wind Cave, for example, wildlife were slaughtered wherein the journalist reports "that the sheer ferocity of vandals, mostly youngsters, but often adults too, knows few bounds" (U.S. News and World Report, June 24, 1974: 39). The association of youth with vandalism is not confined to wilderness areas but applies to historic monuments as well. Whether it's graffiti on Grant's Tomb, disarranging rocks and logs at Gettysburg National Military Park, or smearing paint on the walls of Fort Pulaski, teenagers are identified as the culprit age group. The few analytical studies that exist on park vandalism most generally indicate that "teenaged males are said to be the group committing the most acts of vandalism" (Johnson, 1970:29). Aside from the fact that many of the statistics are based on recent

standardized reporting or compiled from conviction records, youth are singled out as being guilty of such acts¹.

The problem of youth in parks is not something that is clearly understood. But because of isolated incidents that are heavily publicized, park rangers may be sensitized to youth as troublemakers. Some four years after the Yosemite confrontation, the Director of the National Park Service saw fit to comment that problems with young people were being resolved, pointing out that special areas were being set aside in which they "can do their own thing." Since teenagers are more active in parks and recognized as the age group most prone to vandalism, when long hair and avant-garde clothing are added to their person, they become highly visible to rangers.

Because of youth's contrasting presence symbolized through appearance and deviance potential, rangers may be more prone to act in a narrowly conceived police role. In order for that to happen, a ranger's actions and interpersonal exchanges with youth must exhibit police role functions. Stereotyping a ranger as just having an enforcer role, or youth as just being a hippy deviant does not fully reflect the roles of either in a park setting. While there is a real danger that youth could perceive of rangers narrowly because of past incidents, such conjecture can be subjected to investigation.

In order to understand this problem still further, it is essential to note that rangers do possess diversified role functions. The universal observation that occupations in a modern industrial society are made

1. Known Cases of Vandalism, 1974 - 1975

	<u>Under 18</u>	<u>18 - 24</u>	<u>Over 25</u>	<u>Total</u>
Male	133	95	33	261
Female	13	6	2	21
Total	146	101	35	282

Source: Monthly return of offenses known to Police, Period 1/1/74 - 12/31/75, U. S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. In terms of cost, for example, the reported dollar loss was estimated at \$141,132 but the figure is conservative due to 30 percent of reports failing to list a dollar figure.

up of complex multiple functions applies to the role of a National Park Service ranger as well. Beginning at the turn of the century and throughout their brief history, the park ranger has generally been assigned the role of protector of the natural resources in the park. The first sincere rangers were more like game wardens and soldiers of fortune fighting off the excesses of environmental exploitation which catered to the fancies of those who prized buffalo heads or elk teeth. Without legalistic support and the necessary personnel to halt exploitation of the environment, the fledgling efforts of the National Park Service in the early years were replaced by an armed cavalry troop which spent some 30 years policing Yellowstone. Just prior to World War I a more professional posture gradually emerged in the organization of the Park Service so that it could replace with confidence the U.S. Army Cavalry. With fewer political appointees and subsequent civil service status, the Park Service took over the task of managing park areas, fulfilling basic housekeeping functions and arranging for essential visitor services. Beyond these minimal attempts to organize roles and provide for the barest services to the public, the ranger gradually took on the functions of naturalist-interpreter or, when needed in the 1930's, a New Deal organizer of excess labor (CCC). More recent changes in the ranger's role find him wearing not only the traditional Stetson of the protector-maintainer, but also the hard hat of an engineer in Mission 66 which laid out many roads, visitor centers and picnic areas accentuating many of today's national parks.

Today's ranger follows even more complex and varied specializations, such as historian, archeologist, scientist, artist and teacher. The older, more traditional functions of maintenance and protection are also being changed but not without the usual confusion and conflict which accompany a transitional period of resocialization. In observing this movement, a recent historian of the National Park Service (Everhart, 1972:62) observed that in addition to serving as "naturalist, firefighter and wildlife management specialist, the ranger is being asked to take on the responsibilities of a policeman-sociologist" as well. While a simpler life style characterized the turn of the century, romantic images of a ranger patrolling the beauty of our national parks in communal solitude with nature linger in our consciousness.

The surging mobility and technology of the 20th Century, however, have boldly changed the role of this land manager. The contrast between

an urbanized, industrial, analytic world and a work place situated in the wilderness of America creates paradoxes and conflicts for the park ranger. High technology in the form of computers, remote sensing and their attendant skills are infringing upon older methods of solving problems in parks. The ranger is not always innovative or ready to integrate these new possibilities. The police and custodial functions of a ranger are still tangible to a visitor. The clean, safe park is a norm which a visitor understands and appreciates. Beyond these tangible aspects of a ranger's role, other functions may be more subtle and go unnoticed. Youth's perceptions of a park ranger in handling interpersonal relations is the subject of this research.

METHODS

Sample -- Data for this study were collected during the summer and fall of 1974 from public school students in grades 9-12 in a suburban county in the Metropolitan Atlanta (Georgia) area. A random sample was drawn from a universe of 24,289 students compiled from official school records. A total of 600 adolescents (301 males and 299 females) attending 21 schools were interviewed, representing a 78 percent completion rate. Parent and/or student refusals totaled 28 and the remainder of the nonrespondents could not be located due to incorrect addresses, absence from the city or an inability to be contacted by phone. Appointments were made prior to the one-hour interview which took place in the respondent's home. All interviewers were white and matched by sex with the respondents. The respondents were evenly distributed by grade, sex and school and represented the universe from which they were drawn. It is important to note that the sample was intentionally drawn from the white population, thus the choice of county. DeKalb County is relatively white (86.3 percent), affluent (1970 median white family income was \$12,824) and educated (1970 median educational attainment was 12.5 years). This population represents a growing cross section of Americans who visit national parks.

Variables -- As with other studies on role perception, we begin with two assumptions that are a result of the complexity encountered in measuring interactions with an individual. The actor "accepts or rejects a global impression" and further selectively filters the "relevant from the irrelevant characteristics of the stimulus person" (Ehrlich et al., 1969: 535).

The variables giving rise to cognitive impression in the perceiver are not completely unknown quantities. Mehrabian and Ksionzky (1972:592) have positively indicated that sex affects social relations. The female is reported to be more positive toward others. In the analysis, the sex variable will be used to categorize and structure the independent and dependent variables.

The dependent variables specifying perception of youth about park rangers were obtained from an open-ended question which sought to probe this area of interpersonal relations. Insufficient data on the subject precluded formulation of a more structured question. The content analysis of the verbal response focused on the assertions made by the sample respondents on how they define a ranger. The coding of the open-ended responses was carried out by first listing all assertions made by those who volunteered a statement about the ranger's role. The statements were then reviewed for their content. Coding reliability with respect to the open-ended questions was very high because each respondent's expression was resolved by utilizing a common thesaurus.

Four general dimensions of a ranger's role were described by the sample respondents. The first was classified as personality. The ranger was perceived as being pleasant, courteous, friendly, enthusiastic, understanding, knowledgeable, indifferent, and pompous. The second set of responses referred to verbal exchanges. The themes of the conversations on the part of the rangers were explaining, directing, warning, admonishing, checking, entertaining, and nonspecific conversing or "smalltalk." The third set of responses referred to directed actions involving youth. Youth selectively perceived rangers as enforcing rules, distributing permits, providing assistance, sharing goods along trails, and ejecting visitors. At least three of these activities involved maintaining control and indicated a police function (enforcing rules, ejecting visitors for violations, distributing permits). Certainly none of the personality characteristics and only three of the verbal interactions could be construed as being police functions (checking, admonishing and warning). The last of the perceptual dimensions as reported by youth referred to appearance, namely neatness and gestural smiles. No other mention was made of appearance except in these terms. Thus, the perceptual dimensions of rangers as seen by youth contain traits classified under personality, verbal interaction, behavioral actions, and appearance. The extent to which the independent and dependent variables are related will be analyzed through cross-classification of the data applying statistical tests of association where appropriate.

FINDINGS

Because of the exploratory nature of this inquiry, the results are being analyzed by a discursive approach. The perceptions of youth about National Park Service rangers are simply categorized and enumerated on the basis of sex. If we can assume that the assertions made by youth represent the general attitude toward park rangers, then those responses which are more salient would more generally define the type of perception youth have of rangers. Remembering that we are dealing with only a small segment of the American public, assertions from other age groups might be different, similar, or even contradictory. In any case, we feel that the sample respondents accurately represented their feelings about Park Service rangers.

Table 1. Sex Differentiated Perceptions of Rangers' Personality by Youth (12 - 18) Visiting National Parks.

	Male Responses	Female Responses
Pleasant	82	50
Courteous	15	15
Friendly	26	28
Enthusiastic	5	8
Understanding	4	1
Knowledgeable	11	9
Indifferent	9	13
Pompous	1	3
Total responses	<u>153</u>	<u>127</u>

$$r_s = .95^*$$

* A Spearman rank correlation coefficient measured the association between male and female on the assumption that the responses receiving the greatest weight were the most salient.

Table 1 represents the attitudes youth have toward park rangers with regard to the kinds of personality traits they exhibit. Clearly, the dominant categories describe the ranger as a friendly, courteous and pleasant individual. Beyond that, the number of responses referring to behaviors requiring knowledge or understanding about a ranger's role are quite small. The negative responses suggesting a pompous, aloof, unresponsive individual were very few in number. Since research evidence on interpersonal relations suggests that individuals are more prone to define an individual in a pleasant, positive manner, a structured Likert item asking the respondents to grade the ranger on a pleasantness scale was also obtained in the questionnaire. Of the 132 respondents who reported the ranger as being pleasant, the Likert item revealed that only one of the subjects contradicted his previous statement by checking the Neither category, which suggests that the reliability of the responses was quite high. The overall impression conveyed by this information is that the ranger is a very good host in dealing with the public and projecting his personality in an effective, pleasant manner.

Table 2. Sex Differentiated Perceptions of Rangers' Interpersonal Communications by Youth (12 - 18) Visiting National Parks.

	Male Responses	Female Responses
Conversed	17	4
Directed	7	7
Explained	29	35
Warned	1	--
Admonished	2	2
Entertained	1	2
Checked	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
Total responses	58	51

$$r_s = .87^*$$

* A Spearman rank correlation coefficient measured the association between male and female on the assumption that the responses receiving the greatest weight were the most salient.

Table 2 lists those assertions made by the respondents concerning interpersonal communications. The evidence indicates that the major verbal action carried out by a park ranger is the explanation of some feature of the environment and park habitat. Beyond that, he converses with nonspecific intentions which some of the respondents referred to as "small talk" or "passing the time of day." Another function of his conversations regards giving directions. Few conversations revolved around controlling activities, such as checking with a person or warning and admonishing. In evaluating reliability of the item admonishing against the Likert scale on pleasantness, we find that the subjects in two cases considered it a very unpleasant experience, and in one case very pleasant. In any case, the ranger apparently does not have recourse to a great deal of verbal commands which require warning or admonishing. A number of articles have appeared which indicated that rangers were "hassling youth." The responses received from these youth, however, do not indicate that this is generally the case. This is not to say that in isolated and particular instances this does not occur, but the percentage listed here is extremely small.

Table 3. Sex Differentiated Perceptions of Rangers' Actions by Youth (12 - 18) Visiting National Parks.

	Male Responses	Female Responses
Enforcing rules	8	2
Ejecting visitors	1	1
Distributing permits	1	--
Providing assistance	47	36
Sharing goods	--	--
Total responses	57	39

$r_s = .86^*$

* A Spearman rank correlation coefficient measured the association between male and female on the assumption that the responses receiving the greatest weight were the most salient.

The third set of recorded responses indicates particular actions which the rangers carried out on behalf of the youth. Table 3 lists these activities. Clearly, the majority of activities listed by the adolescent respondents refer to the ranger as providing assistance to the youthful park visitor. This category includes such things as helping an individual change a tire, adjusting a backpack, or acquiring drinking water. The category which received the next greatest response was enforcing rules. This refers to very specific rules which prohibit swimming in unauthorized areas, the unauthorized use of park resources, or disregard for park standards. In any case, the percentage is quite small and certainly not indicative of the majority of youthful park visitors. In checking this item against the pleasantness scale for reliability, we found that five considered the act of enforcing rules very unpleasant; one was undecided either way; and four considered the action pleasant and not offensive. In respect to providing assistance, all of the subjects considered the response by the ranger as being very pleasant or pleasant, except four who were undecided. These responses appear to be consistent and not contradictory in the way youth interpret the actions of park rangers. In general, the evidence tends to support a positive attitude of the ranger in engaging in actions with youth rather than playing a negative, autocratic role.

The fourth and final dimension had so few responses we did not list them. The designations fell between two categories, "neat" and "smiled," both of which received positive connotations. Possibly, the appearance of someone in a uniform is an accepted practice which clearly regulates the type of appearance which Park Service personnel exhibit.

In reviewing overall differences in responses of male and female, we find very little distinction which is worth commenting upon. For the most part, both male and female are in agreement. No extraordinary differences were noted, and where there were differences, the number of cases were so small that it would be unwarranted to make a judgment at this time.

The data demonstrate that the actions of a ranger with respect to youth are positive. Clearly, the behavior of youth is compatible with what is expected to be the norm for public decorum so that there is little need to actively enforce park rules. The attitude expressed by some that perhaps prejudice and extreme treatment are accorded youth by park rangers is certainly not in evidence in the data which we gathered.

information and direct visitors in a friendly, polite manner. The general disposition of a ranger being "a nice guy" may also be part of the incentive system which rewards friendly character displays. Reeves (1969:346) points out that "park employees, like most everyone, see getting along with people as normative and expected. The pattern of their response actually implies that being a good neighbor is part of being a good employee and should be rewarded by promotion." If being a good neighbor merits reward, the expectations of being rewarded for friendly interaction with strangers while on the job may be equally meritorious. The extent to which an incentive system rewards rangers for friendly behavior is not precisely known, but undoubtedly this enters into career placement.

This research merely began to examine the interactional relations between visitor and ranger and was limited to only one segment of the American population. Future studies might expand in scope and evaluate the attitudes of family and kin. Besides gaining a more accurate understanding of how the public views a ranger, additional studies ought to investigate how a ranger expects the visitor to behave. Understanding the network of interaction between the public and ranger, and knowing what mutual expectations exist, will certainly objectify the ranger's role. Such specifications can delineate more fully the changing and stable characteristics of a ranger's role. Given such information, isolated incidences affecting his performance may be treated more cautiously, avoiding the dangers of unguarded overreaction. The future consequences of such knowledge may be to modify training courses for rangers, change educational requirements, mold the career socialization process, and change criteria for occupational achievement. These actions must await expanded inquiries into the occupational role of a park ranger as a land manager of nature's heritage.

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