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Popularity of parks threatens to pave them over

*Dollar Value Can't Be Placed
on Wilderness Areas*

*Visitors Stream Back
to Yellowstone
After the Fires of 1988*

Yellowstone snowmobile tours booming

YELLOWSTONE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STUDIES

**Snowmobilers and skiers
share slopes at Yellowstone**

Visiting a new Yellowstone

*We all need to
become 'ecotour-
ists,' leaving a place
as pristine as it was
when we encour-
tered it.*

*Americans Are Willing
To Sacrifice to Reduce
Pollution*

**Crowd Figures
Rile Readers**

**Stressed-Out Vacationers Are
Putting a Strain on Nature
Tons of trampling tourists**

**Humans Lock Horns
At Yellowstone Park**



United States Department of the Interior



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IN REPLY REFER TO:

December 12, 1990

Memorandum

To: Park Superintendents

From: Assistant to the Director for Science and Technology

Subject: YELLOWSTONE POST-FIRE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STUDIES

Superintendent Bob Barbee recently sent me a series of reports dealing with socio-economic studies conducted in and around Yellowstone NP during the last 12-18 months. Some of these studies are well worth noting because they provide considerable insight into matters of broad interest throughout the Service. For example:

-- How does a major event such as a great fire affect short and long-term visitation patterns?

-- What are general public attitudes about natural resource and environmental issues; and what is the proper role for a park to play in educating visitors about environmental protection initiatives?

-- What does an event that receives considerable media attention teach us about factors to emphasize in marketing the attributes of a park?

-- What are basic motives for visiting a park; what are real recreational preferences, and how does one explain differences between what visitors actually do in a park versus what they say they would like to do?

-- What are core public attitudes about the kinds of visitor services that should be provided and the kinds of interpretive and educational messages that should be stressed?

-- What are general public attitudes about fire and fire suppression, and can interpretive and educational messages change these attitudes significantly?

-- What are public perceptions of economic and environmental risk associated with a major park fire, and how does this risk assessment change as one moves further and further away from the fire site?

If I were to characterize the overall sense of the public response to the above set of questions, as presented in findings of the Yellowstone studies, it would be as follows:

- Media Impacts. Media coverage of the fire event stimulated people's interest in the park. However, media coverage did not significantly impact people's basic motives for visiting. Public consensus derived from both on-site and off-site surveys was that visitation levels would increase over the short term (the curiosity factor), but be relatively unaffected over the long term. Likely result: The long term consequences of the media coverage of the fire likely will be minimal.
- Repeat Visitors. Frequent visitors tend to come to the park to participate in a very limited number of specific and pre-selected activities. This finding is consistent with results of visitor surveys from other parks. There are important implications here re the design and administration of interpretive and educational programs in those parks that have a significant number of repeat visitors.
- Potential Versus Actual Recreation Interests at Yellowstone. Comparisons between what potential visitors think they might do if they visit versus what visitors actually did do showed interesting patterns. There was a very high correlation between prospective activities and actual activities for sightseeing, viewing wildlife, bird watching, photography, geyser viewing and snowmobiling. Conversely, actual participation was much lower than anticipated participation for fishing, camping, picnicing, boating and educational/interpretive programs.
- Risk Perceptions. Public perceptions about adverse environmental and economic consequences associated with the YELL fire depended on factors such as extent of personal contact with the fire, distance of residence from the park, and demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. As frequency of contact increased, perceptions of risk also increased. As distance from the fire grew, perceptions of risk decreased. Perceptions of risk and imminent hazard were higher for older, less educated and lower income respondents.

- Public Environmental Attitudes. There is a widespread and deep-rooted environmental ethic among visitors and non-visitors alike as relates to natural areas, and a recognition of the importance of natural ecological processes. Survey respondents believe that parks should take steps to maintain and foster these strong positive attitudes toward the environment, and further that the Service should speak with a strong voice in advocating preservation and protection of the environment.
- Education Initiatives. Survey respondents concluded that visitor interest in a well-publicized event such as a fire provides the Service an outstanding opportunity to use curiosity concerning the event as a focal point around which to build and implement interpretive and educational messages about the Service's resource management policies and practices.
- Outreach Initiatives. Descriptors used by visitors and by non-visitors to characterize the park were fundamentally different. Descriptors used by recent visitors focused on impressions - - - adjectives - - - awesome, beautiful, spectacular, devastated, etc. Conversely, descriptors used by non-visitors to describe the park focused on features - - - things - - - Old Faithful, bears, geysers, wildlife, natural areas, etc. This suggests some very interesting opportunities as one reaches out to the public at large. Survey respondents believe that parks need to present a consistent and enduring message to visitors and potential visitors alike, with emphasis on the amenities that a park has to offer, while at the same time capitalizing on the public's interest in observing both the immediate consequences and the longer term ecological benefits associated with important events that occur in the park.

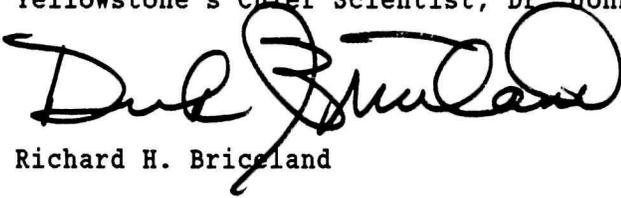
Finally, under the guise of "journalistic accuracy", one of the more fascinating issues associated with the Yellowstone fire relates to how public perceptions were influenced by media coverage of the event . . . or as it was characterized, "the media firestorm that accompanied the real firestorm." Three succinct observations made in this regard are worth noting because they are applicable to many of the media sensitive situations that Superintendents throughout the system must deal with:

"The most sensational story seems to get the time,
not the most accurate or informative." (Denny Bungarz)

"Journalists look for angles, interest and entertainment value. In Yellowstone, the transformation of events into news became a triumph of combustion over substance". (David Altherde)

"Reporters were trying to create conflict, not report facts. They came to cast playlets they already had written, looking for facts to confirm a preconceived story." (local resident)

A list of recent Yellowstone socio-economic studies is shown below. Those who may be interested in more detailed information can contact either Bob Barbee or Yellowstone's Chief Scientist, Dr. John Varley, FTS 585-0011.



Richard H. Briceland

"Projecting Visitation to Yellowstone National Park After the Fires of 1988,"
by David Snepenger

"Impact of the Yellowstone Fires on Planned Public Visitation," by Richard Trahan

"Marketing Yellowstone National Park After the Fires of 1988," by David J.
Snepenger

"How the Media Covered a National Catastrophy," by Conrad Smith

"Risk Perception Analysis of Wyoming Residents Toward the 1988 Yellowstone
National Park Wildfires," by Robert S. Habeck