

## MARKETING NATIONAL PARKS: OXYMORON OR OPPORTUNITY?

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**Abstract:** Although the "national park" concept is universally acknowledged, marketing of the 4,000+ areas so designated worldwide varies dramatically. Some park systems – such as those of Canada and Australia – are extensively marketed, in the sense that considerable resources are devoted to traditional strategic and tactical approaches to the potential user. Other systems pay relatively little attention to these concerns, because of entrenched avoidance of the marketing process (U.S.) and/or perception that the total visitor count is either so high that marketing is unwarranted (U.S.) or so low that marketing is unaffordable (many developing nations). This paper reviews selected issues of "national park" marketing from the viewpoints of the varied interests: managerial (park unit, region, and system); commercial (concessions, external enterprises, and visitor/tourism bureaus); and target audience (actual and potential visitors). Its primary objective is to raise awareness of the possibilities for (and limitations of) greater marketing effort and mutual benefit, in terms of effectively influencing consumer attitudes, beliefs, and purchase decision making.

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### Marketing and the National Park Philosophy

The concept of marketing to draw additional visitors to national parks is oxymoronic to many park administrators. As management of national parks has come to embrace not only internal challenges, but external ones as well, the visitor is often regarded as exactly the latter. Resource preservation is seen as the clear priority (Arberger, Views) (Lowry, Paved). Very little has been published/researched on the "purchase decision" behavior of the visitor, and little has been committed for either accomplishing such research or implementing broad market appeals. The default influences have, therefore, been publicity (media coverage, independent photographic essays, etc.), highway signage, and on-site brochure distribution. If, however, the concept of marketing is not wholly alien, who is best equipped to address the challenge? Should it be a coordinated system effort? An opportunity for unit initiative? The role of the commercial interests that will most directly benefit? Or the task of visitor promotion agencies at all levels, whose mission already includes marketing? We shall begin by examining the traditional 4Ps of marketing in the context of the "national park."

### Product

"National parks" are variously defined. In the broadest sense, they are areas held in the global interest by national authorities, or under national guidelines, absent an international governance other than United Nations/UNESCO World Heritage designation. Most "national park" systems have capitalized on the idealized image of the "national park" by applying this designation as liberally as possible. Park-administrating authorities generally differentiate "national parks" (superior scenic and/or wildlife-based areas) from other areas (primarily historic sites, but also including, as in the U.S. case, numerous subcategories: national monuments, national preserves, national recreation areas, national historical parks, etc.) (National Park Service, Index). Hereafter, despite the above caveats, all "national" areas will be referred to as national parks.

Parks (including most of the subcategories noted above) are also administered by state, provincial, county, and city agencies. Non-national parks are generally seen as more oriented to regional recreation, but may nonetheless be marketed proactively (Iowa, Marketing Plan/SHOW). While the most outstanding areas are generally protected within the national systems, there are significant exceptions. For example, Niagara Falls is a state park; Mount Vernon, Williamsburg, and the sites of the National Trust are run by independent foundations; and Monument Valley is within a native American reservation. National parks are designated by national governments, generally through legislative bodies (Congress, Parliament), but also via Executive declaration, and almost always with broad "public" approval (although not necessarily corresponding to local interests). The most common denominator is that national parks designate existing lands and/or waters as having a protected status. These may be naturally pristine (Yellowstone, Glacier, Auyuittuq), but they may also require significant rehabilitation/conversion (Shenandoah, Great Smokies, Golden Gate), restoration (Castle Clinton), or outright re-creation (Bent's Old Fort, Fort Stanwix, Louisbourg), and all require ongoing management. While many units are the result of political expediency, more recently, park systems have attempted to be proactive in unit designation, identifying ecosystem and historic theme components, and actively seeking appropriate areas for donation/purchase to add to the roster. Three of the more successful efforts of this type are the spectacular lands set aside in Alaska in 1978 and 1980, and the ongoing Canadian and Australian expansion based on biome categories.

Nationally-protected areas are the enlightened withdrawal of lands and waters in the "public" interest. They are most often found in advanced economies that can afford such withdrawals, or developing economies that recognize the self-serving commercial value of such withdrawals or are coerced into making them by external pressures. National park units vary widely in what they offer the visitor

(natural and scenic values, military-industrial-cultural themes, anthropological sites, recreational opportunities), making marketing a particular challenge on a system basis. The primary unifying characteristic of national park units is their extraordinary diversity (National Park Service, Index).

### Price

Fees for park entry are on average, extremely low; many units are free, and even the most expensive U.S. units charge only \$20 for a carload. Annual passes make the cost of any single visit even less expensive. However, access significantly affects total cost, particularly in reaching remote areas. The cost of reaching units in Alaska and the Canadian Arctic, outlying U.S. possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific, and virtually all parks in developing economies, at least in terms of foreign visitors, renders such visits infeasible for most potential visitors.

### Promotion

#### Park Administrators (Federal, Region, State, Unit)

Promotion of parks varies widely; four examples will serve to illustrate the disparity. The United States National Park Service, within the Department of the Interior, has never broadly embraced marketing as a system concept. (Of the Federal entities embracing marketing, only the military, the Post Office, and Amtrak actively promote their services.) Some park regions have issued pamphlets featuring the units within their jurisdiction, and each unit offers superb standardized brochures on request or arrival, but these are passive approaches (National Park Service, Organ Pipe Cactus et al). The long-standing NPS compilation, "Visiting a Lesser-Known Park," is basically an effort to divert visitation from overcrowded units rather than a promotional device per se (National Park Service, Visiting). The primary NPS "National Park Index" is issued infrequently, and is also primarily a passive listing (National Park Service, Index).

The historic rationale for avoiding marketing is readily apparent. Even the modest fees collected by most NPS units have been transferred to the Federal Treasury, rather than retained for the benefit of the unit; given this reality, and the NPS focus on resource protection and management, it is little wonder that marketing seems irrelevant. At numerous "lesser-known" sites, "marketing" consists of little more than often-inappropriate count-enhancement activities barely related to the commemorative purpose of the site (e.g. noonday concerts at Federal Hall National Memorial in New York's Wall Street district) (Hogenauer, Courier). A quasi-independent entity, the National Park Foundation, whose basic mission is encouraging private sector (largely corporate) philanthropy (National Park Foundation, Charter and Mission), has implemented an ambitious promotional device, the National Park Passport (National Park Foundation, Passport/SHOW), intended to

motivate unit visitation by providing inked-impression stamps and a pocket-sized "passport" for their entry. While this has doubtless increased awareness of the extent and diversity of units, and motivated some to visit additional units to collect the stamps, the lack of other than a self-motivating incentive limits its viability as a true marketing tool.

Reams of information are available to those who seek it out - everything from coffee table photographic essays, to those superb brochures obtained in advance or on-site, to - more recently - creative Internet websites offering considerable detail. But active marketing has been limited. The earliest majestic Western parks were marketed, by the railroads benefiting from the carriage of visitors without alternative access (Runte, Promoting). However, aside from in-house tours including parks, today's bus companies and airlines (and rental car companies dependent on them) do little to market national parks (or most of their other destinations, to be fair). Tour books (such as Birnbaum, Fodor, or the AAA series) list parks in objective fashion as attractions to visit once in the area. Today's larger units rely in part on independently produced commercial brochures supported by national advertisers (e.g. Yosemite Magazine, one of American Park Network's 17 national park titles; these have a total circulation of some 3.8 million) (American Park Network, Yosemite, 1998), and on non-profit "cooperative association" publications (Southwest Parks).

In recent years, a proliferation of Presidentially-declared national monuments has been assigned to non-NPS agencies for administration. These have included the Bureau of Land Management (especially most recently with the flurry of new declarations by Bill Clinton), the U.S. Forest Service (Mt. St. Helens), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. None of these is presently involved in wide-scale marketing activity.

Nationally-directed national park marketing is perhaps best exemplified by the extensive efforts of Parks Canada. For several years, both regional support groups and individual unit marketers have taken on the challenge of marketing the national parks. This is evidenced by such innovations as the "Heritage Logs" and accompanying stamps (Parks Canada, Heritage), as well as the widespread use of the beaver logo, focused on Parks Canada's 1985 centennial. However, marketing has been impelled particularly in the most recent years, as revenue generation at the unit level has been elevated in importance, and overall market awareness has increased significantly (Parks Canada, Policy). To an extent, "marketing" within Parks Canada is more a term, and/or a plan, than a system-wide implementation, but its inclusion does indicate awareness of the need for positioning, quality service delivery, target audience identification, and increases in visitor counts (Parks Canada, Halifax). As in most systems, heavily-visited areas represent the greatest challenge: maintaining the balance between preservation and steadily increasing

popularity (University of Calgary, Communiqué) (Zinkan, Changing).

As a fourth specific example, Australia has, in recent years, solidly embraced tourism development, national park designation, and marketing, with a particular focus on the vast, remote, and thinly-populated regions. Areas like Kakadu (home territory of Crocodile Dundee) and Uluru (the former Ayers Rock) are widely promoted, in part as a result of ancillary commercialization in their otherwise-empty vicinities. The administration of Australia's "national" parks has, uniquely thus far, been delegated to the respective states and territories, and there is no visible federal oversight agency as found elsewhere (New South Wales, About Us). Nevertheless, the active promotion of the areas has contributed greatly to a significant expansion of tourism, particularly by international visitors.

#### Commercial Enterprises

One of the key arguments raised against national park marketing is the widely-held view that national parks themselves are not commercial enterprises, and therefore there is no role for marketing. However, few national park areas are immune to the exploitation of their visitors. Since visitor needs are diverse, and the national parks themselves rarely accommodate most, let alone all, reliance upon supplemental suppliers is essential. Few visitors are satisfied with the "natural" state of the parks, but even fewer are aware of the extent to which the units are "managed" for their visiting pleasure (wildlife control; trail, road and facility development; point of interest identification and improvement; etc.). Most in-park concessions to date have been limited to accommodations, food service, and ancillary sales (souvenirs, clothing), but there is considerable pressure to privatize more, including visitor center construction and management, interpretation and guided tours, and the like. The in-park concessionaire has generally been a limited marketer, because demand - highly concentrated in short seasons - has exceeded supply, and rates (i.e. revenues) are proscribed by concession agreement. However, the emergence of the Internet and the relative ease of maintaining e-mail lists of potential purchasers have enabled in-park concessionaires to tap this avenue of marketing (Amfac/Furnace Creek Inn).

Commercial enterprises in the immediate environs of national parks are the most numerous, most at risk, and most likely to already be spending considerable sums on self-serving marketing effort, almost always tied in to the innate appeal of the park itself. At the Tusayan complex south of Grand Canyon National Park's south rim, in Arizona, a host of businesses competes for the tourist's attention in what has become a full-fledged strip of attractions, even offering high-tech interpretations that visitors might anticipate finding within the park (e.g. National Geographic's IMAX Theater) (National Geographic, IMAX). Similar commercialization is found in the vicinity of many units (all communities near the Great

Smokies; St. George, UT; Bar Harbor, ME; etc.). Such commercialization is not limited to the more popular units of park systems. Even in remote Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska, a portion of which is only accessible via a 61-mile unpaved road, tourism development is having a major impact ("indeed, much of the increased exposure [to tourism] can be attributed to the residents [of isolated Kennicott] themselves (particularly the owner of the lodge...), who have succeeded in marketing the community as a recreation destination") (Ringer, Growth).

Increasingly, national/global enterprises - global brands or major national advertisers already heavily involved in traditional marketing effort - are seen as the saviors of national park marketing, in that "modest" proportions of their budgets are allocated to approaching national park visitors directly, in support of the park "cause" (American Park Network, Yosemite).

#### Visitors Bureaus (National, State, Local)

These entities accept at least partial responsibility for marketing national parks within their respective jurisdictions. Virtually all U.S. states and Canadian provinces utilize the same techniques for marketing their inventory of tourist offerings: a comprehensive brochure, a map, a toll-free number, and an Internet site. Given that virtually all are mandated to promote "equally," passively including all attractions, however worthy or unworthy, is the norm, generally in the context of "tourist regions" that cover all of their respective geography. More locally, Chambers of Commerce often serve as the umbrella vehicle for promoting "area businesses" as a group. Thus, there is a clearly-evident body of interests seeking more active marketing of the units themselves, whereby they might reap a portion of the ancillary economic benefit. These interests primarily include area accommodations, restaurants, and attractions (even those wholly unrelated to the park's theme[s]), eager to attract the visitors' dollars.

#### **Place (Distribution)**

In terms of **place**, accessibility of the various areas, most likely regarded as a given by most potential visitors, is one of the most critical aspects of marketing, particularly as more remote sites enter the systems. There are three categories of accessibility: routine, challenging, and inaccessible.

*Routine* access cannot be presumed, particularly as more remote areas are included in national park systems. There is no objective definition of routine access, but at least two sub-categories can be presumed: a road leads directly to the site; or access is only by water, but frequent boat service is available. The first category is the least problematic for the visitor; most national park sites are in fact routinely accessible. Routine driving access, whether via private car, rental car, or tour bus, renders the site easily included in

any trip plan. Routine water access is limiting only in terms of schedules or - for the more popular experiences (e.g. Gros Morne's Western Brook Pond, or Golden Gate's Alcatraz) - vessel capacity.

*Challenging* access includes accessible units that cannot be regarded as routine given the time, cost, or distance involved. At least four sub-categories can be presumed: challenging because access is seasonally constrained or precluded (e.g. sites in the Canadian Rockies and Alaska); challenging because access is only by costly aircraft (scheduled or charter) (e.g. sites in American Samoa, the Queen Charlotte Islands, Alaska); challenging because scheduled boat service is not readily available for water access (e.g. Beaubear's Island, St. Croix Island); and challenging because access is via long and/or arduous (uphill) hiking (e.g. Abbott Pass Refuge Hut, Howse Pass, Athabasca Pass). (Challenging access is actually desirable in some locations to preserve the natural integrity of the site - and not incidentally, concurrently limit visitation).

*Inaccessible* access comprises units that despite their designation are "unreachable." (Units rendered inaccessible due to temporary weather phenomena, disasters, or access interruptions are not included.) Units are inaccessible because they are officially closed to the public (e.g. Yucca House, Hohokam Pima); inaccessible because they have been "lost," or "misplaced" due to obscurity or lack of ready information (e.g. Loyalists Exhibit); or inaccessible because they are surrounded by restricted private lands (e.g. Bois Blanc Lighthouse).

### Target Audience

Who constitutes the market for these places? While this question may superficially be answered "visitors," the market for national parks is the total present - and future - global population for whom these areas are held in perpetual trust. But inasmuch as little in the way of traditional marketing segmentation has been undertaken, generally the emphases are on *total visitors*, by unit and overall (National Resources Defense Council, Reclaiming), and *seasonal peaking*, with its attendant problems.

Specific categories of present-day visitors can be generalized, which suggest various avenues of marketing approach. In order of proximity, there are four categories of visitors: those at home or office, remote from the park; those en route to the area of the park, but still distant; those near the park; and those actually in the park. Within each of these groupings, there are potential markets by age, income, lifestyle, ethnicity, even gender, and of course persons exhibiting interests relevant to the unit's primary attributes (historians, Civil War buffs, transport buffs, hikers, campers, etc.). Unfortunately, most national park visitors come with only a vague notion of what the park has to offer, relying on on-site specifics to determine the length and focus of the actual visit. While this may not match the

idealized conception, it clearly affects the nature of the marketing approaches that might be useful.

### What is Appropriate Marketing, Anyway?

Marketing is most commonly regarded as a process, one to which members of most societies are subjected - often to their discomfort. It is concerns over the process - specifically, the costs and "inappropriateness" of its implementation - that most deter the national park marketing process from moving forward. But more than a process, marketing is a philosophy - one that embraces proactive methods of encouraging the market's response to the product. Support for the marketing philosophy relative to national parks is what is most needed; the specific techniques, and the budget for their implementation, are less problematic. While the total number of U.S. NPS visitors is impressive (287 million in 1998), consideration of the total population of the United States (265 million, 1996), the number of units (officially, 384), the increasing number of foreign visitors, and the deceptive effect of multiple counting suggests that only a minuscule fraction of the U.S. population visits multiple parks or parks multiple times. Marketing can certainly help ensure that more people benefit from all the parks have to offer.

In terms of **product**, the national park will always be many products in one: wilderness, nature, history, interpretation, recreation, commercialization, even civilization (e.g. Riding Mountain, Prince Albert, Grand Canyon south rim). Emphasis on several seriously-overcrowded units diverts attention from the vastly more numerous underutilized areas whose quality is no less evident upon examination (National Park Service, Visiting). Often there is little or no control within the administering agency as to product proliferation (i.e. additional units, failing to be "nationally significant"); this in part was the motivation for proposed legislation mandating a more thorough examination of units both within, and proposed for addition to the existing system (Congress, Common Sense). Over the years, some existing park units have been delisted (i.e. de-classified), but these are relatively rare (Hogenauer, Gone). Perhaps most significantly, park nomenclature is confusing in its proliferation. One response to this, as well as clear evidence of an underlying marketing strategy, is the recent tendency to rename NPS units as national parks, rather than monuments (Black Canyon, Death Valley, Joshua Tree) or recreation areas (Cuyahoga Valley).

In terms of **price**, fees should be commensurate with the customer-desired benefits, not simply amounts offsetting expended costs. Marketing expenses, if such were to be incurred, would have to be offset by increased fees and/or appropriations. The traditional low- (or no-) fee park entry concept is being rethought, often to the consternation of unsuspecting visitors (in 1996, significant fee increases in Canadian parks created considerable difficulty for both visitors and staff). Fees collected should be retained at the

unit level, with supplemental appropriations provided where necessary to optimize unit performance. An income tax deduction for park visits, based on the educational value therefrom, should be implemented, partially offsetting actual visitor cost, and stimulating visitation (and benefits) across the board.

In terms of **promotion**, appropriate national park marketing is that which cost-effectively reaches the proper target audience, encouraging this audience to partake of the visitation benefits provided. More than anything, marketing is information, placed so as to effect the purchase decision in favor of the marketer. Information on national parks has historically, as noted, been largely passive, not active. Evidence of marketing interest at the highest levels of NPS administration can be found, but the speed of marketing integration into system operations has been glacial. A 1998 planning articulation of NPS "goals" lists 31 long-term goals to be achieved in 3 to 20 years; *none* refer to marketing of the units or system (National Park System Goals). A 1999 Director's Order (Director's Order #17: National Park Service Tourism) mandates extensive interaction with, and proactive approaches to the "tourism industry," thus relating the NPS itself to another category (Order, sections 4.1, 4.5). The Order further provides for hierarchical implementation at the international, national, regional and park levels (Order, section 5). Funding for the mandated activities, however, is not clear, and in at least one NPS unit, detailed specifications for a person to assume responsibilities for many types of marketing activity are assumed to be filled by a *volunteer!* (City of Rocks). Clearly, there is a dissonance between maintaining resources "unimpaired for future generations" and making them available now through effective promotion to the current ones.

An even more elaborate exposition of the possibilities is found in the premiere issue of an Employees & Alumni Association newsletter, "Arrowhead" (Arrowhead), in which an extensive "Message Project" examined visitor perceptions and NPS response at length. The Project, evolving from an earlier effort to promote the Golden Eagle Passport (an annual pass to multiple federal agency lands), concluded that there was "an extraordinarily limited understanding, or even awareness, of the depth and breadth of the National Park System." The public was seen to perceive national parks as "a handful of natural wonders, Western wilderness areas, and vacation destinations." In response to this, the NPS undertook a broad review of methods and management of the "communications" process, and found that materials all look different, the arrowhead is inconsistent, the System is overlooked, there are only 25 public information officers among (then) 379 units, there is inadequate attention to visitor segmentation, and parks are protected "from" people, rather than "for" them. These are major findings that most at NERR2001 will see as valid, particularly in the context of possible proactive marketing in response. These are also of major

significance in advancing the prospects for NPS marketing overall (Arrowhead).

In terms of **place**, parks should "guarantee" access to a visitor. Any officially-designated "national park" unit should be readily-accessible to the public, either routinely, or, at the very least, periodically on a scheduled guided visit offered on a non-profit basis. Inaccessible units – including those not yet "open" for visitation, should be delisted (i.e. otherwise-classified).

In terms of **target audience**, the aforementioned four categories of visitor suggest possible marketing approaches. *Those at home or office, remote from the park*, by far the most numerous, need to be motivated to initiate a visit. Marketing should be undertaken by the overall agency, with national advertising, 1-800 information, and spot advertising in local markets, supported by a substantial Internet presence. *Those en route to the area of the park, but still distant* need to be motivated to include the site in their itinerary. En route signage and appropriate print media, as well as possible outdoor advertising are required.

*Those near the park* likewise need to be motivated to include the site in a trip-in-progress. Again, en route signage, print media, and outdoor are recommended. And finally, *those actually in the park* need to be motivated to spend more time enjoying the park's benefits. More effective promotion of the available activities is required, including accommodation incentives to extend length of stay in the area. In many units, creation of additional activities will also be required. Further, trade promotion – reaching out to, rather than defensively responding to the tourism industry – should be undertaken, with the appreciation that any park authority IS part of the tourism industry.

## Conclusions

In summary, national park marketing should adopt traditional methods, but apply them to their specific circumstances. Nomenclature should be simplified, detached units should be treated independently, and product mix and line should be periodically revisited.

Fees collected should be retained at the unit level, with supplemental appropriations provided where necessary to optimize unit performance. An income tax deduction for park visits, based on the educational value therefrom, should be implemented, partially offsetting actual visitor cost and boosting visitation.

Any officially-designated "national park" unit should be readily-accessible to the public, either routinely, or, at the very least, periodically on a scheduled guided visit offered on a non-profit basis. Inaccessible sites should be relegated to some alternative category, rather than designated as part of a national park system.

Marketing should focus on expanding the overall market substantially, by actively encouraging the "right" target audience for each unit. Four visitor groups must be addressed: those at home/office, those en route yet still distant, those nearby, and those already in the unit.

"National park" units should be actively marketed on a coordinated system-wide basis, with the involvement of unit managers and local interests benefiting from such marketing. The most successful efforts will be those where unit management and local interests are mutually supportive, and where the target audiences most effectively addressed by marketing are correctly identified. Tourism industry promotion should also be implemented.

Marketing national parks should be a cooperative effort, spearheaded by a competent group within the administrative agency, but including state/provincial and local government, and related commercial interests (transport, in-park concessions, and area businesses). Controlling authority should come from the largest feasible component of the park system, most often the national authority. But cooperation is essential, and likely to be more readily forthcoming from the respective interests if the effort is well-coordinated. Goals such as those in the laudable NPS Message Project should be vigorously pursued. While marketing activities may appear irrelevant or detrimental to some, expansion of overall awareness of, interest in, and trial of national parks is highly desirable and likely to pay enormous dividends in terms of engendering public support.

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