

For more information, or to request a copy of the NPS social science plan *Usable Knowledge*, contact:

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Mission Statement

The objectives of the NPS Social Science Program are to conduct and promote state-of-the-art social science related to the mission of the National Park Service and deliver usable knowledge to NPS managers and to the public.



Social Science and the National Parks



An Introduction



“I was 12 when I discovered the magic of national parks,” a longtime friend of America’s national parks once said. He and his family tried a backpacking trip to a lake in Olympic National Park in Washington in the late 1940s. As they hiked with canned goods wrapped in army blankets and strapped to their backs, they were drenched by heavy rains and never reached their destination. Yet the trip began a lifetime of visits to national parks and left memories that still exist today.

How many millions of Americans can say the same thing? Since Congress established Yellowstone National Park in 1872, our national parks have occupied a special place in the hearts of Americans. They have become the tablets on which we write our personal as well as national histories. Indeed, studies have shown that even people who have never visited Yellowstone or Ellis Island or Gettysburg still want these places to endure for their children and grandchildren.

However, ensuring that our parks will survive intact for future generations remains an immense challenge. Park visitation (269 million visitors in 1995) is predicted to grow by 34 percent by the year 2000. National Park Service (NPS) managers face unprecedented needs to better understand the public’s values, attitudes, and behaviors. They

must continue to develop state-of-the-art visitor management techniques. And they must learn more about the communities and regions adjacent to park lands, as the people living nearby continue to become more involved in making decisions about the parks.

To protect plant and animal species, park managers need basic scientific information about their habitats, ranges, life cycles, and more. To protect the parks themselves, however, managers need to understand people—the U.S. citizens and international travelers who establish, visit, support, cherish, use, and (sometimes) abuse America’s national parks and park resources. Understanding people means conducting research in the social sciences—including the fields of economics, psychology, geography, sociology, and political science. Park managers can use the information from social science research to protect park resources, better serve visitors, and save taxpayers money.

What Is Social Science?

Traditionally, the social sciences have been those areas of academic study that explore the human condition. Social science is important to park management in several ways.

Economics focuses on markets, industries, and economies and the ways in which they work together. Economic research can help park managers, private sector partners, state and local officials, and others by evaluating the economic impact of parks on local communities, the costs and benefits of park policies, and the role of parks in the tourism industry and the national economy.

Geography treats regions, landscapes, and other physical areas as critical. Geographers study the way people and resources relate to one another. Geography can aid park managers through studies of tourist travel patterns, regional development, and human impacts on the parks' natural and cultural resources.

Psychology focuses on understanding human beings and the ways in which they communicate with one another. Psychology can help park managers through studies of visitor experiences, interpretive media, and other forms of park communications.

Political science addresses the ways people govern themselves. Research involving political science might include studies of public participation in local communities and interest groups, and of improvements in organizational effectiveness.

Sociology studies social groups, organizations, and communities, with human behavior as its central concern. Sociology can explain demographic trends, visitor behavior, and public opinion regarding park policies.

By studying the ways people are "social" with each other—how they play, work, learn, relax, spend, and live—social science research gives valuable insights into how people behave at different times and in different places. Just as businesses have learned to serve their customers better through research in marketing and advertising, the National Park Service can apply social science research to serve its "customers" better (visitors and non-visitors alike) and to improve the management of the national parks.



The NPS Program

The new NPS social science research program is described in a 1996 plan—*Usable Knowledge: A Plan for Furthering Social Science and the National Parks*.

The program will conduct and promote state-of-the-art studies to inform park managers, assist recreation and tour planners, help local communities and businesses, and educate those who care about our parks.

"Usable knowledge" is research that provides information managers can use—in making decisions, in planning programs, and in solving problems. Research that provides practical information to park managers will also benefit the tourism industry, conservation groups, local communities, and citizens.

For example, until NPS employees at Death Valley National Park in California conducted a visitor survey, they did not realize that over 70 percent of the park's visitors were tourists from Europe! As a result, park managers quickly changed emergency signs and brochures to include instructions written in German, French, and Italian, as well as English.

Critical Questions for NPS Social Science

- ▲ Who visits national parks? When do they come, where do they come from, and what do they look for? Who doesn't visit, and why?
- ▲ How do visitors affect national park resources? How does park management affect the visitor experience?
- ▲ How do national parks relate to their surrounding communities? How do they affect local, regional, and national economies?
- ▲ How can threats to national parks be minimized or reduced?
- ▲ How effective are NPS educational efforts—such as museum exhibits, guided hikes, and ranger-led talks—and how can they be improved?
- ▲ How can the parks' natural and cultural resources be managed more effectively?

Key Elements of the NPS Social Science Plan

The NPS Social Science Program is led by a Visiting Chief Social Scientist based in Washington, D.C., who reports to the Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science. It is advised by the National Park System Advisory Board's Subcommittee on Tourism and Social Science. The program will conduct and promote social science research following these key elements of the NPS plan:

1. Establish an electronic clearinghouse to make social science information easily available to park managers and the public;
2. Extend ties with universities to assist in conducting social science research;
3. Identify the social science research needs of specific national parks, park clusters, NPS support offices and regional offices, and conduct research to meet these needs;
4. Provide technical assistance to parks in their management, planning and design efforts;
5. Organize a group of social scientists managing research in federal recreation agencies to share data, find ways to lower costs, and encourage coordination of federal recreation research;
6. Sponsor a competitive contracts program to support research on critical park issues;
7. Create a young scientists competition to encourage innovative research and attract the best and brightest students to study park issues; and
8. Establish an urban-focused university link to direct research on urban recreation issues, and include Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Predominantly Hispanic Serving Universities, and other institutions.

Understanding the relationship between people and parks is critical for protecting resources and providing for the public's enjoyment of America's national parks. This new NPS initiative in social science research will yield usable knowledge—now and in the future—about the vital relationship between people and parks.