



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

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Memorandum

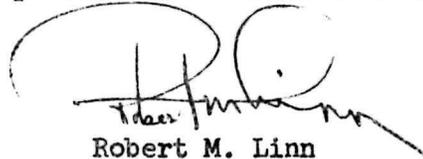
To: Directorate and All Field Directors

From: Chief, Office of Natural Science Studies

Subject: Office of Natural Science Studies Reports

The Office of Natural Science Studies conducts, from time to time, sociological studies to determine the characteristics of people who go to our national parks. The purpose of these studies is to obtain baseline data necessary for additional studies which will be undertaken later. While these data are obtained as an integral part of the scientific work being carried out by the Office of Natural Science Studies, they may also be useful to other divisions for any number of purposes.

Periodically, ONSS will issue short reports similar to the enclosure, in which some information about people in the parks will be presented. These will be technical reports presenting the information and explaining it. How it may be useful to each division will, of necessity, be decided within the division. ONSS will be available, of course, to answer any questions about the information contained in these reports. The reports are provided for administrative use only.



Robert M. Linn

Enclosure

PEOPLE IN THE PARKS

A park may mean many different things to different people. For some, it may recall enjoyable memories shared with family and friends. To others, it may mean the exhilaration of a fast game of tennis, a brisk walk or quiet contemplation. But for whatever reason or memory, parks acquire a variety of social meanings once they have been created. In this report we want to examine a few of the dimensions of meaning by which people in our contemporary society define their parks. The data upon which this report is based were obtained during a study conducted by the Office of Natural Science Studies. (See Report No. 10, pp. 2-3, for further information about the study design.)

We generally tend to think of a park as being created or established for a purpose; i.e., to commemorate an historical event; to preserve some natural wonder; to provide recreational opportunities of a particular variety; to encourage certain kinds of human behavior; etc. The "reasons" for establishing a park are perhaps as varied as the human imagination. Sometimes these reasons for establishing a park almost determine what kinds of use it will unfold. But since all parks are social inventions; that is, made into parks by the acts of men, then we may expect that as men change so might their reasons for establishing and maintaining parks. In addition to these kinds of social meanings, there are those shared among people as they go about enjoying and utilizing their parks. Finally, there are social meanings which are shared among those persons who maintain the parks, both with respect to the parks as social inventions and with respect to the manner in which people utilize them. Sometimes the extent to which these sets of social meanings are complementary becomes attenuated. When such occurs beyond expected limits, we often refer to it as a communications problem. At such times the park manager usually notices events that may be conveniently thought of as managerial or administrative problems which may require some action on his part.

Each of these sets of social meanings attached to parks is important. Each is equally important to an understanding of how parks and going to parks fits into the sociological patterns characteristic of a society. The balance of this report will consider some of the social meanings people who go to the parks attach to them. Other sets of social meanings will be considered in later reports.

Local and Non-local Parks

One way people may distinguish among the many parks present in the society is by their geographical location. Among public parks, it may

be by the kind of governmental agency which administers them - local, county, state, federal, etc. Often times we tend to overlook the importance of the commonplace when we seek to understand human behavior. Sometimes we also forget that most behavior, particularly social behavior, is multidimensional. Too often we tend to accept one plausible explanation or definition of some social fact when further reflection would enable additional insight. For example, we are frequently concerned about how far people have to travel from their homes, work places, etc. to reach a park. We believe that the availability of transportation, particularly public, is an important factor in the utilization patterns associated with some particular park. We further believe that economic factors heavily determine how far a person will travel to some park. Thus, almost inadvertently we come to equate distance traveled to reach some park with economic cost. And we are not incorrect in doing so. But we are incorrect if we stop there. For example, we already know that going to a park is almost always an event which involves more than a single individual. Since individuals engage in many activities during their daily lives, going to a park requires some coordination among several individuals if it is to occur. Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of variation in the degree of coordination required to go to different parks. For example, Table 1 shows that about 66% of those adults who went to some local park did so on the same day as they decided to go. By way of contrast, about 35% who went to some non-local park went on the same day. (See Table 1.) Thus, one of the differences in social meanings a park may have is the extent to which going there requires previous planning and coordination among those persons who go there together. But it must also be realized that it also means that other activities have to be foregone or put aside in order for the event to take place. In other words, the "costs" are not solely economic.

The act of going to a park not only requires coordination among those who go together in order to get there, it requires additional individual "costs" once reached. We know that there is an almost continuous flow of persons into and out of a park during any given day, particularly during the summer months. Hence it is unlikely that going to a park is like going to a baseball game or motion picture where nearly all arrive about the same time and depart similarly. The data in Table 2 suggest that those adults who went to a local park remained only a few hours (70%). Some remained longer. In contrast with a non-local park where about 67% of the adults remained a half-day or longer, 91% of the adults in a local park remained a half-day or less. One may also notice from Table 2 that whereas the local park is substantially defined by short stays, the non-local park is characterized by the presence of about three equivalent patterns of stay (30% under half-day, 30% half-day, and 40% more than half-day). The presence of these differences in pattern between the two kinds of parks suggests that there exists different social meanings with respect to the appropriate period of time during which a social group may remain in a park. Perhaps this

difference can be interpreted as primarily a reflection of how far local and non-local parks are from a person's home. We wondered just how far a park had to be from the respondent's home before it became a non-local park. The data in Table 3 provide an answer. (See Table 3.)

Apparently there is a fairly clear distinction shared with respect to distance as a defining characteristic of a park. About 80% of the respondents indicated a local park was within a mile or two of their homes and an additional 11% said within not more than 5 miles from their homes. By way of contrast, 58% indicated that a park beyond 6 miles was non-local. That is, any park beyond that distance was, for them, not a local park. For some 17%, any park between 3-5 miles was also a non-local park. It is worth noting that the respondents did not distinguish between local and non-local parks in terms of the reasons for their establishment. Thus, a nearby historical park, administered by a federal agency, was for some their local park, irrespective of the social meanings attached to it by others.

Since going to a park requires some degree of coordination among those who go together, it is likely that when they go, to a particular park, may vary. The exigencies of daily life for most adults means that all periods of a week, month or year may not have the same chance for particular behavior to occur within it. Thus most adults work during daylight hours, although certainly not all. When do those who work at night go to parks, if they do? Table 4 shows the data with respect to when the respondents went to local and non-local parks. (See Table 4.) Apparently, for both types of parks, the weekend is the most likely period for making a visit. Notice, however, that a large proportion (about 40%) went to a local park on a weekday. The non-local park was gone to during the week by about 30% of those who went. It also appears that going to a non-local park on a holiday is more characteristic of it than a local park.

Throughout this series of reports we have stressed the importance of the observation that going to a park is inherently social action. That is, most people go to a park with someone else. Moreover, these others are usually friends or family members of the respondent. While these observations describe the usual situation, it would be incorrect to assume that all adults go to all parks all of the time accompanied by at least one other person. From our own experiences, we know that adults do go to parks alone on some occasions. Table 5 provides some interesting material for this discussion. (See Table 5.) Apparently, a larger proportion of those adults who go to local parks do so alone, than is true among adults going to non-local parks. It is still apparent that both local and non-local parks are characteristically populated by social groups, not unaccompanied individuals. What is worth noting is that local parks are different from non-local parks in this respect. This finding may suggest that an important aspect of the social meanings attached to parks are those concerned with the kinds of people a person may expect to see while there. This will be considered in the next report.

To summarize, we have considered a few of the social meanings attached by adults in contemporary American society to various kinds of parks. We have observed that there are basically two types of parks - local and non-local. People distinguish between these types in terms of several identifiable characteristics. A local park is a park to which one may go on the same day one decides to do so, and ordinarily remains a few hours; the park is not more distant than 1-2 miles from home and it is usual to go on both weekends and weekdays; finally, one normally goes with others but on occasion goes alone. A non-local park is a park to which one goes ordinarily after some planning has taken place, but usually not on the same day as one goes there. Since more arrangements are to be made, you usually stay longer (half-day or more) than at a local park. Usually the park is more than 5 miles away but may be as close to your home as 3 miles. You go there on weekends and holidays more than on weekdays. Finally, you almost never go there by yourself.

It should be clear that these vignettes are abstractions from the data. What is important is to notice that they are not concrete types. Thus, a particular park may be both a local and non-local park for different persons at the same time. Consider what the consequences are when people sharing these two sets of social meanings may attempt to be in one park at the same time, seeking perhaps to utilize the same facilities simultaneously or in tandem. But then that's a part of what park operations is all about, isn't it?

Neil H. Cheek, Jr.
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Table 1. Did you decide to go on the same day or ahead of time? - %

	Local	Non-local
Same day	65.6	35.4
Ahead of time	33.0	59.5
Don't recall	1.4	5.1
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 2. During your last visit to a park, how long did you stay? - %

	Local	Non-local
Couple of hrs.	69.6	28.7
$\frac{1}{2}$ day	21.0	29.3
Whole day	6.9	25.1
More than 1 day	.5	12.8
Don't recall	2.0	4.2
Total	100.0	100.1

Table 3. How far from your home is the nearest park? - %

	Local	Non-local
Less than 2 miles	79.5	12.7
3-5 miles	11.0	16.5
6 miles or more	4.5	58.1
Don't know	4.9	12.8
Total	99.9	100.1

Table 4. Time period during which respondent went to park - %

	Local	Non-local
Weekday	41.1	31.0
Weekend	46.6	52.5
Holiday	6.1	11.7
No reply	6.2	5.8
Total	100.0	101.0

Table 5. Group composition when respondent went to park - %

	Local	Non-local
Alone	12.4	3.3
With others	85.9	94.4
No reply	1.7	2.3
Total	100.0	100.0