

Visitors Viewed As Part of Parks

People as a legitimate part of National Parks — as “value creators” who bring their expectations, their attitudes, their hardware and their judgments into park settings — this was the theme of visiting lecturer Donald R. Field on Jan. 13 when he addressed the class on ecological aspects of park management at Oregon State University.

Field quoted Yale Sociologist William R. Burch, Jr., in assigning the origins of natural resources to society rather than to earth alone. Humans impute values, and it is on this value basis that certain things take on “resource” status, he said.

Field used National Parks as an example in describing the naturalness of people and the way human values change over time. He cited Alfred Runte's recent book *National Parks: The American Experience* to show how human perception of the NP System has shifted our view of the resources the System represents. At first there was the idea of something scenic and wondrous, but essentially “worthless” in the economic sense ... a collection of sites that were interesting but of no particular social value.

Around 1916, recreation began to be seen as an economic factor; hence, parklands became a recreational resource. Then in the Sixties, the view of earth from space put a planetary perspective around our whole world; the ecological values began to emerge and parks suddenly became dichotomized. On one side was the biological system, and on the other were the NPS administration and the visitors. In some areas people were excluded; in others, they were superimposed on the “natural system.” It is Field's contention that people are as natural as the systems they populate.

The emerging challenge to the National Park Service and to society as a whole, Field suggested, is to look at parks as promulgators of change — places where people's evolving values and shifting views of themselves are worked out in ways that allow new insights. He cited studies that show visitor self-regulation; in one case, on a single mile of beach, five distinct user “populations” segregated themselves and co-existed with order and enjoyment for all concerned.

These distinct groups of U.S. park users now are being joined in large numbers by foreign visitors who bring their own cultural tool kits and a different set of values and habits. They too are having their impact on the park resource and parks are beginning to reflect it. (The Japanese — one million of them last year — like to travel to parks in large groups on

public transportation. Their sauna-before-dinner tradition, for instance, can completely deplete a hotel's hot water supply at what, for the hotel, would be an unusual time.)

The changing place of population bulges on the age scale is another significant straw in the park management wind. Field pointed out that the heavy use of back country areas may well taper off as the post World War II baby boom becomes more and more involved in making a living and eventually moves on to geriatric status. He predicted a possible 30 to 45 percent decline in back country use for some parks by 1985-90 from the peak usage in 1976, and pointed to a dramatic decline nationwide since that year. Oregon and Washington, he said, might not experience this tail-off, since the Pacific Northwest is one of the selective youthful growth regions of the country.

Field described the human ecological approach as one that offers management an entire new dimension for comprehending — even predicting — changes occurring in parks. Parks are best understood, he suggested, by looking at them in relation to their surrounding environs — such as examining visitor recreation in relation to logging which may be taking place next door as part of the larger system. Cutting policies, reestablishment of native fisheries, access road-building, public transportation and terminal services, all such things are most useful as information when considered in relation to the different user groups that exist as temporary "park populations" and how those groups interact with one another.