

Visitor Perceptions of Yellowstone National Park After the '88 Fires

By David J. Snepenger

During the summer of 1988 Yellowstone National Park (YNP) and surrounding areas experienced fires at a level that normally occurs every 200 to 300 years. The research reported here examines perceptions of recent visitors and nonvisitors to YNP and their future visitation plans.

The data for the study were acquired using on-site and telephone surveys. The surveys elicited information on past and future visitation, media habits concerning the fires, perceptions of the park after the fires, and visitor group information. The on-site surveys commenced shortly after the fires. The first sampling occurred in the fall of 1988, followed by samplings during winter, spring and summer of 1989. Each on-site data collection effort gathered information from more than 200 visitor groups at Old Faithful Geyser. To garner information from people who had not been to the park since the fires, a telephone survey contacted 100 households in Boise, Denver, Lincoln, and Salt Lake. In total 1,315 surveys were collected.

Findings

One of the major issues addressed by the study was who would be likely to visit YNP after the fires. Towards this end, the survey compiled considerable information from those groups visiting the park in the year after the fires. Listed below is the visitor profile:

1. Most visitors stay one (48%), two (24%) or three (15%) days in the park.
2. About 55 percent of all visitors traveled less than 500 miles to get to the park.
3. Most people came to the park in groups ranging from 2 to 5 and with about equal numbers of males and females in the groups.
4. Most of the groups (78%) consisted of family members, family and friends, or couples. The other groups (22%) were made up of tour groups, school classes, or single individuals.
5. Almost 80 percent of all visitor groups had one or more persons with at least some college education.
6. Fifty-four percent of all visitor parties had incomes in excess of \$40,000.
7. The most popular leisure activities in the park were geyser viewing, viewing wildlife, sightseeing, photography, and viewing the fire burn.

The second major issue addressed in the study was future visitation levels to the park. The majority of respondents thought that visitation to YNP would increase in 1989. The actual 1989 visitor data revealed an increase in visitation due to curiosity about the fires. With respect to projecting long-run future visitation, the data showed that visitation over the next 10 years is likely to increase.

In an effort to gain additional insights into future visitation, survey participants were asked to identify their motives for visiting the park. The primary motive was vacationing, followed by viewing nature, and then curiosity about the fires. The most frequent visitors were the most likely to mention curiosity about the fires.

The third topic addressed the issue of what perceptions people hold of Yellowstone due to 1) their own visit to the park and 2) the media coverage of the forest fires. Perception information was collected in two ways. One set of questions asked respondents whether Yellowstone was burned severely, moderately, or lightly. The other set asked respondents to provide three adjectives to describe the park.

The majority of respondents thought that the park was severely or moderately burnt. However, those that have been to YNP since the fires thought that it was not as burnt as those who have not been to the park.

The most mentioned descriptors of the park by visitors and nonvisitors dealt with topics other than the fires. The park's image is dominated by its beauty, nature, and size. These images persist even though most of the survey respondents watched television, listened to radio, or read articles about the fires.

Conclusions

The 1988 fires in YNP have not and will not greatly affect short and long-run visitation. Even though the media coverage was extensive it did not appear to adversely impact the perceptions people hold of the park. Visitors and nonvisitors to YNP appear to be interested in viewing and understanding the consequences of the fires in natural ecosystems.

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