

A Commentary on Visitor Statistics

Editor's Note: It takes all kinds of people to make up a world, and some of them seem to be 2 or 3 different individuals wrapped into one outer covering. Crusty, cantankerous, gun-toting poets aren't your run-of-the-mill park visitor (or your usual hunter, either). But listen to one of them, and it could surprise you into reexamining some of your own comfortable ruts.

By Al Lovaas

Recently, Dick Briceland announced visitation figures for September 1990. There were 25,775,338 recreation visits to the National Park System that month, of which Alaska Region had 148,909, or a little more than half of 1 percent, while 56 urban parks alone scored 7,050,180. For the year to date, Alaska recorded 1,089,906 of the total 210,397,573. While these are important statistics, obviously they are not intended to, nor do they, tell the whole story about visitor use of NPS areas.

Toward the end of that very month I made one of my infrequent recreational visits to an NPS area. There, 130 miles north of Nome, I reveled in the silence, the loneliness, the empty, roadless, sweepingly-open vistas of a truly wild place. I exulted in being alive; in the interplay and flex of my muscles; in the pleasant exer-

tion of hiking hillside where mosses, lichens and forbs displayed pastel autumnal abstractions reminiscent of a Jackson Pollock paint-dribbled canvas (although I doubt the artist ever saw nature's originals).

I marveled at the soaring, flashing speed of a gyrfalcon; a near straight-line trek to nowhere by a ponderous lone musk-ox; large flocks of ptarmigan wheeling in flight, their whiteness stark against sienna tundra and willow. I was enraptured by the mysterious, undulating, glowing beauty of northern lights in the clear night sky. I was struck by the purity and silence of freshly falling snow, creating its mood of timelessness and antiquity. I was lulled by the musical murmuring of clean water flowing endlessly over ancient stones in a tiny brook.

I shot and killed a fine bull moose. I made a longish shot, but one well within the range of my .300 Win. magnum and he fell in his tracks to a 200-grain hand-loaded bullet, although I had to stick a finisher in his ear. He was sleek and fat and beautiful; I may have been the only human he ever saw. I venture to say not any of the 7,050,180 legitimate recreation visits to 56 urban park area in September, nor the 1,065,333 to Yellowstone, Olympic, and Zion that month resulted in the deliberate killing of a large wild animal.

I gutted and quartered my moose and with help from three companions packed the meat to the tiny airstrip and loaded it into a small plane to begin the journey to my home in Eagle River, Alaska. I did not depart, myself, for several days because of inclement flying weather and the need to assist companions in getting out two more moose. While we saw tracks, we did not get a chance to kill any grizzly bears.

The delicious, low in cholesterol, unadulterated, tender, and very expensive meat was stored respectfully and carefully in my freezer alongside packaged filets from 23 sockeyes I dip-netted in June from a river forming part of the boundary of another NPS area. Injuries from orcas, seals and commercial fishermen's nets on a few of those bright, handsome fish were reminders of the incalculable odds they faced during a lifetime of peril, and of their dauntless determination to surmount any obstacles in returning to their natal streams to reproduce their kind. My dip net finally snuffed out that determination so close to their final goal, with only a few fish wheels and predators left between them and their spawning streams. I do not waste their succulent flesh.

I made my September recreational visit to a 2,785,000-acre national preserve, which by law is administered exactly as a national park except that sport and subsistence hunting and trapping are permitted and, in that particular preserve only, reindeer herding. The salmon were taken from a 13,188,000 acre park and preserve. In the early 1980s, I killed three caribou on the preserve, but not qualifying as a local rural resident, I could not participate in subsistence hunting in the park. My hunts were accessed by small planes on marginally short, narrow, rocky, and in one instance tree-girt, landing strips that barely qualified for that designation. On one flight, I saw a gorgeous, rollicking grizzly bear, but never was fortunate enough to find one while hunting.

Consumptive uses present problems, but they also present opportunities foreclosed by complete protection: "The National Park Service recognizes and the Committee agrees, that subsistence uses by local rural residents have been, and are now, a natural part of the ecosystem serving as a primary consumer in the

food chain" (Legislative History, Alaska National Interests Lands Conservation Act). We are mandated also "to insure that consumptive uses of fish and wildlife populations within NPS units not be allowed to adversely disrupt that natural balance which has been maintained for thousands of years" (ibid.).

But how much consumptive use is natural and not adversely disruptive? Research, inventory and monitoring can provide guidance; comparisons with research results from totally protected parks are essential. And how much effect, if any, on the biological processes are we mandated to continue unimpaired by adverse human activity is coming from arctic haze, global climate change, reindeer herding, fire protection/management, special Alaska provisions for ready visitor access and transportation, missing or unnaturally reduced life forms, development of world-class mines near parks, changes in life styles by indigenous people, desires of suburbanites like me to become natural parts of ecosystems, and increasing human populations?

Are the answers to these questions really important? I believe they are essential, not just to manage national parks and preserves in Alaska, but to help at least a little in guiding humankind into an uncertain future. How can we tell what direction we are going if we don't know where we began?

Whether visitors are merely looking at something of interest in an NPS area or whether they are shooting, trapping, or netting something must obviously be considered in management formulas along with the numbers of recreation visits.

Visitor expectations are important. If cost is dependent largely upon comparative scarcity, Dr. Briceland's figures indicate recreation visits to the Alaska Region approach pricelessness. Many of the visits are once-in-a-lifetime experiences; all are expensive and time-consuming. Discriminating buyers expect top value when they pay top dollar and they deserve to get it. While the word "great" has become hackneyed, Alaska deserves its title, "The Great Land." To meet great expectations of visitors while preserving great but often fragile resources and wilderness ambiances requires sophisticated management and decision making dependent upon expensive information. Chip Dennerlien, in a 1988 *George Wright Forum* (Vol. 5, No. 4) paper eloquently and succinctly described the challenges of managing northern and remote parks.

A national park manager from the simpler, less crowded, less knowledgeable world of not all that long ago would be amazed if he could look in on the Alaska Regional Office of today. There are divisions of Protection and Ranger Activities, Budget and Finance, Planning, Concessions, Personnel, Environmental Compliance, Facility Design and Maintenance, Contracting and Property, Cultural Resources, Interpretation and Visitor Services, Subsistence, Land Resources, Information Management, Minerals Management, Natural Resources, and an Office of Oil Spill Coordination.

All are essential or they wouldn't exist in these times of tight budgets, and all are bustling to try to turn concepts into reality in this modern world. I'm sure though that the old timer had plenty of problems to contend with, and probably if anything a more negative ratio of resources to needs. Nobody ever said it was, is, or will be easy, but for sure it will get even more complicated, which must be recognized by the American people if we are to continue to receive their support.

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