

Midwest Identifies Social Issues As Aid In Planning Research Program

**By Roak Parker, David Lime
and Jerrilyn Thompson**

NPS managers face a wide range of management issues that impact both cultural and natural resources. Many of these issues are social in nature. We define social issues as those concerned with the management of human actions and interactions, such as dealing with human-induced erosion along river shorelines, monitoring numbers and types of visitors, developing effective visitor education programs to encourage minimum impact behaviors, and developing cooperative strategies among individual park units and various governmental and nongovernmental agencies.

Social science research can aid resource management in seeking solutions to many social or human issues. But what exactly are these social issues? Are issues unique to individual park units, or do many park units experience similar problems? And which issues deserve priority?

To develop management strategies for social issues in the NPS Midwest Region, the newly established University of Minnesota CPSU was called upon to identify social science research needs and opportunities as they relate to emerging issues within the Region. As a first step in identifying what issues exist and whether or not there are common problems among park units, the CPSU systematically examined 6 major planning documents for the 28 units in the Midwest Region that had completed planning documents.

Planning documents provide direction and focus for park management. Their content and style varies

considerably and often reflects the educational background of the authors. Many are written from a biological perspective, and they focus on the manifestation rather than on the cause of the problem – especially when the problem is caused by visitor impacts. As a result, many social problems and issues may not be readily evident or directly stated. Nevertheless, this effort was viewed as an early and exploratory step to help identify a research agenda and isolate priority issues for study using one source of information.

For each of the 28 parks studied, the contents of each Resource Management Plan (including natural and cultural resources), Interpretive Prospectus, Statement for Interpretation, Statement for Management, and 1990 Outline for Park Requirements were analyzed. All of the social issues or problem statements expressed directly and indirectly in these documents were recorded and later classified into 6 broad categories dependent upon their content:

1. describing use and users;
2. providing for interpretation;
3. describing aesthetic, economic, and psychological benefits;
4. managing visitors;
5. managing external influences; and
6. other issues, not fitting these categories.

Once placed in an initial category, issues were re-examined. Within each of the 6 broad categories, major themes were identified and some categories were subdivided into specific issue groups, such as managing depreciative behavior, determining economic benefits of park use to the local economy, and developing cooperative arrangements with other gov-

emental agencies. The range of issues and the extent to which issues are common among park units were identified.

As a check on the responsiveness of our findings, the initial results for each park unit were sent to the park superintendent for review and comment. The superintendent was asked to do 5 things: (1) cross out any problem statements or issues that already had been clearly addressed and resolved, (2) clarify the wording for any problem statement or issue that did not accurately reflect the problem, (3) add any social problems or issues to the list which were not identified, (4) indicate the issues they would like help in resolving, and (5) rank order the issues they had identified in item 4. Comments from the superintendents were used to amend our findings and to more accurately reflect each park's situation.

General Results

From the 168 documents examined, more than 300 issues were identified, averaging about 10 per park. For example, within the broad category of Providing for Interpretation, more than 100 separate issues emerged. Approximately 85 issues were identified concerning Managing Visitors, and 50 issues were found concerning Managing External Influences. Many of the specific issues in these last two categories occurred in more than one park unit. Within the other three categories, fewer issues were identified. For instance only 23 problems emerged in the category Describing Aesthetic, Economic, and Psychological Benefits, with almost half of these being added by park superintendents during the review process.

The number of issues identified per park unit varied widely, ranging from 47 at Voyageurs NP in Minnesota to one at George Rogers Clark NHS in Indiana. Although the park superintendents added to and amended the issues identified for their units, these changes did not significantly alter the general results.

A Diversity of Issues

Given the diversity of park settings within the region, a variety of social issues was expected and found. The individual issues identified ranged from the need to control vandalism within the parks to the need to determine the aesthetic value of open spaces.

While there is a great diversity of issues and types of issues, it also is clear that many issues are unique to individual park units. All but one park unit identified at least one issue that was not identified at any other park. Many of these issues focused on the unit's need for research, development, and evaluation of interpretive programming. For example, at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial there is an expressed need to conduct oral histories about the building of the arch as an aid to interpretation. At Voyageurs NP a need was expressed to add authenticity to interpretive programs through interviews with Native Americans.

While strategies and methods to conduct such research may cross park unit boundaries, the immediate value of the research will be to the individual unit.

Common Issues

Individual park superintendents and managers may be well aware of the problems faced by their own units, but they may be less aware of management problems and issues in other units. To each manager,

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Table 1. Selected social issues identified in Midwest Region park planning documents.

Park Unit	Need to monitor visitor use patterns	Need to reduce and manage depreciative behavior	Need to manage user conflicts	Need for agency cooperation	Need to address issues adjacent to parks	Need to understand economic benefits of park use
Agate Fossil Beds National Monument	x			x		x
Apostle Islands National Lakeshore	x	x	x			
Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area	x	x	x	x	x	
Effigy Mounds National Monument	x	x		x		
Fort Larned National Historic Site	x	x	x	x	x	
Fort Scott National Historic Site					x	x
George Rogers Clark National Historic Park					x	
George Washington Carver National Monument					x	
Grand Portage National Monument		x				
Harry S. Truman National Historic Site	x			x		
Herbert Hoover National Historic Site	x			x		
Homestead National Monument	x			x		
Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore	x	x	x	x	x	
Isle Royale National Park	x	x	x			
Jefferson Expansion Memorial National Historic Site	x				x	
Lincoln Boyhood National Monument	x	x		x	x	
Lincoln Home National Historic Site	x			x		
Mound City Group National Monument					x	
Ozark National Scenic Riverways	x	x	x	x	x	x
Perry's Victory International Peace Memorial		x	x		x	
Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore	x		x			x
Pipestone National Monument			x			
St. Croix National Scenic Riverway	x	x	x	x	x	
Scotts Bluff National Monument	x		x		x	x
Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore	x	x	x	x		
Voyageurs National Park	x	x	x			
William H. Taft National Historic Site				x		
Wilson Creek National Battlefield	x	x	x		x	
Total number of issues identified:	20	14	14	14	14	5

x = Park unit indicated a need to address an issue in one or more planning documents or from review of initial study results by park staff.

the seemingly exhaustive list of problems can appear to be unique. Thus, it would not be surprising to discover that many managers are less concerned with the "unique" issues that arise at other park units.

Our analysis indicates that many specific issues are *not* unique but are common among park units. Without exception every park unit in the region shared at least one specific social problem with one or more units; park units as diverse in setting and programming as Jefferson NEM and Voyageurs NP share specific social problems and issues.

In Table 1, 6 specific issues illustrate the number and types of issues shared among the units of this region. The need to *monitor visitor use* comes from the broad category of Describing Visitor Use; the need to manage or reduce *depreciative behavior* and to understand and manage *user conflicts* comes from the broad category of Managing Visitors; the need to develop or improve *cooperation with other agencies* and the need to address issues of *adjacent land use* come from the category of Managing External Influences, and the need to understand *economic benefits* related to park use comes from the broad category of Describing Economic or Aesthetic Benefits.

Twenty of the 28 parks indicated a need to know better who are their visitors, how visitors use the park, and to document trends over time (Table 1). Half the parks indicated a need to control depreciative behavior, to manage visitor conflicts, to improve cooperative arrangements with other agencies, and to influence or participate in the management of lands adjacent to and near park boundaries.

The general category Managing External Influences had two components, listed in Table 1 as *need for agency cooperation* and *need to address issues adjacent to parks*. Only 7 parks did not show a problem for one of these categories.

Because park units in the Midwest Region share many similar problems, research strategies should be explored in a regional context rather than on a park unit by park unit basis. For example, visitor use monitoring systems could be developed for Great Lakes national lakeshores and parks to document and analyze trends as well as to explore the degree to which visitors use individual or multiple parks in this regional system.

A more specific regional study is underway by the Minnesota CPSU that addresses how these perceptions could be translated into both natural resource

management and interpretation programs. Phase one of this study is focusing on lighthouses at Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, but the study will be expanded to include a series of Midwest Region lighthouse sites that represent a range of natural resource settings, different intensities of visitor use, and varying levels of managerial response. Such regional studies could be more cost effective and could lead to increased generalization of research methods and results within the region and elsewhere in the national park system.

Further Studies Are Planned

While this exploratory research found that a wide range of social problems exists within the Midwest Region and that many problems cut across park units, it is not clear how responsive this analysis is with regard to actual research needs. Although information received from the superintendents following their review of our findings helped insure that the data reflect actual conditions in the parks, this research gives only an indication of the emerging issues in this region. Additional research seems warranted to identify emerging issues more accurately and to aid in developing a social science agenda.

A logical next step would be to survey or interview park superintendents, rangers, and other staff about their perspectives on emerging issues in park planning and management. Additional study participants could include private environmental groups, state departments of natural resources, commercial sector providers of leisure services, and selected recreating publics. Such a study of NPS employees in the Midwest Region, and perhaps others, has been initiated by the U/MN CPSU.

A survey or modified Delphi approach, which asks respondents to reply to a series of questions, has been found effective as a way to identify and prioritize emerging issues needing study (Gregersen et al. 1989). An initial open ended questionnaire or letter asks respondents what they think are the most important emerging issues facing NPS managers and users over the next 10 to 15 years. Follow-up questionnaires, interviews, workshops, or focus group meetings are planned.

Workshops or meetings would address prioritized topics in more detail; explore what is known and not known about issues of critical interest; develop priorities for field studies, and develop strategies to attack issues for which adequate information is not currently available. Particular attention would be given to multi-park studies to strengthen broader application and transferability of results among park units. These results could be compared with those from the review of planning documents to aid in prioritizing social science research needs.

This research also will seek to develop and test an information-retrieval system as a means of improving dissemination and application of research results. It is anticipated that one or more priority issues will be studied for which information exists but has not been effectively transmitted to or used by field managers.

Parker is a research assistant, division of recreation, park and leisure studies, school of kinesiology & leisure studies, U/MN; Lime is a research associate and NPS/CPSU leader at U/MN; Thompson is a research specialist with the NPS/CPSU.

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