

COLORADO PLATEAU

Last November, the National Park Service reached a milestone in studying carrying capacity limits on park visitors through a process applied at Arches National Park, Utah. Known as visitor experience and resource protection (VERP), the study process determines natural resource and social indicators and standards for the protection of park resources and maintenance of high quality visitor experiences.

Concern over resource and visitor experience degradation associated with the growing popularity of hikes to Delicate Arch, Double O Arch, and automobile travel on 4-wheel

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drive roads led the park and VERP developers to test the process at Arches last fall. The VERP process starts with designation of different management zones based upon different types and amounts of visitor use (e.g., permit-controlled backcountry hiking, unrestricted frontcountry hiking, etc.). Standards for social indicators vary according to the resource and visitor experience objectives of the different management zones.

At the core of the VERP program are the indicators and standards that seek to mitigate resource and visitor experience degradation. When exceeded, the indicators and standards trigger management actions that social conditions back within acceptable limits.

Specifically, the social standard for Delicate Arch requires management action if more than 30 hikers at one time are observed in 10% or more of the samples collected during the peak hours of the peak months of the visitor season. Likewise, visitors will encounter no more than three vehicles per hour or 10 widenings per mile (areas where vegetation and soils are disturbed by vehicles leaving the road) while travelling park 4-wheel drive roads. If these conditions are violated more than 10% of the sampling period, management must take action to bring conditions back within the acceptable limit.

Monitoring will be completed in 1996 and may indicate certain restrictions on some visitor activities in 1997. The VERP process also suggests that a parkwide carrying capacity may be necessary if visitation continues to grow.

Denver Service Center and park staff are currently writing the VERP implementation plan that will explain in detail the management zones, indicators and standards, and management actions that the park will take initially.