

Boontown Studies Help Predict New Visitor Patterns

By James Carroll

For some time, managers have recognized energy development and urban encroachment as problems for the national parks. Formal identification of these threats was made in the 1980 State of the Parks Report.

In recent years, however, much more attention within the National Park Service has been devoted to addressing these perils. Monitoring for air and water quality is the outstanding example, but social scientists have taken a role.

It is known that energy development creates boomtowns, which is another way of saying that almost overnight certain communities will experience sudden population growth, or be created, in response to energy needs. Social scientists are interested in the types of people attracted to boomtowns, and what their recreational habits might be.

There are obvious implications for the National Park System, not only because greater population is likely to mean increased visitation, but because these newcomers may differ in composition from the long-term residents of an area and change the complexion of recreational demand.

Are the energy newcomers different? The Cooperative Park Studies Unit at the University of Denver, with support from the Division of Special Science Projects in Washington, sought the answer in three boomtown communities near national parks.

The communities studied were Pinedale and Big Piney in Wyoming, near Yellowstone and Grand Teton, and Watford City in North Dakota, near Theodore Roosevelt National Park. All three locations were booming because of oil development.

Judith Baxter, the primary researcher, visited each

of the communities, making ethnographic observations, noting recreational facilities and use, and interviewing town leaders. From a random sample of households, she obtained demographic data and information about respondents' use of parks and recreational facilities and their attitudes about them.

Demographically, newcomers tended to be younger, to have more education, to make more money, to be more likely single or divorced, and to be less attached to the community than the longtimers.

In general, however, the report finds that newcomers and longtimers in all three communities shared similar attitudes and behaviors concerning the national parks in their area. Both groups in all communities shared much in common with the typical park visitor — they like to sightsee, picnic, car tour, and camp, and respondents felt that natural formations, natural forest, wildlife, fresh air, and the chance to be with the family were all very important to their enjoyment of the park.

The report describes major differences, however, pointing out that "newcomers showed high participation rates in very strenuous activities, whereas longtimers favored more passive activities. Newcomers in all communities showed considerably higher rates of hunting and fishing than longtimers. Considerably more newcomers than longtimers find roughing it to be important to their enjoyment of the parks. Greater numbers of newcomers want more camping, fishing, hunting, and backcountry access in the parks. Longtime residents, on the other hand, stress the need for better roads and hotel facilities."

The researchers conclude: "These differences become important in determining variations in park behavior between longtimers and newcomers."

The University of Denver team found that the differences were narrowed, however, if the community had a long history of energy development, or if work schedule and crew arrangements at the site permitted commuting.

The nature of the energy industry, therefore, is an important factor in the leisure time and recreational behavior of workers. As a consequence, the researchers emphasize, the findings from these oil-impacted communities might not apply in areas with other types of energy development.

Most newcomers to the boomtowns studied had visited the nearby national parks. Theodore Roosevelt, only 20 miles from Watford City, experienced the greatest visitation — 77 percent of Watford City's newcomers, in fact, visited the park in the year prior to the study.

Lesser newcomer visitation rates, but still high percentages of respondents, were recorded for Yellowstone and Grand Teton from the Wyoming communities, but Pinedale and Big Piney are at least 70 miles from Grand Teton and 100 miles from Yellowstone.

Other state and federal lands take some of the recreational pressure away from the national parks, as do any well-developed community recreational facilities, although the latter often are dominated by the community's permanent residents, the study revealed.

The University of Denver project points to energy boomtowns' having an important impact on the National Park System, but with just three communities and one industry studied, its conclusions must be limited.

Baxter and project leader Dr. Charles Cortese, an associate professor at the University, have developed a predictive model for the impact of boomtowns on the National Park System, based on the variables discussed. They plan to present the model at upcoming workshops for park managers.

If additional testing proves the model to be valid, social scientists will have a valuable tool for broadening their conclusions. Park managers, in turn, will have a tool which will increase their confidence in decisions facilitating park visitation and protecting valuable park resources.

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