

Wilderness Visitor Experience Over Time: Change, Constraints, & Impacts

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INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

Various constraints to recreation & leisure are well documented (e.g. Jackson, 1997). Constraints are “factors that limit people’s participation in leisure activities, people’s use of leisure services, or people’s enjoyment of current activities” (Jackson & Scott, 1999, p. 301). Structural constraints are oft-cited in outdoor recreation and include time and distance. Schneider (2007) suggested that wilderness visitors likely face similar constraints as general recreationists, yet such research is limited to a single empirical study (Green et al., 2007).

As such, the purpose of this study was to understand changes such as constraints impacting recreational wilderness visitors, & to describe the impact of these constraints among visitors to a U.S. wilderness area: the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW).

Specially:

- What are the structural constraints encountered by BWCAW visitors?
- If & how are wilderness experiences influenced by these constraints?

METHODS

Approach: Hermeneutic approach (Patterson & Williams, 2002) provided stories & lived experiences of BWCAW visitors

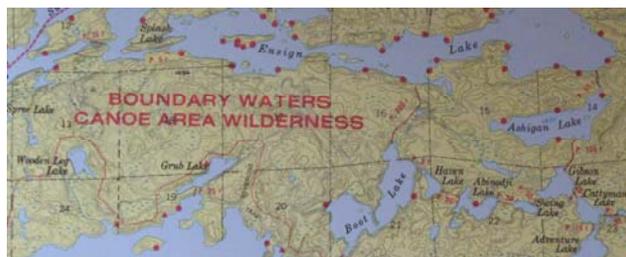
Sample: Purposive sample of BWCAW visitors representing both high & low relationship status

Data collection: In-depth face-to-face interviews between Nov 2008 – May 2009

Instrument: Semi-structured interview guide

Analysis: Multiple reviews of the verbatim transcripts by dual readers, idiographic analysis of each story & nomothetic analysis across cases

Member checking aided credibility & data were coded into emergent themes using NVIVO software



RESULTS

Sample:

Interviewees: 25 total participants
Gender: 13 male & 12 female
Past trips to BWCAW: Range from 1 to 30 +
Relationship with BWCAW: 16 high & 9 low

Structural constraints:

Structural constraints were commonly detailed & time constraints such as family commitments, career obligations, & limited vacations were mentioned most frequently.

“Now that I have a family to raise, free time has dwindled. I don’t have large blocks of time to get out and enjoy the Boundary Waters.” – Isaac

“Time for me is a factor. Having the time to do it, having the vacation.” – Susan

“I’m so busy in the summer and when you do get time off, you’re not necessarily planning a trip. You have other obligations.” – Kali

Impact on experience:

Shortening the experience:

As a result of time constraints, many interviewees discussed shortening their trips.

“I’ve gone on mostly shorter trips. I would love to go on longer trips, I just haven’t been able to [get] time off work.” – Mandy

Substituting the experience:

Interviewees reported that they visited other areas (site substitution) for the activities they enjoyed.

“We went on a canoe trip down a river in Southern Minnesota. So we have done some canoeing & things that are not in the Boundary Waters, but are substitutes.” – Karen

“I do go to other state parks.” – Justin

Opportunities for solitude:

Resultant changes in travel pattern had an impact on the social experience & opportunities for solitude according to the interviewees in this study.

“[Shorter trips] are still relaxing, I mean, but you don’t have the solitude.” – Kali

DISCUSSION

In-depth interviews with BWCAW visitors revealed stories that detail wilderness visitors’ encounters with a variety of structural constraints, & that wilderness experiences are impacted by these constraints. Management & planning implications include:

- Recognize & adjust for spatial displacement. Intra-site spatial displacement & travel pattern changes have considerable influences on both social & biophysical management. Canoe entry points & campsites around the periphery of the wilderness area are likely to be more heavily used. In addition, these changes can impact visitors’ social experiences & opportunities for solitude.
- Provide informational materials to BWCAW visitors indicating where other users are likely to be. This type of informational material can assist in creating appropriate expectations regarding when & where encounters with other groups are more likely to occur.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This initial inquiry into how change, constraints, & coping impact visitor experience with & in wilderness is useful. However, future research opportunities include:

- Long-term follow up on visitor experiences & responses to change
- Monitoring of visitor use patterns
- Documenting biophysical impacts of changes in visitor use
- Studies related to coping mechanisms used in response to constraints



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