



## Social Science Division



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Scenery, wildlife, and clean air are the most important park qualities to Yellowstone visitors. The visitors' experience is likely to include viewing Old Faithful.

### Background

The objectives of the Social Science Program are to conduct and promote state-of-the-art social science related to the mission of the National Park Service (NPS) and to deliver usable knowledge to park managers and the public. This includes several major activities.

The Visitor Services Project (VSP) conducts approximately 20 surveys in National Park System units each year to provide NPS managers with scientific information about visitors. The VSP also carries out a brief annual customer satisfaction survey in 330 parks to measure the NPS performance related to visitors' understanding, enjoyment, and perceived value for entrance fees paid.

The Public Use Statistics Office (PUSO) is charged with counting public use of the National Park System and works with parks to ensure accurate statistical reporting, provides two-year forecasts of visitation, and publishes an annual statistical abstract, which is the authoritative record of national park visitation.

The Money Generation Model (MGM2) is used by the NPS to estimate the economic contribution of visitor and park payroll spending to the economies of regions around parks. These estimates are updated annually.

The periodic NPS Comprehensive Survey of the American Public is a national household survey that is the major means for obtaining information on non-visitors to national parks and their reasons for not visiting. This knowledge is crucial as the NPS prepares for a new generation of visitors.

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### More Information

**Bruce Peacock**  
Chief, Social Science Division

**Phone/E-mail**  
970 267-2106  
bruce\_peacock@nps.gov

National Park Service  
1201 Oakridge Drive  
Fort Collins, CO 80525

[www.nature.nps.gov/socialscience](http://www.nature.nps.gov/socialscience)

## Highlights and Accomplishments

The Social Science Program works closely with the Office of Management and Budget to provide technical review and secure approval of NPS-sponsored surveys of the public, as required under the Paperwork Reduction Act. The surveys and focus groups conducted for parks by partner universities and consultants deliver usable knowledge to park managers in a timely manner.

Social science has made many important contributions to national park management. Examples include:

- *Reducing Visitors' Impacts on Park Resources*—Social science studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of on-site communications in reducing visitor-caused impacts to natural and cultural resources. At Shiloh National Military Park, interpreters describing damage caused by climbing on park monuments to youth groups visiting the park reduced their damaging behavior by 88% compared to a control condition in which groups received no message.
- *Protecting Visitor Experiences*—Social science informs the management of visitor experiences in parks. A study of backcountry hikers at Gates of the Arctic National Park determined that many hikers had little or no previous wilderness experience, contradicting the belief that the park attracted only the most experienced wilderness enthusiasts. Despite legislation specifying minimal regulation in the park, most hikers supported hiker registration, wilderness permits, backcountry orientation, group-size limits, and food-storage requirements to enhance their enjoyment and safety.
- *Applying Descriptive Data on Visitors*—Descriptive information on who park visitors are is important to park planning, policy, and management. A survey showing that the majority of visitors to Yosemite National Park came from California was critical in that state's approval of a Yosemite vehicle license plate, with part of the revenue from sales supporting the park.
- *Identifying and Prioritizing Social Science Research Needs*—Workshops conducted by the Social Science Program in south Florida formed the basis for a social science research plan for the Everglades, Biscayne, Big Cypress, and Dry Tortugas units. This research produced the first systematic information describing patterns and reasons for use and non-use of national parks by residents of the region, including Hispanic Americans and the Creole immigrant population.

## Future Directions

National park managers are confronted with complex issues that require a broad-based understanding of the economies and social trends of human populations in parks, regions around parks, and in the nation as a whole. To address this, research is currently being designed to answer such important questions as:

- How are the age, race, and ethnicity of park visitors changing (or staying the same)?



Hiking in the national parks is a popular activity. At Catoctin Mountain Park, a VSP study reported 78% of all visitors hiked at least one hour.

- Where do international visitors come from? Are their numbers increasing or decreasing?
- Are visitors' preferences for services or facilities in parks and gateway regions changing?
- How are the economies and populations of gateway regions around parks changing?
- Is the American public's opinion of national parks and the NPS changing over time?