

**Tourism Committee
of the
National Park System Advisory Board**

**Strategies for Advancing Stewardship:
Aligning Tourism, Conservation, and Partnerships
in the National Park Service**

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Tourism Committee Members

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Definitions

Gateway community: A community that exists in close proximity to a unit of the National Park System whose residents and elected officials are often affected by the decisions made in the course of managing the park and whose decisions may affect the resources of the park. Gateway communities usually offer food, lodging, and other services to park visitors. They also provide opportunities for employee housing and a convenient location to purchase goods and services essential to park administration.

Local (*park*) visitors: Park visitors who reside in the local area around or adjacent to a park. The National Park Service (NPS) defines “local area” individually for each park when conducting surveys and social science research.

National parks: In this document, the term is used to denote all units of the National Park System administered by the NPS.

Recreation visit: The entry of a person onto lands or waters administered by the NPS except for non-reportable visits (such as NPS staff or service contractors) and non-recreation visits (such as funeral parties at National Cemeteries).¹

Tourist (*park*) visitors: Park visitors who traveled from outside the local area to visit a park. The tourism industry often defines tourists as visitors who have traveled from at least 50 miles away to visit a destination, community, or site.

Visitor: An individual who may generate one or more visits.

¹ National Park Service [Visitor Use Statistics Definitions](#)

Introduction

Tourism plays a vital role in the United States' National Park System, which, except for the COVID-impacted years of 2020 and 2021, has hosted more than 300 million recreation visits annually since 2015. While some visitors are local residents enjoying nearby parks, a significant portion of visitation is comprised of tourists, underscoring the role of parks as major drivers of domestic and international travel. For some, an iconic site like Grand Canyon National Park or Cape Hatteras National Seashore was the motivation for their trip. For others, a site like Boston National Historical Park or Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument is just one part of their travel experience.

Parks-related tourism generates substantial economic benefits. In 2023, park visitors spent an estimated \$26.4 billion in local gateway regions while visiting National Park Service (NPS) sites across the country.² These expenditures supported 415,000 jobs and \$55.6 billion in economic output in the national economy.³

While the economic benefits of tourism to parks are well known, the negative impacts of tourism are increasingly visible as well. Rapidly growing visitation to some parks has resulted in congestion on roads, trails, and other visitor infrastructure, often spilling over into gateway communities and negatively impacting residents' quality of life and the visitor experience. In addition to congestion, tourism affects the environment in a number of ways, from carbon emissions to natural resource depletion. Poorly managed tourism can erode local culture and tradition, and while the economic gains of tourism are usually channeled to a subset of community residents and workers, its costs are felt more broadly.

For these and other reasons, the NPS, as a major tourism organization in the United States, requires thoughtful tourism policy to guide its partnerships, planning, and decision-making. The NPS must collaborate with communities and stakeholders to cultivate the positive benefits of tourism and reduce its negative impacts. Yet tourism is challenging as a management issue, with implications for virtually every aspect of NPS operations. Effective policy must cohere with related policy issues, from park planning to accessibility.

The [current NPS tourism policy](#) was approved in 1999, and a great deal has changed in the quarter-century since. In 2023, NPS Director Charles F. "Chuck" Sams III tasked the National Park System Advisory Board (Board) with drafting recommendations for the bureau to consider in an update to its tourism policy and processes. To carry out this task, the Board established a new Tourism Committee (Committee) at its meeting in August 2023. The Committee subsequently engaged with nearly three dozen parks and tourism experts and stakeholders, gathering insights and perspectives from multiple vantage points. A full list of interviewees is included in the appendix to this paper (Appendix A), and the Board thanks them for their time and expertise.

² National Park Service [About Us – Visitation Numbers](#)

³ National Park Service [2023 National Park Visitor Spending Effects](#)

This report includes observations about the importance of tourism to the NPS and its gateway communities. Each recommendation recognizes the interconnected nature of the issue and the role innovative and considered policy plays in directing tourism-related planning, analysis, partnerships, and decision-making. The goal of these recommendations is to encourage the NPS to update current tourism policy and practices to support shared stewardship and the delivery of high-quality visitor experiences.

The recommendations for the NPS resulting from this work have five broad commonalities:

First, formally manage and promote welcoming, equitable, and sustainable tourism in collaboration with a diverse suite of stakeholders.

Second, use quantitative measurement and evaluation of impacts and opportunities associated with tourism, applying recent technological advances in data and analysis, to help ensure that the costs and benefits of tourism are appropriately management and distributed.

Third, call for deliberate efforts to be made to offset negative impacts and promote opportunities for positive cultural, environmental, and economic outcomes associated with park visitation.

Fourth, propose centering cultural, including Indigenous, context as well as environmental conservation in all tourism-related communication, education, and outreach efforts. This approach supports the mission of the NPS while maximizing the positive impacts of tourism.

Fifth, recommend the NPS analyze and consider options for sustainably supporting its work via tourism partnerships and cost sharing while also enabling equitable distribution of the economic benefits and costs of parks-related tourism.

The Committee organized its findings and recommendations into four categories:

- Partnerships and Communities
- Conservation, Communication, and Shared Stewardship
- Visitor Needs and Technology
- NPS Tourism Program Administration

Partnerships and Communities: Community partnerships play a critical role in managing tourism at scale, enhancing the positive impacts of tourism while minimizing the negative, and finding sustainable solutions to tourism-related challenges.

- **Collaboration:** Highlighting the importance of collaboration with Federal, National, State, local, and Indigenous tourism organizations, as well as the private sector and other stakeholders, for developing and implementing effective management strategies that advance shared stewardship of parks, include community voices in decision-making, deliver high-quality visitor experiences, and support environmental preservation and protection for local heritage and culture.
- **Local community dynamics:** Exploring the complex relationship between community residents and tourism, acknowledging the positive and negative impacts of tourism as well as challenges related to capacity for implementing strategic tourism management and partnerships.
- **Indigenous tourism partnerships and collaboration:** Engaging with Indigenous communities to advance collaborative tourism development and management, increase the participation of Indigenous communities and businesses in the tourism economy, and amplify Indigenous voices and perspectives in the visitor experience.
- **Equity and inclusion:** Considering issues of equity in tourism management and ensuring that benefits are distributed equitably among all stakeholders.
- **Heritage tourism and community development:** Exploring the role of heritage areas and other designations and programs in promoting cultural heritage tourism, economic development, and community engagement.

Conservation, Communication, and Shared Stewardship: Recognizing the evolving role and need for agile communication and shared stewardship in tourism-related collaborative relationships and spaces.

- **Perceptions of tourism:** Navigating the varied perceptions of tourism within the context of national parks and affiliated sites and programs, acknowledging both positive and negative associations.
- **Brand quality and recognition:** The NPS brand provides value to the bureau, communities, and stakeholders, and with that comes a responsibility to maintain a high-quality visitor experience in line with the public's expectations.
- **Messaging and communication:** Developing effective messaging to influence visitor behavior, galvanize support for conservation among tourism stakeholders, and support stewardship efforts.
- **Balancing tourism with conservation and stewardship:** Working to enhance the conservation benefits of tourism and reduce its negative impacts.

Visitor Needs and Technology: As the population of the United States grows in size and diversity, and living and working patterns and leisure interests and preferences change, so do expectations about the visitor experience in national parks. The role of technology in understanding visitors and delivering the visitor experience continues to change as well.

- **Understanding visitors:** Moving beyond generic and broad visitor categories to better understand specific visitor segments and tailor management strategies accordingly.
- **Visitor management and transportation:** Addressing congestion and crowding, implementing managed access systems, and expanding transportation options to better manage visitor flows, with a focus on gateway and Indigenous communities to enhance access and support local connectivity.
- **Digital experience and information management:** Recognizing the role of digital platforms in delivering NPS experiences and the need for strategic management of digital information and services.
- **Data-informed decision-making:** Emphasizing the importance of market and visitor research and data analysis in developing visitor experiences and management plans.

NPS Tourism Program Administration: Adequately, effectively, and efficiently supporting tourism-related analysis, partnerships, planning, and decision-making.

- **The Federal Government's portfolio of tourism-related policy and programs:** Integrating the NPS into a whole-of-government approach to supporting the tourism sector.
- **NPS tourism management structures:** Implementing tourism policy through existing NPS roles and communities of practice as well as providing the additional resources needed.
- **Research and funding:** Identifying obstacles in conducting research and obtaining funding for tourism-related projects and studies.

Category: Partnerships and Communities

Topic: Collaboration

Overview

The NPS plays a crucial role in preserving the natural and cultural heritage of the United States while providing opportunities for public enjoyment, interpretation, recreation, and education. However, the challenges of managing national parks – such as funding limitations, environmental threats, increasing visitation numbers at some parks with declining visitation at others – require innovative and collaborative solutions. These findings and recommendations highlight the importance of partnerships and collaboration with Federal, National, State, local, and Indigenous tourism organizations and the broader tourism sector to implement effective management strategies.

Findings

Importance of collaboration

1. Resource sharing

Collaborating with Federal, National, State, local, and Indigenous tourism organizations allows the NPS to leverage additional resources, including funding, expertise, and promotional support. This shared approach can enhance the capacity to address common challenges, such as visitor management and conservation efforts.

2. Community engagement

Engaging local communities in park management fosters a sense of stewardship and ensures that the needs and values of residents are considered. This collaboration can lead to more sustainable tourism practices that benefit both the parks and the surrounding communities.

3. Visitor experience enhancement

Partnerships with the tourism sector and gateway communities can enhance the visitor experience by providing comprehensive travel information, curated experiences, and better accessibility. These efforts can increase visitor satisfaction and encourage longer stays in gateway communities and destinations, ultimately easing congestion and dispersing visitation while benefiting the local economy.

4. Sustainable economic development

Tourism is a significant economic driver in many regions surrounding national parks. By collaborating with Federal, National, State, local, and Indigenous tourism organizations, the NPS can promote sustainable tourism practices that protect park resources while supporting local businesses and job creation.

Current challenges

Despite the potential benefits, several challenges impede effective collaboration:

- **Misaligned goals:** Different stakeholders may have varying objectives, leading to conflicts in priorities and management strategies.
- **Communication barriers:** Inadequate communication between the NPS and tourism organizations can hinder the development of effective strategies.
- **Resource constraints:** Limited funding and staffing may restrict the ability of both the NPS and local organizations to engage in meaningful partnerships.

Recommendations

Effective management of national parks requires collaboration with Federal, National, State, local, and Indigenous tourism organizations and the tourism sector at large. By fostering partnerships and aligning objectives, the NPS can enhance resource sharing, community engagement, and visitor experiences while promoting sustainable economic development. Implementing the recommended strategies will ensure that national parks continue to thrive and the communities that surround them.

To enhance partnerships and collaboration, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Establish formal partnership frameworks

Develop clear guidelines and frameworks for partnerships that outline roles, responsibilities, and shared goals. This will help align objectives at the local level between the NPS and tourism organizations, ensuring collaborative efforts are focused and effective.

2. Foster regular communication

Implement regular communication channels—such as joint meetings, workshops, and newsletters—to facilitate information sharing and collaborative planning. **Establishing a network of stakeholders can strengthen relationships and ensure that all voices are heard.**

3. Create joint marketing initiatives

Develop joint marketing campaigns that promote both the parks and the surrounding tourism offerings. Highlighting local attractions, businesses, and experiences can enhance visitor engagement and drive tourism revenue.

4. Invest in training and capacity building

Provide training programs for NPS staff and local and Indigenous tourism organizations focused on sustainable tourism practices, conflict resolution, and effective communication. Building capacity will empower all stakeholders to engage in partnerships more effectively.

5. Measure and evaluate impact

Establish metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships and collaborative initiatives. Regular assessments can identify successful strategies and areas for improvement, ensuring that partnerships remain productive and aligned with goals.

6. Encourage local participation

Promote opportunities for local and Indigenous communities to engage in park management decisions, fostering a sense of ownership and stewardship. This can include volunteer programs, advisory committees, and co-management initiatives that involve local stakeholders.

Category: Partnerships and Communities

Topic: Local community dynamics

Overview

Tourism within national parks significantly impacts surrounding local communities, both positively and negatively. These findings and recommendations examine the local dynamics of NPS tourism, focusing on economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for stakeholders, including local governments, Indian Tribes, Tribal organizations, Native Hawaiian organizations, businesses, and residents, to effectively manage tourism and maximize its benefits while mitigating adverse effects.

Findings

Economic impacts

Benefits

- 1. Revenue generation:** NPS tourism contributes significantly to local economies through visitor spending on accommodations, dining, and recreational activities. For instance, a report from the NPS indicates that in 2023, visitors to national parks spent over \$26 billion in local economies⁴.
- 2. Job creation:** Increased tourism creates jobs and small business growth in various sectors, including hospitality, retail, and recreation. This can lead to improved local employment rates and a more diversified economic base.
- 3. Infrastructure development:** The influx of tourists often leads to enhancements in local infrastructure, such as roads, public transportation, and utilities, which can benefit residents.

Challenges

- 1. Seasonality:** Many national parks experience peak tourist seasons, leading to fluctuating demand for local services. This can create economic instability for businesses reliant on consistent patronage.
- 2. Cost of living:** An influx of tourism can drive up the cost of living, making housing unaffordable or unavailable due to short term rental revenue investment opportunities and make everyday goods more expensive for residents.
- 3. Resource strain:** Increased demand for resources, including water and energy, can strain local infrastructure and create challenges for sustainable management.

⁴ National Park Service [2023 National Park Visitor Spending Effects](#)

Social impacts

Benefits

1. **Cultural exchange:** Tourism promotes cultural exchange between visitors and local communities, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation of local heritage.
2. **Community development:** Increased tourism can motivate community development initiatives, leading to improved quality of life through better amenities and services.

Challenges

1. **Cultural erosion:** An influx of tourists may lead to the commercialization of local culture and traditions, potentially eroding the authenticity of local and historical identities.
2. **Community division:** The benefits of tourism can create divisions within communities, with some residents advocating for development while others push for preservation.
3. **Overtourism:** Popular parks may face challenges related to overcrowding, leading to a diminished visitor experience and increased pressure on cultural, historical, natural, and local infrastructure such as natural habitats, sacred sites, water, sewer, roads, etc.

Environmental impacts

Benefits

1. **Conservation funding:** Tourism often provides funding for conservation efforts, as park fees and visitor spending contribute to the maintenance and preservation of natural, cultural, and historic resources.
2. **Awareness and advocacy:** Increased visitor engagement can foster environmental awareness, encouraging advocacy for conservation and partnership efforts among both tourists and locals.

Challenges

1. **Environmental degradation:** Increased foot traffic can lead to soil erosion, wildlife disturbances, and habitat destruction. Parks must manage visitor impacts to preserve natural ecosystems.
2. **Waste management:** Higher visitor numbers can overwhelm local waste management systems, leading to littering and pollution if not properly managed.
3. **Climate change vulnerability:** Virtually every community in the United States faces heightened vulnerabilities due to climate change, which can exacerbate the effects of tourism-related environmental strain, particularly on gateway communities near national parks.

Strategies for sustainable tourism

- 1. Collaborative planning:** Engage local stakeholders in tourism planning to ensure that community needs and perspectives are considered.
- 2. Education and awareness:** Implement programs to educate visitors on responsible tourism practices and the importance of conservation.
- 3. Infrastructure investment:** Advocate for State and Federal investment in infrastructure that supports both tourism and community needs.
- 4. Seasonal management:** Develop strategies to mitigate the impact of seasonal tourism fluctuations, such as promoting off-season visits, lesser-visited parks, and prescheduled, coordinated visitation.
- 5. Monitoring and evaluation:** Establish systems for monitoring tourism impacts on local economies, social structures, and the environment to inform adaptive management strategies.

Recommendations

The dynamics of NPS tourism in gateway communities are complex and multifaceted, requiring thoughtful consideration and strategic planning. While tourism can provide significant economic benefits, enhance community development, and promote conservation, it can also present challenges that threaten the local culture and the environment. By adopting sustainable tourism practices and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, gateway communities can harness the advantages of NPS tourism while safeguarding their unique identities and natural resources.

1. Foster collaborative management

Encourage partnerships between park management and local and Indigenous communities through collaborative governance structures. This includes involving community members in decision-making processes regarding park management, conservation strategies, and tourism development, including housing and community supports necessary for mutually supported sustainable community tourism.

2. Diversify economic opportunities

Support initiatives that promote economic diversification beyond tourism, such as sustainable agriculture, crafts, and renewable energy projects. This can help communities become more resilient to the fluctuations in tourism.

3. Promote sustainable tourism practices

Implement sustainable tourism strategies that minimize environmental impact and encourage responsible visitor behavior. Training programs for local businesses on sustainable practices can enhance their ability to attract eco-conscious tourists.

4. Invest in community capacity building

Provide resources and training for local and Indigenous communities to develop skills in areas such as hospitality, conservation, and environmental stewardship. Empowering residents with knowledge can enhance their ability to engage with visitors meaningfully.

5. Preserve and promote local culture

Encourage the preservation of local and Indigenous culture by supporting cultural festivals, workshops, and artisan markets that highlight local and Indigenous traditions. This can help maintain cultural identity while also enriching the visitor experience.

6. Conduct regular assessments

Establish regular assessments of community dynamics and park-community interactions to identify challenges and successes. This data-driven approach can inform adaptive management strategies that better align park objectives with community needs.

Category: Partnerships and Communities

Topic: Indigenous tourism partnerships and collaboration

Overview

The NPS is entrusted with the management of over 85 million acres of Federal lands and waters that are the ancestral homelands of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. The NPS's collaboration with Indian and Alaska Native Tribes rests on unique nation-to-nation relationships that are based in the U.S. Constitution, treaties, statutes, and judicial decisions. In addition to formal Tribal consultation requirements that the NPS must incorporate into decision-making and park management, it is NPS policy to advance co-stewardship with Tribal nations in accordance with applicable authorities.⁵

Demand for Indigenous tourism experiences has grown rapidly over the last two decades, and travelers are often seeking or open to having both Indigenous and park experiences on the same trip. In fact, 75% of overseas visitors to the United States engaging with American Indian communities also visit national parks and monuments.⁶ Building from years of NPS-Tribal collaboration, particularly with integrating Tribal voices and perspectives into the NPS visitor experience, there are many untapped opportunities to expand collaboration under the policy of co-stewardship in a way that supports Indigenous tourism development, delivers enhanced visitor experiences, and channels the economic and socio-cultural benefits of tourism to Indigenous communities. Recognizing the possibilities, Congress passed the Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience Act (NATIVE Act) in 2016, directing Federal agencies to work with Native communities to advance Tribal tourism.⁷

Findings

- A wide variety of NPS-Tribal collaborations are in place across the National Park System, along national trails, within national heritage areas, and among other NPS programs, such as heritage preservation grants. These existing connections are rarely described as being explicitly about tourism, but many directly or indirectly contribute to Tribal tourism development.
- A variety of tools that enable NPS-Tribal collaboration are available, including formal agreements and service contracts, but they can be burdensome to apply, particularly at small parks with fewer staff.
- There is low awareness among NPS staff of the NATIVE Act as well as of the concept of using tourism-focused collaboration as a strategy for advancing co-stewardship.

⁵ National Park Service [Policy Memorandum 22-03](#)

⁶ National Travel and Tourism Office, Department of Commerce [Market Profile: Visit American Indian Communities](#)

⁷ 114th U.S. Congress [NATIVE Act](#)

Recommendations

- 1. Define tourism-focused collaboration as a form of co-stewardship:** NPS policy should articulate the appropriateness of collaborating with Indigenous communities on tourism and visitor experience projects as a form of co-stewardship.
- 2. Enhance Indigenous representation in interpretive experiences:** The NPS should actively collaborate with Indigenous communities to integrate their perspectives, histories, and cultural knowledge into interpretive materials and opportunities. This includes co-creating content for visitor centers, tours, exhibits, signage, and other educational resources. By centering Indigenous voices and fostering partnerships, this collaboration will provide visitors with a richer, more inclusive understanding of the parks' histories and cultural significance while honoring the contributions and traditions of Indigenous peoples.
- 3. Promote awareness and application of the NATIVE Act:** Leverage NPS communities of practice, including the network of Tribal liaisons, to increase awareness of the NATIVE Act.
- 4. Seek funding for NATIVE Act implementation:** Request Congressional appropriations for NATIVE Act implementation and activate partners for advocacy and support.
- 5. Expand contracting opportunities for Native-owned businesses:** The NPS should proactively engage with Indigenous communities to raise awareness of and promote contracting opportunities for Native-owned businesses. This includes opportunities for guided tours, visitor services, concessions, and commercial use authorizations. By creating targeted outreach, training, and support programs, the NPS can enhance Indigenous economic participation, strengthen local economies, and enrich the visitor experience through authentic, culturally informed services.
- 6. Highlight and share Indigenous collaboration success stories:** Prioritize collecting and showcasing success stories of Tribal collaborations involving American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities in tourism initiatives. These examples, such as the Grand Canyon Desert View Watchtower project, Tribal contributions along national trails, and Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance projects, demonstrate the value of collaborative partnerships. Sharing these stories through educational campaigns, training programs, and public outreach will raise awareness of the benefits of Indigenous partnerships, inspire similar efforts nationwide, and strengthen relationships between the NPS and Indigenous communities.

Category: Partnerships and Communities

Topic: Equity and inclusion

Overview

The National Park System is a treasured asset that offers recreational, educational, historic, and ecological benefits to millions of visitors each year. Disparities in access, representation, and benefits associated with national parks can undermine the NPS’s mission to preserve natural, cultural, and historic resources and provide enjoyment for all. These findings and recommendations discuss the current state of equity and inclusion in the National Park System, highlight key issues in tourism management, and provide recommendations to ensure equitable distribution of benefits among all stakeholders.

Findings

1. Access and representation

Many marginalized communities, including low-income populations, people of color, and individuals with disabilities, face barriers to accessing national parks. These barriers can include financial constraints, transportation challenges, and a lack of culturally relevant programming. Representation in park management and decision-making processes also remains low among these groups, resulting in policies and practices that may not adequately address their needs or interests.

2. Economic benefits

The economic benefits derived from national parks—such as tourism revenue, job creation, and local business support—are often not equitably distributed. Rural communities surrounding parks, particularly those with high percentages of marginalized residents, frequently receive fewer economic opportunities. This disparity can exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequalities and lead to disenfranchisement among local populations.

3. Cultural inclusion

National parks have the opportunity to expand and diversify the narratives they present, moving beyond predominantly Eurocentric histories to embrace the rich, multi-layered stories of Indigenous peoples and minority groups. By enhancing and broadening cultural storytelling, parks can create a more inclusive and engaging visitor experience, fostering deeper connections and increased visitor engagement across diverse communities. Inclusive narratives not only honor the cultural significance of these spaces but also invite all visitors to see themselves reflected in the shared heritage of the parks.

Recommendations

Equity and inclusion are crucial for the future of the National Park System. By addressing the barriers faced by marginalized communities and ensuring that all stakeholders benefit equitably from park resources, the NPS can fulfill its mission of preserving natural and cultural resources for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Implementing the recommended strategies

will help create a more inclusive and equitable national park experience, enriching the lives of all.

1. Enhance access

- **Transportation initiatives:** Develop partnerships with local transportation services to provide affordable shuttle options to national parks from urban centers and underserved communities.
- **Fee waivers and discounts:** Implement fee waivers and discounts for low-income families and individuals, ensuring that financial barriers do not prevent access.

2. Foster inclusive representation

- **Diverse hiring practices:** Prioritize hiring local individuals from diverse backgrounds, including in park management and decision-making roles, to ensure that varied perspectives inform policies and practices.
- **Community engagement:** Establish advisory committees that include representatives from marginalized communities to provide input on park management, programming, and policies.

3. Promote equitable economic opportunities

- **Local business support programs:** Create initiatives that support local businesses owned by marginalized individuals, ensuring they benefit from tourism activities.
- **Equity audits:** Conduct regular equity audits of park-related economic activities to assess the distribution of economic benefits and identify areas for improvement.

4. Culturally relevant programming

- **Multi-layered narratives:** Develop programs that highlight the histories and contributions of all communities associated with parks and their resources, including Indigenous groups.
- **Cultural festivals and events:** Organize events that celebrate the cultural heritage of various communities, encouraging engagement, leadership, and visitation from diverse groups.

5. Education and awareness

- **Community outreach:** Increase outreach efforts in underserved communities to raise awareness about the benefits of national parks and the opportunities they provide for recreation and education.
- **Training for staff:** Implement training programs for NPS staff on equity and inclusion to foster a welcoming environment for all visitors.

Category: Partnerships and Communities

Topic: Heritage tourism and community development

Overview

Heritage tourism, which focuses on the cultural and historic significance of a destination, has gained prominence as a tool for economic development and community engagement. As communities increasingly recognize the value of their cultural heritage, heritage areas emerge as focal points for tourism that can both preserve history and foster local economies. These findings and recommendations explore the role of heritage areas in promoting cultural heritage tourism, their impact on economic development, and the importance of community engagement in ensuring sustainable practices.

Findings

The role of heritage areas in cultural heritage tourism

Heritage areas are designated sites that embody significant historic, cultural, and natural attributes. These areas attract tourists seeking authentic experiences that connect them to local traditions and stories. Key features of heritage tourism include:

- 1. Cultural preservation:** Heritage tourism encourages the preservation of historic sites, traditions, and local narratives, ensuring that cultural identity is maintained for future generations.
- 2. Educational opportunities:** Tourists gain insights into local histories and practices, fostering greater appreciation for diverse cultures. This education can also enhance local pride and identity among residents.
- 3. Authenticity:** Travelers increasingly seek authentic experiences. Heritage areas can provide unique interactions with local communities, traditions, and environments, differentiating them from conventional tourist attractions.

Economic development through heritage tourism

Heritage tourism can significantly contribute to local economies. The economic impacts include:

- 1. Job creation:** Increased tourism leads to demand for services such as hospitality, transportation, and retail, generating employment opportunities for local residents.
- 2. Revenue generation:** Entrance fees, guided tours, and local crafts can provide substantial income for communities. This revenue can be reinvested in community development and heritage preservation initiatives.
- 3. Infrastructure improvement:** To accommodate tourists, communities often enhance infrastructure—roads, public transport, and facilities—which can also benefit residents.
- 4. Attracting investments:** Successful heritage tourism initiatives can draw investors, leading to further economic opportunities and the revitalization of neglected areas.

Community engagement in heritage tourism

Community engagement is crucial for the success of heritage tourism. Effective engagement can lead to:

- 1. Inclusive decision-making:** Involving local residents in tourism planning ensures that development aligns with their needs and desires, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility.
- 2. Empowerment:** Community-led initiatives can empower residents by promoting local culture and history, giving them a voice in how their collective heritage is showcased and utilized.
- 3. Sustainable practices:** Engaging the community in tourism development encourages sustainable practices, balancing economic benefits with environmental and cultural preservation.

Recommendations

Heritage tourism holds significant potential for promoting economic development and community engagement while preserving cultural heritage. By fostering collaboration, investing in community capacity, and prioritizing sustainable practices, heritage areas can thrive as both tourist destinations and vibrant centers of local culture. Through careful planning and inclusive engagement, communities can harness the power of their heritage to create meaningful and lasting impacts.

To maximize the benefits of heritage tourism while minimizing potential drawbacks, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Establish collaborative frameworks:** Create partnerships among local governments, community organizations, and tourism stakeholders to facilitate collaborative planning and management of heritage areas.
- 2. Invest in community capacity building:** Provide training and resources for local residents in tourism management, marketing, and hospitality to empower them to take an active role in the tourism industry.
- 3. Promote responsible tourism practices:** Encourage tourists to respect local customs and traditions through education and awareness campaigns, ensuring that their presence does not disrupt the community. These campaigns need to be mutually agreed upon and communicated through community membership.
- 4. Develop sustainable funding models:** Explore diverse funding sources, including grants, public-private partnerships, and community-driven initiatives, to support heritage tourism projects without over-relying on tourism revenues.
- 5. Monitor and evaluate impact:** Implement systems to regularly assess the social, economic, and environmental impacts of heritage tourism, allowing communities to adapt and respond to challenges effectively.

- 6. Encourage local involvement in storytelling:** Facilitate platforms for local residents to share their stories and experiences, enriching the visitor experience and enhancing cultural authenticity.

Category: Conservation, Communication, and Shared Stewardship

Topic: Perceptions of tourism

Overview

Perceptions of tourism among NPS staff and partners, community organizations, visitors, and other stakeholders are multi-faceted. There is a complex interplay of both positive and negative perceptions of tourism in and surrounding national parks. Some people view tourism as a vital economic driver for local communities while others raise concerns about potential environmental damage and overcrowding caused by large visitor numbers at specific sites. Effective communication about strategic tourism management is necessary for the NPS to advance tourism-related partnerships, planning, and decision-making in support of shared stewardship.

Findings

From our subject-matter-expert interviews and a review of recent research on the perceptions of tourism among public lands and protected areas, particularly national parks, it is clear that there is an increasingly complex set of perceptions among local communities, park staff, tourism operators, and park visitors.⁸ The nuanced perceptions about tourism described by our subject matter experts included awareness of the economic benefits of increased tourism alongside worry about other impacts such as increased traffic, crowding, accessibility, and affordability.

Many studies have explicitly examined the economic benefits of national park tourism, including job creation, increased tax revenue, and support for local businesses.^{9,10} Researchers have also highlighted potential costs or negative impacts of national park-related tourism, such as increased property values and strain on infrastructure.¹¹

Subject matter experts explained that tourism can have both positive and negative impacts on local culture. Positive impacts may include increased awareness of local traditions and customs, while negative impacts can include cultural appropriation and the erosion of traditional values. In the best examples, a variety of partners (e.g., local communities, park management, destination management organizations, and other stakeholders) worked together and created mechanisms to tell shared stories (e.g. Grand Canyon), which also seems to improve stakeholder perceptions of tourism and reduce the potential for conflict.¹²

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed, ranging from large-scale strategies to daily actions, to enhance a shared understanding of tourism among visitors, staff, and partners:

⁸ Silva, S., Silva, L.F., and Vieira, A. [Protected Areas and Nature-Based Tourism: A 30-Year Bibliometric Review](#)

⁹ Flyr, M. and Koontz, L. [National Park Visitor Spending Effects](#)

¹⁰ Hughes, C. and Paveglio, T. [Assessing Visitor Perceptions of Recreation Benefits from Nearby Public Lands](#)

¹¹ Cró, S. and Martins, A. [Tourism Activity Affects House Price Dynamics? Evidence for Countries Dependent on Tourism](#)

¹² Hu, F., Kong, W., Innes, J., Wu, W., Sunderland, T., and Wang, G. [Residents' Perceptions toward Tourism Development: A Case Study from Grand Canyon National Park](#)

1. Define tourism for NPS staff and partners

- **Promote the strategic potential of tourism:** Use presentations, newsletters, training forums, and other opportunities to advance a consistent understanding of tourism among NPS staff and partners, emphasizing the benefits of proactive partnerships with local tourism organizations and networks and the value of integrating tourism data into planning and decision-making.
- **Data, best practices, and examples:** Use data, such as the point-of-origin of park visitors, to illustrate the importance and impact of tourism to the park system. Document and share case studies of effective partnerships between parks and tourism organizations, particularly where they have supported shared stewardship.

2. Develop shared messages and stories

- **Cooperative communication:** Work with local communities, partners, and tourism organizations to co-create messages and stories that reflect local values and heritage to improve stakeholder perceptions of tourism.
- **Communicating conservation:** Clearly communicate NPS conservation goals and achievements to emphasize the importance of protecting natural and cultural resources. Highlight the impacts visitors have on resources, during all phases of their trip and at home, and suggest ways they can lessen their impact and support shared stewardship.

Category: Conservation, Communication, and Shared Stewardship

Topic: Brand quality and recognition

Overview

The brand of the NPS is shaped and communicated by a variety of elements and touchpoints, many of which are intertwined with and influenced by the actions of Federal, National, regional, State, and local tourism organization, networks, and companies. Maintaining the integrity and relevance of the NPS brand in a complex landscape requires proactive engagement with tourism stakeholders.

Findings

The NPS has a strong brand quality and recognition, often ranking high in visitor surveys and studies on visitor experience.¹³ Its iconic arrowhead logo, ranger uniforms, and distinctive park signage are widely recognizable symbols of the organization. The NPS has also been successful in maintaining a positive public image through its commitment to conservation, education, and recreation.¹⁴ Additionally, many of the subject matter experts interviewed noted that there is a need for continued efforts to ensure that the NPS brand remains relevant and appealing to diverse audiences, especially in the face of changing demographics and technological advancements.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed, ranging from large-scale strategies to daily actions, to improve the management of the NPS brand within the context of tourism:

1. Developed shared messages and stories

- **Cooperative communication:** Work with local communities, partners, and tourism organizations to co-create messages and stories that highlight shared stewardship and reflect local values and heritage to improve stakeholder perceptions of tourism.
- **Consistent visitor expectations:** Work with tourism partners to ensure consistent and accurate information is being shared with visitors during all stages of their trip. This will help set accurate expectations for the visitor experience.
- **Real-time updates:** Efficiently share information with tourism partners regarding park conditions, closures, emergencies, weather, and other issues so that all parties can communicate accurate real-time updates to visitors.

2. Improve collaborative visitor management and destination stewardship

- **Work at scale:** Parks should work with communities, including Federal, National, regional, State, local, and Indigenous tourism organizations and the private sector, to strategically plan for and manage tourism, including through the use of destination

¹³ Roemer, J. and Vaske, J. [National Park Service Visitor Satisfaction: A Comparative Analysis](#)

¹⁴ National Parks Conservation Association [Perspective on National Park Visitation](#)

stewardship/management plans. Collaborative planning and management will help ensure that visitor expectations are accurately defined and delivered on, helping to maintain NPS brand quality.

3. Improve shared understanding of visitors

- **Collect feedback:** Implement easy-to-use feedback channels, such as surveys and comment forms, to gather visitor feedback on their park experience. This can inform adjustments and improvements based on visitor preferences and experiences.
- **Share research:** The NPS and National, regional, State, and local tourism organizations should routinely share survey results, data, and other information about visitors and tourists that can inform brand management, while adhering to applicable regulations regarding personally identifiable information and data privacy.

Category: Conservation, Communication, and Shared Stewardship

Topic: Messaging and communication

Overview

Park tourists receive a barrage of messages and information from a variety of sources during all stages of their trip. In order to connect visitors with the practical information they need as well as help visitors engage with natural and cultural resources, the NPS must continuously evaluate and improve the effectiveness of its communication across all channels and platforms.

Findings

The NPS employs a variety of communication and interpretation techniques to provide trip planning information and to connect visitors to the natural and cultural resources within its parks. These strategies aim to enhance understanding, appreciation, and stewardship of park resources. Research on communication, interpretation, and messaging at national parks has focused on the effectiveness of different interpretive techniques, including studies evaluating the impact of different mediums and methods on visitor engagement, understanding, and satisfaction.¹⁵¹⁶ Other research has explored best practices in messaging and communication through the lens of accessibility and the role that technology can play in facilitating access to information.¹⁷ For example, recent studies have explored the use of technology to enhance park messaging and interpretation through mobile apps and virtual reality.¹⁸¹⁹

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed, ranging from large-scale strategies to daily actions, to enhance communication with visitors and tourism partners:

1. Targeted, timely, and engaging information

- **Tailor and target messages:** Tailor messages to different audience segments, such as families, adventure seekers, and diverse communities, using language and imagery that resonate with their specific interests and needs.
- **Provide timely information:** Leverage social media, mobile apps, and websites to provide real-time updates on park conditions, events, and educational programs.
- **Interactive content:** Create interactive content, such as virtual tours or educational webinars, to engage visitors before, during, and after their trips.

¹⁵ Stern, M., Powell, R., and Mutchler, B. [The Difference between Good Enough and Great: Bringing Interpretive Best Practices to Life](#)

¹⁶ Watkins, T., Miller-Rushing, A., and Nelson, S. [Science in Places of Grandeur: Communication and Engagement in National Parks](#)

¹⁷ National Park Service [All In: Accessibility in the National Park Service](#)

¹⁸ Oppegaard, B. and Shine, G. [Going Mobile: Changing the Face of Interpretation in the National Park Service](#)

¹⁹ Fan, X., Jiang, X., and Deng, N. [Immersive Technology: A Meta-Analysis of Augmented/Virtual Reality Applications and their Impact on Tourism Experience](#)

2. Remove barriers to information

- **Language and formats:** Provide information in multiple languages and formats to ensure that all visitors, including non-English speakers and those with disabilities, can access essential park information.

Category: Conservation, Communication, and Shared Stewardship

Topic: Balancing tourism with conservation and stewardship

Overview

Tourism and conservation have a complex relationship. Negative impacts from tourism can include environmental degradation, habitat destruction, an increase in waste flows, greenhouse gas emissions that accelerate climate change, and more. Tourism can benefit conservation, however, by providing funding, raising awareness of environmental issues, and catalyzing stewardship behaviors and conservation advocacy among tourists and residents. For many conservation professionals, tourism is seen as being in opposition to conservation, and for many tourism professionals, conservation can sometimes be perceived as prohibitively restrictive of tourism growth. A new paradigm is emerging, however, that seeks to align tourism, conservation, and community livability goals under a banner of destination stewardship. The emergence of destination stewardship planning as a discipline is an opportunity for the NPS to advance collaborative visitor management at scale.

Findings

Tourism pressure, especially in the highly visited parks, can result in biodiversity conservation and ecological stewardship challenges. As a visitor, fighting past throngs of people to see the sights is counter to the intent of visiting parks to experience nature, and these same throngs of people can negatively impact the wildlife and ecological processes within the parks. However, biodiversity conservation and ecological stewardship more broadly can actually benefit from large numbers of tourists in parks. This is because the experiences and values that people gain by visiting the natural and cultural landscapes made accessible by national parks can influence their conservation ethics and behavior at home. Participation in wildland recreation, such as hiking in national parks, can result in social, environmental, and personal benefits, and people may even show greater support for conservation issues/policies after visiting natural areas (as compared to visiting zoos).^{20,21}

Some of this effect can be achieved in the tourists simply by their act of visiting a beautiful national park. However, there are outreach and interpretation efforts that can support achieving positive impact. Experts we interviewed suggested that there is extensive data and research around how to achieve education messaging that works, but the question of how to target that messaging to tourists to influence behavior change is still being studied. We were given an example of a park that used interpretation about their parking lot nighttime lighting strategy as a way to influence people to use insect safe lighting at home as a conservation measure. Other experts reiterated the great potential for parks in inspiring people to care about conservation and particularly noted that rangers and guides can be very impactful in inspiring people.

²⁰ Holland, W.H., Powell, R.B., Thomsen, J.M., and Monz, C.A. [A Systematic Review of the Psychological, Social, and Educational Outcomes Associated with Participation in Wildland Recreational Activities](#)

²¹ Massingham, E., Fuller, R.A., and Dean, A.J. [Pathways Between Contrasting Ecotourism Experiences and Conservation Engagement](#)

Obtaining potential conservation benefits from large numbers of tourists must be achieved while still mitigating the negative impacts. During the conversations with experts, one disadvantage of “overtourism” stood out. In many different contexts it seemed that the ecological and experiential disadvantages of large numbers of tourists came not so much from the number of people but from the number of cars they use which provide congestion issues, both in the parks and in surrounding communities. Staff from Acadia National Park provided examples of systems they have put in place to maintain visitation rates while reducing car traffic issues.

National parks have a critical role to play as beacons of biodiversity conservation value and action. Their footprint is small, but their potential for reaching people and getting them to care about ecological issues is very large. Meaningful contributions to global biodiversity conservation needs cannot be achieved on national park lands alone, but considerable progress could be made by the knowledge and action of the millions of people who visit parks if their visits can encourage their emotional connection to the landscapes and inhabitants. Thus, we suggest that the narrative around the conservation impacts of tourism should be changed from simply one of negative impact to one of potential for positive impact. We have several tangible recommendations for how that can be done.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to both enhance and raise awareness of the beneficial impacts of tourism to national parks:

1. Parks as models for stewardship

- **Sharing best practices with communities:** National parks can elevate how they serve as models for sustainable management practices, such as the reduction of environmental impacts from park operations (reducing greenhouse gas emissions, plastic pollution, light pollution, etc.).
- **Sharing best practices with visitors:** Park conservation strategies should be highlighted and explained to park visitors along with suggestions for replicating the strategies at home. Park messaging can highlight that behavior changes at home may be the best things visitors can do to protect the resources of the park they’re visiting.

2. Supporting destination stewardship

- **Proactive engagement:** As destination stewardship gains momentum among community tourism organizations and networks, the NPS should proactively support these initiatives through consistent participation, advocating for conservation, promoting impact targets for tourism instead of volume targets, knowledge sharing, collaborative planning, press and public relations, and other participatory tactics. Where destination stewardship initiatives have not taken root but could be useful for supporting park conservation priorities, the NPS should work with community organizations to launch them.

3. Tourism's strategic role in supporting conservation

- **Identifying tourism as a conservation tool:** The narrative within the NPS and among NPS partners regarding tourism should frame and promote tourism collaboration as a strategic tool for supporting conservation goals.

Category: Visitor Needs and Technology

Topic: Understanding visitors

Overview

Understanding the behaviors, needs, preferences, and motivations of park visitors and of the general public is critical for effective decision-making in a range of park management areas, from transportation planning to interpretive programs to communications to visitor services. It can also be useful to differentiate the characteristics, behavior, and preferences of park visitors using a segmented approach, which can yield useful insights for planning and decision-making. Historically, however, the NPS has allocated modest resources towards studying and collecting information about park visitors and has not routinely applied a segmented approach to visitor analysis.

Findings

1. Visitation trends

- While the total volume of recreation visits to the National Park System has increased over the last two decades, per capita recreation visits (in other words, the proportion of the U.S. population visiting the National Park System) have been trending downward for several decades. Visitors to national parks are more likely to be older and white.
- At the same time, the increases in recreation visits are heavily concentrated into a minority of the National Park System. Although there are more than 430 parks in the National Park System, many sites with the “national park” designation, in particular, are experiencing considerable increases in visitation, as are some parks located near growing population centers or along major transportation corridors. Many historic and cultural parks, however, have been experiencing declines in visitation, sometimes significantly so. An exception to this is cultural-focused parks that also offer recreation opportunities, many of which are attracting local residents visiting to exercise, whether alone, with friends or family, or pets.
- Regardless of trends in visitation volume, visitor behaviors and preferences are also changing as the use of technology in daily life evolves, perceptions of historic events and figures change, the U.S. population continues to concentrate in urban and suburban areas, and daily life is increasingly sedentary for many people.

2. Competition for leisure time

- Americans have more options than ever for how to spend their leisure time, particularly with the exponential growth in digital entertainment options (video games, the internet, social media) and intense competition for tourists from the cruise industry, resorts and theme parks, urban destinations, and international destinations.

3. Implications

- The NPS is operating in a very different sociocultural and economic context today than it was when many of its planning and decision-making processes and structures were established, resulting in deeply held assumptions about the public's interests, preferences, and relationships to parks.
- These assumptions often result in a “if we build it, they will come” mentality regarding investments in park infrastructure and programs, which leads to inefficient use of resources.

Recommendations

1. **Visitor segmentation analysis:** Integrating visitor segment analysis that clusters visitors into groups based on characteristics, behaviors, and preferences (not demographics) can help the NPS make more effective and efficient decisions, particularly related to infrastructure, communications, interpretive programs, and visitor services.
2. **Tourist vs. local visitors:** Though not the only way to segment park visitors, differentiating between tourists (who have traveled from at least 50 miles away) and local visitors and understanding their often-distinct motivations, interests, needs, and information sources can help improve the effectiveness of communications, visitor services, interpretation, infrastructure investments, and other decision-making.
3. **Third-Party Data:** Integrating more third-party data about visitors, local residents, and regional tourists into planning and decision-making can help the NPS make more effective and efficient decisions, particularly regarding infrastructure and visitor services.
4. **Reallocating NPS resources:** With the public expressing demand for outdoor recreation near the urban and suburban population centers where the majority of the population lives (as experienced by many cultural/historic parks near these areas), the NPS should consider reallocating investments from parks with low visitation to community programs that support the development of close-to-home parks and green space, like the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program.

Category: Visitor Needs and Technology

Topic: Visitor management and transportation

Overview

Parks where visitation has increased significantly over the last decade are challenged to continue providing public access while delivering a safe, high-quality visitor experience that is compatible with resource conservation. Across the National Park System, there is a need to integrate and adapt to changes in local and regional transportation systems and patterns, including the proliferation of micro-mobility options and ridesharing. Layers of technology that enable these new systems and patterns can provide extensive data to inform decision-making and offer new communication channels to get the right information to visitors at the right time.

Findings

- 1. Distinct trends:** While some general trends in visitation patterns are evident (such as increasing visitation to many sites with the “national park” designation), specific trends in visitor characteristics and behaviors can differ significantly park-to-park. For example, analysis of visitor behavior at Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks revealed a significant uptick in trail use over the last several years at the former park but not the latter.
- 2. Community dynamics:** Local opinions about visitor management, such as whether a park should implement a managed access system, can vary widely based on factors such as an individual’s relationship to the local tourism and recreation economy; the impacts of tourism in the community, as experienced through traffic congestion, prices, and other issues; and the status of environmental indicators. Some communities experiencing the negative impacts of tourism have launched destination stewardship/management initiatives that can complement visitor management.
- 3. Transportation and visitor data:** Technology such as GPS tracking, mobile apps, and sensors provide a wealth of information about visitor behavior, and artificial intelligence techniques can provide deep insights into visitor data, informing planning and decision-making for park transportation systems, connectivity to local transit networks, and communication strategies.

Recommendations

- 1. Tailored, collaborative solutions:** Working closely with communities, including local tourism organizations and networks, to craft tailored, adaptive, data-informed visitor management strategies will improve their durability and effectiveness.
- 2. System integration:** Prioritize visitors in transportation planning and communication by researching and thoroughly understanding visitor behaviors and preferences, such as preferred information sources for directions, and strengthen physical and virtual connections between park and local systems.

Category: Visitor Needs and Technology

Topic: Digital experience and information management

Overview

As the role of technology continues to expand in daily life (social media, mobile payments, facial recognition, smart devices, artificial intelligence, etc.), visitor expectations about the digital park experience and the volume of data associated with technology applications continue to evolve and expand as well. The NPS faces the challenge of determining the appropriate width, breadth, and pace of integrating technology into the park experience as well as identifying, collecting, and applying the most useful data for decision-making.

Findings

- 1. NPS digital experience:** Visitor engagement with the NPS digital experience often starts in the first phase of the visitor journey, *discovery*, and frequently continues in all subsequent phases: the *journey* to a park, arrival, the park *experience*, *departure*, and *recollection*. Components of the digital experience include the NPS website, digital app, and social media channels; in-park technology, such as digital interpretive displays; and aspects of some visitor services, such as lodging (mobile check-in, digital room keys, etc.) and retail (contactless payments).
- 2. Digital data:** The proliferation of technology generates new data sets that can be applied to planning and decision-making, and the evolution of artificial intelligence provides new tools for data analysis. However, the NPS must navigate rules and regulations regarding data privacy and the application of artificial intelligence as well as determine which data is most useful.

Recommendations

- 1. Integrated digital experience:** It is important to center users in digital experience (DX) strategies, understand visitor behaviors and preferences, and tailor DX elements to be as effective and efficient as possible. For example, visitors may have deeply ingrained preferences for existing digital navigation tools, which should inform the types and extent of digital directions and wayfinding information the NPS provides via its digital platforms.
- 2. Tailored digital solutions:** The width and breadth of the NPS digital experience should vary park-to-park based on park characteristics and visitor segments. The digital elements of a large-landscape park with high visitation should differ from that of a small site with limited visitor services. The latter park, for example, could dedicate more resources to establishing and curating a digital archive of stories, testimonials, and documentation available online to researchers, students, and other interested parties, while the former park could prioritize key trip planning information online while dedicating more resources to the in-person experience.

- 3. Information management:** As the expansion of technology makes more data about visitors available, the NPS should proactively identify and implement new applications of data analysis within planning and decision-making processes while protecting personal privacy information.

Category: Visitor Needs and Technology

Topic: Data-informed decision-making

Overview

While the NPS uses a variety of scientific, historic, and cultural data and research to guide the management of natural and cultural resources, the use of visitor-centric data to inform decision-making regarding the visitor experience has often been limited by the availability of resources to collect the data and a preference for internal expertise and judgement. The NPS has also traditionally been reluctant to rely on third-party data regarding visitors, residents, and tourists. As a result, decisions regarding elements of the visitor experience such as infrastructure, interpretive programs, visitor services, and community partnerships have often been based on anecdotal information, staff expertise (which may be biased), tradition, and educated guesses. The proliferation of technology, the successful funding of a new visitor survey program, and the increasing availability of third-party data offer new opportunities to improve data-informed decision-making.

Findings

- 1. Assumptions about visitor demand:** The NPS operates with deeply held assumptions about what the typical park experience should include, such as a visitor center and waysides. These assumptions are rooted in NPS management processes developed in previous decades when visitation patterns and leisure preferences were very different. Over the last two decades, visitation to the National Park System has been increasingly concentrated in a minority of the System, and many historic and cultural parks have experienced declining visitation for decades. This, along with the continuous addition of new parks to the National Park System and ongoing budgetary and staffing pressures, suggests that the NPS needs to use more data to better understand site-specific visitation trends and projections and apply that analysis to make efficient decisions regarding infrastructure, staffing, and visitor services.
- 2. Park-specific visitor data:** While some visitor behavior and preference trends may be evident in multiple parks, effective decision-making requires park-specific visitor data that reveals the behaviors, preferences, and patterns unique to that park. Both NPS data collection and independent social science and academic research have roles to play in improving understanding of visitors and the dynamics between tourism, visitation, and conservation.

Recommendations

- 1. Analysis of visitor-centric data:** Improve the use of audience data (e.g. NPS socio-economic monitoring surveys, the Servicewide Interpretation Database, and other NPS data collection) and market data (e.g. U.S. Census Bureau, numerous third parties) to better understand present and future demand for park experiences.

- 2. Apply data to segmentation:** Including visitor segmentation in visitor experience analysis will help the bureau make efficient, right-sized investments and deliver high-quality experiences that meet visitor expectations. This will help the bureau shift from a “if we build it, they will (all) come” mindset to making effective and sustainable resource investments that align with visitation levels and active visitor segments. It can also help identify potential visitor segments that could be convinced to visit through strategic actions such as targeted messaging and outreach, new and innovative programs and visitor experiences, partnerships and collaboration, and special events.
- 3. Facilitate social science in parks:** Work with academic researchers to determine if there are barriers to conducting social science research in parks that could be eased. Collaborate with independent researchers and academics to develop problem statements and design applied research that can improve the coherency of tourism and conservation.

Category: NPS Tourism Program Administration

Topic: The Federal Government's portfolio of tourism-related policy and programs

Overview

In addition to the NPS, numerous Federal agencies intersect with the travel and tourism sector in a variety of ways. Federal lands and waters serve as tourism destinations, for example, while the Small Business Administration supports business owners in the hospitality, attractions, and travel sectors. The National Travel and Tourism Office, located within the International Trade Administration at the Department of Commerce, coordinates the Federal Tourism Policy Council (TPC), a body established to coordinate national policies and programs relating to international travel and tourism. The Department of the Interior is a member of the TPC, and the NPS actively participates in interagency workgroups under the aegis of the National Travel and Tourism Strategy.²²

Findings

- 1. Awareness of the TPC:** There is little awareness of the TPC among NPS staff, and the stated coordination function of the TPC has no impact on NPS priorities, management, or decision-making. The NPS contributes to the coordination function of the TPC by leveraging and reporting on existing programs, priorities, funding, and other actions.
- 2. Federal tourism objectives:** The stated goals of the National Travel and Tourism Strategy include “reduce travel and tourism’s contributions to climate change,” but there are no metrics identified or tracked in order to determine progress towards this goal.

Recommendations

- 1. Coordinating participation in the TPC:** The limited awareness of the TPC among NPS staff limits the potential benefits that could be gained from increased collaboration with other Federal agencies on issues related to tourism planning and management. The NPS should assess its participation in the TPC alongside its participation in other Federal coordinating bodies, such as the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation, to determine how to engage most effectively with these bodies.
- 2. Federal support for destination stewardship:** As the NPS increases its participation in community-scale destination stewardship initiatives, such as those in Glacier Country, Montana and Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the bureau should concurrently augment its participation with the Tourism Policy Council to advance the fourth goal of the National Travel and Tourism Strategy, “Foster resilient and sustainable travel and tourism.” NPS expertise can play a key role in driving forward Federal advocacy and support for sustainable tourism/destination management models.

²² U.S. Department of Commerce [National Travel and Tourism Strategy](#)

Category: NPS Tourism Program Administration

Topic: NPS tourism management structures

Overview

“Tourism” is a difficult discipline to operationalize because it is a broad concept that includes many existing elements of NPS operations and management. While tourism has a significant impact on the NPS and the resources it manages, the National Tourism Program is limited to one full-time employee with minimal budget. In order to improve NPS’s management of tourism, the bureau needs more clarity and definition of the strategic possibilities of leveraging tourism as a tool for advancing NPS priorities.

Findings

- 1. Responsibility for tourism policy:** Responsibility for implementation of the existing NPS tourism policy falls on the NPS “Director of Tourism,” regional tourism coordinators designated by regional directors, and park superintendents. At present, the NPS National Tourism Program is staffed by one employee with minimal budget, and while some regions nominally have designated a tourism coordinator, there is little related activity underway. Few superintendents are familiar with the policy.
- 2. Defining tourism:** There is no consensus of what “tourism” means in a strategic sense. The NPS already manages many elements of tourism, including transportation, visitor services, interpretation, recreation, and communications. The strategic opportunities of what can be accomplished with improved tourism partnerships and analysis need better definition and awareness.

Recommendations

- 1. Staffed and resourced headquarters office:** Commensurate with the considerable impact that tourism has on the NPS, the NPS National Tourism Program should be resourced sufficiently to enable collaboration with parks, regions, and programs to advance strategic tourism management and partnerships; to fund research into tourism trends and partnership models; to form partnerships and fund collaboration with tourism associations and research centers; to participate in tourism industry forums and conferences where the NPS can advocate for and support the advancement of sustainable tourism and destination stewardship; and to fund contracts to develop tourism-related training, resources, and analysis for NPS staff.
- 2. Regional responsibilities:** The NPS regional offices should work with the headquarters office to clearly identify the most impactful opportunities for improving strategic tourism management in their region and assign responsibility for making progress.
- 3. Activating partners:** The NPS National Tourism Program should engage with philanthropic and non-profit partner organizations to identify the most impactful opportunities for improving strategic tourism management and develop plans for making progress.

Category: NPS Tourism Program Administration

Topic: Research and funding

Overview

In order to improve the NPS's strategic management of tourism, it is necessary to conduct research, form partnerships, conduct pilot projects, and develop an infrastructure and community of practice that establishes tourism as a recognized and vital discipline within the organization.

Findings

- 1. Tourism research and projects:** In addition to the NPS National Tourism Program operating with minimal budget, there is no infrastructure in place to organize, fund, and apply tourism-related research, studies, and projects.
- 2. Community of practice:** The NPS National Tourism Program has successfully taken initial steps in establishing an internal NPS tourism community of practice, building an audience for tourism research and analysis through the publication of the Travel & Tourism Trends newsletter and speaking about tourism trends and issues in a variety of leadership, management, staff, planning, and decision-making forums. However, there is not a distinctly defined NPS tourism community of practice.

Recommendations

- 1. Tourism research and projects:** Work with existing NPS research centers to evaluate the status of existing tourism-related research activities and partnerships and develop a strategy to more effectively structure, promote, enhance, and apply the findings of such research.
- 2. Integrating tourism with NPS processes and communities of practice:** Work with regional offices and NPS programs to determine the most effective methods for advancing strategic tourism partnerships and analysis, considering the multi-disciplinary nature of tourism and centering the goal of using tourism as a practical tool to advance shared stewardship, cultural inclusion, community collaboration, and efficient management of resources.

APPENDIX A

List of Subject Matter Experts

Between January 2024 and November 2024, the Tourism Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board interviewed and consulted with experts in the tourism, communications, conservation, and travel fields. They included representatives from State and local tourism offices, the National Park Service, academia, Tribal tourism, and many other organizations. Following is a list of the subject matter experts who helped inform this report, and we thank them for sharing their time and expertise.

- Jeremy Barnum – Chief of Staff, Grand Teton National Park
- Brian Beall – Director, National Travel & Tourism Office, Department of Commerce
- Toby Bloom – Travel, Tourism, and Interpretation Manager, U.S. Forest Service
- Dan Bolognani – Executive Director, Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area
- Dr. Kelly Bricker – Professor of Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism, & Nature-based tourism, Arizona State University
- Marie Buck – President & Chief Executive Officer, Western National Parks Association
- Tim Cash – Chief, NPS Digital Strategy
- Sara Otte Coleman – Director, South Dakota Tourism & Marketing
- Todd Davidson – Chief Executive Officer, Travel Oregon
- Frank Dean – President (retired), Yosemite Conservancy
- Mae Franklin – Navajo Nation Tribal Member
- Bob Hackett – Executive Director, Travel Southern Oregon
- Dr. Rolando Herts – Executive Director, Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area
- Camille Johnson – Community and Partner Relations Director, Utah Office of Tourism
- Kevin Kissling – President and Chief Executive Officer, Eastern National
- Michael Lyndon – Tribal Relations Program Policy Analyst, Office of Native American Affairs, National Park Service
- Andrew Newhart – Senior Director of Government Relations, U.S. Travel Association
- Dr. Peter Newman – Dean, Rubenstein School of Environment & Natural Resources, University of Vermont
- Tracy O’Toole – National Heritage Program Manager, National Park Service
- Kyle Patterson – Management Specialist & Public Affairs, Rocky Mountain National Park
- Daniel Pawlak – Park Ranger, Grand Canyon National Park
- Dan Puskar – President & Chief Executive Officer, Public Lands Alliance
- Natalie Randall – Managing Director, Utah Office of Tourism
- Kurt Rausch – Chief, NPS Commercial Services Program
- Mindy Riesenbergs – Chief Communications Officer, Grand Canyon Conservancy
- Sherry L. Rupert – Chief Executive Officer, American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association
- Kevin Schneider – Superintendent, Acadia National Park
- Beth Sciumeca – Partnerships & Community Assistance Program Manager, National Capital Region, National Park Service
- Monica Smith – President and Chief Executive Officer, Southeast Tourism Society

- Andreas Weissenborn – Vice President of Research & Advocacy, Destinations International
- Christina White – Chief of External Affairs & Partnerships, Yellowstone National Park
- Caitlin Worth – Partnerships Specialist, South Atlantic Gulf Region, National Park Service