

Park Studies Unit Program.

The University of Idaho, Park Studies Unit (PSU) was established in 1979. Through a long-term research cooperative agreement with the National Park Service (NPS) Social Science Division, the Visitor Services Project (VSP) has conducted in-depth visitor surveys in units of the National Park System since 1982. In 1998, the NPS Visitor Survey Card (VSC) project was added to the PSU. Conducted annually in over 300 NPS units, the VSC is a scannable survey card to meet the requirements of Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) to measure visitor satisfaction, and enabling the NPS to better manage national parks and citizen/visitor experiences there.

The PSU is the primary social science research unit in the NPS, providing visitor feedback to NPS managers at all levels and the broader scientific community. It administers a social science research program of approximately \$1 million annually that produces applied, useable analyses for parks and other conservation sites to help protect resources and improve facilities, services, and management. The unit operates nationally, primarily for the Department of Interior--National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM). It also provides technical survey assistance internationally. In addition to the professional staff, undergraduate and graduate students are provided opportunities to design, conduct, and process survey research data, which are then used in agency decision-making processes.

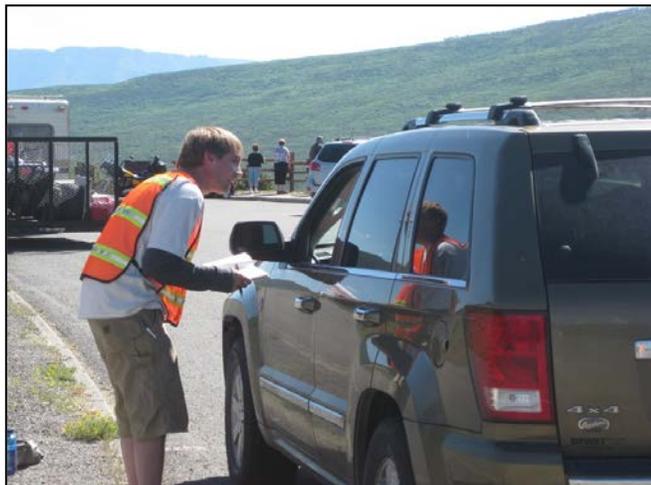
In recent years, the PSU has conducted special social science projects such as the internet-based survey for the Department of Interior on commuter habits of all department employees and the development of a focus group training package which is available on the PSU website <http://www.psu.uidaho.edu/>.

Accomplishments.

Normally, the PSU conducts approximately 20 park unit studies per year. Examples of the nationwide impact of the PSU's research are:

- Zion National Park's gateway communities used study findings to adjust the local shuttle bus service, improving visitor access and stimulating the local tourism economy.
- Results from the visitor study for Craters of the Moon in Idaho were used to improve the understanding of visitor needs among local NPS staff, BLM managers and community leaders.
- The recent visitor study in Yosemite National Park in California provided data used to support a decision by the State to approve a vehicle license plate which returns a portion of the revenue to the park for support.

In 2010, the VSP took over MGM2 economic model analysis and report production from Michigan State University. Economic impact estimates of national park visitation are based on a standard set of questions now available in the VSP questionnaires.



Every year the VSC is administered in over 300 national parks and protected areas to monitor visitor satisfaction. The resulting data are used annually in the congressional budget appropriation process for NPS. Additionally, a somewhat similar effort is done annually for 25 BLM areas.

The PSU has now established a long term data base. Beginning in 1988, it includes data from 228 customized visitor surveys administered in 178 parks. The data base integrates over 230 studies and tens of thousands of data records into one of the largest social science databases focusing on human-environmental interaction, generally, and more specifically for protected areas. The database is in the process of being made available online to natural resource managers, policymakers, researchers and students.

Consequences of Reduced Funding.

The PSU at the University of Idaho hosts one full-time NPS employee and its workforce includes 7-8 additional full-time classified employees, 15 hourly workers and numerous undergraduate and graduate students. The students involved receive hands-on experience in conducting social science research and working with practicing professionals. Also, approximately 10 professors from across the country are employed part-time every year to manage projects in their region. In addition to impacts to this workforce, parks and protected areas throughout the U.S. would not have needed social science data upon which to base their decisions. Some of these data are required by the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

From our perspective as an institution of higher education, the greatest loss would be the synergy between governmental agencies committed to innovation and using scientific data in their decision processes and university researchers and students. Importantly, many of these students will be members of the future natural resource workforce. By maintaining the PSU and its research opportunities, future natural resource professionals will be exposed to best social science research practices and experiencing the use of scientific data in decision-making.

For more information, please contact:

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