

Park Studies Unit Program

The University of Idaho Park Studies Unit (PSU) was established in 1979 and is the National Park Service's primary social science unit. The PSU has had a research cooperative agreement with the NPS Social Science Division to administer the Visitor Services Project since 1982. The project conducts in-depth visitor surveys in units of the National Park System.

The National Park Service Visitor Survey Card project, which was added in 1998, measures visitor satisfaction in more than 300 NPS units by presenting park visitors with a scannable survey card asking them to rate their experience. The resulting data are used annually in the congressional budget appropriation process and enable the the Park Service to to better manage national parks. A similar survey is conducted annually for 25 Bureau of Land Management areas.

The PSU's \$1 million-a-year research program produces applied, usable analyses for parks and other conservation sites to help protect resources and improve facilities, services and management. The unit provides University of Idaho undergraduate and graduate students with opportunities to design, conduct and process survey research data.



In recent years, the PSU also has conducted special social science projects such as developing an internet-based survey for the Department of Interior on employee commuting habits and developing a focus-group training package available on the unit's website, www.psu.uidaho.edu.

Accomplishments

- The Park Studies Unit conducts approximately 20 park unit studies per year. The unit's research is used nationwide in projects such as:
- Zion National Park's gateway communities used PSU study findings to adjust the local shuttle bus service to improve visitor access and stimulate 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 National Park Service staff, Bureau of Land Management managers and community leaders.
- Data from a recent visitor study in Yosemite National Park in California were used to support a decision by the state to approve a vehicle license plate that returns a portion of the revenue to the park for support.
- In 2010, the Visitor Services Project took over the Money Generation Model 2 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 questionnaires.

The PSU has now established a long-term database including data from 228 customized visitor surveys administered in 178 parks from 1988 to the present. The database is one of the largest existing social science databases focusing on human-environmental interaction in general and protected areas specifically. The database will soon be available online to natural resource managers, policymakers, researchers and students.

Consequences of Reduced Funding

If funding supporting the Park Studies Unit is reduced, the greatest loss will be to the synergy between governmental agencies and university researchers and students. Without the PSU, parks and protected areas throughout the U.S. will 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.

Funding for the PSU supports jobs in Idaho and nationwide. The PSU at the University of Idaho hosts one full-time NPS employee, 7-8 full-time classified employees, 15 hourly workers and numerous undergraduate and graduate students. The unit employs approximately 10 part-time professors across the country every year to manage projects in their region.

Many students involved in the PSU today will be the natural resource workforce of the future. By maintaining the unit and its research opportunities, future professionals will be exposed to best research practices and experienced with the use of scientific data in decision-making.

For more information, please contact:

John K. "Jack" McIver, Vice President for Research and Economic Development
vpresearch@uidaho.edu | 208.885.6689 | www.uidaho.edu/research/federal-relations