

PROVIDING SCIENCE INPUT TO MANAGEMENT ISSUES: DEFINING AND ANSWERING RESEARCHABLE QUESTIONS - INTRODUCTION TO A CASE STUDY OF THE DESOLATION WILDERNESS FEE PILOT PROGRAM

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Scientists from the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, the University of Illinois, Arizona State University, California State University - San Bernadino, and the University of California - Berkeley teamed with managers from the Eldorado National Forest and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit to define a set of researchable questions related to public response to a new fee program at the Desolation, a Forest Service wilderness in California. Agreement was reached on the major dependent variables of interest (attitudes or behavioral intentions about new or proposed fees) and the types of visitor descriptors that may influence or be associated with these dependent variables. This paper provides a simple description of the fee pilot program at the Desolation, the attitudes and behavioral intentions visitors hold about fees there, the potential factors that may influence these attitudes and behavioral intentions, and methods of data collection. Subsequent papers from this case study session determine the extent of association between some of these potential influencing factors and visitor attitudes towards fees.

DESOLATION WILDERNESS FEES (beginning 1997)

-Overnight camping (Permit required since 1972)	\$5/night/person \$10/person/2 or more nights \$100/group maximum
-Permit reservation (50% reserved)	\$5/permit
-Annual Camping Pass	\$20
-Parking (One trailhead only)	\$3/day (day use only)

METHODS

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A survey was conducted of overnight users who obtained a permit and paid the camping fee (June 1, 1997 - May 31, 1998) and day users who obtained a required permit for day use but who are not currently charged a fee (July 1, 1997 - June 30, 1998). For overnight users and day users there were two forms of the survey, Forms A & B.

The Forms differed primarily in 3 ways: 1) Form A established the context of fees being used to **improve** or **increase** services, Form B established the context of fees being used to **maintain** the current level of services in light of recent budget shortfalls; 2) Form B asked about visitor expenditures in the vicinity of the Desolation Wilderness; and 3) Form A for day use asked users about their willingness to pay for day use and perceptions about appropriate prices using a scale response (\$0-----\$10-----\$20-----\$30, etc.), Form B was open-ended (\$_____).

Response rates were 73% for overnight users (n=627) and 65% for day users (n=765) on March 1, 1998. Coding and data entry error rate was estimated at less than 1 percent, and there were no detectable differences in respondents across survey forms.

RESULTS

Table 1. Acceptability of wilderness fees (-2=complete unacceptable, +2=completely acceptable)

	Day Use		Overnight	
	Average	% Unacc.	Average	% Unacc
Wilderness camping fees	.7	21.2	.8	22.3
Permit reservation fees	.6	20.5	.6	22.4
Parking fee at trailheads	.3	31.7	.2	29.9
Day use fees	.2	34.3	0.0	34.0

Table 2. Response to fee levels (1=way too high, 2=too high, 3=about right, 4=too low, 5=way too low)

	Overnight	
	Average	% too high
Wilderness camping fees	2.5	35.9
Permit reservation fees	2.6	31.1
Annual camping pass	2.5	36.8

Table 3. Price recommendations for day use

	Form A		Form B	
	Willing	Approp.	Willing	Approp.
Potential day use fee	\$3.20	\$2.10	\$4.00	\$2.40

Donation for Day Use. Managers developed donation stations for day use at a small number of trailheads. Of those who acknowledged seeing the donation station, 55% indicated they did donate an average of \$4.20. The majority of users did not see the donation request, though 77% of those users said they would donate, if asked, an average of \$4.20.

Overall Feelings About Camping Fees at the Desolation. Overall, 18.1% of the overnight users disagreed that the camping fee program is "a good thing." The overall mean response was slightly toward the positive side of the mid-point on a 5 point scale.

Researchable Questions. Managers and members of the science team agreed to focus initial research efforts on understanding how attitudes toward fees were influenced by 1) ethnicity, 2) income level of visitor, 3) trip expenditure levels, 4) strength and type of relationship with the Desolation, 5) strength and type of relationship with wilderness, 6) past experience paying fees for outdoor recreation access, 7) intended use of fees collected, 8) attitudes toward the Forest Service, and 9) impact of fees on trip experiences.

IMPLICATIONS

While a majority of visitors who paid the fee to visit the Desolation Wilderness accept the concept of wilderness use fees and consider the amount charged to be about right, a sizable minority express negative attitudes toward fees generally, and toward the fee policy at Desolation specifically. Day use fees to visit wilderness are significantly less acceptable than overnight camping fees across this sample of day and overnight visitors with about 1/5 disliking camping fees and 1/3 disliking day use fees. In order to make appropriate decisions about future fees policies, we need to understand why this sizable minority provides this negative response, how the fees will change their future relationships with wilderness, and how these changes relate to the intent of original legislation establishing the Desolation Wilderness.

The amount people are willing to pay for day use is higher than what they believe is the appropriate price to charge. This suggests that although what people are willing to pay for

their own access may be a function of value perceived and finances available, there must be other issues being considered when deciding on an appropriate price to charge.

A substantial number of people who were asked to donate did make donations (55%). While 75% of those not asked said they would if asked, that behavioral intention might not accurately reflect actual behavior. More investigation into who donates and the relationship between intentions and behavior is justified.

This process of interaction between managers and scientists to define information needs is a model for identifying researchable questions and assuring relevance of scientific investigation to management needs, while contributing to our scientific knowledge about this important public lands issue.

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