

Concessions in National Parks: Responsible Tourism

by
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Concession operations in natural areas have always been a source of controversy. The objectives of profit and preservation are seen by many to be incompatible. The author will examine the relationship of national park concessions and the environments in which they operate, focusing on concession selection and operation, using responsible tourism concepts as a guide.

The environment, which is central to the economic base of the tourism industry, constitutes a resource, an opportunity, and a constraint.¹ “Ever since the National Park Service was founded, its administrators have wrestled with the problem of safeguarding the public interest yet attracting sufficient private capital to provide facilities Congress and the public seem to want in the national parks.”²

Congress stated that “the preservation of park values requires that such public accommodations, facilities, and services as have to be provided within these areas should be provided only under carefully controlled safeguards against unregulated and indiscriminant use, so that development of such facilities can best be limited to locations where the least damage will be caused.”³ Humans will utilize their environment, but the extent of utilization is in question. Those who manage the parks as tourism attractions must seek to balance the need for infrastructure with their mandate for preservation. A central question to this issue is what should comprise commercial park infrastructure? Human beings’ ability to manage, modify, and control their environment (for better or for worse) is their most important ecological characteristic.⁴

Existing literature concerning concessions and park tourism encompasses a broad spectrum of fields, including tourism, planning, management, marketing, sociology, human ecology, commercial recreation, psychology, hospitality, and public policy. Studies or inquiries on concession operations in the National Park Service to date have been conducted by congressional hearings, the National Park Service for planning and feasibility purposes, and the Conference of National Park Concessions. The Stanford Research Institute (SRI), for example, conducted a study of the concession system for the Conference of National Park Concessions and found that visitors wanted no significant change in services offered.⁵ The SRI study indicated that 35 percent of those surveyed said that they

would not come to the national parks if the accommodations and the facilities were gone.⁶

Development Often Brings Conflicts

Development of public resources to accommodate a burgeoning tourism industry often epitomizes conflict.⁷ However, there must be a certain level of development before something can be considered an attraction.⁸ Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service, once said that “scenery is a hollow enjoyment to a tourist who sets out in the morning after an indigestible breakfast and a fitful sleep in an impossible bed.”⁹ Concessions are found throughout the National Park Service and many other federal recreation areas. Since its inception, the National Park Service’s mandate has been to preserve the environment and encourage visitation. Concessions have been an integral part of this mandate since the beginning of the National Park Service, and have, by law, been granted the opportunity to make a reasonable profit.¹⁰

Businesses selected to be concession operators must be defined by the National Park Service as necessary, that is, required to meet the needs of the visitor/public. These businesses must also be determined to be appropriate, as compatible with the park’s natural, cultural, and/or recreational resources, recognizing the purpose of the established area.¹¹ In a national park, concessions include those businesses cited in the National Park Service’s *Concessions Management Guidelines*: vending machines, hostels, hotels, food service, campground accommodations, marinas, tour operations, gasoline service stations, rentals, retail services (i.e., grocery stores), general merchandise, apparel, etc.¹²

Controversy arises from the development of facilities and their impact on parks. Sax stated that it is not the goal of a park to have the visitor experience what is familiar to him, but to experience natural beauty.¹³ However, some may argue that access is relative to an individual and, therefore, a commercial infrastructure must be in place to serve the needs of the majority of potential guests; thus some familiarity may be necessary. Ultimately, the system of entrepreneurs furnishing lodging, meals, and other services under contract and supervision of the government is likely to continue.¹⁴

Concessions Relate Directly to Tourism

Concern for the environment and the understanding of tourism has led to movements toward ecotourism, quality tourism, and responsible tourism. Led by social scientists from various disciplines, tourism in general is now understood as a phenomenon with advantages and disadvantages, capable of light and shadows.¹⁵ The tendencies have been for tourism development to capitalize on the relatively short gestation period for investments.¹⁶ Conversely, ecotourism implies responsible travel that conserves the natural environs and sustains the well being of local people.¹⁷ Ecotourism means not only

travel to natural areas... but also making the conservation of these natural resources financially beneficial to local citizens. Quality tourism as a subject area also considers the local community and its population and can be summarized in the statement of tourist intentions of the Swiss Canton Wallis:

- quality of life of local residents
- well being of the guest (reception and items at his/her disposal)
- respect for the natural environment
- economic development, creation of jobs, and incomes¹⁸

Tourism destination management and, therefore, national park managers must think in terms of both the environment and the local community and utilize responsible tourism concepts that can achieve economic benefit for the area, but do so in such a way as to not destroy the attraction. Responsible tourism demonstrates planning, developing, and marketing destinations that can provide tourists with meaningful visits, allow businesses to make a profit, ensure the integrity of the destination, and develop a positive relationship between the local population and the destination.¹⁹ Responsible tourism in this context refers to a balance between concessions as part of the infrastructure of the national park system and the preservation of a natural park. Responsible tourism in parks ties the ethics of the business community with the need to preserve the environment for future generations. An effort must be made to consciously work to protect and preserve our natural environment and resources in all that is done.²⁰ Commercial tourism must be balanced with environmental concern to sustain growth.

Sustainable tourism development in parks is the management of all environments, resources, and host communities in such a way that economic, social, experiential, and aesthetic needs are fulfilled, while the cultural integrity of essential ecological processes and biological diversity of the human and natural environments are maintained over time.²¹ Resource development decisions based solely on economic criteria are myopic in the sense that they do not display an appropriate concern for present and future populations, and possibly exceed appropriate levels of social tolerance and physical thresholds in host communities and environments.²²

The relationship between natural preservation and concessions as part of the commercial tourism of the parks is summarized in five goals for improving the concession system as stated by the Department of the Interior:

- above all other goals, protect park natural and historic resources
- provide quality visitor services at a reasonable cost

- provide concessionaires with a reasonable opportunity for profit
- provide for a fair return of fees, investments, and services to the government
- promote competition in concession contracting²³

These goals illustrate the need for a mutually beneficial partnership between the parks and tourism and the human institutions represented by each.

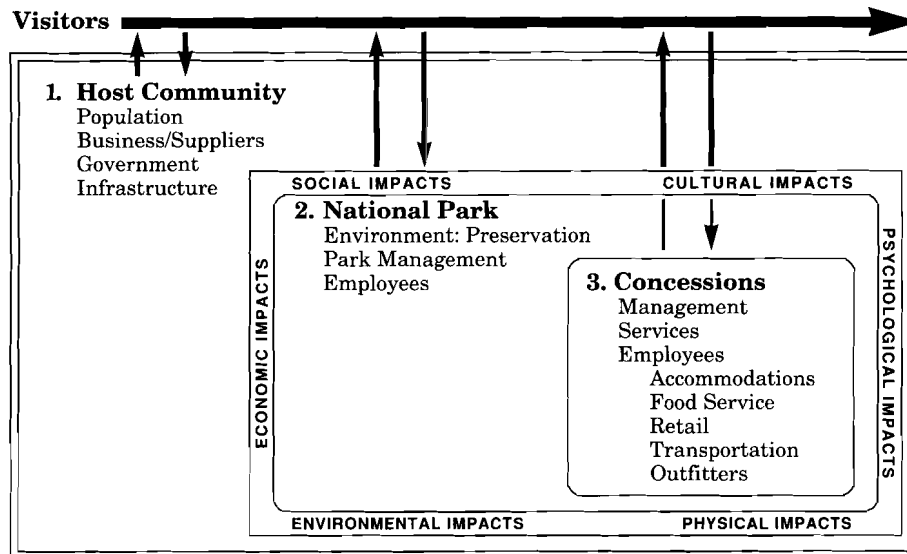
Parks and Concessions Must Accommodate Each Other

Amos Hawley, author of *Human Ecology: A Theory of Community Structure*, noted that human ecology, which is also interested in the relations of human beings to their geographic environment, fastens its attention upon the human interdependencies that develop in the action and reaction of a population to its habitat.²⁴ Concessions are human institutions that operate within the National Park Service and extend to a variety of external support institutions. Parks are considered to be important, complex, and dynamic settings for human behavior.²⁵ Both the National Park Service and the concessionaires are human institutions which must accommodate to the existence of the other.²⁶ This complex interdependence of park-related institutions suggests that knowledge of their relationships could have significant value.²⁷ Additionally, the potential visitor's relationship to the park, the host community, and the concession is vital to the existence of each. Thus the human ecology that exists in a park seeks a balance for mutual co-existence. Figure 1 illustrates these relationships.

These relationships are defined in the model as impacts: sociological, economic, cultural, physical, environmental, and psychological. Visitors to any destination impact the host community; this relates to the park in terms of work force, visitors, public sector interaction, and infrastructure support. Host communities must balance the need for visitors with the social, cultural, physical, economic, psychological, and environmental impacts on the community. For most visitors the park is the main attraction. Concessions are part of the park infrastructure. Both the Park Service and the concession operator serve the visitor, but also serve as employers of local residents and as customers for local businesses.

The host community, the park, the concession, and the visitor can be said to benefit each other. Alterations to the structure or size of any of the human institutions could impact or influence the success of the others. For example, an increase in the size and scope of a concession could impact the park's preservation objectives and potentially impact the park as an attraction. Conversely, a decrease in concession services could potentially deter visitation and influence operator profit. If profit were reduced, then suppliers and other businesses in the host community which relied on the concession business would also be affected. Each human institution must interact

Figure 1
Human Institutions and Responsible Park Tourism
A Conceptual Framework



with the other, taking into consideration the economic, environmental, social, cultural, psychological, and physical impacts each could have on the other. Segments interacting in this relationship are employees, community residents, city officials, park managers, concession operators, and visitors to the area. The model in Figure 1 illustrates a kind of stakeholder relationship, with each dependent on the system as a whole for its success.

Types of Development Need to be Defined

The question is not development versus non-development, but rather what types of development can best expose the public to nature while keeping nature safe from destruction.²⁸ National parks are among the United States' most well-known and heavily-visited attractions. Concessions are a service arm of the National Park Service, helping to meet the demands of the tourism boom and allowing all Americans their fair share of outdoor recreation. Commercialism does not have to mean the exploitation of the parks. It can be compatible with and even enhance the park environment and improve services.²⁹ Several issues need to be examined to assess the relationships between concessions and national parks:

- Can one assume that an increase in accommodations and facilities will spur an increase in visitors to accommodate?³⁰
- Would people come to the parks without concessions?

- At what level of quality do people expect the concessions to be?
- Should additional facilities be built?

These questions need to be addressed. Some argue that the need for development of a tourist infrastructure grows at an exponential rate with the increase in the number of tourists. Therefore, if few tourists frequent a place, they will ordinarily be able to put up with local non-specialized facilities.³¹

It is clear that concessions play an important role in the National Park Service and the satisfaction of visitors. The question is, however, if parks should be maintained as natural tourist attractions or be developed for tourist use.³² Before perfect harmony can be achieved between parks and concession operations, the conflict between private and public interests and the complexity of administrative structures must be resolved to give precedence to the long-term interests of the park.³³ One key issue in this relationship is site sensitivity. The location of a park is a major consideration in the level of development of concessions. Small towns and natural areas are less resilient to tourist invasion than big cities.³⁴ Some parks might never recover from a huge tourist invasion. Concessions developed for visitors to these locations might dramatically affect their well being.

All development must take into consideration topography, ecology, and the sociocultural setting.³⁵ Development must respect the natural limits of the area and not exceed them.³⁶ Each park will have its own site specific situation and the National Park Service must operate the parks with concessions in the manner most efficient for the individual site. The real question is if development of modern tourism really serves to preserve the natural environment, or to improve upon it in the light of human aesthetic ideal.³⁷ Decision makers must review their goals and objectives and the plans they have to achieve these ends in light of this factor.

Thinking in terms of planning has become a universal obligation, since there is an urgent and imperative need to reconcile regional planning, aimed at the harmonious distribution of people and activities, with the preservation of the factors constituting the quality of life.³⁸ Guidelines for concession planning decisions are defined by the National Park Service.³⁹ Park service decision makers examine all aspects of any concession issue and decision makers investigate legislative background, regulations and policies, existing documentation that influences the concession, environmental concerns, cultural concerns, demand for the service, economic feasibility, operating conditions, future potential constraints, and the necessity of the service.

In addition, ecotourism supporters have developed criteria for tourists to use when selecting a tour company. These criteria could also be applied to the selection and evaluation of concessions for national parks. For example, in the area of environmental impacts, park service managers could also investigate the following:

- Does the company evaluate and seek to reduce the environmental impact of the tourist lodges, roads, and transportation?
- Is scarce fuel being used and what is being done with waste and garbage?
- Do business practices encourage conservation efforts?
- Are there opportunities for concessionaires to help support the local ecology?⁴⁰

Other criteria could be sensitivity to the environment, honesty, references and reputation of the potential concessionaire, preparation, business guidelines, cultural impact, economic impact, advocacy, and staffing. Meshing the current park service guidelines with some of these concerns might produce an effective, efficient, and responsible system for selecting concession operators. Planning and investigation of potential concession operators concerning all aspects of their business practice could assist to develop from the start a positive relationship between the park and the concession.

Concessions Must Make Profit

From the perspective of the concession, park service managers must remember the basic objective of all businesses is to make a profit. The concession operator is unique in the business world, a risk taker, with short seasons, supply problems, a demanding and changing public, and policy uncertainties.⁴¹ Park service managers must be sensitive to both the park and the needs of the concessionaire and enhance the opportunities for sustained tourism and environmental protection. The National Parks and Conservation Association believes that the overall relationship between the service, conservationists, and concessionaires is improving.⁴²

A summary of the ecological and commercial needs of the parks and concessions could be represented by matching the future of tourism development in the parks with homogeneous markets and maintenance of the natural environment. This would require examination of the following issues:

- What are the natural, social, and cultural characteristics where the development is to occur?
- What are the characteristics and needs of the various segments of the tourism market?
- What additional infrastructure is required to satisfy the needs of a particular market segment?
- Is it economically viable?
- Is it socially compatible?
- Is it physically attractive?

- Is it complementary?
- Is it marketable?

Once decision makers have analyzed these issues and the goals and objectives of the parks and its visitors, decisions may be made that are optimal for all concerned and reflect an attitude of responsible tourism.

The key to this issue is the relationship of the concession operators, the park system, and its managers. This relationship must be a partnership that can encourage and manage tourism without damaging resources. This is no small task but one that deserves top priority. To accomplish this task, mutual education and training must occur. If park managers and concession operators gain an understanding of each other through education and training and put the needs of the parks first, an ecologically sound business environment can be established and sustained. Positive steps by concession operators to meet the responsible tourism needs of the parks in addition to their commercial obligations should provide all interested parties a bright future.

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