

## CHANGING DEMAND FOR U.S. NATIONAL PARKS: CAUSES AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESERVATION

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### Abstract

The U.S. experienced rapidly growing demand for national park visitation after WWII. Most people assumed that trend would continue leading to overcrowding and deterioration. But new research suggests that demand has actually declined for the past decade (Pergams and Zaradic 2006), and that there actually may be a need to stimulate demand as video games, movies, and the internet compete for children's attention (Louv 2005). Today, the demand for national parks is no longer certain, and the "audience" for national parks is increasingly from large metropolitan areas. Many resource-based public agencies continue to struggle for budgets, and new programs are being designed to encourage visitation, especially through children's socialization.

This paper examines U.S. national park visitation trends and the ethical/policy implications they raise. Visitation statistics suggest that visits to resource-based national parks peaked in 1997 and have since declined. By 2006, per capita visitation had dropped to 1970's levels, while actual (as opposed to per capita) visitation fell to 1987 levels. This decline will continue as the U.S. faces changing population dynamics, continuing metropolitanization, and cultural changes with the shift to visual technology and its accompanying entertainment forms. To assess these changes, we compare current social and economic statistics with a 1962 recreation demand analysis by demographer Phillip M. Hauser (Hauser 1962) who correctly forecast the current decline. But, given the parks' preservation mission, we question how much the parks should cater to new audiences. We argue that not all uses are equally legitimate and that U.S. parks are in danger of over commercialization-- a new threat to national park conservation. We develop ethical arguments initiated by Frederick Law Olmstead (Sax 1981) that there are important differences between "appreciative" and "consumptive" uses of parks, and that only the former—those focusing people's attention on the park itself—are legitimate.

### Key Words

Recreation demand, visitation trends, environmental ethics

### Key References

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