

Recreation Users Fees on Federal Lands: A Test of Structural Change between 1995 and 2003

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Abstract

Federal lands provide many recreation facilities and services. On some of these lands, fees have been and are currently being charged for certain recreational services. This study examined the attitudes of users, between 1995 and 2003, towards recreation user fees on public lands. Data from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment on recreational participants were compared between 1995 and 2003. Respondents gave their views on a set of questions concerning their attitudes towards user fees. Logistic regression models were initially used to examine user's attitudes towards fees in 1995 and 2003. T-tests were then used to examine any significant differences between user's attitudes towards fees between these years. This study examines whether the public's attitudes towards user fees has changed over time. Studies on recreation user fees help land managers to better understand how the public feel their lands should be managed and operated by the federal government.

Introduction

In recent years the emphasis on the importance of providing public lands where people may participate in outdoor recreational activities or simply enjoy the great outdoors has steadily grown (More, Dustin, & Kopf, 1996). Along with this growth there has also been much debate about the increasing introduction and employment of user fees for certain outdoor recreation areas or services on public lands (More, 1999; Warren & Rea, 1998). Recreation user fees are payments users make in lieu of admittance for use of a recreational area or service. The fees are typically intended to be used to manage and maintain services for the public. Despite this intention, many recreation users have questioned the rationale for the need to pay to play. In fact, some studies have shown that outdoor recreation users already contribute a substantial sum of money to an area's tax base and, in many cases, without those taxes some local recreation areas and services would severely decline (Steinstra, 1997). The issue of user fees has also raised some questions concerning the current economic paradigms and pricing methods that are used to justify how our public lands are maintained, operated and funded (More, 1999).

Study's Importance

Federal lands including those managed by the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the Fish and Wildlife Service provide many recreation services. On some of these lands, fees are currently charged for certain recreation areas or services. However, federal lands are often viewed as free spaces by many people. Hence, some people view user fees for recreation areas or services on public lands as an infringement upon their freedom (Harris & Driver, 1987). On the other hand, many of our public lands are dealing with shrinking budgets and reduced staffing levels, while at the same time trying to manage for substantially increased visitation and recreational use, and hence the adoption of user fees is a way to help address some of these problems (Godbey, Caldwell, Floyd & Payne, 2005; LaPage, 1994).

Consequently, studies that examine people's opinions about the implementation of user fees for recreation areas or services are very important as they provide greater understanding of any possible impacts that fees may have on users or potential users. For instance, user fees may be perceived as a way to help maintain or improve upon the quality or quantity of recreation services currently provided on public lands (Warren & Rea, 1998). Conversely, others may argue that fees serve as an economic barrier to public land visitation and use, and hence fees should not be charged on federal lands (More, 1998). In fact, some people may feel it would be better to not offer a recreation service or to close an area rather than charge a user fee for it (More, 1999).

Problem Statement

Despite the attention that user fees creates only a limited number of studies have addressed this issue. Furthermore, much of this previous research has relied on visitor surveys, which by their very nature often fail to capture displaced, constrained or potential users, as opposed to surveys of the general population (More & Stevens, 2000). Hence, this study seeks to build and expand upon existing literature (e.g., Bowker et al., 1999) by continuing to examine people's opinions towards user fees and how those opinions may change over time (i.e., from 1999 to 2003).

Methodology

This study examined the attitudes of users, in 1995 and 2003, towards recreation user fees on public lands. The data for this study came from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE). NSRE is the United States' on-going, nationwide recreation survey which is an in-the-home phone survey of 90,000+ households across ethnic groups and locations throughout the U.S. The NSRE was conducted using a computer-aided telephone interviewing system (CATI) with a random digit dial (RDD) sample. Data on individual characteristics and information about recreation participation were collected. Respondents were asked to give their opinions on a set of questions (possible 16 questions) regarding how the costs of certain recreation services and facilities should be provided. People telephoned during the interview were asked to respond to the questions by stating that the costs should be provided by taxes, user fees, a combination of taxes and user fees, the service should not be provided, don't know/don't care, or refused to answer.

Analysis

Models developed from National Survey on Recreation and the Environment data for 1995 and 2003 were examined to assess the significance and stability of regression estimates. The models included variables on gender, ethnicity, age, education, income, and region of the country. T-tests were also used to compare general opinions about fees, e.g., tradeoff between fees and taxes, and how these opinions varied across services provided between 1995 and 2003.

Results

Preliminary findings from logistic regressions (i.e., 1995 and 2003) indicate that minorities, women, and people with less education were less likely to favor user fees for certain recreation services on public land. However, some significant differences were also found between different minority groups. Preliminary findings from paired independent t-tests indicate significant differences between 1995 and 2003 user's

attitudes towards fees for campgrounds, boat ramps, parking, hiking trails, historic sites and for any fees. Overall, these preliminary findings indicate that further examination is needed in this area of research.

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