

EXPLORING QUALITY STANDARDS FOR NEW RIVER GORGE CLIMBING SITES: ESTABLISHING A BASELINE FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract: The New River Gorge National River has become a major destination for sport climbers in the eastern U.S. A new climbing management plan is being developed for the site. This study examined the satisfaction levels of climbers with some of the easily managed facilities at climbing sites and looked at attributes of the social setting preferred by climbers. Climbers at the NRG were found to place a low level of importance on most recreation site facilities and believed that the National Park Service performed well in providing these facilities. The climbers in the sample were also very tolerant of social behavior and crowds at the climbing sites unless those crowds increased the wait for access to a climbing route.

Introduction

The New River Gorge National River (NRG) has become recognized as one of the premier rock climbing sites in the eastern United States. Use of the NRG's climbing areas has grown significantly over the past ten years. The actual amount of increased use is impossible to measure, as the National Park Service has not and does not register climbers or require any type of permit for climbing. Anecdotal accounts by experienced local climbers have estimated as much as a tenfold increase in climbing use in the past ten years. In response to rapidly increasing use by climbers, the NPS is in the process of establishing a Climbing Management Plan for the NRG. Climbing management plans typically address a variety of site management issues, including such factors as biological impacts on cliff ecosystems, impact on cultural or heritage resources, economic and commercial impact and visitor satisfaction. This study focuses on visitor satisfaction and represents an initial effort to obtain a representative sample of climber information in the NRG. The measures of climber satisfaction from this study may be in the future used to examine the efficacy of the new climbing management plan.

Sampling Methods

Data collection began on July 1st, 2001. On-site sampling took place between July 1st and November 1st at randomly selected climbing sites within the NRG. Researchers made contact with 204 climbers or climbing parties yielding 163 surveys (a 79% response rate). An additional 100 surveys were distributed as mail-back surveys through local climbing shops and climbing organizations. A total of 44 mail-back surveys were returned (44% response rate).

Problems and Limitations

This study began on July 1st, 2001. During the month of July, the New River Gorge area was hit by a series of torrential downpours (as much as 11 inches of rain in 4 hours in one case) that caused extensive flooding throughout the region. Many of the roads and all of the trails within the New River Gorge National River were closed. Some of these roads and trails were not repaired and reopened for a matter of months. This natural catastrophe impacted our survey process, limiting access to climbing sites for both climbers and researchers. We believe that the flooding and trail closures had an impact on the characteristics of the sample.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 207 valid responses were collected (N = 207). The sample consisted of 136 males, 59 females and 12 respondents who failed to answer this item. The mean age of the climbers was 30.08 years (SD = 8.6) with a range of 16 to 53 years.

The respondents were primarily participating with small groups; 77.4% of the respondents were with parties of less than four people while only 3.7% of the respondents were with groups of seven people or more. The sample was very evenly divided between local climbers and visitors; 52.2% of the respondents had traveled two hours or less to climb at the NRG while 47.8% had traveled more than two hours to the site. Respondent's stay at the NRG ranged from Day Trips (34.5%), 2-3 Days (36.6%) 4-5 Days (5.7%) to More Than 5 Days (23.2%). The trip on which they were surveyed was the first trip to the NRG for 32.7% of the respondents, while 67.3% of the sample had climbed at the area previously. The respondents mean expenditure for a trip to the NRG was \$79.03 (Range = 0 to \$1000.00, SD = \$119.26). Only 6.8% of the respondents were with a formally organized group. Climber characteristics were comparable with earlier research at this site by Attarian (1999).

Climbing Characteristics

A majority of respondents (40.7%) considered themselves to be Advanced climbers, 25.5% considered themselves to be Intermediate climbers and 33.8% rated themselves as Beginners. The sample mean for years of climbing experience was 7.68 years, with a range from 0 years of experience to 30 years of experience. Top Rope protection systems were used by 32% of respondents, Permanent Bolts/Anchors were used by 7.9%, 23.2% Placed Protection while Climbing, 22.2% Used More than One of the above systems and 14.3% Did Not Know what kind of system they were using. A majority of the sample (80.6%) were climbing independently, while 19.4% of the respondents were climbing with a local guide or outfitter on the day they were surveyed. In addition, 19% of the respondents reported that they considered themselves to be a leader of their group, while 79.9% did not consider themselves to be leaders.

Results - Importance Performance Analysis

A set of importance-performance questions were included in the survey to reflect features common to many types of outdoor recreation sites. These features included such

items as parking, availability of restrooms, litter control, trail quality and visitor center. In addition the respondents were asked to rate importance and performance of the fixed bolts and anchors at the NRG climbing sites.

Additional analysis was conducted on the Permanent Bolts and Anchors item. Climbers who identified themselves as advanced climbers placed a lower level of importance on the item and rated the performance of the NPS in managing the item higher than did climbers who described themselves as beginners. Climbers who rated themselves as intermediates were very similar in their answers on this item to those who described themselves as advanced (See Table One).

Table 1. Ratings of Permanent Bolts/Anchors Importance and Performance by Skill Level

	Beg.	Inter	Adv
Importance of Permanent Bolts/Anchors	4.753	3.807	3.638
NPS Performance with Permanent Bolts/Anchors	3.865	4.846	4.756

Results – Social Factors

Respondents were asked to rate a series of social factors on the potential of these factors to impact their climbing experience. Because these items contained some factors that were transient in nature and less susceptible to management efforts, a separate analysis was performed on these factors.

A majority of respondents (60.6%) reported that these social interference factors had no effect on their climbing experience on their current trip. Among the 39.4% who did report one or more of the social factors affecting their experience, "waiting to climb" or "waiting for large groups" were the most frequently cited factors. Asked to rate their perception of Crowding at NRG climbing sites on a seven-point scale (1- Not Crowded; 7- Most Crowded), the sample's mean score was 3.95 (SD = 1.77).

Table 2. Social Interference Factors at Climbing Sites

Item	Mean Score	SD
Litter	4.729	2.16
Noise	3.792	2.20
Rowdy Behavior by Other Climbers	4.264	1.99
Observable Use of Alcohol	4.087	2.11
Waiting to Climb	5.048	1.84
Waiting for Big Groups	5.169	2.07

(Mean Scores based on a seven point Likert Scale with "1" representing the least perceived interference and "7" representing the most

perceived interference.)

Conclusions

The New River Gorge climbers who responded to our survey placed a low level of importance on most of the amenities of the climbing sites. The performance of the National Park Service in providing basic facilities and site management met or exceeded the expectations of respondents.

The climbers in this survey also demonstrated a low level of concern with most social interference factors; noise, rowdy behavior and alcohol use were not issues of major concern to most of the respondents. This finding is similar to previous findings regarding the preferences of climbers (Hollenhorst, 1987; Merrill and Graefe 1997). Respondents were more concerned with large groups and waiting to climb popular routes. These factors seem to have a more direct impact on the preferred experience of the climbers. Although waiting and large groups were the most commonly experienced interference factors, the climbers that we surveyed indicated that they had met approximately the number of other users they had expected and that crowding at the climbing sites was not perceived as a major problem. We assume that this apparent contradiction is caused by the popularity or accessibility of specific routes.

Public input processes based on public meetings have traditionally drawn participants who are highly involved in the issue under study. The findings of this survey provide feedback from a wider cross-section of NRG climbers than those who have participated in public forums related to the new climbing management plan. This study indicates that the majority of climbing site users are quite satisfied with the management of these factors.

Literature Cited

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Figure 1. Importance Performance Analysis

