

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE OUTDOOR RECREATION PARTICIPATION OF FAMILIES WHO HAVE A CHILD UNDER SIXTEEN

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Abstract.—Family recreation has been recognized as an effective way to nurture family customs and promote healthy youth development. In particular, outdoor-based recreation that includes inherent challenges often offers opportunities for a family to grow together and promotes family cohesion and youth development. Building on earlier research, this study attempts to further explore factors associated with motivation for participating in outdoor family recreation. A series of research questions was developed and analyzed with empirical data. The results indicated that travelers who have at least one child under 16 years of age were significantly different in their motivations and preferences from those who travel without youth.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Family recreation has contributed to numerous positive family outcomes and plays a vital role in the development of family health, functioning, and strength (Horning 2005). Previous research has shown that family recreation is an effective channel in the development of family customs and promotion of healthy youth development (Couchman 1982, Garvey 1990, Mactavish & Schleien 2000, Kelly 1997, Mannell & Kleiber 1997, Smith 1997). Family recreation refers to the family participating in leisure activities together (Horning 2005). Family members who had often played together reported higher levels of happiness, healthy functioning, and unity because the shared recreational activities provided an environment for open communication, interaction, and problem solving (Nelson et al. 1995). Family recreation not only strengthens family bonds and encourages

family cohesion but also consolidates family values and traditions, which youth can carry for life.

There is considerable evidence that family outdoor recreation helps in developing family strength and relationships (Hawks 1991, Hilman & Epperson 1984, Hill 1988). Outdoor programs often incorporate leisure activities that not only develop skills and require physical movement beneficial to health, but also teach perseverance, teamwork, and cooperation among family members (Smith 1997). Further, outdoor recreation is important for healthy growth of youth. Most outdoor leisure activities take place in a variety of natural settings that are quite distinct from the constructed environment of the schoolyard or home. Outdoor recreation programs contain inherent challenges and offer opportunities for overwhelming mastery experiences that produce feelings of efficacy and have positive effects on family functioning. In addition, the feeling of collective efficacy through outdoor recreation can be generalized to other domains of family functioning, such as the ability to resolve conflict (Wells et al. 2004).

Therefore, building on earlier research, this study attempts to further explore factors associated with family outdoor recreation participation, aiming at furthering our understanding of the dynamics of family recreation participation in an outdoor setting. More specifically, the study examines recreation behaviors, motivations, and selected characteristics and variables among natural area travelers who are traveling with at least one child under 16 years of age, compared to those traveling without any youth in this age bracket.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Family Recreation for Youth Growth and Development

Family recreation has received a considerable amount of attention from researchers in the field of leisure studies over the past few years. Numerous studies have documented the positive relationship between recreation participation and various family outcomes (Freeman &

Zabriskie 2003, Kelly 1997, Shaw 1992, Smith 1997, Zabriskie 2001). Of these outcomes, one of the most important is the impact of family recreation on children's early education. The context of family recreation allows children to acquire skills in social, physical, and recreational arenas and helps to develop interests that influence their lifelong involvement in recreation (Horna 1989). Kelly (1996) and Mannell and Kleiber (1997) further noted that family recreation can be used as an important vehicle for child development. Through role modeling or role taking, parents engaged in structured interactive leisure activities may teach youth moral values, ethics, and good habits. Meanwhile, children improve not only their behavior but also their health and fitness.

In addition, family has been identified as a chief socialization agent (Nisbet 1978). Family recreation cultivates rich opportunities for socialization through which youth acquire social skills. As Kelly (1997) noted, leisure is social in nature. Many leisure activities are performed in a collective format that often allows participants to gain friendship and companionship (Iwasaki & Havitz 1998). Many family leisure programs require interactive activities that encourage intra-family communication and promote child socialization (Horna 1989). Playing together requires cooperation between parents and children. As a result, children may learn how to get along with others, share resources and information, and maintain loyalty to the family (Smith 1997).

Participation in family recreation also helps to promote family health and strengthen family relationships. Sharing leisure opportunities together, family members may engage in teamwork, cultivate collective interests and identity, promote individual commitment, promote the establishment and maintenance of boundaries, and ensure family cohesion (Orthner & Mancini 1991). Joint participation in leisure activities between parents and children may also recreate and maintain parent-child relationships. In particular, shared positive experiences may create a feeling of uniqueness among family members, leading to attachment and bonding in the family relationship (Zabriskie & McCormick 2001).

2.2 Outdoor Recreation for Strength of Family, Remedy of At-risk Youth, and Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

Abundant evidence has shown the positive role of outdoor recreation in promoting family cohesion, maintaining marital stability, enhancing family relations, and improving overall family quality (Holman & Epperson 1984). Specifically, engaging in recreation in an outdoor setting, such as camping, hiking, and backpacking, may also help youth acquire additional survival skills in nature (West & Merriam 1970). Family recreation provides a positive environment that allows children to grow in all aspects, including social, physical, and recreational development. In addition, skills learned in the recreation setting can be carried over into family life. Youths' early engagement in leisure activities will set in motion a life-long interest and involvement in recreation (Horna 1989)

A few studies specifically focused on the positive outcomes of family outdoor recreation participation in relation to building the health of youth. Wells et al. (2004) studied the impact of challenge-based recreation on the collective efficacy of family with youth at-risk. Taking part in a wilderness program, family participants faced three challenges, including strenuous hiking, shelter building, and camping and cooking during a four-day experience. The results indicated that collective family recreation efficacy and conflict resolution efficacy increased for families in all three recreation contexts. Challenge-based family recreation produces collective efficacy within the family, and collective efficacy in one domain can be generalized to other domains of family life.

Family recreation may also provide an inclusive opportunity to invite children with disability conditions to share leisure experiences with other family members. Undertaking such leisure activities collectively can help build family unity, satisfaction, and members' physical and mental health (Mactavish & Schleien 1998). Scholl et al. (2003) also studied the influence of an inclusive outdoor recreation educational program on families that have a child with a disability. In their study, 24 families with at least one child with a disability participated in

a four-day outdoor skill training program that included canoeing, kayaking, dog sledding, and camping. Results indicated that experience gained from the outdoor skill training contributed to an increase in family satisfaction and family cohesion and a decrease in perceived constraints that prohibited whole-family recreation. The authors suggested that outdoor recreation education may be a way to ease constraints on family recreation.

Another empirical outdoor recreation study focused on improvement of parent-adolescent communication. Huff et al. (2003) examined 32 youth who participated in challenging recreation programs in relation to enhancing inter-generation communication. In their study, most of the youth participants were identified as at-risk adolescents who had experienced depression and negative family or peer relationships. Through three outdoor programs offering opportunities to learn a variety of Native American crafts including arrowhead chipping, leather craft, and flute carving, they found that the higher degree of challenge manifested more open parent-children communication. Moreover, regardless of the level of challenge intensity, outdoor recreation can improve parent-adolescent communication.

Thus, building on previous research, the present study seeks to extend our knowledge of the dynamics of family outdoor recreation participation by examining characteristics of travelers in relation to motives of family recreation and family-oriented leisure activities. In addition, the study attempted to explore the distinct preferences by comparing the motivations for an outdoor recreation trip among visitors who travel with a child under 16 and those who do not. Identifying potential users and their motives should help park administrators to plan, develop, and manage family recreation services.

Respectively, three research questions were developed:

RQ1. Is there a difference in outdoor recreation participation between scenic area visitors traveling with children under 16 and those traveling without children under 16?

RQ2. Is there a difference in the motivations or reasons for visiting the scenic area between

visitors traveling with children under sixteen and those traveling without children under 16?

RQ3. What are the factors related to participation in family outdoor recreation?

3.0 METHOD

3.1 Study site

This study was undertaken in 2000 at the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGNSA). The Columbia River Gorge is a spectacular 4,000 foot river canyon straddling the border of Oregon and Washington. The area encompasses 80 miles of land and water along the Columbia River, running from Reed Island, east of Troutdale, Oregon, to Miller Island, near the Dalles, Oregon. The CRGNSA contains 292,500 acres, featuring numerous natural wonders and attractions including more than 120 scenic waterfalls and hiking trails. President Ronald Reagan signed into law an act creating the Columbia River Gorge as a National Scenic Area on Nov. 17, 1986.

3.2 Sample

Data were collected as part of the USDA Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring Project in 2000. A series of on-site interviews was conducted to gather information from visitors in the scenic area. Interviews were conducted at 31 sampling sites, including Multnomah Falls, the number-one natural destination in Oregon. The sample was designed to be representative of the total use of the area for the full calendar year. The interview took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. A total of 1,282 interviews were conducted with an approximate 96 percent participation rate. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 87. One-fifth of the respondents were traveling with at least one child under 16, while 80% traveled with no children in their group. Married travelers comprised 60 percent of the respondents (Table 1).

3.3 Measurement of Constructs

The questionnaire used for the interviews included four sections: demographics and trip characteristics, recreation experience and motivations, economics and satisfaction. Activity participation was measured by asking respondents whether they had participated in a list of 26 outdoor recreation activities. The items of trip motivation

Table 1.—Description of demographics and economic status of park users

Variables	N	%
Visiting type		
With-children	223	20
No-children	926	80
Marriage		
Yes	278	60
No	182	40

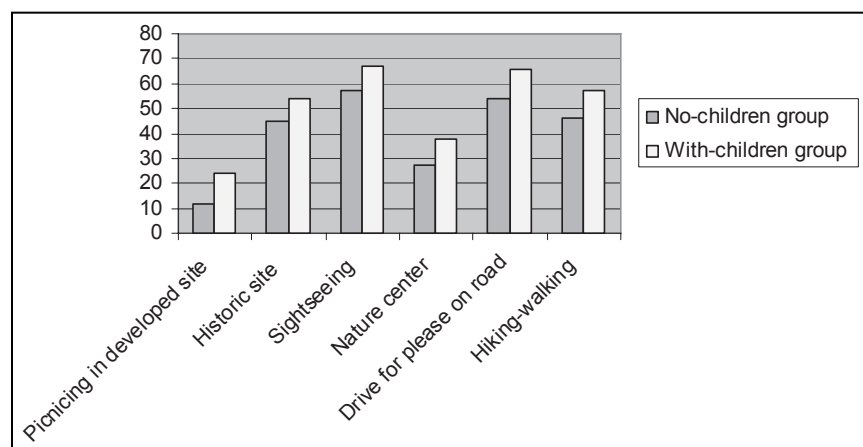


Figure 1.—Comparison of recreation activity participation between no-children and with-children groups.

were designed to measure the major types of motivations, or reasons, for travelers to come to the CRGNSA. These measures were operationalized with nine items using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important. Marital status was measured with a dichotomous question (yes =1; no=0). Travel distance was calculated using the principle of Euclidian (straight line) distance within a GIS system. Other characteristics of visitation and demographics were measured with closed-ended (multiple choice) questions.

Data were analyzed with the SPSS 13.0 statistical software package and include both descriptive and inferential analyses. Chi-square was used to compare rates of participation in outdoor recreation activities between the with-children group and the no-children group. T-tests were employed to compare the mean scores for the motivations between the two groups. Finally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between characteristics of visitors and the importance of the motive of family recreation.

4.0 RESULTS

RQ1. Is there a difference in outdoor recreation participation between scenic area visitors traveling with children under 16 and those traveling without children under 16?

The result from the chi-square analysis indicated that there were significant differences between the two groups for six of the outdoor recreation activities: picnicking, hiking-walking, sightseeing, driving for pleasure, visiting historic sites, and visiting a nature center. In each case, those traveling with at least one child under 16 were significantly more likely to participate than those traveling without children (Figure 1).

RQ2. Is there a difference in the motivations or reasons for visiting the scenic area between visitors traveling with children under 16 and those traveling without children under 16?

Significant differences were found between the two types of visiting groups for three of the motivations. T-tests

Table 2.—Results of t-tests on motivation to visit, no-children vs. with-children groups

Motivations	Groups	N	Mean	t	P <
Physical exercise	No-children	396	3.77	-2.01	.05*
	With-children	95	3.52		
Family recreation	No-children	395	3.57	5.86	.001*
	With-children	95	4.36		
Relaxation	No-children	396	4.37	-2.78	.05*
	With-children	95	4.11		

Table 3.—Multiple regression analysis on motivation for family recreation

	Beta	R
Marital status	.25**	.15
Visiting type	.21**	
Travel distance	-.16*	

* p < .05 ** p < .001

revealed that travelers in the with-children group were significantly different from the no-children group in the rated importance of physical exercise ($t=-2.01$, $p<.05$), relaxation ($t=-2.78$, $p<.05$) and family recreation ($t=5.86$, $p<.001$). Those visiting with children placed less emphasis on both physical exercise and relaxation, and expressed stronger interest in family recreation than their counterpart group (Table 2). However, both groups shared the same interests in “experiencing nature,” “being outdoors,” “being with friends,” “skill development,” and “getting away from the regular routine.”

What are the factors related to participation in family outdoor recreation?

Multiple regression analysis revealed that significant relationships existed between characteristics of visitation and the motivation of family recreation. Among selected exploratory variables, visiting type (with children versus no children), marital status, and travel distance were significant predictors of the importance of family recreation as a motivation for visiting the scenic area ($F=23.76$; $p<.000$). Marital status was the strongest predictor of family recreation ($B=.25$), followed by traveling with children ($B=.21$); Visitors who were married as well as those with children under 16 in their group placed more importance on family recreation. Travel distance also contributed to the regression results ($B=-.16$). Those traveling shorter distances placed more

importance on family recreation. In combination, about 15 percent of the variance in the importance of family recreation was accounted for by the significant variables in this model (Table 3).

5.0 DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to conduct a preliminary test of the relationship between selected explanatory variables and activity participation and motives for family outdoor recreation. By comparing the motivations to visit and participation in recreation activities, the study attempted to reveal differences between those who traveled with a child under 16 and travelers who did not have a child under 16 in their visiting group.

Research question one examined differences in outdoor recreation participation between the with-children group and no-children group. Travelers with children along showed different preferences in selecting recreational activities and sites within the scenic area. Nature centers and historical sites that offer more educational value seem more attractive to those families traveling with children. This same group of travelers also prefers to participate in sightseeing, hiking/walking, driving for pleasure, and picnicking in developed areas for their outdoor recreation participation.

Research question two investigated differences in reasons for visiting the scenic area between visiting types (no-children vs. with-children). The study found travelers who have children attached more importance to family recreation and expressed significantly less interest in relaxation and exercise. It is not surprising to learn that those traveling with children value family recreation. The same logic may explain why they do not think of relaxation as the reason for this trip. However, the study

also found that travelers with children present showed less interest in exercise than their counterpart group. This is consistent with the previous finding for the first research question, in which most respondents in the with-children group expressed stronger interest in educational and less physically intensive leisure activities such as picnicking, and sightseeing.

Research question three tested the relationship between characteristics of visitation and the motivation to participate in family outdoor recreation. The results indicated that visiting type (with children versus no-children group), marital status, and travel distance were significant predictors of the family recreation motive. Previous research suggests that family recreation may contribute to marital stability (Hill 1988). Corresponding to the research, the findings in this study showed married couples attach more importance to family recreation. In addition, travel distance was found to be a significant predictor of family recreation motivation. As Shaw and Dawson (2001) noted, family recreation is a form of purposive leisure. It is logical that traveling a shorter distance for the purpose of recreating with the family would be preferable to traveling a long distance.

6.0 LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

One main limitation of the study derives from the methodology used for sampling the data. All data were collected from a single scenic area. The homogeneous nature of the subjects can be a threat to the generalization of the research findings. Thus, results may not represent the general population of scenic area visitors and must be interpreted with caution.

In addition, the motivation of family recreation used a single-item measurement. This type of measurement can produce some limitations in differentiating the variability of the measure, posing another threat to the validity of the study.

Even though this was a preliminary study of family recreation, the findings revealed that people traveling with children manifested preferences in their outdoor leisure activities distinct from those traveling without

children. Additionally, their motives to visit the scenic sites were different from those traveling without children. These findings may assist nature-based recreation administrators to plan and manage their resources to better serve family-oriented visitors. The study also proposed a model of motivations for outdoor family recreation participation. As a result, the study identified some informative variables that may be helpful to answer the question, "Who are those potential users coming out for family recreation?" However, there may be many other variables that contribute to understanding family outdoor recreation. Interpreting the motives for outdoor family recreation participation is a complicated task. This study is only an initial step in understanding the dynamics of family outdoor recreation. As President Bill Clinton stated, families are fundamental to the life blood and strength of our world. They are nurturers, caregivers, role models, teachers, counselors, and those who instill our values (cited in Nelson, et al., 1995). More research on family recreation is indeed warranted.

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