

Structural Constraints to Wilderness

Impacts on Visitation and Experience

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Abstract: A significant research body on recreation constraints exists, but wilderness constraints research is limited. Like other recreationists, wilderness visitors likely experience a number of constraints, factors that limit leisure preference formation or participation and enjoyment. This project explored how visitors' experiences with and in wilderness are constrained, and examined responses to those constraints. A hermeneutic approach (Patterson and Williams 2002) provided the stories of wilderness visitors' experiences and constraints to experiences with and in wilderness. A purposive sample identified respondents for in-depth face-to-face interviews with a semistructured interview guide. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analysis considered visitors' individual stories and stories across individuals. Member checking and dual readers provided discussion opportunities about and validation of the interpretations. Similar to other types of recreation, a variety of constraints to wilderness visitation emerged, although structural constraints dominated the conversations. Of particular interest to wilderness managers are the visitors' coping responses to constraints: shortened trips with fewer miles traveled influence both social and biophysical management areas. Future research opportunities include monitoring longer-term impacts on experiences, visitor use patterns, and subsequent biophysical impacts.

Introduction

Constraints are “factors that are assumed by researchers and/or perceived or experienced by individuals to limit the formation of leisure preferences and/or to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure” (Jackson 2000, p. 62). Since inception, recreation constraints research has resulted in substantial insight as to what constraints exist (Jackson 2005; Mowen, Payne, and Scott 2005; Green, Bowker, Johnson, et al. 2007), how constraints can be modeled (Jackson 2005; Walker and Virden 2005; Schneider and Stanis Wilhelm 2007), and how constraints are negotiated or accommodated (Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey 1993; Samdahl and Jekubovich 1997; Walker and Virden 2005; Schneider and Stanis Wilhelm 2007). However, wilderness constraints research is quite limited.

A brief review of constraints research reveals that structural constraints were initially hypothesized to intervene between leisure preference and participation, intrapersonal constraints were psychological attributes that interacted with preferences, and interpersonal constraints seemingly arose out of interactions with others. In the evolution of constraints models since the 1990s (Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey 1991; Jackson et al. 1993; Walker and Virden 2005; Schneider and Stanis Wilhelm 2007), a complex and comprehensive model is currently under consideration. The model includes individual and situational factors that influence appraisal and response processes to constraints and recognizes these simultaneously occurring constraints can be accommodated or negotiated (Schneider and Stanis Wilhelm; Walker 2007). A variety of coping mechanisms are frequently used in response to constraints, typically

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classified as problem-focused or emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping include direct actions, planning, and active responses, whereas emotion-focused approaches are indirect and include distancing and controlling emotions (Iwasaki and Schneider, 2003).

Despite the progress in constraints research made more broadly within the field of leisure, wilderness-specific constraints research is limited. In the published literature, a single study examines constraints to wilderness recreation participation (Green et al. 2007). Green et al. compared various factors or constraints to wilderness visitation among a national sample. Findings indicated that minorities, women, those with lower levels of income and education, and elderly populations were more likely to perceive constraints. Notably, these were constraints to visitation only. Although participation constraints are important, they are just one step to a fuller comprehension of wilderness recreation constraints.

Recognizing that the paucity of constraint research impedes effective management and high quality visitor experiences, researchers have called for additional investigations of wilderness recreation constraints (Green et al. 2007; Schneider 2007; Johnson and Dawson 2004) and details of constrained experiences (Cole 2007). In response to these calls and in an effort to expand the knowledge base on wilderness constraints, this project explored structural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal constraints to wilderness visitation and subsequent impacts on visitor behavior and experiences. Within the scope of this report, structural constraints and resultant impacts were considered. Specifically, this project addressed these research questions: if and how Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW)

visitors' experiences are constrained and how visitor behavior and wilderness experiences have been influenced by those constraints. Constraints to wilderness visitation were documented quantitatively by Green et al. (2007); the qualitative findings from this study add depth and additional meaning to the existing constraints literature.

Methods

A qualitative approach explored the depth and breadth of the BWCAW visitor perspectives and lived experiences and, in this article, we report on constraints. This study was guided by the assumption that rich meaning can be found by exploring how people remember, construct, and make sense of their experiences. The study was designed using a hermeneutic approach and in-depth face-to-face interviews with participants (Patterson and Williams 2002).

Sampling

The sample was obtained using a network, or snowball sampling, technique to capture a broad range of BWCAW visitors and visitation histories. A purposive sample was used; a sampling method that reflects the diversity of a group and seeks to include any "outliers" that perhaps would be discounted in a statistical study (Barbour 2001). To obtain the sample, an email request was circulated to known BWCAW visitors that asked them and those they knew to complete a screening online survey. Complementing this approach, fliers soliciting BWCAW visitors to participate were posted at outdoor equipment stores in the Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, metropolitan area.

As a result, 98 potential participants completed an online questionnaire that assessed BWCAW visitation history and experience (see figure 1). Specifically, the online assessment

asked questions related to the year of first and most recent BWCAW visit, BWCAW attachment, and experience use history. Then, respondent data were separated into high, medium, and low experiences with the BWCAW based on a combination of those questions. All those who completed the questionnaire and indicated they were interested in an interview for \$20 compensation, and those who were in either the high or low experience ends of the continuum (one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the median) were invited to participate in an interview ($n = 34$). This sampling protocol increased the likelihood of obtaining rich and unique stories (Laverty 2003) reflecting how constraints and varying coping mechanisms influence the visitors' behavior and experience over time.

The sample size was determined by data saturation, the point at which no new information or themes were observed in the data. The literature has suggested a range of numbers to reach data saturation; Bertaux (1981) claims



Figure 1—Resting at a campsite in the BWCAW. Photo courtesy of Sierra L. Schroeder.

that a minimum of 15 interviews are needed for any qualitative study, whereas Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) posit that data saturation can occur with 12 interviews. Data saturation was achieved with 25 interviews in this study, including 9 interviews with BWCAW visitors with low-experience areas and 16 interviews with high-experience respondents. Interviewees are identified by a fictitious name in this article to guarantee anonymity.

Study Setting

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness is a unique area containing more than 1,200 miles (1,931 km) of canoe routes, nearly 2,200 designated campsites, and more than 1,000 lakes and streams. The BWCAW covers approximately 1.1 million acres (0.45 million ha), extending nearly 150 miles (241 km) along the International Boundary adjacent to Canada with Voyageurs National Park bordering on the west (USDA Forest Service 2009). Situated in the northern third of the Superior National Forest in northern Minnesota, the BWCAW (see figure 2) is one of the most visited wilderness areas in the United States and hosts more than 250,000 visitors annually; approximately 57% are from the state of Minnesota (USDA Forest Service 2006).

The interviews took place in relaxed and convenient environments selected by the participants, such as a cafeteria or library, in and around the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area. The interviews were conducted in these informal settings as “directed conversations” (Charmaz 1990), employing open-ended questions to allow each interview to take shape as directed by the unique conversation (Wolcott 2008). A semistructured interview guide with multiple probes encouraged freedom in response but kept the con-

servation generally focused on the research questions of interest (Kvale and Brinkmann 2008). The interviews lasted anywhere from approximately 20 minutes to almost two hours, and each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data set used for analysis consisted of both the audio recordings and the transcriptions. Interviews took place between November 2008 and May 2009.

Analysis

Interview analysis consisted of multiple and thorough readings of each transcript by dual readers, ordering the data according to categories and coding by themes. Initially, the transcripts were individually analyzed to identify the major categories and elements of each participant’s story and experience. The coding process that followed consisted of identifying similar themes across cases and grouping them under a representative name. The data were coded using the qualitative analysis software NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd 2002).

In this study, participants commented individually via email on the accuracy of the idiographic interpretation of the individual’s story and experience. This member checking is the process through which participants review and validate the interpretations and the findings presented by the researcher (Creswell and Miller 2000), and is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 314).

Results

Twenty-five BWCAW visitors, 13 males and 12 females, shared stories revealing recreation constraints. Similar to other types of recreation, a variety of constraints to wilderness visitation and experience emerged: we focus on structural constraints in this article

due to their prevalence. Further, and supporting current constraints approaches, constraints were not constant but rather dynamic and changed through time, depending on an individual’s life stage, and were influenced by a variety of factors. The study results are organized into two sections to address the research questions: (1) if and how visitation and experiences were constrained, and (2) the impacts of these constraints on visitor behavior and the wilderness experience.

Constrained Experiences

Individual stories of constraints varied; however, themes of structural constraints were most salient, and therefore structural constraints are the focus of this report. Participants offered details describing an array of structural constraints, including time constraints and access issues. These factors constrained both visitors’ ability and time available to get to the wilderness and also visitors’ total time spent in the wilderness. Interview participants across cases identified the structural constraints as most impeding and these included both time and access issues specifically related to permit and campsite availability.

Time Constraints

Time constraints, including limited vacation time from work and family commitments, were an issue for 20 of the 25 participants. For some, restricted free time was a change that came with maturity and increased age. Justin’s available time was impacted as he transitioned into adulthood: “When I was a teenager I had fewer demands on my time. It was easier to just take time and do things.” As a youth, time was not such a constraint for James: “When I was back in school, you know I had plenty of free time and I would never miss a trip.”

Children and other family commitments were important factors that determined available time for BWCAW visits. Eli explained the time constraints presented by family quite succinctly: "I'm married with children. That takes up a lot of your free time." Isaac noted that the time constraints due to family might not be permanent, but as long as he had a young child, free time would be quite limited. He explained, "Now that I have a family to raise, and my wife has also picked up extra shifts, it's definitely...free time has dwindled. I don't necessarily have large blocks of time to get out and enjoy the Boundary Waters." For some women, a new baby was the most constraining. Mandy had never missed a BWCAW visit until "last summer I couldn't go because I had a six-month-old baby that was breast-feeding."

Vacation and getting time away from work was also a time constraint identified by interview participants. Although she would like to visit every year, Susan has not gone to the BWCAW for the past two summers. She explained, "Time for me is more of a factor. Having the time to do it. Having the vacation." Ted described a "kind of a friction thing going on there with work" if he wanted to get away for longer than a weekend. Time off and vacation changed for Karen depending on her current job; she noted, "Right now I am working and a graduate student, so I have really no free time." Kali shared a similar story; her time away from her job was limited and she had "done some other shorter trips over a long weekend or something. A lot of day trips, it was really easy for me to do day trips."

Access Constraints

Access issues, such as permit restrictions and campsite availability, emerged

as another important category of structural constraints. In terms of trip preparation and planning, difficulty obtaining a permit for the time and place desired occurred. Brandt noted that he first started visiting the BWCAW 19 years ago, but that now "it's harder to get permits sometimes; it's harder to go exactly where you want to go." Evan liked to go back to the same place every year, but after a few years he found he was not able to because "some access points are a little more difficult to get permits for."

In most cases, full campsites were not a constraint that prevented a visit to the BWCAW; instead this was an on-site constraint encountered during the wilderness experience. Reflecting on her recent trips, Charlotte commented, "I've had a few experiences now where we really struggled to get a site because they're all full." Rick shared a story about leading a group of high school youth and not finding an open campsite until after nine o'clock at night; he explained, "All the campsites seem to be taken and you have to go from one to another to find a campsite."

Permit availability and occupied campsites were both mentioned as constraints by Liz, who explained, "It can be such a battle to get a permit, and then when you do get a permit, those campsites when you get to an area where you want to camp can all be taken, and so you're forced to move on, and you know, that's a pain."

Impact on Visitor Behavior and Experiences

The structural constraints identified by interviewees had a variety of impacts on visitor behavior and experiences. Impacts included shortened experience, experience substitution, reduced opportunities for solitude, and adjusted trip planning.

Shortened Experience

As a result of structural constraints, interview participants shortened their BWCAW experience. Shortened experiences varied by individual and included a decrease in total trip visitation, staying fewer days in the wilderness, traveling a shorter distance, and base camping. Some participants skipped BWCAW trips or decreased their total trip visitation as a result of structural constraints. With a small child and both parents working, Isaac acknowledged that he no longer has "long blocks of time to get out and enjoy the Boundary Waters," and that he and his wife "are looking forward to the day when we'll have a little more time." For some women, a new baby reduced BWCAW trips. Mandy had never missed a BWCAW visit before, until "last summer I couldn't go because I had a six-month-old baby that was breast-feeding." Even with small children, Jessica was able to get away for a long weekend every summer; however, that window of time disappeared when she had a new baby. She explained, "I took a little break for a couple years because I had a baby, and then another baby."

Mandy explained planning her trip length: "I've gone on mostly shorter trips, like four days. I would love to go on longer trips, I just haven't ever been able to." Time away from work determined the trip length for Bill whose trips are always "four days.... That's usually the limit for work and for jobs." Family commitments also contributed to shorter trips. In the past, James's trips to the BWCAW were always a week long; now, since he is married with children, "trips to the Boundary Waters have gotten shorter in duration to where we'll maybe go in for just a half a week."

In addition to fewer days, shorter trips often entailed traveling fewer



Figure 2—Sunset in the BWCAW. Photo courtesy of Sierra L. Schroeder.

miles and staying closer to the entry points and BWCAW periphery. Karen reflected on a wilderness trip with a small child: “If I have a two-year-old, then clearly a shorter trip would be in order. If anything.” For Marianne, bringing her children on a trip required changing some activities. With the kids, “we would take day hikes; we didn’t do camping back in the Boundary Waters.”

Related to this travel pattern, base camping, or staying multiple nights at just one site, was another impact on visitor behavior. Base camping and shorter trips were often associated; even when trip length was not shortened, the distance of the trip was shortened, and fewer miles were traveled in the wilderness when participants reported base camping. Mandy described her recent trips: “I’ve done a lot of trips where we just stay on one lake and that’s where we are for the time.” A base camp allowed Melissa to take advantage of the time she had available for her BWCAW trip: she was able to spend her time exploring during a day excursion instead of

breaking camp and setting up again at another site. Her group “found a great camp site, so we did a base camp and then we just did a day trip out to another lake.” Ted prefers base camping when he visits the BWCAW with his family; it is more convenient and they enjoy “really getting a sense of that area.” Evan switched entirely to base camping over the last several years: “I’ve found an entry point where there’s one 10 rod portage and then you can base camp on the next lake, so now it’s a total easy man’s trip!” According to James, time constraints make a big difference in his BWCAW travel pattern and “we haven’t gone in as deep into the Boundary Waters through as many lakes and through as many portages. In the past, we’d go in and you know, hop campsites. Now we go in and we’re just going to one campsite.”

Substituting the Experience

Some interviewees also discussed finding different areas for the activities they enjoyed in the BWCAW. It had been many years since Karen’s last visit to the BWCAW, and she discussed

finding alternative areas for the activities she enjoys: “We actually went recently on a canoe trip down a river in southern Minnesota. So we have done some canoeing and kayaking-type things that are not in the Boundary Waters, but are substitutes.” Although he has many fond memories of the BWCAW, Mark has not visited in more than 20 years and instead travels to his nearby lake house during the summers. He explained that now, lacking the time to get away to the BWCAW, “that’s what I do. I go to the lake.”

Reduced Opportunities for Solitude

Structural constraints and resultant changes in travel pattern had an impact on the social experience and opportunities for solitude, according to the interviewees. Participants found fewer opportunities for solitude: the inability to get farther into the wilderness resulted in more encounters.

On her shorter trips, Kali had more encounters with other visitors and never traveled enough distance to reach a less used area. She explained the impact on her experience during these short trips: “It’s still relaxing, I mean, but you don’t have the solitude.”

Ted preferred to travel farther into the BWCAW, but he usually was not able to achieve his desired distance. He explained, “You really have to go in a lot further to get away from people, but then it requires more time, and generally I don’t have one-week and two-week blocks of time to go experience the Boundary Waters.” In contrast, Mandy and her dad would get their canoe towed by a motorboat in order to get away from crowded entry points and out past the periphery of the wilderness area. Mandy observed that, after achieving some distance with the tow, “There’s fewer people; it’s nice to be that far in and see less people.”

Although she enjoyed reaching an area that was not as crowded, Mandy also acknowledged that she felt “kind of bad...sweeping past all these people that were paddling and paddling... probably their whole trip is just paddling on this lake.”

The periphery of the BWCAW and entry-point lakes were perceived as the most frequently visited and crowded areas; this resulted in spatial displacement as visitors planned routes to take them farther into the wilderness interior. However, as more people are displaced from the edges of the BWCAW, the interior areas experience an increase in use. According to Kali, the entry-point lakes were likely to be the most crowded: “If you’re going to go and you want your solitude, you want to go somewhere not on the main close lakes.”

Gerald planned a trip “as far and deep as you can get into the Boundary Waters” in the hopes of finding unpopulated lakes and areas where he could experience solitude. After “four days of hard portaging,” he arrived at a lake located in the central interior of the wilderness and commented that “we couldn’t find a campsite, it was very populated. It just, it shocked me! I don’t know what my strategy’s going to be next year.”

Trip Planning Adjustments

Access issue constraints, specifically obtaining a permit, influenced trip planning and travel pattern. Spatial displacement occurred frequently when a permit was not available for the preferred entry point; participants were likely to modify the entry location to negotiate the constraint. If he had trouble obtaining a permit, Brandt would “have to change plans and put in on a different entry point.” After being displaced from his selected entry point several years in a row, he

explained that now “I start by looking for what permits are available and then planning around that.”

Some interviewees explained that planning ahead and making an early reservation was necessary to obtain a permit; however, others did not plan in advance and readily accepted whichever permit was available, even if it required a change in entry point. Even at the last minute, Charlotte has “always been able to get a permit”; at times she has “had to go in an obscure

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entry point, but nonetheless, I could go.” Planning a trip only a week in advance, Mandy was displaced from her usual entry points. She was not disappointed; however, she explained, “I guess we’re going to some crappy little small lake or something, ’cause that’s just what’s available. And that’s fine with me, ’cause then you see lakes that you might not see otherwise.” Although some interviewees were displaced from preferred routes or entry points, they were able to negotiate this constraint. In fact, obtaining a permit at the last minute or gaining entry to an obscure point in the wilderness was sometimes viewed positively.

Discussion and Management Implications

In-depth interviews with 25 BWCAW visitors indicated that wilderness expe-

riences are constrained, and that wilderness behaviors and experiences are impacted by the constraints. Structural constraints, such as time constraints and access issues, were encountered most frequently among our respondents. Impacts of the constraints on behavior and experience included shortened experiences, substituted experiences, reduced opportunities for solitude, and adjusted trip planning. As such, the results are similar to the breadth of constraints identified by research previously conducted across the leisure spectrum (Green et al. 2007; Shores, Scott, and Floyd 2007; Jackson 2005; Mowen et al. 2005; Jackson et al. 1993), but the impacts are unique due to the nature of the wilderness experience.

With regards to the limited wilderness recreation constraints research, similarities between these interviews and Green et al.’s (2007) analysis of national questionnaire data emerged. Specifically, the qualitative data detailed constraints identified quantitatively, such as time constraints, and added depth and breadth to an understanding of the resultant impacts. Whereas Green et al. reported constraints to wilderness visitation only, the results of this study documented visitation constraints as well as on-site constraints and the resultant impacts of such constraints. Interviewees shared stories of reduced opportunities for solitude and reported crowding in the wilderness area periphery.

The results of this study, particularly the relationship between time constraints and changes to spatial patterns of visitors, have implications for visitor management and planning. Issues of particular interest include visitor travel management, monitoring biophysical resource impacts, and long-term evaluation to better understand the visitor experience quality

and encounters with other users. Given that visitors indicated changes in travel patterns, renewed and reconsidered monitoring and management of BWCAW visitor travel is needed and in process. Based on the stories shared by visitors in this study, travel patterns have changed, and shorter trips and base camping are now more common; therefore, this is an opportune time to review the travel model employed in the BWCAW.

Biophysical impacts within the wilderness will be influenced as a result of the intrasite spatial displacement and changes in travel pattern described by respondents. Continued long-term monitoring of resource impacts is warranted. The number of encounters and impediment to solitude is of concern, particularly due to the legislative mandate for solitude experiences in wilderness areas.

Certain limitations exist in this study. First, although the nonrandom sample and small sample size provided important insights regarding structural constraints, the results cannot be thought of as statistically generalizable results (Patterson and Williams 2002). Second, results addressing interpersonal constraints were not reported here due to the limitation of word count for the article. Third, it is certainly possible that people are so constrained they have never visited the BWCAW.

A number of future research opportunities emerge from this study, but of particular interest are those related to coping in response to constraints. Coping is an integral part of the newly emerging constraints model (Schneider and Wilhelm Stanis 2007; Walker 2007), and it is important as it identifies visitor responses that can be predicted and managed. The existing wilderness coping research has assessed either an immediate response (Johnson and Dawson 2004) or a hypothetical

response (Schuster, Hammitt, Moore, and Schneider 2006). Future studies on the actual use of coping mechanisms to accommodate or negotiate wilderness constraints will benefit from further examination of coping across time. Additionally, qualitative approaches may produce the rich data to provide managers a more comprehensive understanding of the depth and breadth of the coping process (Schneider and Wilhelm Stanis 2007). Like the wilderness constraints research, studies examining wilderness coping are limited (Schneider 2007). As coping research and the constraints model continue to evolve, studies focused specifically on wildlands and wilderness visitors will be critical.

Results from this study indicate that BWCAW visitors experience a variety of constraints, in particular structural constraints, with time and access issues being the most impeding. The impacts of these identified constraints included taking shorter trips, substituting BWCAW experiences in alternate areas, reduced opportunities for solitude, and changes to trip planning. The planning and management implications of these constraints and resultant impacts include monitoring visitor travel patterns, reviewing the BWCAW travel model, and ongoing long-term monitoring of biophysical impacts.

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