

Chapter 5: Serving the Needs of Latino Recreation Visitors to Urban-Proximate Natural Resource Recreation Areas

Deborah J. Chavez¹

Abstract

A major shift has occurred in the ethnic and racial profile of the United States, with large increases in the Latino population. Beyond the demographic profiles are the influences on other aspects of life in the United States, including urban-proximate natural resource recreation area management. Latino groups may have different expectations about natural resource recreation areas, different barriers to participation, and different site development preferences than other groups. The information provided in this article is based on 17 research projects over the past 16 years conducted mostly in southern California. Suggestions for serving the needs of the rapidly increasing Latino population are offered. These suggestions relate to communications, development of recreation sites, use of partnerships and cooperation, and provision of employment opportunities.

Keywords: Latinos, outdoor recreation, preferences, experience use history.

Introduction

The ethnic and racial profile of the United States is undergoing a major shift such that in the decades ahead, people of color will constitute a majority of the population (Shinew et al. 2006). Over the last 100 years, few racial or ethnic groups have had as great an impact on the demography of the United States as Latinos (Saenz 2004). The number of Latinos in the United States more than doubled between 1980 and 2000, accounting for 40 percent of the growth in the country's population during that period. In 1900 there were approximately 500,000 Latinos in the United States. Today there are more than 35 million (Saenz 2004). In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau designated Latinos as the Nation's largest minority group. Beyond demography, this population has had additional impacts on American society. Some of those influences are found at natural resource recreation areas. Research indicates Latino groups may have different expectations about natural resource recreation areas, different barriers to participation, and different site development preferences than other groups (Chavez 2001, 2002; Tierney et al. 1998).

In 1900 there were approximately 500,000 Latinos in the United States. Today there are more than 35 million. In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau designated Latinos as the Nation's largest minority group.

¹ Supervisory social scientist, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station, 4955 Canyon Crest Dr., Riverside, CA 92507; e-mail dchavez@fs.fed.us.

This paper examines the management of urban-proximate natural resource recreation areas as influenced by Latinos. In short, this paper describes special management characteristics of urban national forests (UNFs), especially for use by Latinos, barriers to outdoor recreation experiences, environmental beliefs, and experience use history of Latinos. These will be followed by suggestions for serving the needs of this rapidly increasing population. These suggestions relate to communications, development or renovation of recreation sites, use of partnerships and cooperation, and provision of employment opportunities.

The information provided in this article is based on 17 research projects over the past 16 years conducted mostly in southern California. Owing to this emphasis on southern California, managers in other places may want to verify the validity and reliability of these studies for their management areas.

Urban National Forests

Urban National Forests are forests located within 50 miles of a population center of greater than 1 million people (Dwyer and Chavez 2005). These forests demonstrate unique management challenges and opportunities (Hartley 1986). They also have great potential to educate the public and create supportive constituencies (Gangloff 2003).

In 1995, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, identified 14 UNFs located in eight U.S. states. In 2005, they identified an additional 10 UNFs. Hartley (1986) defined several characteristics of UNFs including year-round accessibility, cultural beliefs, emergence of new recreation activities, and competition for open space. An adapted model is presented here, including intense use, regional parklike use, sprawl, complex communication strategies, safety, and cultural beliefs:

- Intense use: areas that may be managed for “dispersed” use get quite “concentrated” use; often significant amounts of day use.
- Regional parklike usage: since most regional parks in southern California are booked well in advance, some parties intended for regional parks are shifted to public lands; there may be competition for open space.
- High use of designated wilderness: day use increases visitation at designated wilderness significantly (e.g., San Mateo Canyon Wilderness on the Cleveland National Forest where more use occurs from day users than permit holders); not enough permits available for wilderness use and lotteries need to be used.
- Sprawl: urban development adjacent to public land boundaries complicates management decisionmaking (e.g., fire management or land use decisions); community relations become more complex.

- Social ills: urban social problems can migrate to public lands; might see increases in crime, vandalism, arson, traffic congestion, etc.
- Safety: special care must be taken for the safety of the public and employees.
- Complex communication: information strategies need to consider race/ethnic diversity, use of multiple languages, and cultural meanings.
- Cultural beliefs: recreation visitor expectations may be based on behaviors learned in other countries; cultural activities may occur on public lands.
- New activities: the newest recreation activities or fads may occur here first, sometimes without benefit of administrative guidelines.

Some of these UNF characteristics linked to use of sites by Latinos in southern California are discussed (such as intense use levels at some sites, regional parklike use, and complex communication strategies).

Hartley (1986) discussed intense use. Her premise was that some areas might be managed as dispersed sites, but use levels at those sites can be quite intense. Stickers (1983) termed these concentrated dispersed-use areas, where, for example, a thousand people can be found in an area managed for 100 visitors. Importantly, few developments are located at these sites although many people frequent these areas. Some of these sites in southern California are predominately used by Latinos. At the convergence of the north and west forks of the San Gabriel River, approximately 90 percent of site users are Latinos. For years the only development was a nearby parking lot and pit toilet facilities. This has changed little over the years, with a few picnic tables recently added along with improved toilet facilities.

Hartley (1986) also discussed regional parklike usage, focusing on the busy regional parks system in southern California. Indeed, most of the parks are booked well in advance making it difficult for people to obtain group reservations. Consequently, some groups intended for regional parks are shifted to other natural resource recreation areas. Many of these displaced visitors are Latino groups.

In discussing sprawl, Hartley (1986) commented on how complex community relations can become. In areas that include large Latino populations, it becomes important to include Latinos in public meetings. In general, managers in southern California have found that few Latinos attend public meetings or participate in decisionmaking proceedings.

Complex communication strategies were also discussed by Hartley (1986). In southern California, information strategies need to consider race/ethnicity, use of multiple languages, and cultural meanings of communications. Indeed, use of Spanish is quite necessary, but not all Spanish translations are done well.

Hartley (1986) also addressed cultural beliefs. The premise is that recreation visitor expectations for natural resource recreation areas may be based on behaviors

learned in other countries. In southern California, many recreation visitors have family roots in Mexico, and cultural beliefs and practices from Mexico are common (such as mariachi performances at day use sites).

Findings From the 17 Research Studies

Barriers to Outdoor Recreation Experiences

Barriers that were mentioned within at least two of the travel scenarios were: “Would travel if more people of my race/ethnicity were employed there,” “Few friends travel or recreate in natural areas,” and “We don’t know where to go or what to do.”

In a telephone survey of residents of Los Angeles County, Tierney et al. (1998) contacted 894 people. About one-third were Latino. They asked about barriers faced by Latino respondents who had not taken any trip in a 1-year period, who had taken a trip but not to a natural area, and who had taken a trip to a natural area where barriers were limiting their stay. Only barriers identified by at least 50 percent of Latino respondents are presented in table 5-1. There were seven barriers identified by Latinos who had not taken a trip, three by those who took a trip but not to a natural area, and one by those who took a trip to a natural area. There is little overlap in barriers, and no barrier that was identified within all three travel scenarios by Latino respondents. Barriers that were mentioned within at least two of the travel scenarios were: “Would travel if more people of my race/ethnicity were employed there,” “Few friends travel or recreate in natural areas,” and “We don’t know where to go or what to do.”

Table 5-1—Barriers identified by Latinos who either took no trip in a 1-year period, took a trip but not to a natural area, or mentioned barriers limiting their stay at a natural area

	Took no trip	Took trip, but not to a natural area	Natural area stay limited
Normally travel but did something different	X		
Financial situation	X		
Would travel if more people of my race/ethnicity employed there	X	X	
Nearby destinations are too crowded	X		
Few friends travel or recreate in natural areas	X		X
Don’t know where to go or what to do	X	X	
Time commitments	X		
Want more luxury accommodations		X	

Source: Tierney et al. 1998.

Additional issues come from a series of day use studies on two forests in southern California (the series results are reported in Chavez 2001). It was found that day use visitors to two national forests (who were primarily Latino visitors) disliked seeing litter along forest roadways, litter at picnic sites, or graffiti on natural

surfaces (such as rocks or trees). These are interesting findings given the sites where visitors were surveyed were frequently highly littered and graffiti was found on human-made (such as picnic table tops) and natural surfaces.

No discussion of barriers would be complete without some mention of societal barriers. For Latinos these include, among others, barriers to education, barriers to the political process, and racism.

Environmental Beliefs

In 2005, Chavez (2006) examined the environmental beliefs of day use visitors to two canyons on the Angeles National Forest. More than half of the respondents were Latino. The respondents were asked about natural resource areas and what they should be managed for. Items rated included environmental activities. They evaluated items using a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Most felt natural resource areas should be managed for protection of water quality, protection of wildlife, scenic value, watching wildlife, and improved air quality. Using the same list, they were asked if there were currently enough natural resource areas for these activities or if more were needed. Respondents used a scale of -1 (fewer areas needed) to 1 (more areas needed). Most reported the need for additional natural resource areas for improved air quality, protection of plants, protection of water quality, and protection of wildlife.

Experience Use History

Chavez (2001, 2003) found evidence of repeat use of sites over time and plans to return to natural resource recreation areas multiple times per year by Latinos. A series of day use studies in southern California (Chavez 2001) have indicated that although Latinos are not found at all sites across forests, they are found in particular locations. At those sites, Latinos are often repeat visitors, who learned about the sites from family and friends, and who have plans to return to those sites in the future. Some respondents returned to the same day use site multiple times each summer. Respondent perceptions were that the natural resource recreation areas provided great recreation experiences, were well worth the money it took to take the trip, and planned to tell others about their experiences at those areas.

In a qualitative study of Latinos, Chavez (2003) found that family groups were at natural resource recreation areas to rest and relax and have enjoyable family outings. She also found that Latinos were at these natural resource recreation areas because the areas were reminders of homelands. Proximity to homelands (such as Mexico) can contribute to the maintenance of Latino cultures, such as adding to the cultural identity through language or cultural activities. These findings also suggest

that Latinos may be less likely to leave one site and substitute another place—which could be suggested by managers when sites are overcrowded—unless those substituted sites meet the same reminder of homelands criteria.

Serving Needs of Latino Visitors

The remainder of the paper focuses on considering the needs of Latinos in natural resource recreation management. For some of these sections it is important to note that, in general, Latinos tend to use the natural resource recreation areas in larger and extended family groups (nuclear family plus aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) as compared to non-Latinos. Many of the suggestions to consider are directed at urban-proximate natural resource recreation areas where Latinos select and use particular sites, when Latinos are fairly well attached to those places, where large groups of Latinos may use sites for big gatherings with cultural activities, where communications plans need to incorporate the Spanish language and respect cultural meanings, and where barriers to recreation use need to be alleviated.

Suggestions Related to Communications

Research on Latino visitors to two southern California national forest recreation day use areas indicated a large percentage of Spanish speakers and Spanish readers (Chavez 2001). The same studies found a preference for getting information about these areas by word of mouth, particularly from family and friends. It was found that once on site, visitors preferred to receive information through a brochure at the site entrance, signs along the road, and notes on bulletin boards. The information preferred was site specific. At one site, preferences were for information on stream-side areas, things to see and do, rules and regulations, and rare types of plants and animals. At another site, the preferences were for the best times to visit the area to avoid crowds, safety in the area, picnic/barbecue area, and camping in the area.

Research on international symbols (signs without words) in use on two urban-proximate national forests indicated the following were signs well understood by all visitors: Fishing, Swimming, Restrooms, Horse trail, No fireworks, Hiking trail, Picnic area, No trucks, Camping (tent), Drown campfires, and Hikers (Chavez et al. 2004). Fewer visitors understood these symbols: Off-road vehicle trail, Information, and Automobiles permitted. The following symbols were not understood by visitors: No alcohol, No charcoal grills, Amphitheater, Carry water back to the site, Fish hatchery, and Conserve water. The majority of respondents were Latino, but results included others as well.

These various findings suggest some specific actions to consider for serving Latinos at urban-proximate natural resource recreation sites. Providing translated

materials (into Spanish) is strongly suggested. Even better would be to provide well- translated materials that have been back-translated (see Marin and Marin 1991) and are culturally correct. Some international symbols may be used as well, and would possibly serve more than Latino visitors. It appears that traditional use of brochures at the site entrance, signs along the road, and notes on bulletin boards are acceptable. When considering the types of information to provide, managers will need to survey their visitors.

Suggestions Related to Development of Sites

Research conducted in southern California indicated that Latino recreation visitors liked to recreate at relatively developed sites; they wanted restrooms, picnic tables, and related facility development. At one site the strongest preferences expressed by Latinos were for trash cans, water faucets, cooking grills, and picnic tables (Chavez 2002). This was a function of the site being a picnic area. At another site, which is managed for dispersed use, the preferences were for trash cans, telephones, water faucets, and parking areas.

Research indicated that visitors engaged in several activities when recreating on natural resource recreation areas (Chavez 2001). The things they usually engaged in were a function of the site where the data were collected. At one site, for example, the activities were picnic/barbecue, stream play, day hike, watch wildlife, and drive for pleasure. At another site the usual activities were picnic/barbecue, camp, drive for pleasure, stream play, and off-highway vehicle driving. In a study where half of the respondents were Latino, Chavez (2006) found that respondents believed that more areas were needed for camping, day hiking, educational purposes, scenic value, visitor safety, and watching wildlife.

Sites that serve Latino visitors in urban-proximate natural resource recreation areas may need to be developed or renovated to suit the desires of those visitors. Level of development depends on the management plan of an area. For example, picnic areas can be highly developed since they serve a particular need, but managers should exercise more caution for development of dispersed sites. Picnic area development for Latinos should consider grouped tables, barbecues to suit larger groups, and nearby trash containers (Chavez 2002). It is also suggested that Latinos tend to be day users and prefer stream play, picnic/barbecues, and available hiking trails. Some consideration should be made for the longer period Latinos tend to stay at sites—perhaps having services/facilities that fit their preferences (such as group play areas that could be used for volleyball or soccer, drinking water, and toilets). Keeping sites clean is appreciated by all visitors.

Serving Latinos Through Partnerships and Cooperation

Given the backlog of work that needs to be accomplished at many urban-proximate natural resource recreation areas, managers may need to consider partnerships and cooperation with others. Managers of these areas will want to conduct an institutional analysis to determine the capabilities of the agency and to determine who else would be available to assist with site management and visitor services.

Partnerships and cooperation to serve Latinos can be important at three points of the recreation experience—before they arrive onsite, once onsite, and after they return home. Thus, outreach and related efforts can serve many purposes. Managers can use partnerships and cooperation to communicate information to Latino groups before they arrive onsite, they can publicize information meetings, and they can encourage community involvement. If the partners focus on issues salient to Latinos, they will do a good job in developing appropriate environmental education programs and interpretation services and programs. Given how much use occurs onsite, managers can partner with groups to provide public transportation services while onsite, or even to the site (Sorvig 2002). They may also be able to partner with others in developing or renovating recreation areas.

Makopondo (2006) had four major recommendations for creating racially and ethnically inclusive collaboration and partnerships: (1) agencies need to recognize minorities as legitimate stakeholders and invite all relevant organizations and leaders into partnership formation and problem defining, (2) agencies need to consider expanding their mission and goals outside their traditional boundaries, (3) agencies need to make their programs and activities relevant to the lives of racial and ethnic minorities, and (4) agencies must develop genuine personal relationships with their community partners.

Provision of Employment Opportunities

When considering how to best serve Latinos in urban-proximate natural resource recreation areas, managers will want to consider staffing and training (Chavez 2000). One of the barriers for Latinos to taking a trip or taking a trip to a natural area was the perception that few people of their ethnicity were employed at natural areas (Tierney et al. 1998). This perception can be alleviated through the continued hiring of Latinos into urban-proximate natural resource recreation positions. It would also be beneficial to train urban-proximate natural resource recreation paid and volunteer staff members. This training would focus on beliefs and preferences of the recreating public, especially the beliefs and preferences of Latino recreation visitors.

Conclusions

There has been a major shift in the ethnic and racial profile of the United States with large increases in the Latino population. The demographic profiles influence other aspects of life in the United States, including urban-proximate natural resource recreation area management. Latino groups may have expectations about natural resource recreation areas, barriers to participation, and site development preferences that are different than other groups (Chavez 2001, 2002; Tierney et al. 1998).

Suggestions for serving the needs of this rapidly increasing population were offered. These suggestions related to communications, development of recreation sites, use of partnerships and cooperation, and provision of employment opportunities.

The information provided in this article was based on research conducted mostly in southern California. Owing to this emphasis on southern California, the suggestions presented may have different applicability in other areas of the United States.

Latino groups may have expectations about natural resource recreation areas, barriers to participation, and site development preferences that are different than other groups.

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