



Factors influencing perceived appropriateness of concessioner activity in Grand Teton¹

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Abstract Concessioner provided services are integral to the national park visitor experience, and with visitation across NPS units growing steadily, services provided by these public-private-partnerships will likely only increase in importance. Despite this, concerns exist regarding the presence of for-profit entities within national parks. While private businesses may be more responsive to consumers, their presence raises questions regarding equity, access, and perceptions of ownership. The purpose of this study was to assess factors that may influence visitor's perceptions of appropriateness regarding (a) current and (b) future concessioner activities within Grand Teton National park (GTNP). Regression analyses indicate the importance of personal values, rather than actual experiences (positive or negative) with concessions in shaping perceived appropriateness of future concessions activity. Satisfaction with concessions services, amount of concessions activity that respondents perceived in the park in the present, and trust in GTNP were all non-factors in determining anticipated future appropriateness. Instead, a belief that concessions activity would increase, social liberalism, economic conservatism, and place identity with GTNP were related to perceptions that concessioner activity at GTNP would be inappropriately high in the future. Although the regression predicting future beliefs was robust ($R^2 = 0.43$), no variables significantly predicted current beliefs ($R^2 = 0.05$).

Introduction

Concessioners, private companies that work to provide visitor services, are a critical partner of the National Park Service (NPS). Collectively, the NPS administers almost 500 concession contracts that gross more than \$1 billion annually (National Park Service, 2018c). Concessioners offer services that are not provided directly by the parks, but are nonetheless vital to their continued operation and the fulfilment of their mission. These public-private partnerships are an integral part of the history of the NPS, and date back to the days of Stephen Mather, the first Director of the NPS. Mather believed that "Scenery is a hollow

enjoyment to the tourist who sets out in the morning after an indigestible breakfast and a fitful night's sleep on an impossible bed" (National Park Service, 2018a). Since as early as 1872, private partners have helped the NPS deliver a high quality and rewarding visitor experience.

Agreements between private partners and the NPS may include both concessions contracts and commercial use authorizations. Concessions contracts provide services that are necessary to achieving the mission of the park, such as lodging, food and beverage services, and retail operations. Commercial use authorizations allow for-profit entities to conduct commercial activities in a park providing services that are not necessary, but are appropriate for the park

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setting, such as guided tours, trips, and activities (National Park Service, 2018b). In the present day, such agreements are administered by the Commercial Services Program. With visitation across NPS units growing steadily over time, the services provided by these public-private partnerships will likely only grow in importance.

Grand Teton National Park (GTNP) is no exception. A spectacular destination with a range of natural, historic, and recreation resources available for visitors, visitation to GTNP has increased steadily in recent years, with total visits climbing by more than 25% from 2012 to 2017 (Germann, 2018b). In 2018, GTNP hosted more than 3.4 million recreational visits, eclipsing the record set in 2017 (National Park Service, 2019). To meet the demands of an ever increasing number of visitors, the park currently has in place more than 150 concessions contract and commercial use authorizations (Germann, 2018a). Over the next several years, many of the current contracts and agreements in place at GTNP will expire, introducing uncertainty regarding the services delivered, and the private businesses delivering them.

Despite the critical role that concessioner provided services play, concerns exist regarding the presence of for-profit entities within the national parks. On the one hand, private businesses may be more responsive to consumer wants and needs, as they are not saddled with the bureaucratic red-tape that hinders many large governmental agencies. Conversely, the presence of private enterprise may create or exacerbate issues of equity and access, and potentially erode public perceptions of ownership and investment in these protected areas. With this in mind, the purpose of our study was to assess factors that may influence perceived acceptability of private service delivery in national parks, now and in the future.

Background

In the sections that follow, we will provide an overview of relevant literature and previous research related to visitor behavior and preferences in national parks and other parks/protected areas.

Park governance models

In the United States, the governance of national parks involves government ownership of resources, with stewardship and strategic vision provided by a public agency (Eagles, 2009). However, in many instances, visitor services are provided by private companies, known as concessioners. Concessioner agreements may include concessions contracts, which address services that are critical to the mission of the park, or commercial use authorizations, which provide services that are not critical, but are appropriate within a park setting. While a majority of the NPS' funding comes from tax-based support, the Commercial Services Program administers almost 500 concession contracts that gross more than \$1 billion annually (National Park Service, 2018c).

Such arrangements in these public spaces raises many questions, and allows for comparison in service delivery between the public agency and its for-profit partners. Generally, large government agencies are perceived of as inflexible and unresponsive, as a result of significant bureaucratic limitations (Eagles, 2009). The inflexibility that results from the strict structures of a public agency are one reason for the presence of concessioners, as direct service provision by government agencies is inefficient and not cost effective compared to for-profit service delivery (Crompton, 1999).

Criticisms of this model often revolve around a lack of transparency and accountability on the part of private companies (Hannah, 2006), and negative implications for equity of access as a result of the profit making motive (Eagles, 2009). Additionally, it may be difficult for the public partner to effectively monitor contract adherence, resulting in high levels of independent action among private concessioners (Eagles et al., 2002). In a direct comparison using British Columbia and Ontario provincial parks, park visitors and employees rated the public-private management model used by British Columbia less favorably than the government service provision model utilized by Ontario. (Buteau-Duitschaeffer et al., 2010). The public-private model scored lower in each of the 11 elements used to assess good governance,

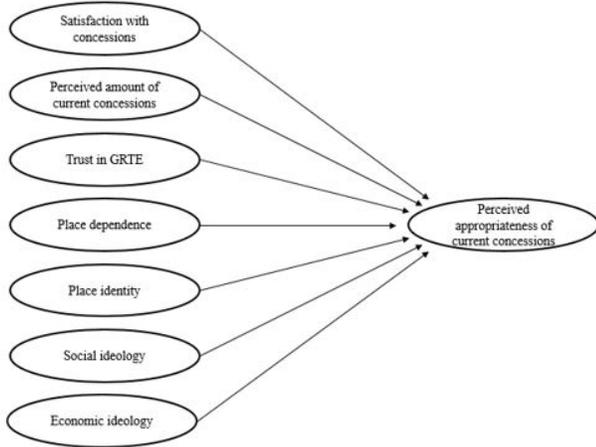


Figure 1. Model of potential factors affecting park visitors’ perceptions of the appropriateness of current concessions.

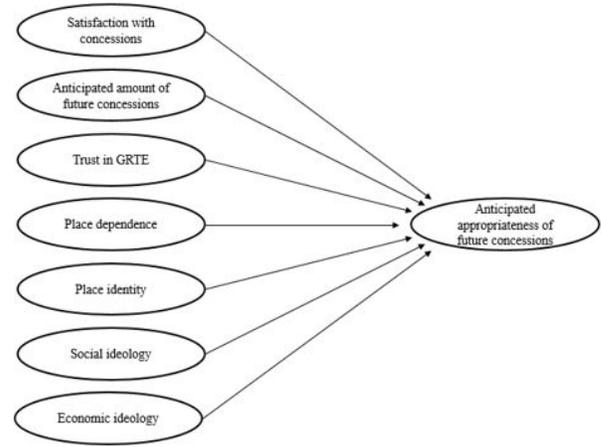


Figure 2. Model of potential factors affecting park visitors’ perceptions of the appropriateness of future concessions.

which notably included factors such as efficiency, equity, transparency, and accountability.

Acceptability of private activity in public parks

A growing body of research examines perceptions of acceptability of private activity in public parks, predominantly at the local and state level. Existing research indicates that overall, attitudes towards using privatization as a funding source at the local level are slightly positive (Pitas et al., 2018). However, significant variation exists between specific practices; while corporate sponsorship and outsourcing are viewed more positively, the sale of park resources to for-profit entities is seen in a much more negative light (Mowen et al., 2006; Pitas et al., 2018). A similar pattern was reported in an outdoor recreation context by Samnaliev et al. (2006), wherein alternative funding strategies such as corporate sponsorship and outsourcing were viewed more positively than the sale of public assets to private companies. At the state level, respondents in a 2010 study preferred that the state park agency provide services that are consistent with the mission of resource stewardship and education, but preferred private provision of services such as food and beverage and watercraft rentals based on perceptions of quality and cost effectiveness (Kerstetter et al., 2010). In their analysis Kerstetter et al. illustrate that it is important to take into account the na-

ture of the services in question when examining user preferences for service delivery.

In both the local and outdoor recreation contexts, it appears that visitors weigh various alternatives when making decisions regarding acceptability, and generally prefer private service delivery over diminished service delivery, or the outright cancellation of some services (Pitas et al., 2015). Certain types of commercial activity may also be becoming more acceptable over time, as members of the public become desensitized to the presence of private entities operating in public spaces (Mowen et al., 2016). Such a shift in attitudes over time may have negative implications for public funding of local park and recreation services, as more positive attitudes towards privatization have been linked to decreased support for the use of taxes as a funding source (Pitas et al., 2019a).

Factors influencing perceived acceptability

A number of factors may potentially influence perceived acceptability of private service delivery, some of which are related to individual experiences with the agency or service in question. For example, a greater level of factual knowledge regarding specific privatization practices has been linked to greater perceived acceptability, potentially because factual knowledge defuses misunderstandings and misconceptions (Pitas et al., 2018). Conversely, Mowen et al.

(2009) found that visitors who perceived their state park agency to be financially responsible had more negative attitudes towards privatization practices, as did visitors who had previously used services provided by concessioners.

Beyond the services or agencies in question, past research has also examined the influence of individual characteristics and person-place relationships in determining perceived acceptability. Interestingly, in the context of local park and recreation services it would appear that the issue of private service delivery is viewed by visitors predominantly through a social lens, rather than an economic one. Although a common argument for private service delivery is greater efficiency and reduced burden on tax-payers, economic ideology appears to have no effect on perceived acceptability of private service delivery; a more conservative social ideology is linked to greater perceived acceptability (Pitas et al., 2019b). An individual's deeply rooted value system has also been linked to perceived acceptability of private service provision, again at the local level. Using the value orientations described by Schwartz (2012), those individuals with a greater focus on the wellbeing of others (self-transcendent value orientation) were less supportive of private service delivery, while those who were more focused on their personal wellbeing (self-enhancement value orientation) were more supportive of private service delivery (Pitas et al., 2019b).

Study purpose

Although a substantial body of research addresses the perceived acceptability of private service delivery in park settings at the local and state level, little is known about concessioner services in national parks. In this study, we seek to address this gap, and extend the findings of previous research to a national park setting. Although national parks share much in common with parks and protected areas at the local and state level, given their size, scope, and significance, they represent a unique content within which to study the issue of private activity in public spaces. Specifically, we sought to address the following research questions:

1. What factors affect visitor's perceived appropriateness of current concessioner activities in GTNP?
2. What factors affect visitor's anticipated appropriateness of future concessioner activities in GTNP?

Methods

Sample and data collection

Data for this analysis were collected at three predetermined locations in GTNP that offer concessioner provided services. We collected a total of 210 completed surveys (81.7% response rate), using a systematic random intercept method: when approaching groups of potential respondents, we asked if the adult with the next birthday was willing to participate. If the first adult refused, we then asked the adult with the next closest birthday; this pattern was repeated until we obtained consent, or all members of the party had been asked. The sampling schedule took place over the course of approximately 20 days, and was stratified by time of day (e.g. AM or PM) and day of the week (e.g. weekday or weekend).

Survey design

We designed the survey to reflect past research examining the perceived acceptability of private service delivery in parks conducted at the local and state level. In addition to demographic information (see Table 1), visitors were asked to rate their experiences with current concessioner services, as well as their beliefs regarding future concessioner services. Visitor trust in GTNP, as well as their place attachment to GTNP, and their social and economic ideology were also assessed.

Satisfaction with concessioner services

Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with concessioner provided services at GTNP which they had personally utilized. Satisfaction with six total services was assessed, on a seven-point scale from 1 = "extremely dissatisfied" to 7 = "extremely satisfied." See Table 2.

<i>Demographic characteristic</i>	<i>n (%) or Mean</i>
Sex/Gender	
Female	91 (44.2%)
Male	112 (54.4%)
Other/non-binary/third gender	3 (1.5%)
Age in years	
	46.6 years
18-35	61 (30.7%)
36-50	56 (28.1%)
51-65	51 (25.6%)
66 or older	31 (15.6%)
Prefer not to disclose	11
Highest level of education	
High school diploma or GED	15 (7.8%)
Some college or associate’s degree	37 (19.2%)
Bachelor’s degree	69 (35.8%)
Graduate or professional degree	72 (37.3%)
Prefer not to disclose	9
Income	
\$40,000 or less	25 (16.7%)
\$40,001 to \$80,000	40 (26.7%)
\$80,001 to \$120,000	51 (34%)
\$120,001 to \$160,000	13 (8.7%)
\$160,001 or greater	21 (14%)
Prefer not to disclose	52
Residence	
United States	184 (90.6%)
International	19 (9.4%)
Prefer not to disclose	7
Race/Ethnicity (choose all that apply)	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1 (<1%)
Asian	3 (1.59%)
Black or African American	2 (1.06%)
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	10 (5.3%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1 (<1%)
White	172 (91%)
Prefer not to disclose	21

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents.

Amount of concessioner services

Respondents were asked to describe how much concessioner activity they had noticed in the park during their current visit, and how much they anticipated would be present in the future. Current perceptions were measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “none at all” to 5 = “a great deal.” Beliefs regarding future levels of concessioner service were measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “much less” to 5 = “much more.” See Table 2.

Trust in GTNP

Respondents were asked to rate their trust in GTNP on a four-point scale from 1 = “not at all” to 4 = “a lot.” See Table 2.

Place attachment

Place dependence and place identity were measured by asking respondents to rate their level of agreement with six statements, based on the work of Williams and Vaske (2003). Statements were designed to assess respondents’ emotional (identity) and functional (dependence) attachment to GTNP, and were measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “strongly dis-

Construct/item	Mean	Standard deviation
Satisfaction ($\alpha = .902$) ¹	5.82	1.06
Campgrounds	6.13	1.16
Lodging	5.83	1.00
Retail	5.78	1.11
Fuel	5.60	1.36
Food/beverage	5.57	1.34
Watercraft rentals	5.22	1.65
Amount of concessions activity		
How much private concessioner activity have you noticed in the park today? ²	2.54	1.13
Do you think there will be more or less private concessioner activity in the park in the future? ³	3.95	.768
Trust in GRTE ⁴	3.94	.440
Place dependence ⁵ ($\alpha = .848$)	4.58	1.32
I would not substitute any other place for the types of things I do at GTNP	4.58	1.70
GTNP is the best place for what I like to do	4.76	1.36
Doing what I do at GTNP is more important to me than doing it at any other place	4.40	1.45
Place identity ⁵ ($\alpha = .861$)	5.41	1.18
GTNP means a lot to me	6.02	1.09
I feel that GTNP is a part of me	4.96	1.45
I am very attached to GTNP	5.29	1.38
Ideology ⁶		
Social ideology ¹	3.46	1.78
Economic ideology ¹	3.95	1.75

¹Measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “extremely dissatisfied” to 7 = “extremely satisfied”

²Measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “none at all” to 5 = “a great deal”

³Measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “much less” to 5 = “much more”

⁴Measured on a four-point scale from 1 = “not at all” to 4 = “a great deal”

⁵Measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”

⁶Measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “very liberal” to 7 = “very conservative”

Table 2. Summarized responses to questions from 210 completed surveys.

agree” to 7 = “strongly agree.” See Table 2.

Ideology

Social and economic ideology were measured by asking respondents to rate their views with respect to both social and economic issues. For both items, responses were measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “very liberal” to 7 = “very conservative.” See Table 2.

Perceived acceptability of concessions services

The dependent variables, perceived acceptability of present concessioner services and anticipated appropriateness of future concessioner services at

GTNP, were measured through two separate items. Respondents were asked to rate how they felt about the amount of private concessioner activity they noticed in the park at present, and how they felt about the amount they felt would be present in the future. Responses were measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “far too little” to 5 = “far too much.” See Table 3.

Data analysis

We performed all data analysis in IBM SPSS version 25. Descriptive analysis was performed on respondent demographic information, as well as predictor and dependent variables. For place dependence, place identity, and satisfaction with concessions at

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
How do you feel about the amount of private concessioner activity you noticed in the park today? ¹	3.17	.505
How do you feel about the amount of private concessioner activity you think will be present in the park in the future?	3.66	.856

¹Measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “far too little” to 5 = “far too much”

Table 3. Survey respondents’ perceptions of current and future concessioner activity in GTNP.

GTNP, we created multi-item indices, using Chronbach’s alpha to assess scale reliability. To answer our specific research questions, we tested the following models (see Figures 1 and 2) using ordinary least squares linear regression.

Preliminary results

Demographic data

Respondents were predominantly white (91%), residents of the United States (90.6%), and were more likely to be male (54.4%) than female or another gender. Respondents averaged 46.6 years of age, and were generally highly educated (73.1% reported a bachelor’s degree or greater). See Table 1.

Respondents reported a higher degree of place identity (M = 5.41, SD = 1.18) than place dependence with GTNP (M = 4.58, SD = 1.32). Respondents were moderate (M = 3.95, SD = 1.75) regarding economic issues, and slightly liberal (M = 3.46, SD = 1.78) regarding social issues. Respondents were generally satisfied with the concessions services they had used in GTNP (M = 5.82, SD = 1.06); campgrounds received the most positive rating (M = 6.13, SD = 1.16), while watercraft rentals received the least positive rating (M = 5.22, SD = 1.65). Respondents perceived a moderate amount of private concessioner activity in the park during the present (M = 2.54, SD = 1.13), and anticipated that there would be more private concessioner activity in the park in the future (M = 3.95, SD = .763). Respondent trust in GTNP was high (M = 3.94, SD = .440). Respondents perceived that private concessioner activity would be more inappropriate in the future (M = 3.66, SD = .865) than in the present (M = 3.17, SD = .505). Chronbach’s alpha was ac-

ceptable for all indices, ranging from 0.848 to 0.902. See Tables 2 and 3.

Research question one

An ordinary least squares linear regression predicting perceived appropriateness of current concessions at GTNP was non-significant (p = 0.350, f = 1.13, R² = 0.05). No individual predictors were significant in the regression model. See Table 4.

Research question two

An ordinary least squares linear regression predicting anticipated appropriateness of future concessions at GTNP was significant, with approximately 43% of variance explained (p < .001, f = 15.83, R² = 0.43). Anticipation that there would be more concessions activity at GTNP in the future was significantly related to anticipation that there would be too much concessioner activity in the future (β = 0.577, p < .001), as was greater social liberalism (β = -0.298, p = 0.011), economic conservatism (β = 0.270, p = 0.021), and place identity (β = 0.144, p = 0.050). Place dependence (β = -0.016, p = 0.833), satisfaction with concessions (β = -0.042, p = 0.515), and trust in GTNP (β = -0.053, p = 0.402) were not significant in the regression model. See Table 5.

Conclusions

Services provided by private concessioners are vital to the continued capacity of the NPS to deliver on its dual mandate of resource protection and recreation management. Though concessions have long been a part of NPS operations, their importance has grown over time, a trend that is likely to continue with increased visitation at NPS sites expected into the fu-

Criterion	B (SE)	β	t-value	p-value
Appropriateness of current concessions				.350
Amount of current concessioners	.049(.035)	.116	1.34	.164
Social ideology	-.022(.040)	-.084	-.549	.584
Economic ideology	-.001(.040)	-.002	-.014	.989
Place dependence	.033(.035)	.092	.944	.347
Place identity	.002(.038)	.004	.044	.965
Satisfaction with concessions	-.061(.040)	-.127	-1.534	.127
Trust in GRTE	-.120(.096)	-.102	-1.25	.212

$R^2 = .05, f = 1.13$

Table 4. Results of a model (see Figure 1) predicting appropriateness of current concessions based on key factors assessed in respondents.

ture. Grand Teton National Park is no exception, as park managers currently oversee more than 150 concessions contracts providing services to more than 3 million recreational visits annually. Over the next several years, many of the current contracts and agreements in place at GTNP will expire, introducing uncertainty regarding the services delivered, and the private businesses delivering them. With the growing centrality of concessioner services across the NPS, and the potential changes coming to GTNP, we sought to explore potential factors influencing perceived appropriateness of current and future concessioner services at GTNP.

The results we present indicate the importance of personal values, rather than actual experiences (positive or negative) with concessions or the NPS, in shaping perceived appropriateness of future concessions activity. Satisfaction with concessions services, the amount of concessions activity that respondents perceived in the park in the present, and trust in GTNP were all non-factors in determining anticipated appropriateness. Instead, respondent’s personal characteristics, as well their emotional attachment to GTNP, were significantly related to perceptions appropriateness. As such, it would appear that visitor conflict with concessions activity is social-values conflict, rather than interpersonal/goal interference conflict (Vaske et al., 1995). That is to say, if concessions are viewed in a negative light by visitors, it is not because of actual service quality on the part of the concessioner. The role of place identity rather

than dependence bolsters this conclusion, as emotional connections to place, but not functional ones, were significant in the future model.

Based off of our results, it also appears that there is concern among visitors at GTNP about an increase in commercial activity within the park, and a perception that such an increase would have negative repercussions for the visitor experience. While our regression model predicting anticipated appropriateness of future concessions was significant and showed a robust predictive power, our model predicting perceived appropriateness of current concessions was non-significant, and had no significant individual predictors; specifically, ideology and place identity were significant in the future model, but had no effect in the present model. This suggests that there is nothing inherently negative about concessions services for individuals based on their ideology or their place identity, but rather that individuals with certain personal characteristics, or certain types of connection to GTNP, fear an increase in noticeable commercial activity. Although not reported in this analysis, open-ended comments recorded during the survey process support the notion that over-commercialism in the future is perceived as a threat to the integrity of the visitor experience.

The significance of social ideology in determining anticipated acceptability in our present analysis is consistent with past research examining private activity in public parks at the local level (Pitas et al.,

Criterion	B (SE)	Beta	t-value	p-value
Appropriateness of future concessions				<.001
Amount of future concessioners	.629(.069)	.577	9.09	<.001
Social ideology	-.142(.055)	-.298	-2.57	.011
Economic ideology	.129(.055)	.270	2.33	.021
Place dependence	-.010(.048)	-.016	-.211	.833
Place identity	.103(.052)	.144	1.98	.050
Satisfaction with concessions	-.035(.054)	-.042	-.652	.515
Trust in GRTE	-.114(.136)	-.053	-.841	.402

R² = .430, f = 15.83

Table 5. Results of a model (see Figure 2) predicting appropriateness of future concessions based on key factors assessed in respondents.

2018, 2019b). Similar to responses at the local level, greater social liberalism among respondents at GTNP was related to more negative evaluations of increased private activity in the future. This is consistent with the idea that socially liberal individuals value equity in access to benefits across groups (Gerber et al., 2010; Graziano et al., 2007). Counterintuitively, and contrary to previous research, economic ideology was significant in the future model; greater economic conservatism was related to more negative evaluations of increased private activity in the future. This relationship may indicate that there is something unique about the national park context, the sample we used, or that an interaction existed with an exogenous variable not accounted for in the current model.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. Unfortunately, the sample collected was highly homogenous, and largely consisted of White American residents. Also related to sample, we originally intended to survey a larger group of respondents, but time constraints resulted in a smaller than optimal sample. Regarding the survey instrument, several concepts were measured using single-item measures; multiple item indices for all concepts would be preferable to increase predictive power and reliability.

Management implications and conclusion

Despite these limitations, we still believe the results we present in this analysis have potential implications for the management of both current and future concessioner provided services. For park managers and

other decision makers, our most substantial findings may be the level of visitor concern regarding any potential increase in perceptible commercial activity at GTNP in the future. In the present, we would advise that concessioner employees maintain a low-profile when providing services in the context of a national park. This may mean avoiding ostentatious corporate logos, maintaining a color or design scheme that is consistent with NPS facilities, or other strategies to avoid drawing unnecessary attention. We make a similar recommendation when considering future concessioner provided services. An increase in perceptible commercial activity in GTNP was the single strongest predictor in our future model, and steps should be taken to minimize the visible presence of any new commercial services.

At a more fundamental level, managers should carefully consider the necessity of any concessioner activity, new or existing. National parks represent a unique setting for recreation and conservation, and a context that allows visitors to escape from the pace and flow of their “everyday” lives. Concessioner services that impinge on the visitor experience, even those that may be appropriate in non-park contexts, should only be considered for implementation after significant scrutiny. Such decisions may be difficult, and necessarily rely upon the discretion of park managers, who must exercise their best judgement, and all available evidence. We believe that the results we present in this manuscript provide a valuable addition to that evidence, and may progress the conversation regarding private activity in public spaces.

Future work

Future work may wish to expand on the current research in a variety of specific ways. Potential avenues for future work may include:

Including measures of individual values and value orientations that may influence visitor acceptability of future concessioner provided services (e.g. anthropocentric or biocentric, self-focused or other-focused, etc.). Given the role of social and economic ideology, expanded measures of ideology (beyond the single-item measures used in this study) may also be warranted.

Further investigation into factors influencing perceived acceptability of current concessions activities.

Continued efforts to diversify the sample of respondents, from a demographic standpoint, but also from a domestic vs. international visitor standpoint. Non-white and international visitors were not adequately sampled, and given the importance of these groups to the NPS, future work may wish to consider them specifically.

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