

Research to Support Application of the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection  
Framework at Zion National Park

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Introduction

As the name suggests, the national park system contains natural and cultural resources of national, and increasingly, international significance. Units of the national park system contain natural and cultural resources of great importance to the nation and, in many cases, to the international community. Given the significance of this resource base, public demand to see and experience these areas is not surprising. Data on visitation to the national park system dramatically support this premise. Visits to the national park system are approaching 300 million per year.

The increasing popularity of the national park system presents substantial management challenges. Too many visitors may cause unacceptable impacts to fragile natural and cultural resources, and may also cause crowding and other social impacts which degrade the quality of the visitor experience. How many visitors can ultimately be accommodated in a park or related area? How much resource and social impact should be allowed? These and related questions are commonly referred to as carrying capacity (Manning 1999; Stankey and Manning 1986; Shelby and Heberlein 1986; Graefe et al. 1984).

Zion National Park is a good example of the issues noted above. This unit of the national park system contains significant natural and recreational resources. The area draws increasing number of visitors, and this can result in significant resource and social impacts. How much and what types of visitor use can ultimately be accommodated in Zion National Park? This question is of special urgency in the backcountry/wilderness portion of the park for which a management plan is now being formulated.

#### Visitor Experience and Resource Protection: A Carrying Capacity Framework

Several years ago, the National Park Service began developing a carrying capacity framework titled Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) (National Park Service 1997). As the name suggests, this planning framework is aimed at maintaining the quality of the visitor experience and protecting natural and cultural resources in the face of increasing visitor use. VERP is built upon the same basic principles and concepts that drive other contemporary carrying capacity and related planning/management frameworks, including Limits of Acceptable Change (Stankey et al. 1985), and Visitor Impact Management (Graefe et al. 1990).

VERP contains several critical steps that can be supported by research. The first is collecting baseline data on visitor use and associated resource and social impact. How many and what types of visitor uses are occurring where, and what resource and social impacts are associated with such use? The second step is identification of indicators and standards of quality for natural/cultural resources and the visitor experience. Indicators of quality are measurable, manageable variable that help define the quality of natural/cultural resources and the visitor experience. Standards of quality

