



Identifying Indicators of Quality for the Backcountry Visitor Experience at Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska, USA



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Introduction

Kenai Fjords National Park (KEFJ) protects over 600,000 acres and has approximately 400 miles of coastline. Sea kayaking is a popular activity and one of the primary ways visitors access the coastal backcountry area of the park. However, suitable landing and camping beaches are topographically limited. This concentrates visitor use in more accessible areas. Resource and social values may be at risk for more severe and rapid impacts resulting from increasing levels of use and higher visitor densities in specific areas. Identifying indicators and standards of quality can help managers protect these values.



Management-by-Objectives Frameworks

Management objectives: desired resource and social conditions to be provided

Indicators of quality: specific, measurable variables that serve as proxies for management objectives

Standards of quality: minimum acceptable condition of indicator variables

Objectives

1. Collect baseline data on visitor use
2. Identify indicators of quality for the backcountry experience

Study Design and Methods

- On-site survey of backcountry visitors conducted in July and August 2010 (n = 13)
- Open-ended questions:
 - ◊ What did you *enjoy most* about your visit?
 - ◊ What did you *enjoy least* about your visit?
 - ◊ What would you *ask managers to change*?
- Close-ended questions:
 - ◊ Reasons for visiting
 - ◊ Rate importance of potential issues or problems
- Responses coded according to criteria outlined in Manning 2011 to identify indicators of quality

Meet the Visitors

- Primarily male (61.5%)
- Average age = 36 years
- Mostly first-time visitors to KEFJ (92.3%)
- Majority participated in guided trip (61.5%)
- Primarily day trips (61.5%)
 - ◊ Multi-day trips 3 to 19 days (mean = 8)



Photo by Jim Pfeifferberger, NPS

Reasons for Visiting

	Mean*	SD
To learn about the cultural history of the area	2.1	0.86
To see and learn about the natural environment of this area	4.23	0.73
To participate in a recreational activity (e.g. kayaking, hiking)	4.46	0.66
To be with family and/or friends	4.0	1.13
To get some exercise	3.0	0.95
To experience solitude	3.31	1.11

*1 = Not important; 2 = Somewhat Important; 3 = Moderately important; 4 = Very important; 5 = Extremely important

Things that made the visit more or less enjoyable

	Percent
Enjoyed Most	
Seeing wildlife	46.2
Scenery/beauty	30.8
Viewing glaciers	23.1
Experiencing solitude	23.1
Enjoyed Least	
Rain/Fog/Weather	76.9
Noise from tour boats	7.7

What visitors would ask managers to change

Item	Percent
Nothing	30.8
Increase visitor services (e.g. lodging, viewpoints)	15.2
Limit development in area	7.7
Increase access	7.7
Allow fewer tour boats	7.7

The values of KEFJ

	Percent
Most Valued	
Being in nature	38.5
Wildlife	30.8
Sense of wildness/freedom	23.1
Important Qualities	
Wildlife	38.5
Solitude/serenity	30.8

Evaluations of potential problems

Item	Mean	SD
Noise from tour boats	2.31	0.86
Speed of tour boats	1.90	0.99
Presence of tour boats	1.85	0.99
Damage to ghost trees	1.57	0.79
Env. impact to campsites	1.56	0.73
Presence of large kayaking groups	1.50	0.67
Visitors making too much noise	1.46	0.78
Env. impact to beaches	1.44	0.73
Visitors harassing wildlife	1.33	0.65
Air quality	1.25	0.62
No. of people at beaches	1.18	0.41
No. of kayaking groups	1.15	0.41

*1 = Not a problem; 2 = Small problem; 3 = Big problem

Indicators of Quality

- Opportunities for experiencing solitude
- Scenic quality of natural environment
- Wildlife-viewing opportunities
- Kayak/tour boat interactions
- Natural sounds

Next Steps

1. Administer visitor survey summer 2012
 - ◊ Measure standards for selected indicator variables
2. Brainstorm management alternatives
3. Develop backcountry management and coastal resource stewardship plans

Take-Home Points

- Visitor surveys can be a useful tool for identifying resource and social indicators of quality
- Visitors at KEFJ found opportunities for experiencing solitude, scenic quality of the natural environment, wildlife-viewing opportunities, kayak/tour boat interactions, and natural sounds to be important factors in determining the quality of the backcountry experience
- Currently, visitors are encountering very few issues they consider to be problems out on the coast

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