

Visitor/Non-Visitor Use Constraints: Exploring Ethnic Minority Experiences and Perspectives

General Technical Report Submitted to:
**The Golden Gate National Recreation Area
and
The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nina S. Roberts, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Principal Investigator



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Dr. Nina S. Roberts, Principal Investigator

Raphael Crawford-Marks, Graduate Research Assistant

Michele Laskowski, Research Technician

This report was prepared by San Francisco State University for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. This focus group study attempts to help realize the park goals of understanding how to improve “connecting people to the parks” and how best to engage under-represented communities in plans and programs. This was especially timely given the onset of the park’s General Management Plan update and other major GGNRA and GGNPC planning efforts related to both trails and transportation access.

This study was approved by the NPS Social Science Program, U.S. Department of the Interior, and subsequently received OMB approval as well. The purpose of this report is to summarize the results of this study including the following: 1) To describe the racial, ethnic and cultural patterns in use and non-use of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, 2) To identify primary constraints to use or visitation for these constituents and, 3) To learn how best to engage some of the local under-represented groups in park planning and projects.

Eight focus groups consisting of nearly 100 ethnic minority residents ($n=99$) in three Bay Area counties within the GGNRA boundaries (San Mateo, San Francisco, and Marin) were conducted between September and December 2006. The target racial groups were Hispanic/Latino, African Americans/Black, and Asian/Pacific Pacific Islanders as determined by ethnic majority groups for each county identified through local Census data. A snowball sampling technique occurred with trusted and respected community leaders to ultimately form each focus group process that included between 9 and 15 participants.

Focus group recruitment emphasized selecting a majority of individuals that were unfamiliar with national park sites in GGNRA in order to better understand "obstacles" to their use of parklands; however, it was also essential that some of the participants involved had visited to learn about their connections as well. Subsequently, more than one-third of the participants involved in this study had visited at least one GGNRA site in the past year to provide some understanding of their 'visitor experience.' It is important to note that many comments surfacing from this focus group sample, that are reported herein, were not always specific to GGNRA and a national park site, but to parks in general, unless otherwise specifically noted in this report. Nonetheless, comments about "park experiences," in general, do affect feelings, associations and value choices that are made by these populations in regard to visiting a park, and should be considered in any park's planning and programming.

Major results and findings:

- All groups researched expressed a clear desire to enjoy the numerous benefits associated with outdoor recreation and interest in education about national parks.
- Many comments that surfaced in the interviews provided indicators of park use constraints independent of type of park and overall management structure (e.g., some people did not distinguish between city, state, or national parks).
- Cultural connections to nature/natural environment ranged from mental and physical benefits to spiritual and religious gains in personal life.
- Participants identified benefits of parks in relation to nature being healthy with a typical emphasis on mental health (parks as reducing stress/strains of every day life) and in reference to increasing their connection to “God or spirituality”.
- Findings revealed that a noteworthy segment of the population interviewed care deeply about parks and natural resource issues. Many people, however, expressed not knowing how these resources are managed or by whom. This reflects a communications gap between certain ethnic groups and the National Park Service.
- At least one or more participants in every group reported not knowing the specific Golden Gate National Recreation Area existed.
- Results of this study corroborate well with other constraints research findings conducted across the country, as well as includes factors unique to the Bay Area based, for example, on geography and history. The literature review included in this report provides a few related highlights from previous studies and is not intended to be comprehensive.
- Primary constraint factors limiting use of, or visitation to, GGNRA and/or other national parks include the following five broad categories with a few subsequent themes:
 - ✓ Access
 - * *Transportation* issues: Lack of a personal/private vehicle, poor public transport links, and/or lack of knowledge for accessing transportation to reach GGNRA units (offering recreational or educational opportunities) impacts independent, self-sustained access.
 - * *Cost* is a key factor that surfaced among all groups: Gas/auto, parking, buying food, equipment or gear required for certain activities, and entrance fees (where applicable).
 - * *Safety and fear*: Discomfort, personal safety, and fear of the unknown about certain outdoor environments.
 - ✓ Communication: Language issues, signage, printed brochures/materials not always available or known that they exist.
 - ✓ Discrimination, cultural differences, perceived prejudice: Perceived and real; non-verbal cues from other visitors; “too many rules” (e.g., park policies overwhelming and/or confusing); brochures/marketing materials not reflecting ones own cultural context.

- ✓ Lack of Knowledge, Experience, and Awareness: Where to go or what to do, and lack of previous experience/skills to partake in certain activities.
 - ✓ Representation: Lack of ethnic minorities on staff/workforce diversity, lack of awareness of, or questioning, recruitment and hiring practices.
- Concern of some about not feeling welcome has undermined people’s confidence and/or desire to access national parks and some other local outdoor recreation areas.
 - Scarcity of ethnic/cultural diversity of NPS staff-personnel was acknowledged as a lack of “representation” (of community) as an issue yet was not a fundamental barrier across ethnic groups.
 - Several people from one of the African American groups discussed employment and NPS recruitment at length and comments were expressed around challenges and frustration of securing employment. The majority recognized that Blacks were primarily maintenance staff (many Latinos mentioned this latter factor as well).
 - Experiences with and/or fear of potential discrimination was a real issue for many people yet different patterns of use and culturally implicit connotations varied (e.g., “bad looks, stares and glares, bad vibes”). A few people provided explicit / overt examples including racial slurs and harassment by other visitors. Majority of comments related to overall discomfort with non-verbal body language and other non-verbal cues. Perceptions varied yet there was consistency across groups in explaining that these “feelings” from being around other visitors—at times—impacted the overall experience. **Indicators** consisted of three primary variables: Source, Severity, and Consistency. Note: Most African Americans from all three of the groups interviewed consistently expressed feeling ‘discriminated against’ in some capacity from both visitors and staff (non-verbal as well as verbal cues). This was evident yet not manifested as deeply in the other focus groups.
 - Dogs as problems were mentioned by all Latino and Asian groups. For example, dogs off leash create fear. Dog owners not picking up feces in fields, on trails and beaches, and picnic areas reduce enjoyment of the experience. Latinos, overall, expressed concern about dog owners “not caring” or lacking control (e.g., owners assume other people will like their dog as much as they do; allowing dogs to approach other people without their permission; dogs begging for food and owners not retracting them).
 - The longer people are in the Bay Area, their needs and perceptions change (e.g., recent Chinese and Latino immigrants versus 1st or 2nd generation).
 - There are more differences within the Latino community (versus similarities) than any other ethnic group in the study. Attitudes and experiences relate to immigration status, where they were born, level of literacy/education, and socio-economic status. The message is clear that management decisions should not be based on assumptions about the Latino culture as a whole. Examples of where people in the study were from include El Salvador, Guatemala, Spain, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, and Mexico.

- While there were more differences within the Latino community as a whole, it is notable that there were many more similarities than differences when specifically discussing barriers relating to accessing GGNRA parks.
- Communications/media relationship to safety/fear: News reports on violent crimes, murders, search and rescue in parks and outdoor areas, perpetuated fear among these ethnic communities to not want to go or venture out.
- Consistency across all groups on every point relating to “accessibility” (e.g., obstacles identified to outdoor access): Language, cleanliness of bathrooms, transportation issues, safety/fear (crime), cost, and lack of companions desiring to share the experience.
- Family as the number one ‘recreation companion’ was commonly brought up among all groups interviewed.
- Each group suggested that GGNRA should bring information into the community (“to us”) by their established modes of communication. Not enough to have the information ‘out there’. They talked about different factors, yet spoke about the value of park staff learning about their preferred modes of communication for their community in order to connect with them (e.g., language, media, schools, community groups, etc).
- Participants expressed interest in GGNRA coming out to various communities and studying the local norms and traditions (e.g., “engage us accordingly”) with staff who “mirror” their culture and reflect a common background.
- All of the African American/Black participant groups discussed the importance and ‘power’ in having their story told by them. That is, representation in interpretation was critical to many of the participants.
- Targeting/reaching youth through schools and field trips was brought up and discussed by all participants in every group interviewed. For instance, if children are interested and excited about visiting a park, adult parents or care-takers will usually endure any hardship to “make it happen.”



The Golden Gate National Recreation Area must understand both the sense of appreciation for visiting parks and the depth of constraints. Management should do everything possible to mitigate these barriers as well as ensure all sectors of the community are offered equal opportunity to participate in park activities. Everyone should enjoy the many benefits of parks, including health, well-being, and stewardship

A summary of five (5) major areas to demonstrate better connections to under-represented groups in the San Francisco Bay Area can be illustrated as follows¹:

1. Acknowledge that both the GGNRA and Parks Conservancy are attempting to grow in better understanding and connecting people to parks. Continue to provide recognition for the incremental successes and best practices that currently exist.
2. Take short-term steps to insure all community groups contacted have park information, announcements and brochures printed in other major languages with culturally designed contexts for graphics and photographs.
3. Work on designating key community and park linkages (e.g., ‘hubs’ and trailheads with community-based organizations) that reflect welcoming and safe opportunities for individuals and groups to meet and enjoy parks with family or friends.
4. Explore ways to address transportation issues and increase access without cost burden whenever possible (e.g., consider appropriate fiscal partners/sponsors).
5. Seek culturally diverse outreach staff liaisons to work on behalf of the Park and Conservancy to bridge the gap with various ethnic communities around the Bay Area.

¹ See full report for complete series of recommendations.

General Technical Report:

Roberts, N.S. (2007). “Visitor/Non-Visitor Use Constraints: Exploring Ethnic Minority Experiences and Perspectives.” General Technical Report, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, National Park Service. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco State University.