

National Parks Service 'Visitor Use Management' (VUM) in action

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Visitor Use Management training pre-visit

The US National Park Service's approach to Visitor Use Management was not totally new to me, when travelled to the US to spend three weeks to learn more about how it's used in practice. That's because they were kind enough to invite me to a week-long online training course that they run periodically for NPS staff. That gave me a great grounding in how they looked at visitor use, and set me up to investigate further how it compared with the way we approach visitor management in the National Trust.

Day 1 of US NPS Visitor Use Management training

Whoever you talk to in the Park Service, if they are familiar with their Visitor Use Management (VUM) framework it won't be long before you are into a discussion about Desired Conditions, Indicators & Thresholds and Management Actions. In many ways the framework is common with many other planning frameworks that I have come across, but its uniqueness is how its aligned to thinking holistically about visitor use. The focus is on achieving a level of visitor use ***that ensures visitors are getting rewarding experiences whilst providing a high level of care for natural and historic assets.***

First two weeks based in Fort Collins, Colorado

It's all very well getting familiar with frameworks and guidance documents, but what I was keen to understand more about was how the approach was being embedded in the Park Service. Whilst there are similarities to the approach we use at the National Trust, I was also aware of some differences I wanted to find out more about.

Supported by the National Trust and INTO, and with the help of NPS Office of International Affairs, their Denver Service Centre and their InterMountain Regional Office, I set up a fascinating trip to the US. I met people involved in leading and supporting Visitor Use Management and enrolled in the NPS International Volunteer Programme. The visit culminated in a tour of NPS units in Colorado and New Mexico, to look at the VUM challenges in practice.

One thing that stood out to me at the outset was that the NPS is part of the US Federal Government, compared to the Trust which is a not-for profit organisation, receiving no government funding, other than specific grants. Being part of government inevitably subjects the NPS to many more statutory requirements that apply across government, and more specifically to each part of it.

For example, US Park units have a statutory obligation to report visitor use statistics, which they have been doing as far back as 1904 when it was across just 4 parks in a very manual away. Nowadays nearly 400 units report visitor use statistics which are available to the public. Each of these units has a clear methodology for how it counts visits, also available publicly, within a framework managed by the Social Science Program of the NPS. It was a pleasure to spend some time with this unit and find out more about the work they did around visitor use data, but also wider social and economic research.

Another area of their work that interested me was the analysis they do on visitor spend to estimate the economic impacts of National Parks, my sense was that this can play well in US government circles as it's a way to quantify the benefits that parks deliver to communities. It's not something we have looked at so systematically with respect to the impact of National Trust properties and I'd need to think more about the value it would add to our work.



NPS Social Science Program Team - From left to right, Bret Meldrum (Social Science Program Manager). Dave Pettebone (Applied Research Coordinator). Pamela Ziesler (Visitor Use Statistics Program Coordinator), Lynne Koontz (Economist)

It was at my meeting with the Social Science Program that I'd started to understand more about the work the NPS was doing in what it calls "managed access". Like the National Trust, NPS had to use booking systems during Covid to manage visitor volumes. Following on from this, it has been trialling managed access systems at a number of units where managing volumes is one of the primary challenges. This was something I was to learn more about during the rest of my visit.

Whilst in Fort Collins, I had further meetings with the Planning Division of the Denver Service Centre, who support park units in doing their visitor use management planning. I also had

the opportunity to co-host a Webinar attended by around 50 NPS staff, to share more about my role in the National Trust, our history and how we approach visitor use. Before long it was time to get out and see some of the places the Park Service manages.

Tour of NPS units in Colorado and New Mexico

My host for this part of my visit was Zach Miller, who picked me up in Denver for a week-long trip, which took in 6 places across Colorado and New Mexico. Zach proved to be an amazing guide, not only due to his expertise in visitor use management, but also his knowledge of the natural environment, culture and history around the places we visited.

Great Sand Dunes National Park

Our first stop was Great Sand Dunes National Park in southern Colorado. We were lucky enough to visit when there was water flowing through the Medano Creek at the foot on the dunescape which create what local feel like is Colorado's beach, unique in the landlocked state! This can generate a high volume of visits; it was fairly busy on the weekday we were there, but I sensed nowhere as busy as it could get.



Great Sand Dunes National Park – Colorado's beach

This was a good illustration of how the Parks Service looks at Zoning the visitor experience, with much higher volume use in the creek, with many visitors using the area how we see UK beaches used, with far more space between visitors on the dunescape. Dunes by their nature are resilient natural features, so visitor experiences are more likely to be what NPS calls the limiting factor. However, as Zach explained to me it's not always going to be volume that causes the challenge but often visitor behaviours. This is apparent in more sensitive environments later in my visit, when we talk about 'social trails'*. Although it looks like this site can accommodate the volumes, the challenge is probably more that cars queue

back from the admission station and the car parking capacity can fill, I sense these are things VUM planning is likely to look at this location.

* **Social trails** are also referred to as 'desire lines', where a path has been widened or short-cuts formed by human foot traffic. This can lead to erosion of sensitive habitats or environments.



Zach and Rob discussing visitor use challenges at Great Sand Dunes

We left Great Sand Dunes and entered New Mexico. We were privileged to visit the Taos Pueblo, a Native American reservation, a World Heritage Site close to the town of Taos.



Toas Pueblo – World Heritage Site

The Manhattan Project

Day 2 started out with a visit to the town of Los Alamos, which is home to one of three sites that makes up the Manhattan Project National Historic Park. The site tells the story of the people, the events, and the science and engineering that led to the creation of the atomic bombs that helped to bring an end to World War II. The park has a small visitor centre with a short film available to view. The Park is spread over three sites Project Y in Los Alamos, Site X at Oak Ridge, Tennessee and Site W at Hanford, Washington. The visitor experience at Los Alamos is managed in partnership with the Department of Energy, NPS, private land owners and Los Alamos County. Zach suggested that this might represent the kind of model future NPS sites take, with much less visitor infrastructure and managed in partnerships with other organisations.



Rob and Zach at the Los Alamos Visitor Centre

The visit to the Manhattan Project helped to highlight to me the range of different units the Park Service manages, whilst there are 63 National Parks which are probably the better-known sites to international visitors, they manage a total of 424 units which include National

Monuments, National Historic Sites, National Historic Parks, National Battlefields, National Memorials, National Wild and Scenic Rivers and Riverways, amongst other types of unit.

Valles Caldera National Preserve

Our next stop was Valles Caldera National Preserve. About 1.25 million years ago, a spectacular volcanic eruption created the 13-mile-wide circular depression now known as the Valles Caldera. The preserve is known for its huge mountain meadows, abundant wildlife, and meandering streams. The area also preserves the homeland of ancestral native peoples and embraces a rich ranching history. Despite its beauty, the first topic of conversation when we arrived at the gate was visitor counting, as we looked at the people counter at the pedestrian entrance gate. The parks service employs many of these counters around its sites, as part of its measurement of visitor use.



Rob and Zach discussing visitor counting at Valles Caldera (left) and a counter (right)

Here the Superintendent (equivalent to a General Manager in National Trust speak) had suspended charging entry fees, as he felt the facilities available did not merit a charge. The Park Service had only taken over the management of this site in 2015 and thinking is underway around how it could be developed. At the moment, vehicle access deeper into the park is restricted to just 35 vehicles a day, which is based on historic access prior to NPS management. In order to change, NPS needs to go through a planning process which VUM will inform. We stopped in a lovely spot in the Historic Cabin District overlooking the Caldera, which could be where the main facilities could be located in any development.

Bandelier National Monument

The next stop at Bandelier National Monument had to be one of the highlights of the week. The Monument protects over 33,000 acres of rugged but beautiful canyon and mesa

country, as well as evidence of a human presence here going back over 11,000 years. Petroglyphs, dwellings carved into the soft rock cliffs, and standing masonry walls pay tribute to the early days of a culture that still survives in the surrounding communities.

The main thing we noted as we arrived at the entrance station at Bandelier, was that park staff were turning arriving cars away. It was likely this was due to the car park being full, but we were given access and found one of the remaining spaces to park. In the peak season the park is only accessible by shuttle from a White Rock, a town 9 miles away.

Once out of the car, following a quick look at the Visitor Centre, we took the Pueblo Loop Trail. The 1.4 mile trail enabled us to see ancient Pueblo homes carved into the rocks (Cavates) and allowed us to climb up into the homes, which felt like a real privilege. Sadly, one of the homes had been closed due to vandalism, which returns to the visitor behaviour point I made earlier. If this continues, then it's possible in the future that access might be given by guided tour only, if it is felt the cultural assets are at too great a risk. It was interesting to also consider how people can also act as protection against vandalism, as it may be a deterrent to have others around.



Climbing into a Cavates (left) and another Cavate closed due to vandalism (right)

I was also struck by how quiet the trail was, despite the car park having been close to full when we arrived, and cars being turned away. We encountered hardly any other visitors

along the 1.4 miles. The answer might not always be to extend car park, other management options need to be explored. Interestingly, I noticed there is currently an alert on the NPS website, 'Too many visitors, not enough parking', suggesting people visit before 10.30am or after 2pm, to reduce the risk of being unable to visit.

We ended Day 2 in NPS offices in Santa Fe, where Zach invited me to join an online 'Managed Access Community of Practice' meeting. This was attended by park staff who are currently trialling different approaches to managed access. Like the Trust, NPS implemented visitor booking during the pandemic and is now trialling different approaches to managed access at different units.

Perhaps the most mature of these is at Arches National Park, where visitors have to make a reservation to gain admission. It was timely that during my visit, the Salt Lake Tribune ran an article with the headline, 'Arches National Park may have found a magic bullet for overcrowding. Could it work for other parks?'. Later in the week, Zach shared the extensive analysis and modelling that had gone into the Arches managed access system and pointed me in the direction of the evaluation, that I look forward to reading.

Petroglyphs National Monument

Day 3 started with a drive down to Albuquerque, with the focus of the day visiting Petroglyph National Monument. The Monument protects one of the largest petroglyph sites in North America, featuring designs and symbols carved onto volcanic rocks by Native Americans and Spanish settlers 400 to 700 years ago. These images are a valuable record of cultural expression, and hold profound spiritual significance for contemporary Native Americans and for the descendants of the early Spanish settlers. The monument is spread across a number of sites and is jointly managed with the City of Albuquerque.

We started at the visitor centre. The main building housed the Park store - these are run by not-for-profit partners of the Parks Service. There was a small amount of interpretation about the park, but when Covid arrived they put a Park Service Kiosk outside the main building to provide visitor orientation. They have kept this in operation post-Covid, and have a film that can be viewed on an outdoor screen, which was again implemented during Covid and kept. The location of the visitor centre does not provide any access to Petroglyphs and one consideration is to move it to one of the Petroglyph sites. However, this would potentially leave redundant buildings.



An outdoor film theatre – introduced during Covid pandemic but still being used

We drove to Boca Negra Canyon; the site is run by the City. There should have been a fee charged for parking, \$1 weekdays, \$2 weekends, but these were suspended, possibly due to staffing shortages – something which the US seems to be suffering from like the UK. The site was relatively busy, but well below the full capacity of the parking lots. The longest trail is the Mesa Point trail which takes 30 minutes to walk, giving views of countless petroglyphs. This appeared to be the most popular trail on the day visited and although included a fairly steep climb, was sufficiently appealing for older and potentially less active visitors.

The trail gave excellent close-up viewing of petroglyphs - there was some evidence of vandalism on the odd petroglyph and some evidence of social trails. These had been blocked off by metal railings, which are more effective and possibly less expensive than natural barriers e.g. rock. Zach and I discussed what possible indicators might be relating to desired conditions and what the limiting factors might be on capacity. NPS often looks at indicators like number of encounters on a trail, and I could see here why that would be something you might want to consider, because the trail was narrow in places and passing was difficult. If the trail became too busy that might make progress very slow, and lead people off the main trail.



An example of a petrograph and an undercover viewing scope for disabled visitors



We drove to a second site, Piedras Marcadas Canyon, which was just off a main road, served by a small car park on a housing estate. It was clear that this site was used more as a local recreational facility, and the Park Service had taken a different approach to marking out trails than I have seen elsewhere, with metal railings either side of much of the trail route in order to keep people on the trail.

This is apparently a low cost and effective option, but I wondered whether it would be something the Trust would do, as it jarred somewhat with the landscape.

Zach staying on the trail!

We ended the day travelling down to Alamogordo in Southern New Mexico, a short distance from White Sands National Park, which would be the last location we visited on the tour.

White Sands National Park

We left the best until last. Rising from the heart of the Tularosa Basin, is one of the world's great natural wonders - the glistening white sands of New Mexico. Great wave-like dunes of gypsum sand have engulfed 275 square miles of desert, creating the world's largest gypsum dunefield. White Sands National Park preserves a major portion of this unique dunefield. The park was upgraded to a National Park from a National Monument in 2019, and I could see why given its uniqueness.



The visitor centre and other facilities are in the park's historic district, housed in beautiful buildings which are excellent examples of the Pueblo Revival architecture, modelled after the Pueblos and Spanish missions in early New Mexico. As well as visitor interpretation, I found two NPS stores, the second of which was bigger than any other NPS store I have seen. Also, probably larger than the Trust would have in a property that gets a similar volume of visits. There was some ongoing thinking around special planning which included the road access,

parking and use of the historic buildings. I suspect National Park designation was bringing a renewed emphasis to the site and possible visitor volumes would grow in the future.

Zach and Rob discussing spatial planning around the visitor facilities at White Sands

We left the visitor centre to drive into the park and joined the first queue to get into a park that I had witnessed on the trip. This clearly had the potential to lead to queues back on to the main highway.

One simple solution would be to put the entrance kiosk further down the park entrance road. However, this would not reduce queuing and there might be ways admission could be speeded up as an alternative.



The experience itself was magical. Driving on the white sand covered road made it feel like we were in a winter wonderland. We got out of the car into 80-degree heat, but the white sand was cool to the touch. Something that will remain in my memory for a long time. There was an amazing amount of capacity within the park to accommodate vehicles and visitors, whilst enabling people to spread out as they wished.



Rob and Zach having a White Sands experience

Department of the Interior Offices, Washington DC

I was privileged to be able to visit the NPS Washington DC office, in the Department of the Interior (DOI) building in the centre of DC. This is an impressive building, that also houses the DOI Museum. I met Donald Leadbetter, who is the NPS Tourism Program Manager, Stephen Morris, Chief of the Office of International Affairs and Sangita Chari, Program Manager, Office of Relevancy, Diversity & Inclusion.

The initial discussion with Donald and Stephen reflected on my trip, as Stephen and his office had been instrumental in helping to set up the visit. It was great to have a chance to thank him in person. Donald shared some of the work he is doing, and appears to be one of the few voices in NPS which promotes tourism. Part of the work his programme leads, is around packaging up NPS offers in a way that the tourism sector can market, as NPS has no authority to do its own marketing. I had picked up the perception that many NPS sites struggled with crowding, but in discussion my sense is that this is only a relatively small number of very popular national parks. Donald highlighted that many other NPS units, particularly museum-like places and battlefields, were seeing declining visits which was a concern. Promoting them to tourist markets was a potential way of reversing that. We agreed it would be good to keep in touch, particularly in light of the Trust currently doing work on its own Tourism strategy.

Stephen gave me an overview of the work of the International Affairs office, which includes managing the US's World Heritage Site programme and new applications from the US to achieve designation.



Sangita Chari – Program Manager Office of Relevancy, Diversity & Inclusion, Myself, Stephen Morris – Chief of the Office of International Affairs

I shared with Sangita some of the inclusion and diversity work the National Trust was doing under its 'Everyone Welcome' banner. She outlined some of the actions NPS had taken, sharing their Relevancy, Diversity and Inclusion strategy - I will connect Sangita with our Everyone Welcome leaders.



View over the Washington Monument from the roof of DOI building

Before I left the office Stephen took me onto the roof to see a fantastic view across DC!

Shenandoah National Park

Now on the independent leg of my visit the next stop was Shenandoah National Park, which is just 75 miles from Washington, D.C. The park was created in response to the need for a National Park in the East of the US. The park was established in 1935, pieced together from over 3,000 individual tracts of land, purchased or condemned by the Commonwealth of Virginia and presented to the Federal Government. In the process, at least 500 families - described as "almost completely cut off from the current of American life", were displaced. To restore, or rather create, a 'natural' landscape, Civilian



Enjoying Shenandoah

Conservation Corps volunteers dismantled buildings and obscured the detritus of human habitation.

At the core of the park's development was the skyline drive, which runs the 100-mile length of the park. With numerous overlooks across to the Blue Ridge mountains and over the Shenandoah Valley, the drive gives access to numerous trails to magnificent vistas and waterfalls. The park saw nearly 1.5m visits in 2022, with the highest numbers in October for autumn colours. Its proximity to Washington DC and other populated areas, means it can be crowded at times. One trail in particular, the Old Rag Trail, has some crowding issues which in response the Park Service has been piloting a managed access system, where visitors book a day use permit to do the trail. I have arranged to have an online discussion with a member of the team to understand how this is working. The trail is ranked as very strenuous and takes 6-10 hours to complete, so was not on my agenda.

The management issues are around queuing to enter the rock scramble section of the trail and overcrowding at the summit. The park has done some in-depth analysis on the use of the trail using visitor surveys, mobile GPS tracking and visitor counting; all of which informed the managed access pilot.

The park had two visitor centres, the second of which at Big Meadow, told an excellent story of the formation of the park. Visitor centres come across as an important feature of all parks and invariably include a film shown in an auditorium, alongside static interpretation and park staff who provide orientation and advice.



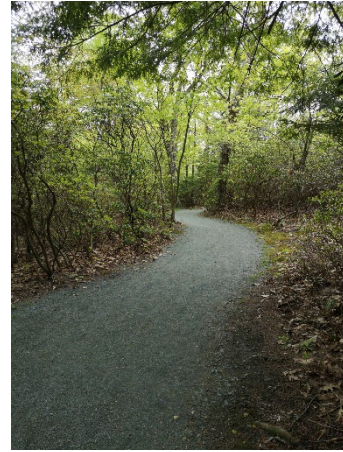
Inside the Big Meadow visitor centre

The future of visitor centres came up a number of times in discussions during my visit, and I wonder whether the traditional approach NPS has taken to these will not reflect the future direction. I will see if I can uncover any further thinking they have done on this, particularly in light of the recent decision of the Peak District NP in the UK has taken to closing its visitor centres due to cost pressures. My sense is whilst the role that Park Staff play will continue to be important, the size of facility in the future would not be as grand as some of the centres I have seen on this trip.

One trail I did complete was the 1.4-mile accessible Limberlost Trail. It was also a trail that features on an initiative the Park Service has with Kids in Parks – an expanding network of family-friendly outdoor adventures called TRACK Trails. Each TRACK Trail features self-

guided brochures and signs. Kids can also earn prizes for tracking their adventures. See the video in the link below:

<https://youtu.be/xLH-a3FUtDw>



Limberlost Trail - TRACK Trail information at the trailhead and the accessible trail

Some final thoughts

I am hugely thankful to the National Trust, NPS and INTO for supporting my time in the US. The visit has left me much to reflect on and has enabled me to establish mutually beneficial contacts within the parks service, that I hope to maintain. I think there will also be opportunity to make wider connections between NPS and the Trust and the continuing relationship we have through INTO. Special thanks go to Zach Miller, who hosted the tour of New Mexico and shared so much of his thinking on visitor use management. I sincerely hope we can host a return visit for Zach in the UK in the near future.