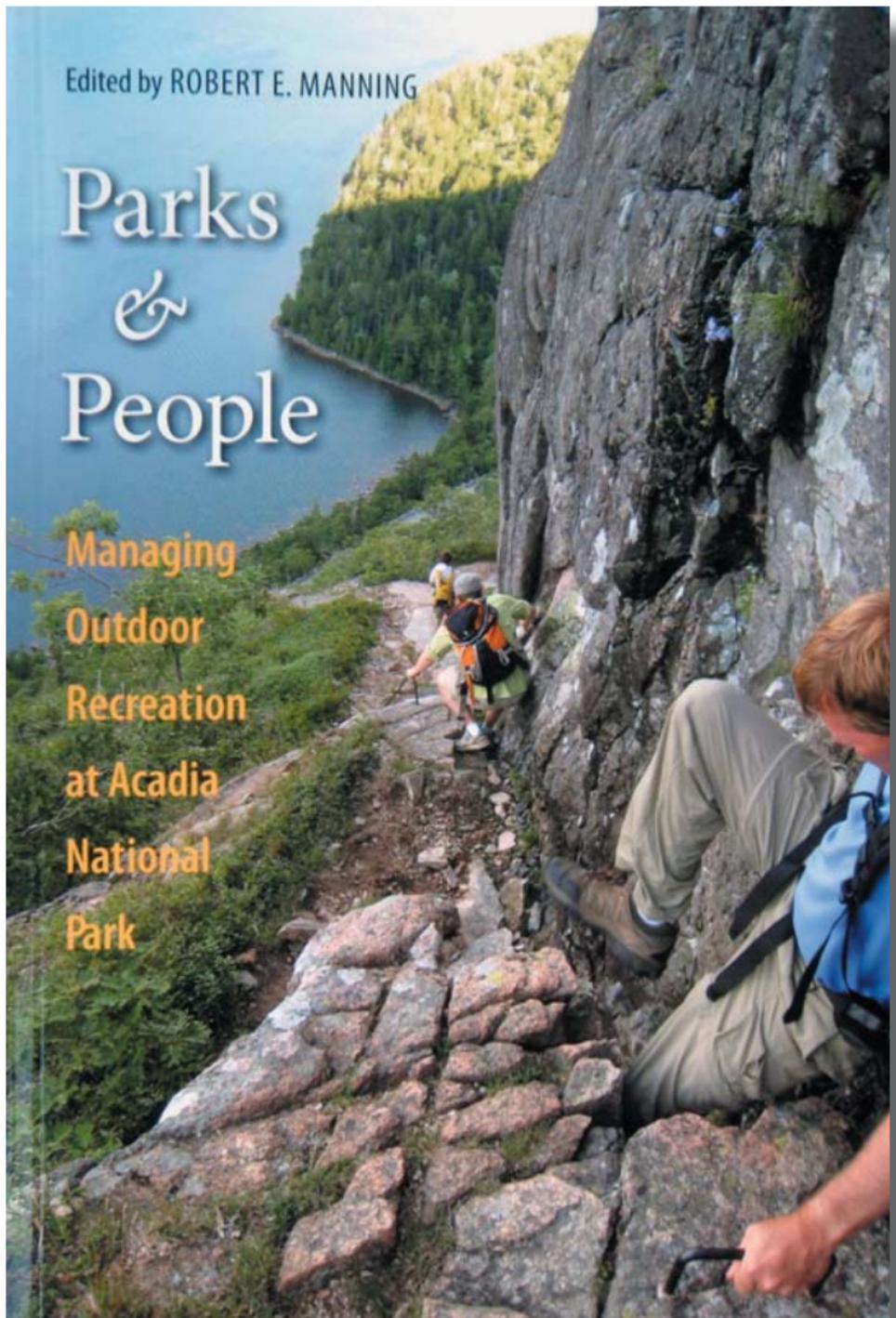


Parks and People: Managing Outdoor Recreation at Acadia National Park

Edited by Robert E. Manning

TO DEAL WITH THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE'S SOMETIMES conflicting mandate to protect and conserve natural resources and at the same time provide a high-quality experience for visitors, the Park Service has developed the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) framework. Robert Manning, professor at the Rubenstein School of Environmental and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont, and director of its Park Studies Laboratory, has used this framework to organize the 26 studies in his latest book, *Parks and People: Managing Outdoor Recreation at Acadia National Park*.

Part I of the book, like the VERP process, starts with studies to determine standards of quality for indicators of conditions of park resources and of the visitor experience. These standards are



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necessary to achieve managers' objectives or "desired conditions." Part II concerns monitoring the indicators, and in Part III managers act on the data they have collected.

The first and longest section of this book is devoted to indicators, mostly indicators that affect visitor experience. Acadia is one of the 10 most visited of the national parks and therefore managers have given a high priority to research on visitor behavior and expectations; thus, this book is more about social science than natural resource science. Many of the studies presented here reveal the complexity of evaluating visitors' responses to surveys asking what they like most and least about the park, and what conditions they suggest managers change. Responses reflect visitor preconceived standards, their level of education about threats to natural resources, and, among other factors, the level of candor with which they are responding.

The reader quickly notices that most of the studies included in this section are devoted to the visitor experience not so much as it threatens the natural landscape, but as it is threatened by the presence of so many other visitors: crowding. Just when and where does a visitor feel crowded? To define a standard of visitor density that is comfortable to the visitor, the authors of "Crowding in Parks and Outdoor Recreation" (chapter 10) bring to bear research from the fields of sociology and social psychology that explains crowding as a normative concept to visitors. The experience of crowding depends on many variables, including visitor expectations, activities fellow visitors are enjoying (e.g., canoeists are crowded by motorboats while motorboaters may not be crowded by canoeists), location (e.g., backcountry hikers want few people per view [ppv] while those enjoying high-use locations tolerate a much higher level of ppv).

One of the studies, for example, involved defining standards for level of use on the carriage roads, a 50-mile (80 km) system of unpaved roads heavily traveled for hiking, biking, and horseback

riding ("Standards of Quality in Parks and Outdoor Recreation," chapter 2). Visitors were shown several photos of a 100-meter (328 ft) stretch of road showing differing numbers of people. Respondents rated the acceptability of the ppv for each picture. The upper limit, results showed, was 14 people per view. Visitors also rated acceptable ppv upon viewing five computer-simulated scenarios of hour-long trips on the roads. From these surveys, managers decided that a high-quality experience would be one that 80% of visitors would rate at +2 on a scale from +4 to -4. Managers determined that 3,000 visitors a day would satisfy this standard, given that people move from high-use to low-use portions of the road and that as they do, the ppv varies from 0 to a maximum of 10. That standard was adopted and then the next step in the VERP framework was initiated: monitoring.

An electronic trail-use counter records the total level of use on the carriage roads. Computer simulations, visitor surveys, and staff observation provide the input to estimate ppv levels. Management action—the third part of the VERP framework— included development of "rules of the road" posted at major entry points to the carriage road, "courtesy patrols" on the roads, and liaisons with local biking groups. These are the management actions surveyed visitors preferred that were undertaken to avoid conflicts that respondents sometimes reported.

In the studies in this collection, visitors are asked not only for their responses to their experiences at Acadia, or for their preferences about conditions, but also about how they would like to be managed when their activities might impinge on others' enjoyment or on natural resources. It is not often that people are asked how, for example, they would like to be directed to protect the landscape (chapter 21). This research certainly provides managers at Acadia with a wealth of material from which to develop plans of action that will offer their much-queried visitors a most enjoyable experience, and these insights will not be lost on managers at other high-use parks.

Reference

Manning, R. E., editor. 2009. Parks and people: Managing outdoor recreation at Acadia National Park. University of Vermont Press, Burlington, USA.

—Betsie Blumberg

