International Trends in Park Tourism: 
A Macro View of Park Tourism Finance


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This paper outlines trends in political, social, demographic and technological sectors affecting park tourism management. Since park finance is ultimately dependent upon larger influences that affect park visitation, tourism, and management, it is important to consider the macro trends that impact on parks. The trends outlined should affect park management, worldwide, over the next 25 years.

The author chose 17 trends. Each is discussed in turn.

**Trend 1:** Growing demands for democratic forms of government translate into increased public participation and collaboration in park planning.

Park planning and management developed into professional and bureaucratic forms as parks expanded in size and influence. The limitations of these approaches started to become obvious as conflicts arose over diverging goals, as strong competitors for resource use arose and as park visitors and local communities became politically active. These influences and the global trend towards more democracy and accountability in government shift park management towards a more open style, with strong public participation and collaboration. Tourism is another pressure towards this approach, forcing park agencies to become more client-focused.

**Trend 2:** Increased accessibility of sophisticated technology and science means that visitors are knowledgeable about what opportunities exist and the consequences of management actions.

Park visitors tend to be well-educated, urbane, well-travelled and open-minded. They are comfortable with advanced science and technology, somewhat strangely considering their strong interest in human-scale technology and human-powered activities in the parks. The average park visitor is well aware of the leisure and service opportunities available, both within parks and in other sites. The visitor is aware of and interested in park management, and is capable of forming intelligent positions on a wide range of park...
management alternatives and actions. This type of clientele is both strongly advantageous to parks, in that they will easily seek out information and opportunities provided by parks, and challenging, as they will aggressively comment upon management actions. These people are sophisticated consumers, with a level of knowledge and savvy that will challenge most park management.

**Trend 3:** An aging population means that there will be significant demand shifts in what activities, settings and experiences visitors seek from parks areas.

Throughout the developed world a revolution is underway in population demography. This area is entering a period with the highest proportion of retired and senior-aged people in history. These people are the healthiest and wealthiest older people in world history. They show strong interest in nature-based activities and travel. They will be a very large potential market for the leisure experiences provided by parks and protected areas. They will not only be consumers of park activities, they may be a large pool of volunteer activity and donations. However, there are challenges. They are not very interested in camping, preferring roofed accommodation. They are less physically capable than younger people. Their ability to travel declines as age-related physical challenges develop.

**Trend 4:** As educational levels rise, demand for appreciative and learning opportunities associated with parks and protected areas will increase.

In the vast majority of the world, educational levels of the population are rising quickly. There is an increasing participation rate in post secondary education. In the developed world almost 50% of all new jobs involve post secondary education. National park use is highly correlated with higher education levels. Higher education leads to higher service quality demands as well as higher educational service demands. Parks are challenged to provide services and programs that build on the education trend. However, since higher education levels lead to higher income levels, these people are able to pay for the services that they demand.

**Trend 5:** In the medium term, advances in the technology of travel and reductions in costs will result in increased demand for park and protected area opportunities distant from one’s residence.

For the last 50 years advances in airline technology, energy efficiency, information technology, human social welfare and education led to increases for long distance travel. Such travel affects many parks, and is a critically important export industry for many countries. This trend can be expected to continue in the medium term, for approximately the next 10 years.
For most countries in the world park visitation increased, sometimes dramatically over the last 50 years. This increase can be expected to continue in the medium term.

**Trend 6:** Continued growing sensitivity to environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts of human activity lead to new and different roles of protected areas, often to multiuse sites similar to biosphere reserves. Private ecolodges and nature reserves develop, funded by tourism.

As parks reach beyond the 10% level of the earth’s terrestrial surface, their roles will continue to deepen and diversify. Tourism can adapt to a wide variety of situations, ranging for low-density wilderness to high density urban and resorts. There is an emerging market for multi-use sites that provide a spectrum of opportunities within a geographically and conceptually-linked space, such as a biosphere reserve. Such a site can, in one place, provide ranges of experiences dealing with human use density, levels of physical challenge, ranges of accommodation quality and price and levels of interaction with nature from intense to casual.

Private ecolodges are developing strongly in many countries, typically exploiting the market for advanced levels of education and service. These sites vary dramatically in form as the industry experiments with this new type of travel destination. They are already having visibly positive environmental, economic and social impacts in many countries. Many of these sites will challenge public parks in the upper scale markets of nature-based tourism.

**Trend 7:** Growing knowledge about visitors, parks and their interactions lead to more sophisticated and effective methods of managing park-based tourism.

As park tourism continues to develop, as parks recognize the need to compete for a finite tourism market and as park visitors demand more sophisticated services, park agencies must develop higher levels of tourism management competence. The key areas include:

- Understanding visitors’ needs and wants
- Service quality management
- Leisure pricing policy
- Leisure marketing
- Tourism and resource economics
- Finance
- Tourism management

**Trend 8:** The global increase in park area, number of parks and park visitation outstrips the capability of many park management institutions.
The ecology imperative is also a cultural imperative in much of the world. As a result, societies place increasing amounts of land into parks. However, equivalent amounts of money for the effective management of these lands are not forthcoming from taxpayers. Clearly, the new parks, the increasing area to management and the increasing visitation leads to new management challenges. Some of the outcomes of this trend include:

- Financial needs exceeding the current money supply.
- Paper parks.
- Environmental quality degradation.
- Increased emphasis on tourism income.
- Increased use of NGO, volunteer, profit sector management.

**Trend 9:** Park management shifts gradually from government agency structures, with centralized financial control, to parastatal forms, with financially flexible and entrepreneurial forms of management.

The typical government park agency is designed to make the park visitor into a problem. Such an agency is an expenditure unit with a fixed budget. The agency gets no direct benefit from the visitor and sees the visitor as a drain on that fixed budget. Increases in visitation are problematic with a fixed budget. New areas to manage, increasing numbers of visitors and increasing societal roles for parks all stretch the government agency management model to the breaking point.

Government and policy innovators look for alternatives to the government model. Three models come to mind. One is privatizing all of the tourism services to the profit-making sector of society. This brings efficiency, but not necessarily effectiveness and little equity. Another is privatizing many of the tourism services to the non-profit sector, such as Community and Friends Groups. This can provide efficiency, effectiveness and some equity. Another is privatizing within government, the use of the parastatal form of management. The model is increasingly used, often in concert with the non-profit sector. This approach may be the best model to provide the most balanced mixture of efficiency, effectiveness, and equity. Examples of park agencies using the parastatal model include the park agencies in the following areas:

- Ontario Provincial Parks (Canada’s oldest and biggest provincial park system)
- Parks Canada (National Parks, National Historic Parks and National Canals)
- TANAPA (Tanzania National Parks)
- SANP (South Africa National Parks)
- Kenya Wildlife Service (Kenya National Parks)

**Trend 10:** Park management funding increasingly shifts from government grants to park tourism fees and charges. This results in higher levels of visitor focus in management.

It is reasonable to propose that since all people benefit from the ecological and cultural values of parks and protected areas, that all people, through public taxes, should pay for such benefits. However, only park visitors benefit from a trip to a park, and increasingly
there is resistance to public funds being spent on such private benefits. Therefore, a substantial portion of park management funding is shifting from taxes to park tourism fees and charges. Parastatal forms of management are particularly effective in handling with this shift. For example, in the 8 years since Ontario Provincial Parks moved from a government agency to a parastatal the agency’s cost recovery moved from 32% to 82%. This shift moved the agency more strongly into a client focus, and moved it away from a government hierarchy focus.

**Trend 11:** Park agencies develop increased sophistication in their understanding and management of park visitation and tourism.

The level of sophistication for park management within park agencies is rapidly increasing. Increasing numbers of visitors and the move to revenue retention stimulate this. Strong innovation occurs in areas such as pricing policy, service quality, accommodation, and food and beverage provision.

For example, Kruger National Park in South Africa provides many levels of accommodation within the park. There are at last 6 pricing levels with the park, 3 in camping and 3 in roofed and lodge accommodation. The private ecolodges on the western side of the park provide 3 more levels, typically at the more exclusive levels. Such innovation allows this nature-tourism industry to capture the maximum level of financial return with this broad range of service provision.

**Trend 12:** Increasing globalization of information, business and government results in increasing international cooperation amongst park agencies, park visitors and non-governmental organizations.

Globalization affects parks in many ways, two of which will be discussed here: digital convergence and professionalization.

Digital convergence results in the rapid, inexpensive and effective global transfer of information. Very soon park managers and park visitors alike will be able to utilize advanced computer power, instantaneous access to data bases, Geographical Positioning Systems (GPS) and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) anywhere on the earth’s service at any time. The impact on parks can be enormous. For example, a person so equipped could record a bird in the field, transmit that sound to a central computer that identifies the bird to species, records the location geographically and records the data into a database. Simultaneously, the visitor may download maps of the site, a summary of all the records of this species and a status report. The activity of wildlife observation becomes profoundly enhanced. Such technology will affect all aspects of park tourism. It is probable that many park visitors will carry such technology with them throughout all areas of the parks they visit.

Park management is vitally important profession that will gain much more influence and recognition as the protector and interpreter of the world’s environmental and cultural inheritance. This professionalization will strengthen over time. There will be a much
more widespread generation and exchange of knowledge. The World Parks Congress here in Durban is an example of such an exchange. The huge attendance at the Congress is a visible signal of the demand for such knowledge and the many speakers a willingness to share this knowledge. Exchange programs will flourish as a way of sharing knowledge and professional development. As this field develops, there will be more specialized programs in park management in colleges and universities. The USA and Canada lead in this area now, but many other countries can be expected to develop such programs.

**Trend 13:** Foreign aid and grants from NGOs will increasingly fund biodiversity conservation and sustainable tourism development in developing nations.

Increasingly foreign aid and bilateral aid funds biodiversity conservation and sustainable development with the goal of providing both conservation and economic benefit. For example, the GEF Council on October 15, 2002 approved 33 projects worth US $681,000,000. This work program followed the August 2002 agreement by representatives of 32 governments to contribute US $2.92 billion to fund GEF operations over the next four years.

Often foreign aid provides the capital funding for conservation. Sustainable tourism has the potential of providing on-going conservation and economic benefits.

**Trend 14:** Increasing demands for resource exploitation, such as oil, gas, minerals, water, and wood, place stronger pressure for the exploitation of park resources.

As renewable and non-renewable resources outside parks become scarcer, the demands for exploitation within parks increase. Healthy park tourism provides one counter balance with its politically relevant benefits. However, it is vitally important that these benefits are accurately calculated and effectively communicated.

**Trend 15:** A substantial number of parks and their tourism will be destroyed by war, famine and civil unrest, especially in Africa and Asia.

Some countries will see a decline in park tourism, typically when social unrest is given widespread coverage in the press. Countries with recent tourism declines due to widely-reported social unrest include:

- Zimbabwe (Nature Tourism, both consumptive and appreciative)
- Uganda (Nature Tourism)
- Indonesia (Cultural and Nature Tourism)
- Israel (Religious Tourism)

**Trend 16:** International travel will increase until decreasing supplies of
inexpensive light oil result in large increases in cost between 2010 and 2020. As the energy costs increase, international travel will decline. Substantial pressure will take place on many parks and protected areas.

The world annual oil production will peak some time between 2005 and 2015. This is known as Hubbert’s Peak. After this peak, there will be substantial impacts on the global economy and on tourism. Some of the impacts of Hubbert’s Peak include:

- Higher energy prices.
- Move from light oil to heavy oil and other energy sources.
- Move to hydrogen economy.
- Lowered long distance travel and international tourism.
- Increased use of urban and near urban parks.
- Energy generation could mean huge financial income for some parks.

**Trend 17: Global climate change will affect most parks and most park tourism.**

Global climate change will continue to affect many parks. The impacts on park tourism are unclear, however some obvious impacts could include:

- Increasing drying and droughts leading to water stress, droughts and fires.
- Travellers involved with summer outdoor recreation may move into cooler climes to avoid heat stress.
- Substantial changes in snow-based activities with reductions of snow cover.
- Substantial changes in tourism as weather changes typical climate-based recreation seasons (i.e. periods of drought, heat and coolness shift).
- Much higher risk exposure with increases in fires, winds and erratic storms.

**Summary**

The next 25 years will see the greatest management challenges ever. Managers must be increasingly skilled at political negotiation, community relations, finance, tourism, and regional ecological management. Research and management innovation is fundamental in the rapidly changing environmental and social environment.

**Reference**

A fuller discussion of the trends outlined in this paper is found in the following recent book.