In 1916 Congress established the National Park Service within the Department of the Interior. At that time, NPS involved a handful of employees in Washington, D.C., 18 national parks, and some two dozen national monuments and historic battlefields. Today the system has grown to include 80.7 million acres and 384 park system units. The crown jewels of the system are the national parks, offering extraordinary recreational opportunities while preserving unique natural systems.

There are a number of designations within the national park system. National Military Parks—battlefields, cemeteries, historic landmarks and memorials—are dedicated to preserving our cultural heritage and memorializing significant events in our history. National Monuments protect landmarks, structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest. National Preserves protect outstanding natural beauty while allowing for such activities as hunting and camping. National Recreation Areas provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and include reservoirs, seashores, lakeshores, rivers, trails and parkways.

Some national parks are enormous, like Grand Canyon National Park, which encompasses 1.2 million acres and has over 4.5 million visitors a year. A number of units are small but well known, such as the historic Ford Theater where President Lincoln was assassinated, or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Other units may be large but remain obscure, such as the 6.5 million acre Noatak National Preserve in Alaska, which had only about 4000 visitors in 1999.

Frederic I. Solop is associate professor of political science and director, Social Research Laboratory, and Kristi K. Hagen is research operations manager, Social Research Laboratory, Northern Arizona University. David M. Ostergren is assistant professor of political science, Center for Environmental Sciences and Education, Northern Arizona University.
he national park system is as diverse as America itself, and management decisions require extensive information about what Americans think of their national parks, as well as their policy preferences. The National Park Service regularly surveys park visitors to track visitation trends, obtain ratings of park quality, and measure levels of support for policy decisions. Until recently, however, relatively little information had been gathered from people who do not visit national parks. Yet nonvisitors support park units by paying taxes to the federal government, and NPS is interested in providing opportunities for all Americans.

Last year NPS commissioned its first comprehensive national survey of the American public. The Social Research Laboratory at Northern Arizona University designed the questionnaire and conducted the survey between February 21 and May 21, 2000. Random samples of approximately 500 people within each of the National Park Service’s seven regions were surveyed, and the data were combined into a national sample of 3,515 respondents.

One of the most important goals of the survey was simply to gauge the proportion of the American public that visits national park system units. Respondents were asked if they had visited a national park within the previous two years. To rule out those who might have visited public lands outside the system, respondents who said they had visited a park were asked to name the unit they had last entered. This response was checked against a list of all national park system units. If the response corresponded to an actual unit on the list, the respondent was coded as a “recent visitor.” Those who could not accurately name a park and those who had not visited a national park within the previous two years were coded as “nonvisitors.”

Now, for the first time, we know that at least one-third of US residents recently visited one of 384 units within the national park system, with rates varying significantly along demographic lines. Income and education most strongly affect an individual’s likelihood of visiting national park units. Eighteen percent of people living in households with a combined yearly income of less than $20,000 visited a national park recently, compared with 50% of people from households making more than $100,000 a year. Only 15% of people with less than a high school education were recent visitors, as opposed to half of people with post-college educations.

Of these barriers to visitation, the National Park Service is particularly concerned about entrance fees. In the last few years, NPS has been authorized by Congress to raise entrance fees temporarily in some park units, in what is known as the “Recreation Fee Demonstration Project.” The additional revenue generated is to be used by individual units.
People are very pleased with this nation’s system of national parks, but they are somewhat less enthusiastic about the bureaucracy that manages it. When asked to rate the national park system, including national parks, historic or cultural sites and monuments, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being worst and 10 being best, visitors gave an average score of 8.08 to their experience with national parks. Americans as a whole, however, gave only a 6.81 to the National Park Service. The service was defined in this question as an agency that provides for public enjoyment, while ensuring that the parks are left unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. While many people have little actual contact with National Park Service personnel, it would seem that perhaps a general concern about “all things Washington” spills over to the national parks.

An important fee-related issue is how the money should be distributed. The fee demonstration program allows the difference in revenues between old fees and new trial fees to go directly to the unit where the fees are collected.

The National Park Service is currently grappling with alternatives for handling fee revenues. The practice now in place allows for a lower entrance fee, with additional fees charged for activities inside the park. A competing option is for NPS to charge higher entrance fees and make them inclusive of all activities within the park units. This survey found the public preferring the current system of a lower entrance fee two to one over the idea of a higher, all-inclusive entrance fee.

Once again, education was an important factor. While two-thirds of respondents with a post-college education (68%) prefer separate fees, only half of people with less than a high school degree think similarly. Income also plays a role in this preference, with 79% of those making more than $100,000 a year preferring separate fees, compared with 57% of those making less than $20,000 a year.