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Visitors' willingness to pay for interpretive services in Alberta parks

Introduction and Literature Review: Interpretive services provided at protected areas can add value to visitors' experiences (Beckman, 1999; Cook et al., 2019). They can also serve as conservation management tool in mitigating negative behaviours and inspiring pro-environmental action through educational and entertaining content and delivery (Hvenegaard, 2017; Hvenegaard & Halpenny, 2020; Stern & Powell, 2021; Tubb, 2003).

Traditionally these services have been provided for free in parks and protected areas, paid for by tax dollars or integrated into general park entry fees. With shrinking investment in conservation from public coffers, protected area managers are increasingly forced to charge for specific services made available in their parks, rely on partners organizations and volunteers to deliver park services (Kerstetter et al., 2010; Mowen et al., 2016; Mowen et al., 2006), or cut offerings entirely. Most recently at Alberta's provincial parks, due to budget cuts (Klingbeil, 2021), in-person interpretive programs were eliminated for the 2021 summer season for all parks with the exception of Writing on Stone and Dinosaur Provincial Parks – where fees are charged for interpretive programs (Corrigan et al., 2021).

Evidence is accumulating that supports investment in interpretive services, to achieve visitor satisfaction as well as conservation outcomes (Sim, 2018). However, in the face of decreasing public investment in parks, managers must consider the viability of charging fees for such services. Very few studies have examined visitors' willingness to pay for these services. In a comparison of experienced and new birdwatchers attending a Korean birdwatching festival, experienced birders were 20% more willing to pay for interpretive services than people new to birdwatching (Lee, Lee et al., 2009). A choice experiment that examined visitors' valuation of interpretive services on a whale watching trip found interpretive services increased visitors' willingness to pay by US\$9 for the tour (Lee, Mjelde et al., 2019). Korean birdwatching fair attendees were willing to pay US\$10 for interpretive services (Lee, Lee, et al. 2010).

Context and interpretive format can affect WTP. Tourists visiting cultural heritage sites in Israel were willing to pay more for an in-person guided tour than an electronic guided tour (e.g., with audio recording and headphones). No significant difference was observed between those at a World Heritage (WH) site and those at a non-WH site (Poria et al., 2011). Additional factors that appear to shape WTP for interpretation services specifically include perceived price fairness (Chung et al., 2010) and attachment to place (Kyle et al., 2003) These studies contribute to the growing academic literature on park fees (Steckenreuter & Wolf, 2013; van Zyl et al., 2019) which consider affordability and fostering citizen access to parks, park resourcing, and conservation objectives. Affordability is an especially concerning issue for many jurisdictions as fees serve as a visitation barrier. For example, Zanon et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis of North American park visitation studies observed low income was the leading visitation constraint.

In sum, while some research has examined visitor's willingness to pay park fees, far fewer have examined WTP for interpretation. Much of this research has been based in the US and Australia. To address a deficiency and enhance Canadian managers' understanding of visitors' ability and willingness to pay for park services fees, our study investigates sociodemographic characteristics of southern Alberta WH site visitors appear most related to WTP for park interpretation services.

Methods: Our study, conducted in 2016-17, measured World Heritage site visitors' attitudes towards select park fees. A self-reported questionnaire was used to collect information from visitors to four major WH sites in southern Alberta: Canadian Rockies Mountain Parks (i.e., Jasper, Banff, and Yoho National Parks), Dinosaur Provincial Park, Waterton Glacier International Peace Park and Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Provincial Historic Site. Visitors were asked to complete the survey on an Android tablet or

paper questionnaire. Questionnaire items were developed using Poria et al.'s (2010) WTP survey items. SPSS v.21.0 was used to clean the data, derive descriptive statistics and then run a series of ANOVAs and t-tests to examine what visitor characteristics are related to WTP park related fees.

Results: A total of 730 questionnaire were collected and analysed. The sample had the following characteristics: 285 (52%) of participants were male and the average age of the sample was 41 years old; 62% of the participants had university degrees; 78% of the sample was Canadian (56% Alberta and 22% other Canadian provinces), 18% were from the USA and the rest were from other countries. Willingness to pay frequencies for select services included (n, %): (a) Guided general interpretive tour: \$0 fee (n=224, 33.2%), \$5 (159, 21.7%), \$10 (189, 25.8%), \$15 (70, 9.6%), \$20 (70, 9.6%). (b) Guided specialized interpretive tour: \$5 (144, 20.0%), \$10 (154, 21.4%), \$15 (139, 19.3%), \$20 (153, 19.3%), \$25 (129, 17.9%). (c) Digital general interpretive tour (audio guide or app): \$0 (324, 44.4%), \$2 (177, 24.2%), \$5 (162, 22.2%), \$10 (46, 6.3%), \$15 (21, 2.9%). (d) Digital specialized interpretive tour (audio guide or app): \$0 (262, 36.0%), \$2 (168, 21.7%), \$5 (205, 28.2%), \$10 (63, 8.7%), \$15 (28, 3.9%).

No significant statistical differences ($p < .001$) were observed among first time versus repeat visitors to the park where they were surveyed, male vs. female, Canadian residents vs. visitors from other countries, as well as those traveling with kids vs. those without children in their travel party. This latter result is surprising as traveling with children is often linked to an interest in attending interpretive programs. The introduction of a fee for interpretive programs appears to be an important constraint for families, while families are traditional a major market for interpretive program, they may be unable or unwilling to pay fees to engage in them. Additionally, no significant statistical differences were observed based on level of education, which was also unexpected as higher levels of education and interest in interpretive programs are often correlated. After dividing the sample into two motivation groups, those whose primary reason for visiting the park was to learn about culture or nature (n=73) did not differ significantly in their WTP for interpretive services than those who indicated other primary motives for visitation. We suggest this is due to the ever-changing dominance on one motive vs another, depending at each situation encountered during a trip. A more sophisticated analysis of simultaneous influences of motivations may reveal greater clarity regarding individuals' attitudes towards interpretive program fees related to travel motives.

Two statistically significant differences were observed: First, unsurprisingly visitors varied in their WTP based on their level of household income. Those who made more money were more willing to pay for interpretive programs. This correlates well with previous studies that suggest low income and park fees present barriers to families and individuals who wish to visit and enjoy parks. Second, after splitting visitors into two groups based on self-reported World Heritage knowledge, those who reported high levels of WH knowledge were more willing to pay interpretive fees than those with low levels of self-reported WH knowledge.

Conclusion: In-person delivery and specialized content garnered higher levels of WTP for park interpretation services. Wealthier visitors were more willing to pay fees, as were those who had already invested time (i.e., involvement) to learn about cultural and natural heritage (i.e., WH experts).

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