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Factors influencing perceived appropriateness of concessioner activity in Grand Teton National Park

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Abstract

Concessioner-provided services are integral to the national park visitor experience, and date back to the origins of the National Park Service (NPS). With visitation across NPS units growing steadily over time, services provided by these public–private partnerships will likely only increase in importance. Despite the critical role of concessioners, concerns exist regarding the presence of for-profit entities within national parks. While private businesses may be more responsive to consumer wants and needs, their presence raises questions regarding equity, resource protection, and over-commercialization, while potentially eroding public perceptions of ownership and investment in these protected areas. With this in mind, the purpose of the present study was to assess factors that may influence visitors’ perceptions of appropriateness regarding current and future concessioner activities, using data from visitors to Grand Teton National Park (GRTE). Regression analysis found no significant predictors of perceived appropriateness of current concessioner activity. Several significant predictors of anticipated appropriateness of future concessions activities emerged, however. Respondents who believed that there would be more concessioner activity in the future felt that such an increase would lead to an inappropriately high amount of commercial activity at GRTE. In addition, social liberalism, economic conservatism, and place identity were also related to a belief that there would be inappropriately high levels of concessioner activity in the future. Place dependence, knowledge regarding the role of concessioners at GRTE, and trust in GRTE were not significant predictors. Implications for future research, as well as for decisionmakers, are discussed.

Introduction

Concessioners—private companies contracted to provide visitor services—are a critical partner of the National Park Service (NPS). Collectively, NPS administers almost 500 public–private contracts that gross more than \$1 billion annually (NPS 2018a). Agreements between private partners and NPS include both concessions contracts, and commercial use authorizations. Concessions contracts offer services within parks that are not provided directly by NPS, but are nonetheless vital to their continued operation, such as lodging, food and beverage services, and retail operations. Commercial use authorizations allow for-profit entities located outside of parks to conduct commercial activities that are deemed appropriate for the park setting, such as

guided tours, trips, and similar activities (NPS 2018c). Currently, such agreements are administered by the NPS Commercial Services Program.

These public–private partnerships have an extensive history, and commercial activity in national parks actually predates the establishment of NPS in 1916. Concerns regarding excessive commercial activity in Yosemite Valley were at the center of the Yosemite Grant in 1864, and eventual federal protection. The modern system characterized by government-regulated monopolies was established thanks to the efforts of Stephen Mather, the first director of NPS. Mather believed that “[s]cenery is a hollow enjoyment to the tourist who sets

out in the morning after an indigestible breakfast and a fitful night's sleep on an impossible bed" (NPS 2018b), and felt that private investment in the parks would be integral for securing congressional support for the parks, and growing NPS.

With visitation across NPS units growing steadily over time, the services provided by these public-private partnerships will likely only grow in importance. While expanded capacity by concessioners may be necessary to accommodate increasing visitor demand, any potential increase in commercial activity would likely invigorate ongoing debates regarding commercialization in the national parks. For example, the Made in America Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee, a panel of Administration advisors largely drawn from private industry, recently recommended that the Department of the Interior explore "modernization" of national park campgrounds, with a vision of food trucks, Wi-Fi and even Amazon deliveries" (Holden 2019).

The recommendations set forth by the Made in America Advisory Committee encapsulate the debate regarding commercial activity in national park settings. Supporters argue that private businesses play an important role in the operation of national parks, and may be more responsive to consumer wants and needs, as they are less constrained by the statutory and regulatory requirements that government agencies must adhere to. Conversely, the presence of for-profit entities in national parks raises a host of concerns. Advocates for reducing or controlling commercial activity argue that the presence of for-profit entities in national parks may create or exacerbate issues of equity and access; impact resource protection efforts, as private companies prioritize profit; and potentially erode public perceptions of ownership and investment in these protected areas.

Grand Teton National Park (GRTE) provides an example of the competing pressures NPS faces with regard to this issue. A spectacular destination with a range of natural, historic, and recreation resources, visitation to GRTE has increased steadily in recent years, with total visits climbing by more than a quarter from 2012 to 2017 (Germann 2018a). In 2018, GRTE hosted more than 3.4 million recreational visits, eclipsing the record set in 2017. To meet the demands of an ever-increasing number of visitors, the park currently has in place more than 150 concessions contracts and commercial use authorizations (Germann 2018b). Over the next several years, many of the current contracts and agreements in place at GRTE will expire, introducing uncertainty regarding the services delivered, and the private businesses delivering them.

With the changes coming in the near future at GRTE, and the growing controversy surrounding commercialization across NPS, the purpose of this study was to assess factors that may influence perceived acceptability of private service delivery in national parks, now and in the future.

Background

The sections that follow provide an overview of relevant literature and previous research related to visitor behavior and preferences in national parks and other parks/protected areas.

Park governance models. In the United States, the governance of national parks involves government ownership of resources, with stewardship and strategic vision provided by a public agency (Eagles 2009). However, as previously mentioned, private concessioners are responsible for providing a range of visitor services within the parks, and contribute more than \$1 billion to NPS in contract fees annually (NPS 2018a). Advocates for this arrangement point to the revenue generated by public-private agreements, and argue that for-profit service delivery is more efficient and cost-effective than direct service provision by government agencies (see Holden 2019).

Criticisms of this model often revolve around a lack of transparency and accountability on the part of private companies (Hannah 2006), and negative implications for resource protection and equity of access as a result of the profit-making motive (Eagles 2009). Additionally, it may be difficult for the public partner to effectively monitor contract adherence, resulting in high levels of independent action among private concessioners (Eagles, McCool, and Hayes 2002). This lack of regulatory capacity, and the relative freedom of action it provides private concessioners, speaks directly to concerns regarding public perceptions of ownership and investment, and may raise questions regarding "who is really in charge" of national park operations.

There is also evidence that a purely public model may be preferable to park visitors in a variety of respects. In a direct comparison using British Columbia and Ontario provincial parks, park visitors and employees rated the public-private management model used by British Columbia less favorably than the government-service provision model utilized by Ontario (Buteau-Duitschaever et al. 2010). The public-private model scored lower in each of the 11 elements used to assess good governance, which included factors such as efficiency, equity, transparency, and accountability. Notably, this stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned arguments re-

garding efficiency raised by advocates of private service delivery (Holden 2019).

Acceptability of private activity in public parks.

A growing body of research examines perceptions of acceptability of private activity in public parks, predominantly at the local and state levels. Existing research indicates that, overall, attitudes towards using privatization as a funding source at the local level are slightly positive (e.g. Mowen, Kyle, and Jackowski 2007; Pitas et al. 2018a). However, significant nuance exists beyond a simple comparison of “public versus private.” For example, variation exists between specific privatization practices: while corporate sponsorship and outsourcing are viewed more positively, the sale of park resources to for-profit entities is seen in a much more negative light (Mowen et al. 2006; Pitas et al. 2018a). Additionally, public opinion is generally less favorable towards public-private partnerships involving large corporations, sponsorship exclusivity, naming rights, and visible sponsor recognition (Mowen et al. 2007).

A similar pattern was reported in an outdoor recreation context by Samnaliev and colleagues (2006), wherein alternative funding strategies such as corporate sponsorship and outsourcing were viewed more positively than the sale of public assets to private companies. At the state level, respondents in a 2010 study preferred that the state park agency provide services that are consistent with the mission of resource stewardship and education, but preferred private provision of services such as food and beverage and watercraft rentals, based on perceptions of quality and cost effectiveness (Kerstetter et al. 2010). In their analysis, Kerstetter and colleagues reinforce that it is important to take into account the nature of the services in question when examining user preferences for service delivery.

Regardless of context, it appears that visitors weigh various alternatives when making decisions regarding acceptability, and generally prefer private service delivery over diminished service delivery, or the outright cancellation of some services (Pitas et al. 2015). Certain types of commercial activity may also be becoming more acceptable over time, as members of the public become desensitized to the presence of private entities operating in public spaces (Mowen et al. 2016). Such a shift in attitudes over time may have negative implications for public funding of local park and recreation services, as more positive attitudes towards privatization have been linked to decreased support for the use of taxes as a funding source (Pitas et al. 2019b).

Factors influencing perceived acceptability. A number of factors may potentially influence perceived acceptability of private service delivery, some of which relate to individual experiences with the agency or service in question. For example, a greater level of factual knowledge regarding specific privatization practices has been linked to greater perceived acceptability, potentially because factual knowledge defuses misunderstandings and misconceptions about proposed policies or actions (Pitas et al 2018a). Conversely, Mowen and colleagues (2009) found that visitors who perceived their state park agency to be financially responsible had more negative attitudes towards privatization practices, as did visitors who had previously used services provided by concessioners. In a separate analysis in the local park context, Mowen and colleagues (2006) found a similar relationship for trust between the public and a park and recreation provider: respondents with greater trust in the agency were more negative towards privatization practices, and simultaneously reported greater support for public funding.

Beyond the services or agencies in question, past research has also examined the influence of individual characteristics and deeply rooted cognitive processes in determining perceived acceptability. Interestingly, in the context of local park and recreation services it would appear that the issue of private service delivery is viewed by visitors predominantly through a social lens, rather than an economic one. Although a common argument for private service delivery is greater efficiency and reduced burden on taxpayers, economic ideology appears to have no effect on perceived acceptability of private service delivery, while a more conservative social ideology is linked to greater perceived acceptability (Pitas et al. 2019a). An individual’s deeply rooted value system has also been linked to perceived acceptability of private service provision, again at the local level. Those individuals with a greater focus on the well-being of others (operationalized as a self-transcendent value orientation) were less supportive of private service delivery, while those who were more focused on their personal well-being (a self-enhancement value orientation) were more supportive of private service delivery (Pitas et al. 2019a).

The nature of an individual’s relationship to a particular park or protected area may also influence support or opposition to various funding models. Individuals may form relationships with or an attachment to a specific place for a variety of reasons, including symbolic/emotional (place identity) and functional (place dependence) factors (Williams and Vaske 2003). Just as visitors generally view privatization through a social

lens in the local park and recreation context (Pitas et al. 2019a; Pitas et al. 2019b), the emotional/symbolic dimension of place attachment has been linked to spending preferences in both local (Pitas et al. 2018b) and more broadly outdoor (Kyle, Absher, and Graefe 2003) recreation settings. In both contexts, place identity functions as a moderating factor, magnifying the intensity of visitor preferences for various spending practices; in essence, those with a great emotional attachment to a particular park or recreation setting feel more strongly—both negatively and positively—about public and private spending practices.

Study purpose

Although a substantial body of research addresses the perceived acceptability of private service delivery in park settings at the local and state levels, comparatively little is known about factors that may influence acceptability of concessioner services in national parks. In this study, I seek to address this gap, and extend the findings of previous research to a national park setting. Although national parks share much in common with parks and protected areas at the local and state levels, given national parks' size, scope, and significance, they represent a unique content within which to study the issue of private activity in public spaces. Specifically, I sought to address the following research questions:

1. What factors affect visitors' perceived appropriateness of current concessioner activities in GRTE?
2. What factors affect visitors' anticipated appropriateness of future concessioner activities in GRTE?

Methods

Sample and data collection. Data for this analysis were collected at three pre-determined locations within GRTE and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Memorial Parkway (a separate NPS unit, administered by GRTE, which connects to Yellowstone National Park to the north): Gros Ventre campground, Colter Bay swim beach, and Flagg Ranch. Survey locations were selected to be at or near concessions services provided by Grand Teton Lodge Company and Flagg Ranch Company. Gros Ventre is the largest campground in GRTE, and Flagg Ranch offers a variety of concessioner services, including lodging, camping, fuel, retail, and food and beverage. Although concessions services are not offered directly at the Colter Bay swim beach, access to the beach is through the larger Colter Bay complex, which includes a variety of concessioner services, such as lodging, camping, fuel, retail, food and beverage, and marina operations. Only northbound travelers (i.e., those who had just left GRTE) were surveyed at the Flagg Ranch location (which is within the parkway),

and a screening question ensured northbound respondents had stopped to visit GRTE (i.e., they were not simply driving through).

Data were collected through a face-to-face, pedestrian intercept survey, completed by respondents on an iPad running the Qualtrics mobile survey application; time-to-completion averaged between nine and 10 minutes. Sampling took place over the course of approximately 20 days in June and July 2019, and was stratified by time of day (e.g., AM or PM) and day of the week (e.g., weekday or weekend). I collected a total of 210 completed surveys (81.7% response rate), using a systematic random intercept method: when approaching groups of potential respondents, I asked the adult with the next birthday to participate. If the first adult refused, I then asked the adult with the next closest birthday; this pattern was repeated until I obtained consent, or all eligible members of the party had been asked. Sampling was conducted with the goal of representing all park visitors, not only those that used concessioner services (i.e., respondents were not specifically targeted based on concessions use).

Survey design. I designed the survey to reflect past research examining the perceived acceptability of private service delivery in parks conducted at the local and state levels. In addition to demographic information (see Table 1), visitors were asked to rate their experiences with current concessioner services, as well as their beliefs regarding future concessioner services. Visitor trust in GRTE, place attachment to GRTE, and social and economic ideology were also assessed.

- *Independent variable: Awareness of concessioner provision of services.* Respondents were asked to rate their level of awareness that concessioners provided specific services at GRTE. Awareness of concessioner provision of food and beverage, retail, fuel, watercraft rentals, campgrounds, overnight lodging, and guided activities was assessed through a series of dichotomous “yes” or “no” items. Aware (“yes”) responses were scored positively as a 1, while unaware (“no”) responses were scored as a 0. See Table 2.
- *Independent variable: Amount of current and future concessioner services.* Respondents were asked to describe how much concessioner activity they had noticed in the park during their current visit, and how much they anticipated would be present in the future. Current perceptions were measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “none at all” to 5 = “a great deal.” Anticipated future levels of concessioner service were measured on a five-point scale from 1

= “much less” to 5 = “much more.” Current perceptions were used in addressing research question one, while anticipated future levels were used in addressing research question two. See Table 2.

- *Independent variable: Trust in GRTE.* Respondents were asked to rate their trust in GRTE on a four-point scale from 1 = “not at all” to 4 = “a lot.” See Table 2.
- *Independent variable: Place attachment.* Place dependence and place identity were measured by asking respondents to rate their level of agreement with six statements, based on the work of Williams and Vaske (2003). Statements were designed to assess respondents’ emotional (identity) and functional (dependence) attachment to GRTE, and were measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.” See Table 2.
- *Independent variable: Ideology.* Social and economic ideology were measured by asking respondents to rate their views with respect to both social and economic issues. For both items, responses were measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “very liberal” to 7 = “very conservative.” See Table 2.
- *Dependent variables: Acceptability of current and future concessions services.* The dependent variables, perceived acceptability of present concessioner services (research question one), and anticipated

Demographic characteristic	n (%) or Mean
Sex/Gender	
Female	91 (44.2%)
Male	112 (54.4%)
Other/non-binary/third gender	3 (1.5%)
	46.6 years
Age in years	
18–35	61 (30.7%)
36–50	56 (28.1%)
51–65	51 (25.6%)
66 or older	31 (15.6%)
Prefer not to disclose	11
Highest level of education	
High school diploma or GED	15 (7.8%)
Some college or associate’s degree	37 (19.2%)
Bachelor’s degree	69 (35.8%)
Graduate or professional degree	72 (37.3%)
Prefer not to disclose	9
Income	
\$40,000 or less	25 (16.7%)
\$40,001 to \$80,000	40 (26.7%)
\$80,001 to \$120,000	51 (34%)
\$120,001 to \$160,000	13 (8.7%)
\$160,001 or greater	21 (14%)
Prefer not to disclose	52
Residence	
United States	184 (90.6%)
International	19 (9.4%)
Prefer not to disclose	7
Race/Ethnicity (choose all that apply)	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1 (<1%)
Asian	3 (1.59%)
Black or African American	2 (1.06%)
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	10 (5.3%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1 (<1%)
White	172 (91%)
Prefer not to disclose	21

TABLE 1. Sample demographic characteristics.

Construct/item	Mean	Standard deviation
Awareness of concessioner provision¹ ($\alpha = .909$)		
Food and beverage	.74	.44
Retail	.77	.42
Fuel	.76	.43
Watercraft rentals	.66	.47
Campgrounds	.53	.50
Overnight lodging	.76	.43
Guided activities	.74	.44
Amount of concessions activity		
How much private concessioner activity have you noticed in the park today? ²	2.54	1.13
Do you think there will be more or less private concessioner activity in the park in the future? ³	3.95	.768
Trust in GRTE⁴		
	3.94	.440
Place dependence⁵ ($\alpha = .848$)		
I would not substitute any other place for the types of things I do at GRTE	4.58	1.32
GRTE is the best place for what I like to do	4.58	1.70
GRTE is the best place for what I like to do	4.76	1.36
Doing what I do at GRTE is more important to me than doing it at any other place	4.40	1.45
Place identity⁵ ($\alpha = .861$)		
GRTE means a lot to me	5.41	1.18
I feel that GRTE is a part of me	6.02	1.09
I am very attached to GRTE	4.96	1.45
	5.29	1.38
Ideology⁶		
How would you rate your views on social issues?	3.46	1.78
How would you rate your views on economic issues?	3.95	1.75

¹Measured as a dichotomous response 0 = “no” and 1 = “yes”

²Measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “none at all” to 5 = “a great deal”

³Measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “much less” to 5 = “much more”

⁴Measured on a four-point scale from 1 = “not at all” to 4 = “a great deal”

⁵Measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”

⁶Measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = “very liberal” to 7 = “very conservative”

TABLE 2. Independent variable descriptive characteristics.

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
How do you feel about the amount of private concessioner activity you noticed in the park today? ¹	3.17	.505
How do you feel about the amount of private concessioner activity you think will be present in the park in the future?	3.66	.856

¹Measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “far too little” to 5 = “far too much”¹

TABLE 3. Dependent variable descriptive characteristics.

appropriateness of future concessioner services (research question two), were measured through two items. Respondents were asked to rate how they felt about the amount of private concessioner activity they noticed in the park at present, and how they felt about the amount they thought would be present in the future. Responses were measured on a five-point scale from 1 = “far too little” to 5 = “far too much.” See Table 3.

Data analysis

All data analysis was performed in IBM SPSS version 25. Descriptive analysis was performed on respondent demographic information, as well as independent and dependent variables. For place dependence (Little’s MCAR test: $X^2 = 3.17$, $df = 7$, $p = .869$), place identity (Little’s MCAR test: $X^2 = 3.95$, $df = 5$, $p = .557$), and awareness of concessions services in GRTE (Little’s MCAR test: $X^2 = 16.33$, $df = 16$, $p = .430$), I created multi-item indices, using Cronbach’s alpha to assess scale reliability. To answer the specific research questions, I tested the following models (see Figures 1 and 2) using ordinary least squares linear regression.

Results

Respondents were predominantly white (91%), residents of the United States (90.6%), and were more likely to be male (54.4%) than female or another gender. Respondents averaged 46.6 years of age, and were

generally highly educated (73.1% reported a bachelor’s degree or greater). See Table 1.

Respondents reported a higher degree of place identity ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.18$) than place dependence with GRTE ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.32$). Respondents were moderate ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.75$) regarding economic issues, and slightly liberal ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.78$) regarding social issues, with an approximately normal distribution. Respondents were most aware that retail was provided by concessioners (77.2% “yes”), and least aware that campgrounds were provided by concessioners (53% “yes”); overall, respondents perceived a moderate amount of private concessioner activity in the park during the present ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.13$), and anticipated that there would be more private concessioner activity in the park in the future ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .763$). Respondent trust in GRTE was high ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .440$). Respondents perceived that private concessioner activity would be more inappropriate in the future ($M = 3.66$, $SD = .865$) than in the present ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .505$). Cronbach’s alpha was acceptable for all indices, ranging from .848 to .909. See Tables 2 and 3.

Research question one

An ordinary least squares linear regression testing the model in Figure 1 predicting perceived appropriateness of current concessions at GRTE was non-significant ($p = .340$, $f = 1.14$, $R^2 = .047$). No individual predictors were significant in the regression model. See Table 4.

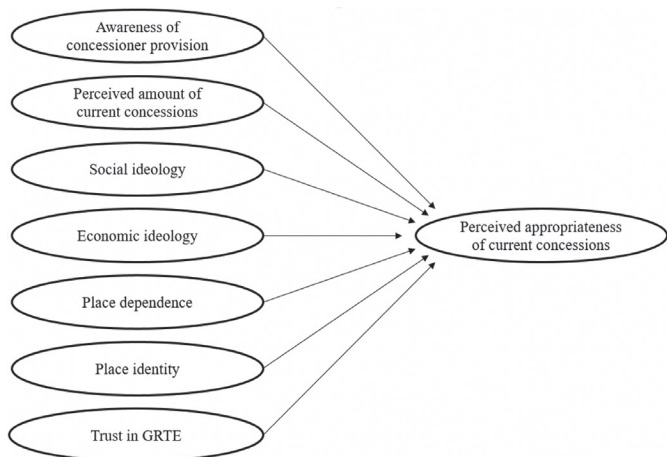


FIGURE 1. Regression model predicting perceived appropriateness of current concessions activity (research question one).

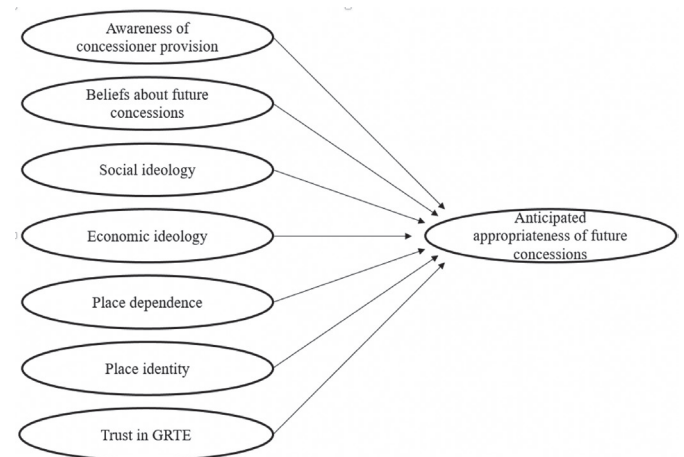


FIGURE 2. Regression model predicting anticipated appropriateness of future concessions activity (research question two).

TABLE 4. Regression predicting perceived appropriateness of current concessions activity in GRTE.

Criterion	B (SE)	β	t	p	VIF
Awareness of concessioner provision	-.121 (.105)	-.096	-1.15	.254	1.19
Overall awareness of current concessions	.062 (.035)	.150	1.76	.08	1.23
Social ideology	.008 (.037)	.032	.217	.829	3.71
Economic ideology	-.020 (.037)	-.081	-.546	.586	3.70
Place dependence	.025 (.032)	.071	.765	.445	1.45
Place identity	.023 (.036)	.057	.629	.530	1.41
Trust in GRTE	-.214 (.109)	-.156	-1.96	.051	1.07

$R^2 = .047, f = 1.14, p = .340$

TABLE 5. Regression predicting anticipated appropriateness of future concessions activity in GRTE.

Criterion	B (SE)	β	t	p	VIF
Awareness of concessioner provision	-.044 (.145)	-.019	-.307	.759	1.02
Beliefs about future concessions	.639 (.072)	.551	8.83	<.001	1.03
Social ideology	-.152 (.055)	-.324	-2.78	.006	3.58
Economic ideology	.128 (.054)	.271	2.35	.020	3.54
Place dependence	-.018 (.047)	-.028	-.389	.698	1.39
Place identity	.119 (.053)	.160	2.23	.027	1.37
Trust in GRTE	-.262 (.165)	-.101	-1.59	.114	1.07

$R^2 = .392, f = 14.813, p < .001$

Research question two

An ordinary least squares linear regression predicting anticipated appropriateness of future concessions at GRTE was significant, with approximately 39% of variance explained ($p < .001, f = 14.81, R^2 = .392$). Anticipation that there would be more concessions activity at GRTE in the future was most strongly related to anticipation that the amount of concessioner activity in the future would be inappropriately high ($\beta = .551, p < .001$), as was greater social liberalism ($\beta = -.324, p = .006$), economic conservatism ($\beta = .271, p = .020$), and place identity ($\beta = .160, p = .027$). Place dependence ($\beta = -.028, p = .698$), awareness of specific concessions ($\beta = -.019, p = .759$), and trust in GRTE ($\beta = -.101, p = .114$) were not significant in the regression model. See Table 5.

Discussion

Although services provided by concessioners are vital to the operation of many NPS sites, the presence of commercial interests in a park setting raises a variety of concerns related to equity, access, perceived ownership, the visitor experience, and resource protection. Visitation to NPS sites will likely continue to grow in the long term, bringing a potential increase in demand for these visitor services, which must be balanced against maintaining the character and integrity of the protected areas. With this in mind, discussions regarding the acceptability of these public-private partnerships are becoming increasingly timely. Grand Teton National Park, where managers currently oversee more than 150 concessions contracts providing services to more than 3 million recreational visits annually, is no exception. Over the next several years, many of the current contracts and agreements in place at GRTE will expire, introducing uncertainty regarding the services delivered, and the private businesses delivering them.

Given the current context at GRTE and across NPS, I sought to explore potential factors influencing perceived appropriateness of current and future concessioner services at GRTE.

Although there were no significant predictors of perceived appropriateness of current concessioner activity, regression analysis indicated several significant predictors of anticipated appropriateness of future concessions activities. Interestingly, how much respondents noticed concessioner activity in the park, or their knowledge regarding the extent to which services are provided by concessioners, had no relationship to perceived acceptability. Instead, personal values and beliefs influenced perceived future acceptability; social and economic ideology, place identity, and beliefs about the amount of future concessioner activity contributed to a relatively robust regression model predicting anticipated future appropriateness.

The single strongest relationship to emerge indicates that visitors are concerned about an increase in concessioner activity at GRTE. Respondents who believed that there would be more concessioner activity in the future felt that such an increase would lead to an inappropriately high amount of commercial activity at GRTE. As NPS continues into its second century of operation, this may provide useful guidance for decisionmakers and managers considering their strategy with regard to commercial services. It is worth noting that the concern regarding future over-commercialization captured in this analysis came shortly after an NPS centennial supported by corporate sponsors including Budweiser, American Express, and Coca Cola, and not long before the Made in America Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee recommended a campaign of “modernization” within NPS (Holden 2019).

In addition, respondents' personal characteristics, as well their feelings of attachment to GRTE, were significantly related to beliefs about anticipated future appropriateness. Consistent with previous research examining spending preferences and privatization in the park context (e.g., Kyle et al. 2003; Pitas et al. 2018b), the emotional element of place attachment played a significant role in the present analysis. Specifically, a greater level of place identity was related to a feeling that there would be too much concessioner activity in the future; individuals who reported greater emotional attachment to GRTE were more concerned about over-commercialization in the future. Also consistent with past research, place dependence, the functional element of place attachment, had no relationship to anticipated appropriateness.

The significance of social ideology in determining anticipated acceptability in the present analysis is consistent with past research examining private activity in public parks at the local level (Pitas et al. 2018; Pitas et al. 2019a). Similar to responses at the local level, greater social liberalism among respondents at GRTE was related to more negative evaluations of increased private activity in the future. This is consistent with the idea that socially liberal individuals value equity in access to benefits across groups (e.g., Gerber et al. 2010). Counterintuitively, and contrary to previous research, economic ideology was significant in the future model: greater economic conservatism was related to more negative evaluations of increased private activity in the future. This relationship may indicate that there is something unique about the national park context, the sample used, or that an interaction existed with an exogenous variable not accounted for in the current model.

While the regression model predicting anticipated appropriateness of future concessions was significant and showed a robust predictive power, the model predicting perceived appropriateness of current concessions was non-significant, and had no individual significant predictors; specifically, ideology and place identity were significant in the future model, but had no effect in the present model. This suggests that there may be nothing inherently negative about concessions services for individuals based on their ideology or their place identity, but rather that individuals with certain personal characteristics, or certain types of connection to GRTE, fear an increase in commercial activity. Although not reported in this analysis, open-ended comments recorded during the survey process support the notion that over-commercialism in the future is

perceived as a threat in a variety of ways, potentially undermining the integrity of the visitor experience, damaging fragile/unique natural environments, and altering the character of the national parks.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. Unfortunately, the sample collected was homogeneous, mostly consisting of highly educated white Americans; time and other constraints also resulted in a smaller than optimal sample. Regarding the survey instrument, several concepts were operationalized using single-item measures; multiple-item indices for all concepts would be preferable to increase predictive power and reliability. In particular, ideology and trust are multidimensional constructs that demand more robust measurement and further exploration in future research. Also, perceived appropriateness of anticipated future concession activity is a hypothetical concept, as there is no way for most users to accurately predict changes over time in concessioner activity. This research also took place in a limited manner in a single park; future research should extend to various contexts within multiple park settings.

Future research may specifically wish to examine this phenomenon through the lens of conflict theory (Vaske et al. 1995). Based on the results of analysis examining future appropriateness, it may be that visitor conflict with concessions activity is social-values conflict, rather than goal interference conflict. That is to say, if concessions are viewed in a negative light by visitors, it is not because of actual experiences with or awareness of concessioner activity, but rather because of perceived incompatibility with an individual's values. The role of place identity rather than dependence bolsters this conclusion, as emotional connections to place, but not functional ones, were significant in the future model. Future research should address this by directly measuring both social-values and goal interference conflict, related to both present and future concessions activity.

Management implications and conclusion

Despite these limitations, the results presented in this analysis have potential implications for the management of both current and future concessioner-provided services. For park managers and other decisionmakers, the most substantial findings may be the level of visitor concern regarding any potential increase in commercial activity at GRTE. Any decision to increase commercial activity must be considered carefully, and weighed against a variety of potential impacts; as visitation will likely continue to grow in the long term, and with continued pressure to increase commercial activity from

groups such as the Made in America Advisory Committee, finding the correct balance will likely remain a challenge for NPS decisionmakers.

In the present, concessioner employees should continue to maintain a low profile when providing services in the context of a national park. This may mean avoiding ostentatious corporate logos, maintaining a color or design scheme that is consistent with NPS facilities, or other strategies to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to operations—all practices already largely in place, due to requirements imposed by their agreements with NPS. A similar recommendation applies to potential future concessioner-provided services. An increase in perceptible commercial activity in GRTE was the single strongest predictor in the future model, and steps should be taken to minimize the intrusiveness of any new commercial services.

At a more fundamental level, managers should carefully consider the necessity of any concessioner activity, new or existing. National parks represent a unique setting for recreation and conservation, and a context that allows visitors to escape from the pace and flow of their “everyday” lives. Concessioner services that impinge on the visitor experience, even those that may be appropriate in non-park contexts, should only be considered for implementation after significant scrutiny. Such decisions may be difficult, and necessarily rely upon the discretion of park managers, who must exercise their best judgement in concert with all available evidence. The results reported in this manuscript provide a valuable addition to that evidence, and may advance the conversation regarding private activity in public spaces.

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