

# Visitor Experiences of Stress and Reported Hassles in the Shining Rock Wilderness Area

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**Abstract:** This article describes the nature of hassles experienced by visitors in a southern U.S wilderness area, defined as irritating, frustrating demands and situations during a recreation experience. Of the 486 respondents, 87% indicated that a hassle was experienced. The greatest sources of hassle were litter and other impacts from human use of the resource. A visitor education program is recommended to achieve the management goal of reducing the amount and intensity of hassles.

People experience stress in everyday life and cope with it; recreation in wilderness environments is no exception. Stressful situations and the stress process have the potential to negatively affect a recreation experience. A better understanding of the stress and coping process in recreation activities can help managers to design management techniques that reduce perceived stress and enhance visitor experiences. Providing information concerning the stress process will help recreationists to mitigate stressful situations and improve their overall experience.

Stress and coping theory (Kaplan 1996; Lazarus and Folkman 1984) has been used to understand recreationists' appraisal of stressful situations, coping processes, response to stress, and the outcomes of the process. Hassles are a form of stress. The daily hassles concept was developed by DeLongis (1985), DeLongis and others (1988), Kanner and others (1981), and Lazarus and others (1985). Hassle variables measure the immediate and multiple pressures that occur during the recreation experience and the disruption associated with them. The hassles concept suggests that every day demands on a person have a greater overall effect than larger life events.

The definition of *hassle* used here is the irritating, frustrating demands or situations that occur during recreation experiences; they can range from minor annoyances to fairly major pressures or problems. A wilderness visitor might experience numerous events that must be appraised and

coped with, but may be considered regular events in a wilderness context. For example, traveling off-trail might create a route-finding hassle, nearby campsite users may cause irritating noise, and seeing litter in the backcountry might be frustrating. In addition, situations used to describe conflicts in outdoor recreation settings can be sources of hassles, such as user crowding or negative interactions between horse riders and

hikers. Hassles represent specific attributes of the outdoor recreation experience that may negatively affect the experience, and when taken collectively, could have a significant-disruptive impact.

Previous studies used the stress and coping model to investigate recreation conflict; according to stress theory, recreation conflict was methodically treated as a stressful major life event (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Schneider 1995; Miller 1997). The work reported here expands upon



Article co-author Rudy Schuster. Photo courtesy of Rudy Schuster.

previous studies and promotes the "hassle" concept for recreation stress research. The primary objective of this article is to provide information that will aid in the management of stress-related hassles in wilderness areas.

## Study Area

The Shining Rock Wilderness Area (SRWA) consists of 18,700 acres and is located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. The SRWA is located within four hours' driving time from multiple urban centers, shows signs of previous human activity, and receives a high amount of recreation use. The dominant uses within the SRWA include day hiking, backpacking, berry picking, and hunting. Mountain-bike and horse use are permitted on trails surrounding the SRWA.

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) manages the SRWA and surrounding buffer zone for dispersed recreation use. The SRWA has a group size limit of 10 people, and the buffer zone a group size limit of 25. In the buffer zone, trail blaze-markers and signs are provided, but trails are not marked within the SRWA. Campsites are not designated in either the SRWA or buffer zone, and due to high and consistent recreation use, many sites have become regularly used, with some posted for closure due to severe impacts. Recreationists in the SRWA and buffer zone must cope with hassles themselves since little on-site assistance is available.

## Methods

A survey of visitors to the SRWA and surrounding buffer zone was conducted from July through November of 1999. Sampling was conducted at four different trailheads and designed to increase the diversity of users in the area (e.g., summer and fall hikers,

berry pickers, and hunters). Commercial groups requiring special use permits or groups who had leaders/facilitators were not included in the sample. A mail survey was used with up to three reminders.

## Results

A total of 713 surveys were mailed; 486 surveys were completed and returned (adjusted response rate of 68%). While 424 (87%) indicated that some sort of hassle was experienced at the study site, only the results from a screened sample of 388 respondents who had no missing data in the survey were used here.

The three most frequently participated-in activities in the SRWA were

weekend backpacking (45%), day hiking (39%), and backpacking trips longer than one night (13%). Other activities reported were: blueberry picking (5%), wildlife viewing (2%), car camping and hiking (2%), and photography (2%). Visitors could participate in more than one activity on the same trip.

Twenty-seven percent of respondents were on their first visit to the SRWA; 73% had been to the area previously. Most of the respondents spent five days or fewer per year within the designated SRWA boundaries (56%) or in the buffer zone (38%). Overall, about three-quarters of respondents had more than one year of experience in the SRWA and buffer zone.

**Table 1—Sources of hassles in the SRWA reported by respondents.**

Source of Hassle	Percent (n=388)
Litter	46
Noise from other people	44
Damage to the resource (plants, trails...)	36
Too many people at campsites	36
Vehicles near the Wilderness Area	26
Too many people on the trail	26
Dogs or other pets	25
Route finding/navigation	24
Behavior of other people	23
Weather conditions	20
Hunters	18
Equipment problems (tent, backpack...)	10
Traveling to the area	7
Developed facilities	7
Group troubles (disagreements, arguments)	6
Traveling home after the trip	6
Personal ability to complete desired task	6
Mountain bikers	5
Things were not as I hoped they would be	5
Planning the trip	3
Other	24