Managing for the Long Run: Managing Trail Runners in Grand Canyon National Park

Michael Brunson, M.A., Ryan Sharp, PhD, Nathan Reigner, PhD, & Tyler Cribbs, M.S.

National Outdoor Recreation Conference
Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals
May 6, 2018
Managing Trail Runners in Grand Canyon National Park

- Background
- Objectives
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
Background

- Increased overall visitation
  - 2018 visitation: 6,380,495 (up 2% from 2017; up 6.8% from 2016)

- Variety of user types utilizing the Cross Canyon Corridor (CCC)

- 2014 study of inner canyon users (Pettengill, 2015)

- 2018 study replicates aspects while adding new elements
Press Releases and Social Media

Grand Canyon R2R2R Run!

Public group
14,874 Members

Push yourself on any of these challenges! Mike Lanza, BACKPACKER Northwest Editor

1. Grand Canyon Rim to Rim Trail (AZ)

Score: 74 Miles: 21 Elevation Change:

For sheer majesty, this beauty takes

Grand Canyon Trail Runners
@GrandCanyonTrailRunner

Protecting scenic Grand Canyon trails has been

Courtesy of Doug Williams
Cross Canyon Corridor

- Bright Angel Trail, South Kaibab Trail, North Kaibab Trail
- Total Distance: 24 miles via Bright Angel
- Elevation Loss/Gain: 4380 ft/5761 ft
Objectives

1. Identify current spatial-temporal patterns of visitor use along the Cross Canyon Corridor,

2. Assess relationship between the quality of visitor experiences and visitor use types and amounts,

3. Assess prevalence, and potential impacts, of trail runners within the Cross Canyon Corridor
Methods

- Surveys at each trailhead with access to CCC (Objective 1)
- GPS Visitor Tracking (GVT) (Objective 2)
- Trail Counters (Objective 1)
Methods

- Surveys uploaded via Qualtrics
- Response data entered into SPSS 23.0 for analysis (ANOVA, Chi Square)
- GPS data uploaded to Canway software
- Trail counter data uploaded via Trafx software
Results

- 1,563 visitors approached
  - 1,172 completed surveys (75% response rate)
  - Robust representation of visitor population (2.4% C.I.)

- 425 GPS units sent out (95% response rate)

- Counter data provided mixed results

So what about trail runners?
Results

Trail Runners

- 43 respondents self-identified trail running as primary activity
  - Out of 224 hiking Rim to Rim or Rim to River
- Counter and GPS data suggest shoulder season spikes in traffic corresponding to popular times for Rim to Rim traffic
- Decrease in trail running as primary activity between 2014 and 2018
  - 8% - 4%
Results Trail Runners

There are too many trail runners using the trails
Other trail users did not make way for me to quickly pass
Encountering mules along the trail made me feel unsafe
I used my smart phone along the trail
I saw too many other visitors along the trail
I saw very little human waste along the trail
I saw people doing unsafe things to take selfies
I saw people doing disrespectful things to take selfies
I saw a lot of litter along the trail
I saw very little human waste along the trail
I used my smart phone along the trail
Visitor Experiences

The way others were using technology (phones, speakers, tablets, GPS, etc.) along the trail detracted from my experience
Other trail users expected that I move out of their way so they could pass

Percentage

32% of respondents disagreed that there are too many trail runners
79% of respondents stated that trail runners are not a problem
Discussion

- Are trail runners the problem we make them out to be?
- Open ended question about issues:
  - 8 related to trail runners
- Comments:
  - “Inconsiderate, unethical, selfish, ego-driven”
  - “Too many…very rude”
- So do trail runners need to be “managed?”

Hateful Old Hikers Association
January 11, 2015
I hate trail runners! It’s unnatural! It’s unsafe for hikers! Hear hear for banning trail running!!
http://www.tennessean.com/.../safety-concerns-halt-.../19981507/
And get them out of the Grand Canyon too!!
http://running.competitor.com/20.../.../news/grand-canyon_108186

Grand Canyon NPS
@GrandCanyonNPS
Crossing #GrandCanyon this weekend? Don’t store or abandon gear along the trail. Why?
go.nps.gov/GCTC06 #LNT #R2R #Hiking #Running -mq
Discussion

- Majority supported registration for Rim to Rim travel (no limits or fees)
- Majority supported more education regarding trail etiquette/behavior (*more support from inner canyon users*)
- Visitor interference low
- Acceptable encounter rates
Discussion

- Trail runners need to be managed... just like any other visitor.
- Perception that trail runner's are a problem
- **Education** – strategic and purposeful
- Increased visitation requires continued monitoring with the appropriate focus
Questions?

Many thanks to the staff of Grand Canyon National Park, especially Mike Kearsley and Debbie Brenchley. Thank you to the research crew at Kansas State University, especially Jordan Blair, Tyler Cribbs, Tommy Giordano, Sarah Jackson, Ashley Kelly, Karl Noren, and Kristen Sikorsky.

Dr. Ryan Sharp
ryansharp@ksu.edu

Michael Brunson
michaelbrunson@ksu.edu

Photo credits: Michael Brunson, Nathan Reigner, Ryan Sharp
Biggest Problem - Open Ended Response Highlights

- Crowded south rim
- Construction
- Poor hiking etiquette/disrespectful visitors
- Music played on speakers
- Graffiti on rocks
- Hard to find a good map with trail distances
- Not enough signage (other landmarks than resthouses)
- Parking
- Poor trail conditions
- Long shuttle bus lines
- Hiking time estimates
Biggest Problem - Open Ended Response Highlights

- Aggressive squirrels
- Long bathroom lines and cute elk
- Digestive tract
- Mule droppings
- Forgot my trail beer
- My wife
- My menstruating wife
- Slow breakfast service
- The uphill