THE CHANGING FACE OF TOURISM
IN DEATH VALLEY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in Geography

By

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ABSTRACT

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This research examines patterns of visitation to Death Valley National Park (DVNP) from 1990 through 2011 to determine if changes have occurred, what those changes are, how they reflect upon DVNP and the U.S. National Park System, and if they mirror trends in global tourism. Three surveys distributed during the 1990s and one from 2010/11 were compared to identify differences in visitor demographics and interests; initial impressions that these had changed significantly over the subject period were not borne out by the data. However, other unexpected patterns were revealed and examined; in particular, the overwhelming number of foreign tourists visiting the Park, primarily Western Europeans, and especially during the summer season. As global tourism is increasing, Asia is becoming a major source of such travelers, but data reviewed in this thesis indicates that DVNP is not a popular destination for these international visitors. This phenomenon warrants attention in terms of the continued attraction and sustainability of this unique environment and invaluable part of the U.S. National Parks System.

Keywords: Death Valley, U.S. National Parks, geotourism, University of Idaho’s Visitor Service Project
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Death Valley National Park (DVNP) is one of the United States’ most well-known and oft-frequented National Parks. Located in eastern California, it includes the lowest elevation in the contiguous United States (-86m) and holds the global record for the highest temperature ever documented (56.7°C). These two factors alone encourage travelers to visit the park; those who arrive then find the beauty, solitude and geologic wonders this remote locale offers.

There are several classes of visitors to DVNP. Some find themselves in the Park unintentionally, as California State Route 190 (SR 190) connects the oft-visited eastern Sierra Nevada (home of Yosemite National Park and other popular tourist destinations) with Las Vegas, Nevada. School field trips, scouting expeditions, or other formal group outings - decided upon and arranged by others – bring additional visitors. Others spend time in the Park as part of their employment, including public safety officers and road maintenance personnel. The term “visitor” may be applied to those for whom this destination was not necessarily a personal choice, and “tourist” to those for whom the visit was intentional. As such distinctions are often difficult to ferret out from the data available, the terms “visitor”/“tourist” and “visitorship”/ “visitation”/ ”tourism” shall be used interchangeably within the body of this thesis.

It is the purpose of this study to examine patterns of visitation to Death Valley National Park and determine if: a) those patterns changed significantly between 1990 and 2011, b) there are specific patterns of visitation which make Death Valley unique among
U.S. National Parks and, c) how this pattern of visitation fits into contemporary global tourism.

This research is significant within the field of geography for several reasons: a) it is a study in tourism geography, concerned with travel and place, b) the unique physical geography of Death Valley National Park entices a class of visitors who can be evaluated within the sub-field of geotourism, and c) concerns over sustainability are clearly relevant to the present and future of Death Valley, as both a physical environment and a tourist destination.
CHAPTER 2
PHYSICAL SETTING

Death Valley National Park is located in eastern California in the Basin and
Range Geomorphic Province. The valley is surrounded by high mountain ranges, with
altitudes that lie between 1000 and 2000 m: the Amargosa Range on the northeast (itself
comprised of the Grapevine and Funeral Mountains), the Greenwater Range on the east-
southeast, the Black Mountains on the southeast, the Owlshead Mountains on the
southwest, the Panamint Range (incorporating the Cottonwood Mountains) on the west,
and the Last Chance Range on the northwest. The highest peak is Telescope Peak, in the
Panamint Range, with an elevation of 3368 m. (See Map 1.) Vehicle access into the
valley may be gained through Grapevine Canyon, Daylight Pass, SR 190, Wildrose
Canyon, SR 178, and Big Pine Road. The valley itself is largely at or below sea level; at
Badwater in the southeast end of the valley, the elevation is ~86 m. The unique
geophysical setting - a very low elevation and the rain shadow effect of the surrounding
mountain ranges - contributes to widely ranging temperatures. Summer temperatures are
often above 49˚C (120˚F); in the winter one may experience nighttime temperatures
below freezing (NPS, 2013a). Notably, the highest land temperature ever recorded on
Earth was at Furnace Creek on July 10 1913, when the mercury reached 56.7˚C (134˚F)
(NPS, 2013a).
Map 1. Death Valley National Park (Source: www.mappery.com)
CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL TOURISM

The development of Death Valley as a tourist destination can best be understood by briefly examining forms of tourism in the past and comparing contemporary trends to those in the rest of the world. The question of why it is that humans travel holds the key to why specific places have appeal, and what a place like a National Park must offer to attract those travelers. As history shows, the reasons people travel are myriad - aesthetic, intellectual, hedonistic – and each uniquely personal to the traveler. A place that provides multiple physical, mental and/or emotional attractions will likely be a preferred destination.

3.1. Old World Journeys

Travel for leisure dates back as far as the 6thC BCE, with the Babylonians and Egyptians hosting religious festivals (White, 2009), where leisure activities for the attendees included viewing the notable architecture and works of art in the festival host cities.

This idea of travel to regions other than one’s own soon evolved to include trips made for economic, religious, educational, celebratory, medical, and simply hedonistic purposes. In the 4thC BCE, the Greeks were producing guidebooks akin to modern-day AAA guides, including advertisements. The Romans were not far behind; they soon touted healing spas, travel on seas safe from piracy, and the acceptance of Roman coinage everywhere in the Empire (White, 2009).
With the end of the Roman and Greek empires, tourism stalled for a number of centuries. Religious travel did continue however, a reversal of the trend towards the more recreational aspect of travel during the empires’ glory days.

The European Renaissance, known as a rebirth of culture, allowed for resurgence in travel. For most, land transport was the only mode available, so the infrastructure of roads and roadhouses was improved. It was in the last years of this period, and through the early 19thC, during which wealthy young men made the famous “Grand Tour” of Europe’s major cities as a part of their coming of age.

From a geographer’s viewpoint, the travels of Alexander von Humboldt during the early 1900s mark a critical point in the advent of tourism for enjoyment. As what may well have been the first eco-tourist, Humboldt later wrote that he travelled “to study the construction of the Globe,” “the influence of the atmosphere and its chemical composition on organic life,” and “the similarity of the earth’s layers in countries far apart from each other” (Sachs, 2006). Travel for knowledge, the appreciation of beauty, and hedonism was now an established activity.

3.2. Early U.S. Travel

True to the puritanical mores of this country’s founding fathers, American attitudes towards travel and recreation were primarily negative through the mid-19thC. Hedonism was a threat to morals and the Christian work ethic; recreation was acceptable only when it was productive in terms of education, physical or emotional healing, or spiritual growth (Culver, 2007). There was certainly an economic component to this attitude; only the wealthy had the leisure time or finances for recreation. From a theoretical perspective, Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An*
*Economic Study of Institutions* (1899) argued that “conspicuous consumption” and “conspicuous leisure” (recreational travel) were markers of class status; to be seen traveling was to be viewed as part of the gentility (Culver, 2007).

Such attitudes began to change in the late 19th C as the American West became a travel destination for both U.S. and foreign visitors. The influence of Humboldt is evident in the writings of John Muir, who shared the joys and beauties of the West with his readers, once exclaiming to a friend “How intensely I desire to be a Humboldt” (Sachs, 2006). Charles Wilson Peale, the esteemed painter and naturalist, wrote that Humboldt could “empathize with the American spirit of restlessness” (Sachs 2006).

The West was a new type of destination, one which demanded attention to wilderness, and, consequently, its conservation (Wrobel, 2001). However, it wasn’t until the late 19th C that U.S. academics (primarily historians) considered tourism a field worthy of study (Pomeroy, 2001). Once established as an academic field, it burgeoned. Earl Pomeroy’s 1957 treatise, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America*, was the first academic work on tourism about the western United States. MacCannell’s *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1999), first published in 1973, focused on tourism as a cultural phenomenon and is still considered a classic work in the field. The theory of individuals’ interactions with the environments they visit evolved in the 1960s and 1970s, with the focus on the tourist experiencing “the other”, something other than everyday life, in both location and experiences (Stevenson, Wearing and Young, 2009). As Williams (2009) puts it, MacCannell “argues that one of the primary motives for modern tourism is the immersion in the real, authentic lives of others and as an antidote to the in authenticity of the modern lives that the tourists
themselves endure. “In terms of where tourism belonged as an area of study, there were two schools of thought, the first viewing tourism as an economic realm, and the other as an area of social study (Stevenson, Wearing and Young, 2009). The economic viewpoint is valid; Pomeroy (2001) states that contemporary tourism in the West garners more community income, in jobs and commercial profit, than did the “extractive industries” (grazing, mining) of the region’s past. But clearly tourist activity is also a matter of social interaction. Wrobel et. al. (2001) observe that tourists have traditionally been viewed by local inhabitants as ripe for the plucking, to be fleeced “intellectually and financially”. In his 1998 work Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth Century American West, Hal Rothman proposed that residents of the American West were making a “Faustian” agreement with the tourist industry; as tourist dollars increase, the community’s self-identity and autonomy decrease. That would somewhat negate the experience described by MacCannell (1999) wherein the contemporary tourist is as a “pilgrim” searching for authenticity in his travels. In the early days of U.S. tourism, and within the first U.S. National Parks, both of these viewpoints were undoubtedly valid. As time passed, tourists’ interactions with other tourists (who were and are increasingly from places far from their own homes and experiences), grew increasingly unfamiliar, and became a part of the tourist experience itself. These complex interactions of finances, customs, and personalities remain issues of concern to all tourist destination planners and managers.

3.3. Death Valley’s Early Days

Seven thousand years BPE, the Nevares Spring People occupying the Death Valley region enjoyed a cooler, wetter environment than today’s, and game was
abundant. Around 3000 BPE, the Mesquite Flat People arrived in the valley. During their occupancy, the environment became hotter and drier, and over time they switched to more gathering and less hunting. They left before the valley became the truly arid landscape it is today. By 900 CE, the Saratoga Springs People were living in the valley; they sustained themselves with what they could kill with bow and arrow, edible plants, and flour made from seeds (Clark, 2002). (Petroglyphs representing these hunting techniques, and the game sought, are found in and around the valley.) The first Shoshonean People, ancestors of those who now reside in the Valley, were present by 1100 CE; they were primarily seed gatherers but also ate small animals and some insects (Clark, 2002). Their descendents, now known as the Timbisha Shoshone, call their home Valley of the Red Ochre, or Timbisha (Death Valley Journal, 2013).

Non-natives began to pass through Death Valley in the 1800s: New Mexican traders, and U.S. and Canadian trappers enroute to coastal settlements and the California missions (Lingenfelter, 1986). But it was the lure of gold that first brought new explorers to Death Valley; as early as 1844, John C. Fremont was very near Death Valley, and in 1849, the famous Bennet-Arcane party experienced tragedy there due to a poorly drafted map (Lingenfelter, 1986). Thereafter, improved maps not only formalized the valley’s name (it is purported that one of the members of the Bennet-Arcane party, at last leaving the valley, turned and said “Goodbye, Death Valley”), but allowed for easier and more certain access. Gold seekers began arriving in greater numbers by the mid-1850s, and early development began. Greenwater Ranch was founded as a source of hay for miners’ horses, and soon the valley had an official first resident: Andy “Bellerin’ Tex” Laswell (Varney, 1990).
Gold mining was not a very lucrative pursuit, but in 1881, Aaron and Rosie Winters discovered borates in Death Valley. By 1883, twenty-mule teams were hauling this newly discovered and valuable ore to processing facilities in Boron and by 1907, the Tonopah – Tidewater Railroad had reached Death Valley (Lingenfelter, 1986). Greenwater Ranch expanded to support borate miners and the mule teams; eventually renamed the Furnace Creek Ranch, it remains the hub of activity in the valley as the site of the Visitor Center, the majority of the Park’s overnight accommodations, a store, restaurants, a museum, and employee housing.

Tourism came to Death Valley as a by-product of the mining industry. As the industry grew, so did the number of people coming to the valley, and not all were rugged miners. The earliest public accommodations in Death Valley were established in November 1926, when H.W. “Bob” Eichbaum opened a small camp named Bungalette City at Stovepipe Wells. (A sign describing Eichbaum’s encampment is today posted on the Stovepipe Wells store; it mentions the 20 small tent cabins along with larger buildings and Army tents used as communal areas.) With electric light, running water, and reportedly good food, tours and trail rides were popular with the early – and hearty - tourist class.

To meet the need for appropriate accommodations for mining executives and higher-end tourists, the Pacific Coast Borax Company built the Furnace Creek Inn less than one mile uphill from Greenwater Ranch. The Inn, designed by Albert C. Martin (architect of the Los Angeles City Hall and other notable edifices), opened in February 1927. Built in the Santa Barbara Spanish Colonial style (a.k.a. Mission style), the Inn was constructed of adobe building materials, with red tile on the roof and tiled archways,
and included a lush – albeit completely non-native – garden through which guests are still invited to stroll (Van Valkenburg, 2010). A constant-flow, spring-fed pool (the water flows down to Furnace Creek Ranch as irrigation water) was but one of the many luxuries afforded those who made the arduous trek by train, or later automobile, to this unique location. The intended market of the Inn remains high-end; in the early days, those same people who visited Palm Springs were enticed to Death Valley with news articles in Los Angeles newspapers and travel brochures. One brochure, now on display in the lobby of the Inn, lured those in search of beauty with phrases including: “In variation of form and color Death Valley exceeds the Grand Canyon”, and “The Valley floor must be made of jades and turquoise and rose quartz, with the pearl foundation showing through”. More mundane needs were also met; after the end of Prohibition, a bar and cocktail lounge were added, constructed with local travertine stone, Colemanite ore, and old railroad trestles). What Cabana (2011) terms the “euphoria of hotels,” exemplified by the Royal Hawaiian in Waikiki and the Death Valley Inn, encouraged businessmen to bring their families to vacation in previously inaccessible locales. Death Valley became a sort of “West Coast Adirondacks” (Cabana, 2011), where families of similar income and cultures could meet and socialize; undoubtedly there was some “social engineering” in the matchmaking efforts for youth. Cabana (2011) notes that some 40 – 50 of these “Old Money” families continue to visit the Inn once or twice each year.

Not to miss a potential niche market, Death Valley was also promoted as a location in which one could recover in comfort from polio or pleurisy (Cabana, 2011). Nor was the scientific value of Death Valley overlooked; in 1926, Glendale High School
(Glendale, CA) made its first of many Spring Break Death Valley field trips for chemistry students (Southworth, 1990), and the tradition of field trips is continued by dozens of colleges and universities today. The valley was also on the radar of the federal government; prior to the public opening of the Inn, Pacific Borax had hosted National Park Service (NPS) Director Steven Mather and his Deputy, Field Service Director Horace Albright.

After WWI, tourism to Death Valley had burgeoned. Ownership of personal vehicles had increased dramatically, and the Automobile Club of America promoted driving tours from Los Angeles. This was the cue for Pacific Borax to leverage its political connections to earn some sort of protection for Death Valley, to ensure that its financial interests – both tourist-based and mining - were protected. Critically important was that the Furnace Creek Inn did not lose its characteristic seclusion and outstanding views to runaway tourist development, as was happening at the Grand Canyon (Van Valkenburg, 2011). The government responded, and on January 13 1933, President Herbert Hoover signed into existence Death Valley National Monument. Why a Monument instead of a Park? The reasons were numerous, and related both to economics and politics. Most importantly, all of the Death Valley mining companies had been against a National Park designation, as that would have precluded continued mining and any new mining claims in the valley – an issue of which Hoover, a former mining engineer, was well aware.

Somewhat awkwardly, Steven Mather had been a Pacific Borax employee (it was he who had created the “20 Mule Team” slogan), so a potential conflict of interest existed. Further, California already had more National Parks than any other state in the
union; at that time, it wasn’t politically advisable to continue adding to that number (Rae, 1991). It was also reported that Hoover’s response to the possibility of National Park status for Death Valley was “vociferous and profane,” for if it was designated a Park, not a Monument, he would not be able to camp wherever he wished in the valley, a fact of National Park status he found objectionable (Rothfus, 1996).

Death Valley continued to grow as a tourist destination through the early 20th C, initially aided by the construction of over 500 miles of road by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the construction of campgrounds and other facilities by the CCC and the National Park Service. The Inyo Independent estimated that over 80,000 people attended the valley’s centennial celebration in 1949, and in November 1958 alone, over 10,000 vehicles entered Death Valley through the western passes (Lengner and Thomas, 2008). The growth of Death Valley as a tourist destination seemed inevitable, although the future held challenges and opportunities unrealized until the 1990s.
CHAPTER 4
MODERN TOURISM

4.1. Trends in Global Tourism

The increasing ease with which both U.S. and foreign tourists may visit Death Valley undoubtedly accounts for much of the growth in tourism there over the past decades. But access alone is not enough to explain this trend; there are reasons which reach far beyond the infrastructure and conditions within the Park. In essence, as goes the global economy, so goes global tourism.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) tracks and promotes tourism “as a driver of economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability” (UNWTO, 2013) in over 200 nations. Among the many publications of the organization is the World Tourism Barometer, which analyzes international tourism for a specified period of time and makes projections for the near future based on recent observations. The most recent edition (Volume 11, October 2013) notes an overall increase in tourism world-wide during the “Northern Hemisphere peak season” (June, July and August) over the same period for 2012, with international arrivals (overnight visitors arriving from other countries) topping 100 million in June (a first) and 125 million in July and August. The months January – August 2013 evidenced a 5% increase for the same period in 2012, with that growth evident in all of the world’s regions, for an estimated total of 747 million international tourists.

This pattern of the growth of global tourism is consistent with the October, 2006 edition of the Barometer (Volume 4, No. 3, October 2006). As stated therein, 2006 year marked the third year of sustained growth in tourism, with international arrivals
approaching 578 million for the year. However, it is also noted therein that North America evidenced only a +0.4% growth during the first eight months of 2006.

Of importance is the above phrase “the third year of sustained growth”. This reflects the overwhelming fact that travel is not immune to the economic and social ups- and-downs of modern society. The global events of the early 2000s, including the war in Iraq and a global outbreak of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), significantly reduced global tourism (UNWTO, 2003). In Death Valley, this was evident in an 11.5% decrease in visitation (117,040 individuals) from 2001 to 2002. Another downturn took place in 2007 - 2009, when the U.S. housing bubble burst, followed sequentially by reduced consumer spending, lessened business investment, and cuts in job availability, resulting in less travel by U.S. residents both home and abroad. (These financial difficulties had begun in 2006, when the housing market first teetered; the above-noted limited growth in North America in 2006 may well be attributable to that, along with the fear of al Qaeda attacks at home and abroad.) By mid-2008 the rate of increase in global travel dropped an average 3.7% during the first eight months of that year, down to a total 2% rate of increase, much lower than in previous years. The UNWTO projected minimal growth in international tourism for 2009 (UNWTO, 2008); that projection was accurate, as by August, 2009, there had been a 7% drop in international tourism from that same period in 2008 (UNWTO, 2009). Again, visitation to Death Valley National Park followed the global trend, with a nearly 5% decrease in visitation from 2008 to 2009. In summary, in terms of the actual number of visitors recorded, Death Valley National Park shows trends similar to those recorded in other the U.S. and globally. Economic crises,
political instability and social conditions in both destination and home countries affect global tourism.

Assuming finances and world politics allow, people will travel. But how they view themselves as travelers also dictates the places they visit. Weber and Sultana (2011) note that national parks have been viewed with wariness by some, seeing them as refuges of the wealthy and privileged. Certainly, the lodges of Yosemite and Yellowstone, and the Furnace Creek Inn, reflect the values and interests of their moneyed clientele, and there is an element of status to staying in these accommodations. While access to the Parks is no longer limited by transportation costs (although with rising vehicle fuel costs, this may prove relevant once again), Weber and Sultana (2011) cite Chen’s 2009 work indicating that wilderness users are more often highly educated persons, which may somewhat limit the demographic range of who visits DVNP with its barren, wilderness image (despite the luxurious accommodations available there).

Discussions such as this lead to the identification of types of tourists and tourism, an increasingly popular aspect of tourism studies. Harkening back to the work of MacCannell (1989) and others, the idea of authenticity in travel today brings us various categories of travel. Table 1 presents a number of these categories, as defined by The Center for Responsible Travel, a non-profit organization operating through Stanford University, with partners including Audubon International, Rainforest Alliance, the United Nations Environment Programme, and other lesser-known organizations. Most of the terms listed have evolved since the 1970s; those noted as “Impact-Driven” date to the 1990s, when the social and environmental impacts of tourism became of more concern to host nations, the travel industry and many travelers themselves. It is important to note
that many of these terms are mutually inclusive, though they may not necessarily be so. 

There will always remain those who travel to enjoy nature, but despoil it with their footprints and trash; others travel to visit different cultures, only to disparage customs and behaviors unlike their own. As these categories of tourism become more well-known to potential customers, new areas of the globe will begin to profit from tourism through specialized tours and activities catering to those with specific interests in adventure, culture, or nature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adventure Tourism</th>
<th>Nature travel which involves physical skills, endurance &amp; degree of risk-taking.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Tourism</td>
<td>The movement of persons for essentially cultural motivations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Tourism</td>
<td>Large-scale tourism – typically associated with ‘sea, sand, sun’ resorts and characteristics such as transnational ownership, minimal direct economic benefit to destination communities, seasonality, and package tours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature Tourism</td>
<td>Travel to unspoiled places to experience and enjoy nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco-Tourism (Impact-driven)</td>
<td>Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geo Tourism (Impact-driven)</td>
<td>Tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place-its environment, heritage, aesthetics, and culture and the well-being of its residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable Tourism (Impact-driven)</td>
<td>Tourism that meets the needs of present tourist and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Tourism Terminology (Source: www.responsibletravel.org)
4.2. National Parks (U.S. and Abroad)

The 1872 designation of Yellowstone as the first National Park in the world was a product of the American notion of the west as wilderness, a valuable and then already threatened commodity. Now often referred to as “America’s Best Idea,” as Wallace Stegner described our National Parks (and later adopted as the title of Ken Burns’ documentary on U.S. National Parks), it was an idea that quickly took hold both in the U.S. and abroad. The first such park in Europe, Sweden’s Sarek National Park, was established in 1909. In Great Britain, the first attempts at ensuring public access to the countryside praised by “(t)he romantic poets such as Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth” (National Parks U.K., 2013) was made through the introduction of a “freedom to roam” bill in 1894 (National Parks U.K., 2013). While that effort failed, it marked the beginning of efforts which reached fruition in 1949 with the passage of an Act of Parliament to at last establish National Parks in Great Britain; within the first 12 years, 10 such parks had been established (National Parks U.K., 2013). Today, there are over 300 National Parks in Europe (IUCN, 2010), and hundreds elsewhere throughout the world. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which claims to be the largest and oldest organization concerned with global environmental issues, has defined national parks as “large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities” (IUCN, 2013). Not all areas considered to be National Parks by their home countries meet the IUCN criteria, nor are all areas meeting those criteria given the National Park
designation. However, using the stated criteria, the IUCN recognizes almost 7,000 National Parks world-wide (Levere, 2011).

In the U.S., a National Park “contains a variety of resources and encompasses large land or water areas to help provide adequate protection of the resources” (NPS, 2013c). The U.S. now boasts 401 areas designated as National Parks, ranging from the .02 acre Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial in Pennsylvania to the vast, 13.2 million acre Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska. Total visitation to the 84 million acres of National Park land in 2011 was 278,939,216; visitors’ needs were attended to by over 22,000 employees and over 221,000 volunteers (NPS, 2013b).

Unfortunately, no national park is immune to the cultures, politics and finances of its home country. Poaching is a major problem in parks all over the world; those in Africa, set aside primarily as animal preserves, face a constant battle with local peoples who have hunted the now-protected species for generations. The U.S. is no better; poachers lurk in the swamps of Everglades National Park hoping to snare alligators for their valuable hides. And no park can operate without funding, as was recently evidenced in the October 2013, U.S. budget crisis. As stated in the headline of an article on the website of West German Broadcasting (WDR.de, 2013), “U.S. government crisis and the tourists: Nothing works in the U.S. national parks”, noting that “suddenly many Germans know what the word “shutdown” means.”

**4.3. Death Valley National Park**

Since it first became a National Monument and recognized tourist destination, Death Valley has continued to grow both in acreage and visitation. In 1994, President Bill Clinton awarded it National Park status and added 1.3 million acres of protected area
to create a park which now encompasses 3.4 million acres. Incorporated into the park at that time were the Saline, Eureka, North Panamint, and Greenwater Valleys.

As at all National Parks, in DVNP the NPS provides materials and leads programs intended to educate all visitors about the history and natural environment of the region. The Visitor Center, reopened in late 2012 after extensive remodeling, now focuses on the themes of Death Valley as the “Hottest, Driest and Lowest” (Kyriazis, 2011). The NPS continues to make the Park more accessible to foreign tourists; in 2011, the Visitor Center offered printed tourist information in eight languages: English, French, Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian, Japanese, and Russian. As of 2013, written translations of the Scotty’s Castle tour were available in German, French, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, Italian, Czech, Slovenian, Russian, Korean, and Japanese (NPS, 2013d). Detailed materials (to date available only in English) cover such topics as landforms, geology, vegetation, wildlife, weather and climate, mining history, pre-history, photo hints, and safety concerns (roadway conditions and extreme temperatures).

Not all who visit Death Valley travel independently; Commercial Use Permits are issued to tour companies which bring both U.S. and foreign tourists to the Park. While most visit only the most popular sights, some companies offer small group trips to out-of-the-way, backcountry locales such as the Devil’s Racetrack. A large number of such permits are issued annually; on June 13 2011, there were 33 active commercial permit authorizations in Death Valley National Park (Kempkowski, 2011). Special Use Permits are required by non-profit organizations visiting the Park, such as larger academic field trips, (grueling) marathons and bicycle races, astronomy clubs, and the Death Valley ‘49ers. In 2011, twenty-three Special Use Permits had been authorized between January
1st and June 13th. There has been a recent increase in film crews using the Death Valley, and auto manufacturers and vehicle transmission builders come to the Park each summer to test their equipment under extreme conditions (Kempkowski, 2011).

To further attract and engage visitors, the NPS offers educational programs for children and adults. ROCKS (Recreation Outdoor Campaign for Kids through Study) brings 4th – 8th graders from Nevada and California for 3 days/2 nights to learn about geology, astronomy and ecology. WILD (Water, Invasive species, Landscape ecology and energy Development) is aimed at high school students (Kyriazis, 2011), and daily Ranger Talks and Programs appeal to adults and families. Today, those visiting Death Valley as vacationers find an array of activities in which they may participate. The striking scenery is on almost every visitors “must see” list, and paved or well-graded unpaved roads lead to numerous sites, including Dante’s View, Zabriskie Point, Badwater, Natural Bridge, Devil’s Golf Course, Artist’s Palette, Golden Canyon, Mesquite Dunes, Mosaic Canyon, and Ubehebe Crater.

For those interested in the region’s mining history, there are easily accessible points of interest, including the museum at Furnace Creek Ranch, Twenty Mule Team Canyon, Harmony Borax Works, and Wildrose Charcoal Kilns. The famous Scotty’s Castle is oft-visited; that magnificent home (now owned and operated by the NPS) was built by Albert and Bessie Johnson, but they allowed Walter Scott (“Death Valley Scotty”) to claim it was his, built from the (nonexistent) proceeds of his mining exploits. For a nominal fee, one may tour the castle and/or its technologically-advanced basement and underground tunnels.
Options for back-country travel also exist; by vehicle one may make the trek through Titus Canyon (which starts near the ghost town of Rhyolite) or visit the Devil’s Racetrack. Trips may be made in one’s own vehicle, on a tour, or by renting a 4WD Jeep from Farabee’s Jeep Rental, located across the road from the Furnace Creek Inn. For those who wish to hike, there are numerous trails throughout the Park, some leading to old mining settlements, others offering views unseen by the vehicle traveler.

For those looking for more resort-oriented activities, accommodations in Death Valley offer swimming pools, tennis courts, bicycle rentals, gift shops, and one of Golf Digest’s “America’s 50 Toughest Courses” (Furnace Creek Resort, 2013) for those who enjoy playing a round of golf with coyote as greens keepers.

While Death Valley is certainly known the world over for its harsh environment and extremes of nature, the NPS has only recently focused on those aspects in its educational and promotional materials, and as the new theme for the Visitors Center. Badwater, near the southern end of Death Valley, is the lowest spot in North America; many visitors not only stop, but walk out onto the usually-dry lakebed to more fully appreciate the unique characteristics of the location. And on the hottest days of summer, some hardy visitors – the majority of whom are from Europe – come to the valley with the express intent of experiencing the extreme heat. Lest they miss that opportunity, European tourists regularly stop in at the Visitor Center and inquire where it might be the hottest on that particular day (Baldino, 2010). Coincidentally, Badwater is often the hottest place in the valley, so those visitors check two items off of their “must see” lists with one stop. With limited time, uncomfortable conditions, and minimal NPS staff on duty during the summer, such an abbreviated travel plan is not unwise.
How is it that people come to learn of Death Valley as a destination? As a National Park, it has certain credibility as a place worth visiting, but many people in the U.S. and abroad lack a clear idea of all that Death Valley has to offer. One mechanism by which people have become aware of Death Valley is through popular entertainment. While offering only a limited perspective of the valley, movies have been filmed in Death Valley since 1915; in the early days such films starred well-known actors such as Wallace and Noah Beery, John Wayne, Douglas Fairbanks, James Cagney, and Bette Davis (IMDb, 2013). And of course, television’s weekly western drama, *Death Valley Days* (1952 – 1970), brought images of the area into homes around the world through at least the 1980s (IMDb, 2013). Filming has seen a recent resurgence (Kempkowski, 2011); perhaps yet another generation will be introduced to Death Valley through entertainment.

Clearly, popular media are not sufficient to make the global public aware of Death Valley. Many natives of the U.S. are unaware of all that this nation has to offer in public lands; one tourist, born in New Jersey and now living in France, remarked to the me that a visit to a U.S. National Park ought to be a high school graduation requirement, as he is embarrassed to admit that he knows nothing about the Parks when asked by friends in France.

The physical environment of Death Valley provides both encouragements and obstacles to travel to, and within, DVNP. On the upside, wildflower blooms such as those in 1998, 2004, and 2005 attract more than the usual number of tourists during the spring season. Unfortunately, the prerequisite for such blooms is above-average rainfall, which often leads to flash floods which damage roads, campgrounds and structures. At
this writing (November 2013), two of the roads into DVNP and one within it are closed due to damage experienced from storm-related flooding in late July 2013.

Many who visit DVNP are relatively local, that is, they come from California and Nevada, and so it is not a major commitment of time or energy to visit the Park. They may already be somewhat familiar with the Park, having either visited it before or having family or friends who have done so.

Others make Death Valley a part of a tour of western Parks, including Yosemite and/or the Grand Canyon. Materials advertising Death Valley are available in the lobbies of hotels and motels, and numerous visitor centers and information kiosks along the roads between the Parks offer information about DVNP, including tours and accommodations, encouraging those who might not otherwise have taken a route through Death Valley to do so.

Las Vegas is a huge source of visitation to Death Valley; it is less than a 3-hour drive from the glitzy Las Vegas Strip to the sublime hues of Artist’s Palette. In Las Vegas, the hotels, motels, and even shopping malls, offer materials on self-guided or packaged tours to Death Valley. For many tourists, Las Vegas is the starting or ending point on a trip which includes at least a drive through Death Valley, going to or coming from the west coast’s other tourist destinations. During the week after Christmas, DVNP experiences what is known as the “Las Vegas Effect”, an unusually heavy number of day trippers from that nearby vacation spot. On these and many other days, the Visitor Center is busiest between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m., reflecting the drive time from Las Vegas (Blacker, 2010).
With the advent of the internet, foreign tourists have found it much easier to get information about visiting Death Valley National Park. Germans, for example, have numerous websites from which to choose, including: USATourist.com, Westküste-usa.de ("The West Coast", which itself notes that 42% of the Park’s visitors are German), www.kalifornien-tour.de, and americandream.de. These sites each provide a physical description of Death Valley, including its elevation and temperature extremes, mention of things to see and do in the Park, and include listings or advertisements for lodging. USATourist.com also has web pages in French, Spanish, Chinese (and English).

As mentioned above, numerous tour companies offer tours of Death Valley. Some tours consist entirely of foreign tourists (who may or may not all be from the same country), others are mixes of U.S. residents and foreign tourists. Some are one-day trips out of Las Vegas, some multi-day trips passing through a variety of National Parks; others are educational trips, such as those offered by Road Scholar, created by the well-known Elderhostel organization. Whatever one may wish to see and experience in Death Valley, there is either a packaged tour or information available for a self-guided trip.

Despite the growth of tourism in DVNP over the years, the Park is underutilized in terms of available infrastructure (e.g. roads, facilities); it could handle 2.5 million visitors per year (Blacker, 2010). That would equate to more than twice the number of visitors seen in 2012 (NPS IRMA, 2012). While the infrastructure might have the capacity, the visiting public already complains about overcrowding at popular scenic locations within the Park. Continued increase in the number of visitors to DVNP is undoubtedly inevitable; it is important to understand that increase, so as to not only meet
the demands of those visitors, but to protect the natural environment which makes Death Valley so popular.

Tourism specific to Death Valley has not been studied in depth, other than through the surveys performed by the University of Idaho’s Visitor Services Project program (VSP) and Death Valley Natural History Association et al. The works of Zierer (1952), numerous contributors to Wrobel and Long (2001), and others who have written on the phenomenon of tourism in the U.S. West often mention Death Valley, but only by example or in an historical context. A number of small books and pamphlets, published by the Death Valley ‘49ers and others with particular interest in Death Valley, including Decker (1996), Lengner and Thomas (2008), and Rae (1991), discuss tourism within the context of mining, the railroads, car travel, etc. The Death Valley Natural History Association hosts an annual Conference on History and Prehistory; as of 2010, none of the research presented (or appearing in the published Proceedings) specifically addresses modern tourism to Death Valley.

This thesis attempts to fill in the gaps regarding mid-late 20thC tourism in DVNP, and to explore current trends. This latter effort was accomplished primarily through analysis of the survey distributed in 2010/11 (the White survey) and those completed in the 1990s. These surveys elicited responses on demographic characteristics of visitors, their visitation practices (e.g. type of lodging, length of stay) and their preferred activities within DVNP, in hopes of understanding tourists’ motivations for visiting the Park and behaviors while there.
CHAPTER 5
METHODOLOGY

In order to gain insight into historic and contemporary trends in tourism in Death Valley, information on historical and present-day visitation to DVNP was gathered from a number of sources. These included: 1) published articles or books; 2) past surveys of Park visitors; 3) guest registers at one lodging establishment; and 4) interviews with persons familiar with tourism in the Park over the past five decades. Additionally, information on present-day park visitorship was gathered through a survey of visitors during 2010-2011.

5.1. Determination of Historical Death Valley Tourism

The first source of information on historical tourism consisted of academic and non-academic articles, books, and pamphlets including information on the early days of Death Valley as a tourist destination (e.g., Decker 1986, Lengner and Thomas 2008, Rae 1991). These sources were reviewed to determine what had brought people to the region when travel was hard and tourist infrastructure either absent or primitive. It was found that the mining industry, combined with the railway, offered opportunities for rugged travelers to explore Death Valley. This tourism drove the development of tourist accommodations within the Park, and the good favor with which travelers viewed the mining company was arguably a strong motivation for the designation of the valley as a National Monument in 1933.
A second source of data on historical visitation was provided by visitor surveys from 1990, 1991, and 1996. The first and last were conducted by the Cooperative Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho as part of their Visitor Services Project (VSP), under contract with the NPS. The 1991 survey was performed by a consortium including the Death Valley Natural History Association (DVNHA), National Park Service, Death Valley ‘49ers, and Fred Harvey Inc., the park concessionaire at the time; that survey shall herein be referred to as the DVNHA survey. These surveys provided basic information on the demographic composition of the traveling public and the preferences of, and activities undertaken by, that public. The results were used as points of comparison with current trends.

Another valuable set of historic data was obtained by reviewing visitors’ places of origin using the Guest Registers of the Panamint Springs Resort, located near the current western boundary of DVNP along Highway 190. (The term “of origin” reflects the U.S. State or country the individual(s) listed as “home” when completing registers and surveys.) These registers spanned 12 months in each period 1989-1990, 1999-2000, and 2009-2010. The visitors’ places of origin and the number in each group was hand-tabulated, entered into an Excel spreadsheet, and graphed to (1) illustrate the number of countries from which such visitors had come and (2) track any changes in the relative prevalence of those places of origin over time. (Data on visitorship from specific U.S. states was also recorded from the records at Panamint Springs Resort, but was not evaluated as a part of this thesis.) Using this data, any changes in patterns of foreign visitation to the region were revealed.
Lastly, interviews with concessionaire and Park volunteers and personnel provided additional insight into observed patterns of travel motivations (e.g. places that have become popular destinations for travelers from specific countries, so-called “bucket lists”, and “must see” locations as determined by popular culture or the public campaigns of the NPS) and changes in the composition of the tourist groups themselves.

5.2. Determination of Trends in Modern Death Valley Tourism

Information on present-day visitorship to DVNP was gathered through a survey I created, largely modeled after the NPS Visitor Studies survey described above, and herein referred to as the “White” survey. A 25-question survey form was developed which included relevant questions from earlier surveys and some new questions reflecting societal changes (e.g., mention of refuse and recycling). The intent of the survey was to determine the following: 1) country or state of origin of the visitor; 2) reason for visiting DVNP; and 3) participation in activities and sights seen. Some questions included in the White surveys are not relevant to this thesis, but were included as a service to the NPS, which will receive a copy of the complete results.

The survey was conducted over the course of twelve months in 2010-2011. The survey distribution plan was developed so as to maximize the representation of visitors throughout the year, as the extreme climate of the area encourages travelers with differing objectives (i.e., Europeans prefer to experience the high summer temperatures). In the attempt to minimize bias, surveys were distributed both on weekdays and weekends, school vacation periods were not intentionally overlapped, and weather conditions not considered.
Surveys were distributed to visitor groups (one survey per group) over four different three-day periods (Friday through Sunday or Saturday through Monday), one each in the fall, winter, spring and summer tourist seasons. Fortunately, there were had been no recent floods or significant events which limited access to or within the park coincident with survey periods.

So as to minimize the disruption to the tourists’ nature experiences and to maximize the number of surveys returned (and as permitted by the NPS), surveys were handed out in the parking areas adjacent to five of the Park’s most popular scenic attractions: Badwater, Artist’s Palette (this survey site was later changed to Golden Canyon as the original site was not as frequently visited as anticipated), the Mesquite Dunes, Scotty’s Castle, and Zabriskie Point (Map 2). Each site was targeted at different times of day over each three-day period to account for early-birds, late risers, travelers-through, and those seeking to enjoy a desert sunset. Visitors surveyed were ideally selected on a first-come, first-surveyed basis, although the occasional language barrier or large influx of tourists at any one time required adjustments to that plan. The goal was to distribute ten surveys at each of the five sites on each of the three days, for the following totals: 50 each day, 3 days per period over 4 periods, for a total of 600 surveys disseminated to the public for the development of this thesis. The surveys were to be filled out after the tourists had completed their visits to the park; return postage was affixed to the survey form. Although online surveys were considered, they were not used because it was believed that few tourists would have the available technology with them to answer promptly, and that the surveys would be forgotten when the trip was over.
In total, 243 surveys, 40.5\% of the total number disseminated, were returned, meeting the criterion for a 95\% confidence level. Most of the returned questionnaires were fully complete and the remainder at least partially completed; those variances are noted in the data presentation as differences in sample size (n). The results were entered into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets (as had been the data from the earlier surveys) to facilitate analysis. Responses to those questions relevant to the focus of this thesis were tallied, evaluated, and compared both within the survey period and against prior survey results.
CHAPTER 6
DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

As stated above, the data presented herein derives from four different surveys. The first, the 1990 VSP survey, was conducted in English and French. The second, the DVNHA’s 1991 survey, was copied substantially from the VSP survey, but was available only in English. The third, the 1996 VSP survey, was also conducted only in English. The first three surveys each differed slightly in the questions that were asked and no clear interpretation of the results were included in the summaries or reports. The fourth, and most recent, survey (the “White” survey of 2010-2011) was offered in English, French, and Italian. Loosely based upon the VSP questionnaire, it incorporated substantive changes and additions to the questions asked. In some categories, a higher level of detail was requested. Not all responses to questions in either survey are reported in this thesis. Instead, the focus is on those questions which address the issues of Death Valley National Park visitation.

It is important to note that the circumstances under which the VSP and DVNHA surveys were distributed are different from those described above for the White survey. To quote from the 1996 VSP Report¹:

Interviews were conducted and questionnaires distributed to a sample of selected visitors visiting Death Valley National Park during September 15-21, 1996. Visitors completed the questionnaire after their visit and then returned it by mail. Visitors were sampled as they stopped at the Furnace Creek Visitor Center, Scotty’s Castle, Badwater, Zabriskie Point, Dante’s View, Furnace Creek Ranch General Store, Stovepipe Wells Store and Panamint Springs Store. … Visitor groups were greeted, briefly introduced to the purpose of the study and asked to

¹ Data originated from the University of Idaho Park Studies Unit, Visitor Services Project. Database creation is supported by funding from the National Park Service, Social Science Division, and from individual National Park Service units.
participate. If visitors agreed, the interview took approximately two minutes. These interviews included determining group size, group type and the age of the adult who would complete the questionnaire. This individual was asked his or her name, address and telephone number for the later mailing of a reminder-thank you postcard. ... Two weeks following the survey, a reminder-thank you postcard was mailed to all participants. Replacement questionnaires were mailed to participants who had not returned their questionnaires four weeks after the survey. Eight weeks after the survey, a second replacement questionnaire was sent to a random sample of visitors who had not returned their questionnaires.

These opportunities for more accessible survey distribution points, direct interview techniques, and personalized follow-up in the earlier surveys certainly increased the percentage of surveys returned, and may have contributed to more positive responses to subjective questions. On the other hand, when distributing the White survey, some individuals responded that they would complete the questionnaire only because it was not an official government survey. (This attitude was evident on the morning of March 11 2011, as Ranger Augie Berman distributed Visitor Survey Cards - one-page surveys administered periodically by NPS staff - to guests at Zabriskie Point, coincidental with this my distribution of survey forms. Some visitors who gladly accepted one of the White survey forms declined to interact with Ranger Berman, which did not surprise the NPS staffer.)

It is noted that although Death Valley was still “only” a National Monument when the 1990 and 1991 surveys were distributed, the fame of the location is likely to have outweighed its lack of designation as a National Park, therefore not having any negative effect on either the number or origins of those who visited.

As was also stated above, not all of any survey’s questionnaires were returned with appropriate or complete responses to all questions. Accordingly, the sample sizes
(‘n’) are included in each figure. Identification of the period in which the data was gathered is noted by season, as follows:

- W90: Winter 1990
- S91: Spring 1991
- F96: Fall 1996
- S10: Summer 2010
- F10: Fall 2010
- W11: Winter 2011
- SP11: Spring 2011
- TOTAL10/11: Total for 2010/2011

Another difficulty in reconciling the survey responses was that some were recorded in the VSP and DVNHA reports as percentages, and others as raw numbers. Wherever possible, the White survey data was recorded in the same manner as in earlier reports for ease of reconciliation. Further, not all totals for a given question or response equal 100%, due to the incompleteness of some earlier data. The surveys being compared in this study were of vastly disparate size, from n=48 to n=1053, rendering one-to-one numeric comparisons invalid.

The following figures illustrate the responses received to the survey questions. They are not shown in the order in which they were asked on the survey questionnaires, but rather have been presented so as to answer the key questions of who it is that visits Death Valley National Park, why they visit, and what they do once there. It must also be noted that one of the hazards of the relatively small sample sizes of the White surveys is the appearance of apparent aberrations. For example, in Figure 1, single surveys answered by large family groups suggest drastic increases in visitors from India in winter 2011 and from Italy in summer 2010. Accordingly, the actual numbers of visitors are not
used in Figures 1 – Figure 4; rather percentages of those surveyed are used to indicate trends, rather than to serve as definitive analyses of specific travel patterns.

6.1. Visitor Demographics

6.1.1. Country of Origin

All of the surveys asked where the visitors considered home (U.S. Zip Code, U.S. State, or Country). The responses to this question varied greatly by season, with summer providing the most unique results. Forty-seven percent (47%) of all international tourists visited during the summer season; in August 2011, foreign tourists accounted for 81.9% of the survey respondents. Figure 1 reflects that there fewer U.S. visitors surveyed (12) than French (17), German (38), or Dutch (13) (Figure 3). In the White study, foreign tourism dropped off significantly during the other seasons, with foreign tourism at 9.0% in fall, 7.3% in winter, but rebounding to 37.5% in spring. Unfortunately, no survey was completed during the summer season in the 1990s, so comparisons to that decade cannot be made for this summer phenomenon.

Another aspect of change in the tourism base of Death Valley is the inclusion of visitors from countries in 2010-11 that had no representation in 1990s. These include China, India, Malaysia, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, and Thailand. On the other hand, earlier surveys recorded visitors from Brazil, Columbia and Luxembourg, and these were not recorded in the White survey. However, these latter countries represented less than 0.1% of the total number of foreign visitors surveyed in the 1990s, and it is likely that the relatively small size of the White survey meant that not all countries would be sampled.

Other evident patterns of interest include: a) the higher visitation by Canadians in winter, b) a general increase in the percentage of Dutch visitors over time, c) the
consistently high rate of visitation by Germans, and d) the apparent preference of the French to visit in spring, rather than in summer as is the case with most Europeans. Some reasons appear obvious, as with those who escape cold winter temperatures to enjoy a relatively mild season in Death Valley. Others are less clear and may be predicated upon social behaviors such as word-of-mouth recommendation of Death Valley as a travel destination, preferences for specific types of weather, or specific events (e.g., spectacular blooms of desert flora) at the destination.
Figure 1. Percentage of Visitors by Country (non-U.S.), 1990 – 2011
Figure 2. Percentage Change in Visitors by Country, 1990 – 2011
The data shown in Figures 1 and 2 represent the “official” data collected on behalf of the NPS (the 1990s surveys) and that from the White survey. In addition, the guest registers from the Panamint Springs Resort were mined for country of origin data for visitors to that out-of-the-way establishment. Figure 3 includes data for only the 27 countries from which five or more visitors were noted in the registers, and indicates that international tourism to Death Valley has increased significantly with each decade. (It is imperative to note that some countries either ceased to exist or were newly established during the decades covered, making direct comparisons between countries impossible.)

Also, Panamint Springs was not a part of Death Valley National Monument (it is now an in-holding in the National Park), so visitors there were likely passing through on Highway 190 or were simply out exploring the desert environment, as it was not on the National Park map.

In total, 73 countries (and 1 U.S. Territory) were represented over the 21 years covered by the registers; the 46 countries which showed less than five signatures are shown in Table 2. As the entries selected for review covered longer periods of time (8/3/89 – 8/2/90, 8/3/99 – 8/2/00, and 8/3/09 – 8/2/10) than did any of the individual 1990s or White survey periods, they likely paint a quite accurate picture of travelers’ countries of origin. Further, signing one’s name and including group size and country of origin is much easier than completing a multi-page survey and remembering to deposit it in a mailbox, increasing the number of percentage of visitors responding.
Figure 3. International Visitors to Panamint Springs Resort, 1989 – 2010
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Table 2. Countries with Less than 5 Entries in Panamint Springs Resort Guest Registers, 1989-2010

6.1.2. U.S. State of Origin

Data collected on visitors’ U.S. state of origin was compiled for each survey and the totals for the 1990s and the White surveys compared (Figures 4). Clearly evident is the relative popularity of Death Valley National Park with residents of California and Nevada. As the Park is located in eastern California, it is actually closer to the population centers of Nevada than those of California; Nevadans appear to visit the DVNP at a higher rate than do Californians. Although the population of Nevada was only 7.2% that of California in 2010 (U.S. Census, 2013), in the 1990s surveys, 180 Nevadans responded compared to 685 Californians; that is, 26% of the California total number of respondents. That figure rose to 47.5% in the 2010/11 surveys, as evidenced in Figure 5.
Amalgamation of state data by region (Figure 6), as defined by the National Geographic Society (2013), shows that visitors who indicated that their home state was in the West accounted for the vast majority of U.S. tourists in every season, with a range of 30.4% in the fall 1996 survey to a maximum of 83.9% in winter 2011. Visitors from the Southwest accounted for 25% of U.S. visitors surveyed in summer 2010, second only to the West; there were no travelers from the U.S. Northeast and Southeast. As discussed above, proximity is a component in such visitation, but as the West also includes states as far afield as Hawaii and Alaska, there must be more of a draw to Death Valley than its relative location.

6.1.3. Gender

Data on visitor gender were not collected in the 1990s surveys, and there was nothing remarkable in the data collected in the White surveys, with males accounting for 58% of those visiting.
Figure 4. Percentage of Visitors by U.S. State, 1990 – 2011
Figure 5. Percentage Changes in Visitors by U.S. State, 1990 - 2011
6.1.4. Age

Visitors’ ages are another piece of information gathered through all of the surveys. While no significant changes in the distribution of the ages of visitors to Death Valley are evident from the data (Figure 7), one can discern that certain age groups are more likely to visit the Park than are others. Data for those under 20 (the first three age brackets identified) primarily reflect the actions of their parents or other adults, and as such are not seriously considered as variables other than to note that the general percentages of children apparently being brought to the park has not changed significantly. Overall, the only even marginally notable change (Figure 8) is an increase in 11-15 year olds visiting DVNP, and close analysis of the White survey data indicates
that these youth are primarily visiting the Park with Boy Scout Troops. A slight increase is also evident with young seniors (ages 61-65), but not so for those of more advanced age. There is limited visitation (1%) by those over age 76.

6.1.5. Group Size and Type

With whom travelers visit the park is an area of interest, addressed through questions of group size and type. Responses to the first question, illustrated in Figure 9, reveal that twosomes are the most popular group size (40-60% of all groups are of this size). And as shown in Figure 11, “family” was the most often selected group type. Unfortunately, “family” is a term difficult to reconcile with the data, as most married couples identified themselves as such, and those noting that they were traveling with a “significant other” were also included in that category, and they are also twosomes (Figure 11). However, in answer to the question with whom the respondents were traveling - alone, with family, friends, family and friends, or other (e.g., school groups or scout troops) - those identifying themselves as traveling with family or family and friends (which might include multiple married couples) are in the majority. Sixty-four percent of the respondents were traveling with some family member(s); 24% were with friends only. (Again, family is a loosely-defined term herein.) Another interesting observation is that the percentage of solo travelers has increased over time (Figure 10); the 1990s surveys consistently showed less than 5% singles, whereas the White surveys range from 4% in summer to 12% in fall, with a yearly average of 8%.
Figure 7. Percentage of Visitors by Age, 1990 - 2011

Figure 8. Percentage Changes in Visitation by Age, 1990 - 2011
Figure 9. Number of Groups by Size, 1990–2011

Figure 10. Percentage Changes in Group Size, 1990–2011
6.2. Visitor Behaviors and Preferences

An important focus of this thesis research is why it is that visitors come to Death Valley National Park: Is it an intentional visit, how long do they stay and where, and what is it they do while there? A version of each of those questions was asked in most of the surveys distributed from 1990 – 2011; one question was omitted from the 1990 and 1991 questionnaires.
6.2.1. Destination Intent

Responses to the question of whether DVNP was a primary destination (asked only in the 1996 and White surveys) suggest that spring and fall visitors generally visited DVNP as part of a longer, more inclusive trip, while for winter visitors DVNP is a primary destination (Figure 12). The groups for whom their visit to DVNP was not planned, possibly the result of driving through the Park on Highway 190, were reported at or below 5% in all surveys.

![Figure 12. Death Valley as Destination Type, 1996 – 2011](chart)

6.2.2. Length of Visit and Overnight Accommodations

The questions relating to length of stay and type of accommodations chosen relate closely to the previous question. As admission to DVNP is $20 per vehicle and entry is valid for seven days, there is no financial penalty for staying more than a few hours in the Park, especially if one would be paying for lodging elsewhere. (Other payment options include a $10 per passenger bus charge or use of an annual DVNP or NPS pass, each of
which provides the same incentive for a longer visit.) Of course, there is also the free option of driving through the Park without stopping for those for whom “windshield tourism” will suffice.

In the White surveys, 46% of travelers stayed in the Park for less than 24 hours. Of those who visit for more than 24 hours, the majority stayed for two days (Figure 13). Somewhat surprisingly, the season with the largest percentages of those who do stay overnight is summer; when visitors might otherwise be assumed to pass through as quickly as possible. (In the White surveys, increments of days were rounded up to the next full day.) Next most popular is a one-day visit (but more than 24 hours), which means that these visitors, too, have the opportunity to experience the Park at sunset, nighttime, and/or sunrise. Seasonally, a higher percentage of larger (over five member) groups are most likely to visit in winter; that is also the only season in which larger groups stay more than one day.

Figure 13. Length of Visit in Days by Those Who Stayed Over 24 Hours, 1990-2011
Overnight lodging in Death Valley National Park ranges from primitive campgrounds to the Death Valley Inn, with corresponding per-night prices ranging from free to over $475.00. Between those two extremes are developed tent campgrounds, RV campgrounds, and the Panamint Springs Village and Death Valley Ranch. In asking about accommodations, survey questions were not overly specific; in the 1990s the categories included were “motel”, “RV campground”, and “tent campground”; the White survey changed the first option to “hotel/motel” for clarity. The choice of hotel/motel was far and above the most popular selection (Figure 14).

![Figure 14. Overnight Accommodations Selections by Percentage of Overnight Visitors](image)

6.2.3. Reasons for Visiting DVNP

In addition to such questions of travel style, the surveys considered visitor motivation in their choice of DVNP and the specific locales that were visited therein. Perhaps the most significant question, “On this visit, what were your reasons for visiting Death Valley National Park?” offered respondents different options over the years the
surveys were conducted. The 1996 survey deleted one option (visiting Scotty’s Castle) and added two (“experience wilderness and open space” and “enjoy solitude and quiet”). The White survey added two options relevant to the Park’s new focus, “experience extreme temperatures” and “experience the lowest elevation in North America.” In the 1990 and 1991 surveys, respondents were asked to identify their primary reason for visiting; hence only one option was selected by each respondent. In the 1996 and White surveys, respondents were encouraged to check all of the reasons that applied to their visit. Accordingly, Figure 15 does not represent the full range of interests of 1990 and 1991 visitors to the park, and for the latter surveys, totals for each option may well be over 100% for each survey. Overall however, viewing desert scenery is the most-oft selected reason in all of the surveys. In those surveys which included the choice “Wilderness/ Open Space”, it was the second most popular choice in every season but one. The exception was summer 2010, when the White survey options of “Extreme Temperatures” and “Lowest Elevation” were most popular, each selected by 69% of the respondents. Solitude and Quiet was a priority for 40% - 54% of visitors. In the White surveys, flora and fauna of the Park motivated the most visitors in spring 2011; the least in summer 2010. Recreation in the Park scored in the 60% range during fall, winter and spring 2010/11, whereas recreation at the Inn or Lodge was never selected by over 12% of respondents.

6.2.4. Locations Visited within DVNP

The 1990, 1991 and White surveys also sought to determine which sights visitors had seen in DVNP, again providing lists of selections. Given that these lists were not constant through time, along with the numerous varied entries under “Other,” those
locations which were listed on two or more of the surveys are included in Figure 16. Those areas which were added to the Park in 1994 are included to reflect the preferences of contemporary visitors. While Figure 16 illustrates visits to the primary points of interest emphasized in NPS materials, other sources may have been used in trip planning (e.g., Fodor’s, TripAdvisor, Lonely Planet), and some visitors may have stopped simply because there was an official sign. Four of the five most oft-visited sites (based on average visitation recorded in the 1990s and White surveys), specifically Badwater, Furnace Creek, Mesquite Dunes and Zabriskie Point, are immediately adjacent to Highway 190 or Highway 178, both of which pass through the heart of the Park. These spots are likely favored by those on short time schedules, yet are also visited by those with abundant time to explore the Park’s sites of interest. Interestingly, Artists Palette, which is accessed from Hwy. 178, but requires a 9-mile, one-way drive, is the third-most popular site (using averages from the 1990s and White surveys); it is possible that visitors don’t necessarily know what awaits them when they leave the highway.
6.2.5. Activities

The activities in which visitors participate when visiting DVNP are another facet of this analysis of park visitation. The specific activities listed varied slightly from survey-to-survey; shown in Figure 17 are those which were either specifically listed in all surveys or were listed with some frequency under the “Other” category. Clearly, simple sight-seeing and photography are the two most popular activities for visitors to DVNP. Short hikes – sometimes necessary to reach the points of interest identified in Figure 16 – are most popular in winter, when temperatures are more likely to be mild. The same
pattern holds for longer hikes, although many fewer visitors embark on such potentially arduous treks. Visits to mining ruins and historic sites hover at only around 40% participation, indicating that the aesthetics of Death Valley outweigh the appeal of historical tourism. Driving on unpaved roads is often necessary to reach popular sites, and between 18% and 56% of respondents indicated that they had done so; the higher percentages may reflect visitors who also explored some less-popular areas.

Backcountry travel in DVNP is unwise without 4WD; some travelers arrive in their own suitable vehicles, while others choose to rent a 4WD Jeep from Farabee’s Jeep Rental in the Park, an expensive proposition. Nevertheless, over 29% of the fall 2010 survey respondents participated in off-road activity using a 4WD vehicle. For the less adventuresome or for post-adventure relaxation, swimming in the pools at Stovepipe Village, Furnace Creek Ranch and Furnace Creek Inn is popular in spring, when the weather is warm but inviting. Bicycling is an attractive option in winter, and a number of organized rides take place during these cooler months. Guided tours of Scotty’s Castle are always popular, but less so in summer, when house tours are offered less frequently throughout the day, and the underground tour not at all. Stargazing is dependent upon weather conditions, but the draw of astronomical events, such as meteor showers, was noted on some surveys.
Figure 16. Visitors to Selected Sites in DVNP, 1990 - 2011
6.2.6. Importance of DVNP Experiences

Ranking of the relative importance of aspects of the Death Valley experience was a part of all of the surveys, however, the questions were asked differently from year-to-year, and different aspects listed. Table 3 lists the average percentages of visitors rating specific experiences in DVNP as “Extremely” important reasons for visiting, as reflected in the VSP and DVNHA 1990s surveys.
### Table 3. Relative Importance of Aspects of the Death Valley Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REASON</th>
<th>AVERAGE PERCENT SELECTING “EXTREMELY” IMPORTANT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing the desert</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean air</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing wildlife</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting mining/historic sites</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitude</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night-time views</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness/Open Space</td>
<td>48% (1996 only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>45% (1996 only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic/prehistoric site preservation</td>
<td>37% (1996 only)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collected in the White surveys is shown in Figure 18. Rating was on a scale of 1-5, with 5 representing the highest importance. The features or qualities receiving the highest rankings overall were “Scenic vistas” and the “Desert experience”; that is consistent with the importance given to “Experiencing the desert” by earlier respondents. The value to visitors of Wilderness/Open space ranked highly in the 1996 and White surveys. The spike in the value of “Historic/prehistoric site preservation” in fall 2010 may have been due to some particular group visiting the park, although the relatively small sample size (n=54) is more likely the source of this apparent aberration. The White surveys’ newly-added choices of “Lowest elevation” and “Extreme temperatures” both received high scores (selected by 69% of respondents) in summer 2010; this is not surprising as DVNP attracts international “weather extremists” in the summer months. Overall, the scores for these two new choices reflect well on the NPS’ new focus for the Park (“Hottest, Driest, Lowest”). “Lowest elevation” was selected by 55% - 65% of fall, winter and spring visitors, while “Extreme temperatures” were at 0% in fall, 5% in winter, and 20% in spring.
6.2.7. Detractions from Enjoyment of DVNP

The 1996 and White surveys asked visitors whether or not anything had detracted from their enjoyment of the Park. Their responses covered a wide array of issues; those mentioned by more than 1% of respondents to the White survey are shown in Figure 19. (The types of complaints in the 1996 survey did not vary significantly from those in the White survey).
Figure 19. Items Cited as Detractions to Visits to DVNP, 2010/11

6.2.8. Value, Importance and Quality of NPS Informational Materials

Given that the NPS seeks to educate and inform visitors to DVNP, the value of the information distributed to Park visitors is an important consideration. Accordingly, questions were included in the 1996 and White surveys asking about the importance and quality of the Park brochure. Again, changes in phrasing between the surveys make comparison of data a bit imprecise. In the 1990 and 1991 surveys, the question had been phrased as “Usefulness of park maps/brochures”, and the majority of respondents (64% and 29%, respectively) gave a rating of 1 on the 1-5 scale, with 1 the highest. In the 1996 survey, 57% of respondents rated the materials a 1 in “Importance”, the corresponding percentage was 52% in the White surveys. The question of the “Quality” of the Park brochure garnered the highest rating in 51% of the 1996 survey responses, in the White survey 57%.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION

The data gathered in the seven different surveys completed over the 22-year period from 1990 – 2011 reveals that DVNP has not experienced significant changes in the demographics or preferences of its visitors over time.

7.1. Demographics

7.1.1. Visitors’ Place of Origin

In terms of demographics, the large percentage of international travelers who visit the Park in summer, unique as it is to DVNP, remains consistent over time, although the countries from which the Park sees visitors does vary from season to season, year to year, and decade to decade. Differences in visitorship between U.S. regions over time are unremarkable, although the number of visitors living in Nevada has increased through the decades.

This popularity of DVNP with international tourists during the summer season, particularly in contrast to the sparse visitation by U.S. residents, makes Death Valley unique among U.S. National Parks. The Yosemite National Park Visitor Study - Summer 2009 (PSU 2013) performed by the VSP revealed that 25% of that Park’s summer visitors were international. It is impossible to know if all international tourists who visit Death Valley also visit Yosemite, but it does emphasize that more U.S. travelers visit Yosemite than Death Valley. Even other Parks in hot, dry environments akin to that of Death Valley, such as Big Bend National Park in Texas, reported only 10% foreign visitation in a VSP report completed in spring 1992 (PSU, 2013). When grouping the earlier surveys’ results and comparing them to the totals for the White surveys (Figure 2), it is revealed
that while Germany has consistently accounted for the greatest number of international visitors per year to Death Valley, their actual proportion has declined from over one-third in the 1990s to approximately one-fourth of international visitors in 2010/11. Of note is that in the Big Bend survey, Germans are also the most highly represented (48%) international tourists. In DVNP, there have also been slight declines (-5%) in visitors from Belgium and Great Britain, but these losses, and those from Germany, are balanced by the 4% - 5% increases in tourists each from Italy, France, India, and Canada.

In terms of U.S. tourists, the Southwest accounted for 25% of visitors surveyed in summer 2010, second only to the West; it is reasonable to conclude that the high temperatures and dry weather in those home states make a trip to Death Valley less daunting than it would be for those from the U.S. Northeast or Southeast (0% visitation). Additionally, the percentage of so-called “snowbirds,” that is, retirees escaping the cold weather in the Midwest and Northeast, who responded to the winter 2011 White survey, was much smaller than expected (3.2% and 2.8%, respectively). That may have been a factor of days of the week on which the surveys were distributed, as many of these seasonal Park denizens remain in and around their campsites on weekends. As they have weeks or months to visit DVNP’s tourist sites, they may be less likely to visit these locations when the Park is most highly visited. Overall, in the White surveys, the majority of U.S. tourists were from the West, followed by the Midwest, Southwest, Northeast, and lastly, the Southeast.

Interestingly, when looking at the percentage changes in visitors to DVNP by state, one immediately notes the large percentage increases in visitors from both California and Nevada. The question is how has Nevada, with a much smaller overall
population, nearly kept pace in the number of residents visiting DVNP? It may reflect the states’ respective rates of population growth. Between the 1996 and 2010, Nevada’s population grew by 15.6%, California’s by only 3.8%; it is possible that residents new to an area are more highly motivated to explore their environment.

7.1.2. Gender

The White survey results show that visitors are 58% male, greater than the percentages of males to females in the populations of Western European and North American countries (Geohive, 2010), the nations from which most of Death Valley’s visitors come. That is not entirely unexpected, as this figure is consistent with results of the 2005 Outdoor Industry Foundation Outdoor Recreation Participation Study, which showed that outdoor activities (including camping, backpacking, climbing, skiing, fishing, etc.) attract 56% male participation.

Comparison of gender data cannot be made across time, as that information was not gathered in the 1990s surveys. However, at least one contemporary theorist, Karla Henderson (2000), holds that women are more likely to participate in outdoor recreational activities, including hiking, if they participated in such activities as a child. Perhaps the passage of Title IX in the U.S. over 40 years ago has indeed increased the number of women seen in places like Death Valley; there are today more women-only backpacking trips and excursions offered by companies such as Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI). On the other hand, it is possible that the increasing varieties of countries from which travelers visit DVNP may in some way negatively affect the percentage of women visiting the Park (i.e., more visitors from countries in which women may not travel freely).
7.1.3. Age

Even the slight decrease in visitors age 21-40 is worrisome, as these represent the Park’s future visitors. As fuel prices have nearly quadrupled since the 1990s, the cost of a trip to this remote location has drastically increased; this would likely most affect those just starting their careers (21-25) or raising families (36-40). However, given that people are living longer, and generally have more leisure time and disposable income in their later years, one might expect a constant or increasing rate of visitation in these age groups, which is not seen in the data.

7.1.4. Group Size and Type

The data relating to the specifics of visitors’ traveling partners revealed that “family” couples are the most prevalent grouping; 40%-60% of all groups are twosomes. These may be married couples, “significant others,” siblings, parent and child, grandparent and grandchild; the possibilities are numerous. The significance of this is that the traditional “American” image of a family - Mom, Dad and 2.3 children - is not well-represented in the survey results. This may be a function of the fact that the Park does not offer the amenities often sought on a traditional U.S. family vacation, such as swimming, relaxing in a hammock in the shade of tall trees, or visiting points of historical interest. It may also be a function of recent disturbances in the U.S. economy which have made travel less viable for families. Further, the increasing percentage of solo travelers may indicate a change in the type of visitor, i.e., more adventurous, and less interested in the services offered by the concessionaires.
7.2. Visitor Behavior and Preferences

7.2.1. Destination Intent

Responses to the question of whether DVNP was a primary destination (asked only in the 1996 and White surveys) revealed that spring and fall visitors generally visited DVNP as part of a longer, more inclusive trip, while for winter visitors DVNP was a primary destination. The groups for whom their visit to DVNP was not planned, possibly the result of driving through the Park on Highway 190, were reported at or below 5% in all surveys.

7.2.2. Length of Stay and Accommodations

The relatively brief stays of most visitors to DVNP are shorter than those to nearby National Parks. For example, the 2009 VSP survey at Yosemite National Park found that the average length of stay in that Park was 2.4 days. The White survey at DVNP showed an average stay of 3 days among those who do stay overnight, but again, 46% of those who visit DVNP stay less than 24 hours. It may be the harsh environment of DVNP which discourages longer visits, or it may be the tourists’ lack of awareness of the variety of available activities.

Responses regarding accommodations within DVNP reveal that the traveling public overwhelmingly prefers to stay indoors, in a motel or hotel room, when visiting Death Valley. In most of the surveys, the percentage of overnighters who stayed in such accommodations is greater than the combined percentages of RV and tent campers; only fall1996 survey respondents noted a preference for camping, and in winter 2011, the indoor and outdoor options garnered 50% each. Clearly, weather conditions are a factor, but it is also likely to some extent due to of the large number of international visitors and travelers coming from or through Las Vegas. It is difficult to transport all of one’s
necessary camping equipment when flying by air; regulations prohibiting the transport of camp stove fuels further compound this difficulty.

7.2.3. Sites visited within DVNP

Visitor behaviors and preferences in terms of sites visited and activities in which tourists participate also showed no significant changes over time. However, as not all questions were asked in the same manner in the various surveys, and there was the option for “Other” on most questions of this type, each must be evaluated within its own context and the data viewed only as general indicators of trends.

The most consistent response touched upon the visitors’ appreciation for the scenery and sensory environment (i.e., quiet, solitude, vastness) of Death Valley. It is also important to note that proximity to the highway and/or other visitor amenities (e.g., those at Furnace Creek) appears to factor heavily in the amount of visitorship a given site receives. Recreation in the park, not specified in the surveys, but presumably including such activities as hiking, climbing and bicycling, also represents a significant interest of visitors. Exploring the flora and fauna of Death Valley is not a terribly popular selection; that may be due to the widely-held misconception that it is a stark and barren environment. For many travelers, the image of a National Park conjures up images of dense forests and large mammals (bear, elk, moose), as in Yosemite or Yellowstone; not so for Death Valley. Desert plants and animal species do abound, but those are not the images which generally spark the public imagination. And while the Furnace Creek Resort and Inn do offer many of the same amenities as the great lodges of famous Parks, these amenities alone draw relatively few visitors.
Interestingly, the White survey showed that visitors are attracted to the aspects of geography and climate for which Death Valley is famous - temperature and elevation. High positive responses to the new selections “Extreme temperatures” and “Lowest elevation” provide justification to the NPS’ new focus on promoting those elements in its literature. The survey data suggests that further publicizing these characteristics may provide additional enticement to visitors. Most remarkable – but not really surprising – is that nearly 70% of summer 2010 visitors cited those factors as reasons for their visits; again, it is noted that the majority of that season’s visitors were foreign, predominantly German.

7.2.4. Detractions from Enjoyment of DVNP

DVNP staff will likely be glad to know that the most frequently mentioned detractions are beyond their immediate control; the service stations, dining establishments (concessionaries), and the wind. Issues which theoretically could be addressed by the NPS require additional capital investment (roads, signage, and restrooms) and staffing (dealing with noisy campers and pets in the wrong places).

7.2.5. Value, Importance and Quality of NPS Informational Materials

NPS maps and brochures are periodically updated to reflect changes and to focus upon new or different aspects of a Park, so while not all evaluations were of the same materials, DVNP visitors give high scores to this written information when ranked for usefulness, importance and quality.
7.3. Additional Comments

7.3.1 Anecdotal Observations

Race was not one of the questions asked of visitors to Death Valley National Park in any of the surveys, but anecdotal evidence indicates that while relatively few African Americans visit the Park (certainly in numbers less than their percentage of U.S. population), Latinos (this term is used interchangeably with Hispanics within this thesis) are even less well-represented. As an example, while the White survey was being distributed, a young Hispanic couple queried me as to “where (their) people are.” This is remarkable given the location of Death Valley: within California, adjacent to Nevada, and but a few hours’ drive of both Los Angeles and Las Vegas. According to the U.S. Census data for 2012 (U.S. Census, 2013), 38.2% of California’s population self-identified as Hispanic or Latino; that percentage was 48.2% in Los Angeles County. Nevada’s statistics too are significant; 27.3% of that State’s residents self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, Clark County (in which is located Las Vegas) recorded 29.8%. The relative dearth of Latinos engaged in outdoor activates and visiting wilderness-oriented National Parks is being addressed through many quarters; Death Valley’s own R.O.C.K.S. program is one such example. Community leaders are also involved; the website for Latino Outdoors (www.latinoourdoors.org), describes itself as “an opportunity for Latino Outdoor and Environmental Education Professionals to serve as role models and leads… for the purpose of expanding the Latino experience in the Outdoors…”
As noted above, proximity to Death Valley National Park is apparently not sufficient to entice Latinos to visit. The work of Weber and Sultana (2011) suggests that while limited economic resources are one cause, long-held cultural traditions and biases within an ethnic or racial community are likely strong components of chosen leisure activities. If this is true, there is much work to be done by the National Park Service to broaden its appeal to non-whites overall.

A very important player in today’s global tourism market is nearly absent from the data gathered over the past 22 years: the Asian market. These tourists are increasing in number world-wide; in 2012 the U.S. was the 8th most popular destination for Chinese travelers, an increase in 26.6% over 2011 (Carroll, 2013). The UNWTO reports that the combined spending by visitors from China is greater that by tourists from any other country in the world (Associated Press, 2013). Recognizing this market, Nevada’s 2013 Governor’s Conference on Tourism highlighted China, Japan and South Korea, and included trips for conference attendees (who included travel agents and tour packaging companies) to locations including DVNP, Rhyolite (the ghost town at the entrance to Death Valley’s popular Titus Canyon), and Beatty, one of DVNP’s gateway communities (Carroll, 2013).

I believe that the reason that so few Asians are included in the survey data is their generally selected mode of visiting the park: by tour bus. A quick search of Google.com looking for “Chinese tours to Death Valley” turned up numerous tour companies offering trips through Death Valley with bilingual/Chinese-speaking guides; there are undoubtedly such sites in Chinese, Japanese and Korean (as were found in German and noted previously). In addition, related bilingual advertising materials are readily
available in Las Vegas, which as noted above, is a popular tourist site for Asian tourists. Unfortunately, in the earlier VSP and DVNHA surveys, questionnaires were not provided to individual tour bus passengers, and in the White survey, while Asian tourists were approached and asked if they would participate, there was usually a language barrier. I also observed one tour bus stop at a point of interest, whereupon one individual exited the bus, took photographs, and re-boarded the bus. If this was not a truly unique phenomenon, this reticence to get out and explore the desert environment also contributes to the apparent dearth of Asian visitors.

Another issue affecting tourism in Death Valley is the fact that modern society has become dependent upon electronic devices, or “hyperconnected”. The Collins Dictionary (2013) defines hyperconnectivity as “The state of being constantly connected to people and systems through devices such as smart phones, tablets and computers - and sometimes through software that enable and promote constant communication.” This poses a problem for travel in Death Valley, as commented upon by David Blacker (2010), Executive Director of the Death Valley Natural History Association, who noted that visitors today want their electronic amenities, such as cell phone coverage and WiFi. Such desires are not limited to the young; retiree “snowbirds” too wish to remain connected to family and friends as they travel about the country. Unfortunately, the same physical attributes that make Death Valley National Park appealing – its remote setting at low elevation between high mountain ranges – means that cell phone coverage is minimal. Last decade’s attempt to install a cell phone tower near Telescope Peak resulted in the crash of a helicopter, but there is now coverage in some areas of the Park (i.e., Furnace Creek Ranch and Furnace Creek Inn), although not all carriers provide the
same level of service. WiFi is available for free at the Visitor Center during limited hours and in limited amounts at Stovepipe Wells Village; one may access the internet for a fee at the Furnace Creek Ranch and Furnace Creek Inn.

7.3.2. Summary History of DVNP Visitation

Given the multiple attractions of Death Valley, it is not surprising that it was one of the top 25 (#22) visited National Parks in 2012 (NPS IRMA, 2013), with 984,568 recreation visitors. According to the National Park Service, the number of “recreation visitors” – the term used by the NPS in tracking visitation - has usually increased annually at Death Valley since it was founded as a National Monument in 1933; from 9,970 that first year to 100,829 in 1941 (NPS IRMA, 2013). Visitation was severely limited during the war years (in fact, many of the valley’s facilities were closed due to lack of provisions), but returned to 100,976 in 1946. There were slight fluctuations, but generally Park attendance grew until 1971, when it fell by nearly one-half as the US economy suffered high unemployment and rates of inflation. Attendance figures then returned to a pattern of growth, until a combination of global events in the early 2000s led to a drastic decrease in European tourists visiting the Park. According to an article in the Los Angeles Times (Romney, 2003) a weak euro, the September 11 2001 attacks, a generally negative world view of the U.S.’s invasion of Iraq, and the global outbreak of SARS all contributed to this decline. The Furnace Creek Inn closed its doors for the summer season for the first time since 1997 (when it had begun staying open for those same foreign tourists), and remains closed during that season today. For U.S. tourists, the lack of desire to go abroad during those years led to a spike in domestic car travel – but not to Death Valley in the summer, where they have never been prevalent. (Note:
The numbers of recreation visitors to DVNP are computed using multipliers for various vehicle types entering the park via seven roads, as recorded by pneumatic tube traffic counters. Other data is gathered from the Furnace Creek Airport (number of plane passengers) and through bus passenger counts by private concessionaires.

7.3.3. DVNP’s Future Viability

While not the original focus of this research, a very important issue was brought to my attention in a conversation with Lori Spoulhof, an NPS Volunteer in DVNP. Ms. Spoulhof commented that she is concerned that as the percentage of U.S. visitors declines, so too will the resolve of U.S. citizens to maintain DVNP in its current status as a National Park. That concern, combined with the decrease in tourists of the “Y Generation,” may bode poorly for the U.S. public’s emotional connection to (and hence, continued financial investment in) DVNP.
CONCLUSIONS

As stated above, this thesis began with my perception that who it is that visits DVNP and why they visit had changed over the past 22 years. While that perception was not borne out by the data, other aspects of tourism in the Park were found to be unique among visited environments, including international and U.S. National Parks.

As has become more and more the case in distinctive environments around the world (e.g., Antarctica, the Amazon Basin), in international national parks (e.g., Canada’s Banff, Russia’s Kronotsky) and in other U.S. National Parks (e.g., Denali and Hawai’i Volcano National Parks), DVNP’s unique physical characteristics consistently draw a type of “geotourist” – a traveler interested in seeing and experiencing the natural physical environment (as opposed to the built environment). Each environment or park appeals to its own audience; in the case of DVNP, these include people out for a weekend getaway, road-trippers, retirees finally having the opportunity to “see America,” hikers and bikers, amateur herpetologists, petroglyph hunters, and sun-seekers.

What is remarkable about visitorship to DVNP is the prevalence of international travelers, most notably European (and largely German). As stated above, while other popular U.S. National Parks are visited by tourists from abroad, the number and ratio of international to U.S. visitors in DVNP is distinctive. According to the same University of Idaho group (PSU, 2013) who performed the 1990 and 1996 studies in DVNP, Acadia National Park in northeast Maine attracted only 6% international visitors in August 2009, most of those coming from Canada (and it is only a 5 hour drive from the border). Yellowstone National Park, while most visited in the warmer months, saw only 6% foreign travelers in February 2012, the majority of those from Australia. It is also true
that nature-based U.S. National Parks attract more international visitors than do protected areas such as National Monuments or Military Parks which focus upon aspects of U.S. history. For example, the fall 1994 VSP survey showed that Gettysburg National Military Park had only 3% international visitors; the Statue of Liberty National Monument in summer 1989 received only 14% foreign visitors, again mostly German. Review of all summaries of National Park surveys completed by VSP since 1988 shows no other U.S. National Park has higher international visitation than Death Valley.

International visitorship provides benefits to the Park through a wider global awareness of, and exposure to, the things that make DVNP special. It also presents complications in ensuring that the Park is truly accessible to everyone, including issues of overcoming language barriers and possible cultural biases of both U.S. residents and visitors.

The answers to questions concerning the future viability of DVNP are beyond the scope of this thesis, but are worthy of consideration by the reader and future researchers into tourism trends in this, and other, National Parks and protected areas.

It must be restated that the results of these seven surveys are not conclusive; no one survey is a complete representation of visitation to DVNP during its coverage period. All of the surveys were completed during relatively short time periods (3 – 7 days), survey distribution methods varied, and questions asked, while addressing the same issues, varied in phrasing. Further, response to the survey questionnaire was entirely voluntary in all cases, which may or may not skew the data. In summary, there may exist some patterns of visitation to DVNP which are not evident from the data gathered.
Nonetheless, the trends in visitation to DVNP are clear in the data: Visitation remains generally constant in most respects. These include the demographics of age, gender, group type, group size, and state of origin. There are variances in country of origin for foreign travelers, yet invariably international visitation is at its peak in the summer months, and most of those visitors are from Western Europe, with the majority German. Again, this makes DVNP unique among U.S. National Parks. A review of 77 Visitor Survey Project Report Summaries for 44 National Parks surveyed through the VSP since 1990 shows that the Park with the next highest percentage of international visitors is Everglades National Park; the spring 2008 VSP survey of that Park showed 46% international visitors, 36% of whom were from Netherlands, followed by 23% from Germany (PSU, 2013).

Visitor preferences and behaviors within the Park are also seen as unchanging; tourists to DVNP remain primarily interested in seeing and experiencing the desert in ways that are relatively easy and inexpensive. Hence, the popularity of points of interest in proximity to the highway where visitors may take pictures, enjoy a short hike, and get the feel of the Park’s vast and serene environment.

Overall, the data revealed that visitors’ impressions of the efforts of the NPS to operate and maintain the Park are appreciated; there were complaints about infrastructure (e.g., restrooms and roads) and the behavior of other visitors (e.g., noisy campers and dogs where they are not allowed), but given the budgetary constraints on capital expenditures and the funding of additional Park staff, such concerns are common in any most any public facility in the U.S.
Upon reviewing the data from all of the surveys, one can identify a “typical” DVNP visitor for each season of the year. Some characteristics are constant throughout the seasons: i.e., there are few visitors over age 70, or age 10 or less; motels/hotels are always the majority’s choice for lodging in DVNP; and those who visit from within the U.S. are most likely to come from a western state. International visitors are by far the majority (91%) in summer, spring sees 38% foreign guests; fall and winter are less diverse with 9% and 7% international tourists, respectively. Given these constants, the typical visitor to Death Valley National Park varies by season, as shown in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>SUMMER</th>
<th>FALL</th>
<th>WINTER</th>
<th>SPRING</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ages</td>
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<td>Mix of ages</td>
<td>55-70, many late 20s</td>
<td>40-65 primarily, but mixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Type</td>
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<td>Family or Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>Family or Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>Family</td>
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<td>Group Size</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time Spent in DVNP (If &gt;24 Hrs.)</td>
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<td>3 days</td>
<td>2 or 3 days</td>
<td>1 or 2 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country (if not US)</td>
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<td>Germany or Netherlands</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>France or Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVNP the Primary Destination?</td>
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<td>One of several or Primary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>One of several</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. “Typical” DNVP Visitors by Season
The remarkable popularity of Death Valley National Park with international tourists, particularly those from Western Europe, and the overwhelming occupancy of the Park by foreign visitors during the summer months, makes it unique among U.S. National Parks. If global tourism continues as current trends indicate, this may indeed change not only the ethnic and cultural composition of the visiting public, but may require changes in the approach of the NPS in managing DVNP. Further investigation and consideration of these global trends as they affect Death Valley are warranted, and promise to be an interesting study in how global trends stimulate change in U.S. institutions.
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