Pungent parks: smell's growing relevance in park tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to present the growing relevance of natural smells – both pleasant and unpleasant – to park and protected area tourism and the need for more consideration of their role in the visitor experience.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper presents four observations – selected via an informal review of the tourism literature – relevant to the future of smellscapes research concerning tourism in parks and protected areas.*

Findings – *An emerging body of literature is indicating natural smells are central to the sensory experience of parks and protected areas. The iconic nature of park smellscapes underscores their role in the tourism experience.*

Originality/value – *This paper extracts the current trends in smellscapes research relevant to park and protected area tourism. It therefore provides value to both tourism practitioners and researchers, alike, through its attempt to compile significant trends.*

Keywords *Parks, Outdoor recreation, Sensory tourism, Smellscapes*

Paper type *Trends paper*

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The first condition to understanding a foreign country is to smell it. (Rudyard Kipling, attributed)

Introduction

Tourists' motivations for visiting parks fall across a broad spectrum of experiential and emotional domains. One of the most common domains is the sensory enjoyment of nature (Manfredo *et al.*, 1996). For the past 50 years, research has examined what motivates tourists to visit parks (Manning and Krymkowski, 2010). Over that period, the importance of the sensory experience has been solidified, even informing the protection of soundscapes, night skies and viewsheds (Fancy *et al.*, 2009). Soundscapes, alone, have not only generated a substantial body of research, but also currently carry considerable weight in the management of parks – even requiring their own office within the US National Park Service (USNPS) (Miller *et al.*, 2014). Smellscapes present another sensory resource of parks and protected areas, yet they have received no such protection, despite their importance to the ecological integrity and visitor experience of national parks.

This paper is a look to the future of sensory management in parks – the upshot of careers spent surveying park tourists about their motivations and subsequent experiences. One particular encounter in Grand Teton National Park serves as its primary inspiration. Here a visitor was asked why he chose to visit a particular area of the park, to which he answered, "To explore the smellscape." An unexpected answer led to further inquiry elsewhere, which yielded the following revelation: not only must natural smellscapes be taken seriously as potential drivers or – in the case of unpleasant smells – inhibitors of tourism, but their influence is on the rise. What follows are four observations – derived via an informal review

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of the tourism literature related to natural smellscapes – concerning the growing relevance of smell to tourism and its specific implications to park and protected area tourism and management.

Observation 1: smell matters

The benefits of natural smells are well documented (Franco *et al.*, 2017; Gorman, 2017). Like sounds, aromas tie closely to emotions – whether alerting us of dangers or filling us with nostalgia (Classen *et al.*, 1994). Whether fragrant or foul, smell matters to tourists too. Yet recognizing its importance within the context of the tourist experience has taken quite a while to catch on. Since the turn of the last century, however, a groundswell of research has emerged concerning smell and the tourist experience in parks. Perhaps beginning with Dann and Jacobsen's (2003) *Tourism Smellscapes* – in which the authors argue that in the not-so-distant future, tourism destinations are going to need to appeal to more than just the visual and must prepare for the "olfactory tourist." In their wake, a substantial body of literature relating to smell and tourism has amassed, as reviewed by Agapito *et al.* (2013).

Although the literature remains rather sparse at present, smell's role in park and protected area tourism has also seen increased research interest, with recent findings suggesting that such interest is warranted. A study of visitors in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park found that 75.6 percent of visitors' trips were motivated by the smells of nature (Taylor and Grandjean, 2007). Pan and Ryan (2009) found 24 percent of New Zealand travelogues referenced the smells of nature. Applying a qualitative approach, van Hoven (2011) examined the role of smell in the multi-sensory experience of ecotourists in Canada's Great Bear Rainforest, finding it to be an alternative means of experiencing the place. This research of the tourist's experience has been met with attempts to understand how practitioners might leverage smell to promote their destinations. Magnini and Karande (2010), for instance, found that ecotourism advertisements featuring references to smell yielded significantly more positive affective responses among readers.

Observation 2: parks are smelly

In what is widely considered the first guidebook to US national parks, John Muir (1901) writes of the smells of Giant Sequoias in Spring, a passing storm in Yosemite, Yellowstone's forests and Glacier's wildflowers. Presently, thousands of visitors from around the world crowd around a small hole in Yellowstone National Park every day to take in the eruption of the famed Old Faithful Geyser. And as TripAdvisor reviews attest, its "horrible" albeit "curious" "rotten-egg smell" plays a significant role in their experience. Parks, preserves and other protected areas often serve as archives for the unique, sometimes endangered smellscapes that make up the natural world. Venture into the foreboding jungles of the Amazon and be put at ease by their rich, fresh aroma. Step into a local, community park and breathe in the nostalgic perfume of freshly cut grass. Stroll the protected beaches of Cape Cod and take in the less-than-savory bouquet of one thousand seals digesting a few tons of herring. Even a visit to an urban park can provide an olfactory respite from the "blandscapes" of the built environment (Drobnick, 2002).

For better or worse, natural areas smell. In some cases their smells define them, with a handful of parks being quite literally defined by their smells: Beijing's Fragrant Hills Park, Spain's Aromático Park and Arkansas's Sulphur Springs Park Reserve, to name a few. Yet many of these smellscapes are currently under threat. Global climate change not only threatens the olfactory-driven ecosystem functions of protected areas (see Mundy and Evenson, 2011), but also the tourist experiences that are derived from those ecosystems. Thus, as we scramble to preserve those things that define our parks in an era of climate change – the glaciers of Glacier National Park or the Joshua Trees of Joshua Tree National

Park – the need to integrate smell into future park management goals is also increasing in urgency.

Observation 3: smells are iconic

The earliest of national park tourists wrote of how smell shaped their experiences. While touring Yellowstone Park, a young Rudyard Kipling wrote of its sulfuric features, "The places smelled of the refuse of the pit, and that odor mixed with the clean, wholesome aroma of the pines in our nostrils throughout the day." Decades after touring the parks of Hawaii, Mark Twain reminisced, "In my nostrils still lives the breath of flowers that perished twenty years ago."

Today commercial interests have taken note of the iconic smells that reside in parks. The modern tourist can take home the scents of their destinations in the form of candles that harken the "strength and stillness" of the Redwood forest or deodorant that smells like "the ice, wind, and freedom" of the Matterhorn. The US National Park Foundation (NPF) even markets a "Smell-The-Parks" air freshener series that brings the smell of Yosemite's lodgepole pines, Olympic's coastal cedar forest and Rocky Mountain's valley lavender into your home or automobile. Alternatively, you can purchase NPF-endorsed laundry detergent promised to bring the smell of Glacier Bay's pristine waters and Acadia's "calm scent of dusk" to your linens.

Observation 4: the future smells

Just as Aristotle deemed smell as the lowest of the senses, more than two thousand years later, we have yet to give smell its due (Low, 2005). Within the realm of the tourism experience, as theorized by Dann and Jacobsen (2003), the time has come to change the tide. So much of the visitor's sensory experience in parks and protected areas is controlled by the individual. Taste, touch and – with the popularization of hiking with headphones – even sound can be personalized (Kang and Gretzel, 2012). What remain largely outside of the individual's regulation are the visual and olfactory senses. Even still, you may be able to close your eyes, but it requires quite a pungency to force the pinching off one's nose. Thus, the natural smellscape remains stalwart as truly experiential, unable to be adjusted to preference, curated on social media or passed on through a recipe book. While millennial tourists continually search for the authentic (Veríssimo and Costa, 2018), these qualities of smell will doubtlessly grow in importance.

As park and protected area tourism practitioners begin to realize smell's role in the visitor experience, it is quite possible that policy will follow course. For instance, the USNPS is mandated to monitor both viewscapes and soundscapes through its Ecological Monitoring Framework (EMF) (Fancy *et al.*, 2009). As research accumulates, perhaps smells might also soon be added to the EMF.

Conclusions

As a means of experiencing parks and protected areas, smell has proven its worth. We theorize its role will only expand in the future, given the growing interest within the literature, its iconic quality and its authentic, experiential character. Yet what we have presented here is less of a systematic review of research to prove smell's value to the park visitor, but more bluntly an eye-witness account of an emerging trend and call for future research on the importance of smellscapes to park visitors. Like Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie's (2015) knitters, the smellers of the world represent their own micro-trend and market segment in the tourism world. To join them, we recommend visiting your local park and having a sniff around.

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