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Healthy Parks Healthy People: Evaluating and Improving Park Service Efforts to Promote Tourists Health and Well-being Introduction

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Presenter Information

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Healthy Parks Healthy People: Evaluating and Improving Park Service Efforts to Promote Tourists Health and Well-being Introduction

Introduction

Beyond traditional values like recreation and scenic beauty, parks, such as those managed by Parks Victoria in Victoria, Australia and the U.S. National Park Service (USNPS), are increasingly being assessed for the ecosystem service benefits they provide (Dustin et al., 2018; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2003; 2005; Thomsen, Powell, & Monz, 2018). These ecosystem services are measured through a social and ecological lens to inform a holistic approach to health (Aronson, Blatt, & Aronson, 2016). Parks Victoria and the USNPS focus on promoting human health while sustaining environmental well-being. This effort can be facilitated through tourism to local parks as well as internationally iconic parks managed by these agencies, such as Yellowstone in the U.S., or Twelve Apostles Marine Park in Australia.

This has been fostered by both agencies through their “Healthy Parks Healthy People” programs in which Parks Victoria and the USNPS are global leaders as well as partners through an official Memorandum of Understanding. This relationship was solidified at the World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia in 2014, where the agencies framed the focal goal of “unlock[ing] the values of parks and protected areas for health and well-being, while conserving biodiversity” (IUCN World Parks Congress, Healthy Parks Healthy People Stream Proceedings, 2015, p. 88). Given the growing global concerns and uncertainties regarding health and well-being (human and environmental) as well as increasing disparities for some populations, the potential for this tourism movement is crucial (Aronson et al., 2016).

Despite the progress these agencies have made, empirical evidence on the benefit of parks on the well-being of individuals and communities is limited (Thomsen et al., 2018), and even less is known about the specific role parks have on human health and well-being (Taff, Hodge, Layland, Costigan & Gorske 2017). Furthermore, the park tourists in both countries are not representative of the existing and predicted demographic profile of the populations (Ball, Carver, Jackson, & Downing, 2015; U.S. NPS Centennial Final Report: Realizing the Vision for the Second Century, 2016; VicHealth 2015). Thus, several critical questions arise that have societal and ecological ramifications. These agencies, through their promotion of Healthy Parks Healthy People programming, respectively, served as a case study to gain understanding of the following key questions around this topic:

- What is a healthy park, in the cultural and governance contexts of both agencies?
- What policies are in place that sustain social and ecological well-being in these settings?
- How are these policies and existing evidence being promoted to current and potential tourists?
- Who is benefiting from these health benefits?
- Who is currently neglected from these benefits, and how can these and other agencies improve promotion to positively impact well-being for all, now and in the future?
- How can this movement best sustain the ecological resources that promote human well-being now and in the future?

Methodology

Through a collaborative research partnership between Monash University in Victoria, Australia, Penn State University in the U.S., Parks Victoria, and the U.S. NPS, researchers focused on these important questions through a rigorous content analyses, interviews with key agency informants, and a synthesis of existing and projected tourism use patterns. Content analyses were applied for each agency to examine existing policies specific to Healthy Parks Healthy People, internal agency management plans, and publicly available materials promoted by the agencies (marketing around concept, peer-reviewed research articles). Interviews with key informants were conducted in person, over the phone and via email with agency staff such as the USNPS Chief of the Healthy Parks Healthy People Program, Parks Victoria Director of Community Partnerships, and Field Rangers promoting related programming to visiting tourists and local visitors. The existing and projected use synthesis used previous and current agency visitor use statistics, projected demographic patterns, and spatial analyses to better understand who is and could be positively impacted by the ecosystem services provided by these protected areas. These methods were combined to provide a holistic understanding of this topic through two global agency leaders in protected areas management, in a manner that helps inform promotion of Healthy Parks Healthy People concepts for all, there and in other park settings internationally.

Results

Results suggest that a Healthy Park is one that provides for both social and ecological well-being, and this is thematic across both USNPS and Parks Victoria. Specifically, according to the USNPS, a Healthy Park promotes mental, physical, spiritual, and social health. This also aligns largely with how Parks Victoria perceive parks as providing health benefits through tourism-related opportunities. Despite different agency missions and histories (USNPS history much longer than Parks Victoria as an agency), both largely focus on promoting quality (i.e., healthy) tourism experiences while maintaining and protecting the resources (i.e., healthy, sustainable ecosystems) that promote these experiences.

With regard to the Healthy Parks Healthy People focus specifically, content analyses suggest that both agencies promote anthropogenic health far more than ecological health (e.g., sustainable conservation and preservation of ecological biodiversity). Thus, there is uneven promotion of human health within the Healthy Parks Healthy People frameworks, despite the fact that human health is directly linked to the ecosystem services supported by healthy ecosystems. Management documents from both agencies suggest that Parks Victoria provide a slightly more balanced approach to promoting conservation and biodiversity when compared to the USNPS. Alternatively, the USNPS feature a bit more content promoting social justice through a focus on access, participation and learning, and community benefits associated with park tourism.

Both agencies seem to recognize the opportunities to promote tourism through the use of Healthy Parks Healthy People initiatives. Analyses suggest that the opportunity to increase visitation and use of parks through tourism is salient in nearly half of the Healthy Parks Healthy People-focused materials for both agencies, but slightly more for USNPS. Across both agencies, most of the literature and promotional materials about Healthy Parks Healthy People focuses on urban-proximate parks, with much less attention on wilderness tourism-type health opportunities. Finally, the limited peer-reviewed evidence regarding the impacts of parks on human health is being

promoted to the general public through research examples provided almost entirely from Parks Victoria, rather than the USNPS. However, the USNPS does have a Healthy Parks Healthy People Science Plan from 2013 that suggests the need for rigorous science focused on this topic. The limited research that does exist and is being promoted through these agencies (almost exclusively Parks Victoria) do not provide enough understanding of who is currently benefiting from park health benefits, and those who are currently being neglected.

Implications

Both agencies frequently note health promotion as an opportunity to increase visitation. This is interesting, as the USNPS system is frequently cited as being “loved to death” from over-tourism, and aligning with this overuse; and recent research has noted the importance of quality, ecologically healthy parks, free from impacts associated with over-tourism (e.g., Taff, Benfield, Miller, D’Antonio, & Schwartz, 2019). This presents a promotional opportunity for both agencies to highlight the importance of ethical tourism behaviors that not only preserve ecological settings, but also in doing so, promotes human health and well-being. Given the unbalanced focus from both agencies regarding anthropogenic health while largely missing the focus on ecological well-being, this type of promotion could aid in holistically addressing increased visitation as well as health, in a sustainable manner. Both agencies must look for opportunities to partner with the tourism providers that facilitate experiences in these parks, to improve the health focus of their programming and aligning promotional materials. Again, it will be crucial that these external health advertising campaigns be framed equally in the promotion of both social and ecological well-being through these parks.

These results suggest there are ample opportunities to enhance Healthy Parks Healthy People-focused research in these parks, and other protected areas globally. While the USNPS promotes social justice throughout many of their related materials, there is still a dearth of understanding regarding who is actually benefiting from park health resources, what these benefits may be, and those who are currently being neglected from these services. This is particularly important as demographics continue to shift in these geographic settings, but also globally as population shifts influence tourism and park use. These agencies should consider partnering with academic entities of a variety of disciplines (e.g., medicine, ecology, sociology, psychology, demography, human dimensions of natural resources, tourism) to advance the science behind Healthy Parks Healthy People. Research should examine the benefits of urban-proximate --- which to-date has been the focus of most research --- but, also focus on more wilderness-type experiences and the benefits these settings may provide through tourism opportunities. These parks have the opportunities to serve as living laboratories to improve the science behind both social and ecological health.

Conclusion

Parks Victoria and the USNPS focus on promoting human health while sustaining environmental well-being through Healthy Parks Healthy People initiatives, which both agencies facilitate and promote through quality tourism experiences in these settings. These efforts are vital to improve the global health crisis, while also ensuring the sustainability of our ecological resources which foster human well-being. Both agencies see these initiatives as opportunities to promote visitation, while improving human health and well-being. Both agencies also highlight the importance of sustaining ecological well-being through these initiatives, but the focus on anthropogenic health

far outweighs the ecologic undertone. Healthy Parks Healthy People initiatives have immense opportunities to improve global sustainability through improved social and ecological health, but unbalanced promotion and insufficient research, currently limit the potential of these efforts. These current challenges provide opportunities for transdisciplinary research and aligning promotion of these resources, with particular consideration to current and future demographic shifts that may influence the sustainability of these parks, and our well-being.

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