

# Elderly Mobile Winter Visitors

## *Preliminary Research Results from Why, Arizona*

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Winter visitors from colder regions of the United States and Canada have been increasingly attracted to the relatively warmer areas of the Southwestern desert during the winter months of November through March. The Bureau of Land Management reports that the numbers of these visitors have been growing significantly in recent years, and many are seeking an alternative to the traditional practice of establishing their winter residence in private trailer parks. Typically, these people are retired couples of varying income who live in self-contained truck campers, travel trailers or motor homes. Some of these visitors utilize Bureau of Land Management campgrounds; many others are "squatting" on the public domain in areas where there are no sanitary or other facilities.

The impact of these elderly winter visitors on the public land resource is varied. Questions relating to the problem of waste disposal, pressures on vegetation and wildlife, and the effects of the use of off-road motor vehicles by numbers of these campers on fragile desert soils need to be examined. An understanding of the nature of these environmental impacts is important, but proposed solutions to temper adverse effects depend upon our ability to understand the people potentially responsible for environmental deterioration. Accordingly, the Department of Watershed Management of the University of Arizona has undertaken a research project concerning the characteristics of elderly mobile winter visitors and their camping site preferences.

Specifically, the basic questions are:

1. What are the differences among public land campers, those who reside in urban trailer parks,

and visitors who prefer a private trailer park in a rural setting?

2. How do Bureau of Land Management campground users differ from those public land campers who choose to "squat" in unauthorized camping sites that have little in the way of physical facilities?
3. What connections are there between pre-retirement and post-retirement life and camping "styles" among these visitors?
4. To what extent are public land campers utilizing free camping facilities because of their financial circumstances?
5. What are the significant factors affecting length of stay in various public land camping sites? Are they associated with visitor characteristics, or is length of stay a function of the characteristics and facilities of individual campgrounds.

### Previous Related Research

Research in the field of outdoor recreation has established relationships between the intensity of use of particular sites and the level of facilities available there (Johnston and Panky, 1968). The importance of sociological factors in the development of the campground experience has been established. Guedry and Stoevener (1970) found significant correlations between socio-economic variables and recreational objectives and stated that "socio-economic char-

acteristics of the user populations of various facilities are likely to be different." They also stress the importance of the level of facilities and site remoteness as factors having an effect on visitor preferences.

It should be emphasized, however, that these findings have been the results of studies of RECREATIONISTS seeking diversion from the routine of the work-a-day world. Elderly winter visitors to Southwestern desert areas are not recreationists in the usual sense of the word. They are people living out of mobile quarters, looking for an economical and congenial place to park. They do engage in recreational activities, but their primary interest would seem to be in finding a site where they can locate their shelter and establish semi-permanent residence during the winter months. Some will stay in one spot the whole winter; others will move every few days or weeks, usually breaking camp and moving on with little formal planning. Except for a brief survey of elderly winter visitors on public land in the area of Quartzsite, Arizona by Cushing (1972), no previous research has intensively investigated this type of elderly mobile winter visitor use. The paucity of available information on the characteristics, preferences and behavior of these elderly winter users is striking; this current University of Arizona study will help bridge a "research gap", and fill a need for information considered essential to public land management and planning needs in the arid Southwest.

### The Preliminary Interview Site

Coyote Howls Park is one local response to the demand of some mobile winter visitors for low-cost public

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Table 1. Comparisons of socio-economic values for "stay puts" and "movers" among elderly trailer-owning winter visitors in Coyote Howls Park, Why, Arizona.

	"Stay puts"	"Movers"
Average age (in years) .....	59.56	63.76
Educational level (years of school) .....	10.46	11.88
Condition of health (0-100 range) .....	66.00	74.12
Years since retirement .....	7.31	4.88
Number of days per year of trailer-type camping before retirement .....	68.08	34.00
Years of trailering after retirement .....	4.50	3.82
Average annual income (in dollars) .....	3,629	5,767
Non-real estate liquid assets (in dollars) .....	7,348	27,875

land campsites. During the winter of 1970-71, the Bureau of Land Management decided to close an unauthorized camp called "Big Wash", which was located on public land just north of Organ Pipe National Monument. Businessmen in Why, Arizona, a cross-roads hamlet eleven miles southeast of Ajo and near Organ Pipe, decided to undertake the construction of a new public campground to serve the needs of their about-to-be-evicted winter clientele. Land was leased from the BLM and, by means of donations of materials and time, Coyote Howls Park quickly came into being. Camping fees there are \$1 per night, \$5 per week and \$10 per month. Facilities are minimal, but adequate, and include drinking water, holding tank sewage disposal vaults and public toilets.

During the Thanksgiving Day weekend of 1973, thirty-three winter visitors were interviewed in Coyote Howls Park. The main purpose of the survey was to pre-test a questionnaire in order to check the appropriateness and clarity of individual questions and to determine the typical range of response for several of the items. Questions dealing with personal characteristics of visitors included items on winter travel pattern, educational level, age and health factors, economic situation, personality variables and pre-retirement camping experience. The respondents were also asked about their most recent stays on various public land camping sites in the lower Colorado region, including questions about their preferences, reactions and satisfactions. In addition to fulfilling the major objectives of the interviewing work, the data gathered is of interest in its own right and may serve as a preliminary insight into elderly mobile winter visitor characteristics and their preferences.

### Initial Findings and Interpretation

The sample of thirty-three winter visitors, when questioned, divided about equally into two groups. One portion of the residents intended to live in Coyote Howls Park for the entire winter. The other half expected to live in several regional campgrounds during the winter, and were in Coyote Howls Park for only a few days or weeks. The data reveal some interesting contrasts between the two groups (see table 1). For convenience, the groups will be labeled the "stay puts" and the "movers", respectively.

The "stay puts" live in their mobile quarters for a greater percentage of the year, and more of them consider their trailer, camper or motor home to be a permanent residence. Although the "stay puts" were, on the average, younger than the "movers", they had been retired longer and had trailered more years after retirement than the latter. This suggests that the more recently retired group was on the move, seeing the country and "trying out" various camping sites. The "stay puts", with more post-retirement trailer experience, were content to spend the duration of the winter on one site. The "movers" reported a higher level of general good health than the "stay puts", indicating that condition of health may be a factor in explaining winter travel patterns.

Although the value of trailer and tow vehicle averaged about the same for the two groups, there were important differences between them with respect to other economic variables. The average annual income of the "stay puts" was \$3,629. The "movers" averaged \$4,767 per year. Non-real estate liquid assets for the two groups were \$7,348 and \$27,875, respectively. Economic circumstances,

therefore, would also seem to play an important role in explaining winter living patterns. Although data for both groups revealed an upgrading in the type and value of equipment owned before and after retirement, the "stay puts" made the greater improvement in this respect reflecting, perhaps, that most of them considered their mobile quarters to be their permanent home. Educational levels were higher among the "movers", which correlated with their generally superior financial situation.

The questions relating to what might be called "outdoor socialization" provided an interesting pattern of answers. The "movers", who could be described as being presently more camping-oriented than the "stay puts", did significantly less trailer-type camping before retirement than the latter group. They tended to have retired in a more urban setting than the "stay puts". However, more of them were introduced to camping by their parents, had camped as children and had introduced their own children to camping than had the "stay puts". More of them had lived in mobile homes before retirement. This suggests that the "movers" have a background which has predisposed them to trailer camping, but more limited opportunity to enjoy this type of outdoor recreation before retirement has resulted in a kind of latent, "built-up" demand that seeks fulfillment in a pattern of camping mobility during the early retirement years. The "stay puts", with their more limited financial resources (due to earlier retirement which means a shorter earning period and a longer period for inflation effects), poorer state of health and larger amount of pre-retirement and post-retirement camping experience are content to spend the entire winter camping in one site.

The respondents were asked various questions about past stays in four other public land camping sites in the Lower Colorado region: Crystal Hill, the Quartzite "strip" area, Imperial Dam, and Andrade Circle. These questions included an evaluation of the social, natural and physical facility characteristics of the sites, the general level of satisfaction of camping at each site, and the length of stay of the most recent visit (see table 2). The correlation between length of stay and general satisfaction was 0.67. This means that satisfaction with a particular campsite plays an import-

ant role in explaining how long people camp there. This is, of course, a common-sense notion, but because satisfaction level only explains about 45% of the variation in length of stay, it is clear that other factors are important in explaining this particular aspect of visitor behavior.

The thirty-three respondents had, in the past, paid a total of at least thirty-eight recent visits to the four sites. They were asked to rate the sites on a 0-100 scale. We have placed in rank order the four sites in terms of physical facilities, natural environment, social environment and average length of stay figures. Inspection of the table reveals that length of stay seems to be related more to how people evaluate the natural and social environments of the camping sites than to the physical facilities available there. Imperial Dam and Crystal Hill are rated comparable in terms of physical conveniences, but Imperial Dam is not rated nearly as high as regards natural and social environments and, also, the length of stay at Imperial Dam is considerably shorter than at Crystal Hill. Andrade Circle offers virtually nothing in the way of physical amenities, but people stay there at length because of the perceived superiority of its natural and social environments.

### Conclusion

The preliminary research at Coyote Howls Park in Why, Arizona was useful and instructive. It suggests that elderly mobile winter visitors are a disparate group, not readily categorized. Their site preferences and winter travel patterns are motivated by a complex interaction of several important variables. In an effort to identify the most important of these relationships, a much larger sample of winter visitors was interviewed during the period from December 14, 1973 to January 13, 1974. A total of 580 interviews was conducted in four public campgrounds, four rural trailer parks, and two urban trailer parks. The results of this study should prove both interesting and useful in understanding the elderly mobile winter visitors who utilize the public lands in the lower Colorado River area.

### References

Cushing, B. 1972. Visitor Use and Visitor Characteristics at the Quartzsite Strip and Crystal Hills Recreation Site. Files of the Phoenix District Office. U.S. Bureau of Land Management. 11 p.

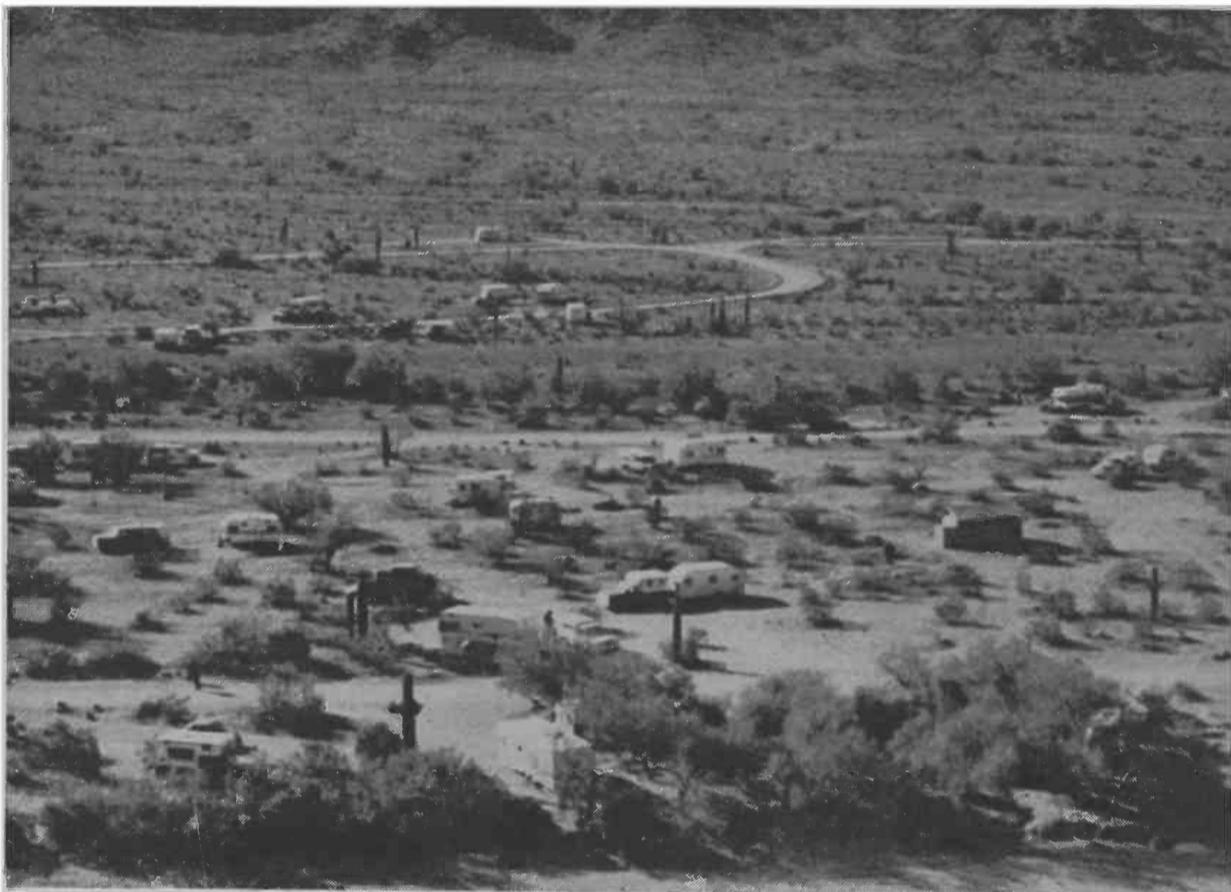
Table 2. Length of stay compared to ratings of physical facilities, natural environment and social environment.

	Average length of stay (by rank and days)		Rating (by rank and by per cent)					
			Physical Facilities		Environment			
				Natural	Social			
Crystal Hill .....	1	(27)	1	(46)	2	(86)	2	(77)
Andrade Circle .....	2	(15)	4	(05)	1	(87)	1	(91)
Imperial Dam .....	3	(11)	2	(45)	4	(64)	3	(67)
Quartzsite .....	4	(9)	3	(33)	3	(73)	4	(65)

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View of portion of Crystal Hills Campgrounds developed and operated by Bureau of Land Management.



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