



# Perceptions of availability of beach parking and access as predictors of coastal tourism



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between perceptions of parking and visitation patterns to beaches in North Carolina. Data were collected from both a systematic face-to-face interview ( $n = 1384$ ) in a semi-structured format at several coastal locations in the state and a random telephone survey ( $n = 1877$ ) of North Carolina residents living in coastal counties 120 or fewer miles from the ocean. Results showed that beach visitors' perceptions of parking conditions did not correspond to the actual record of parking availability. Moreover, parking perceptions did not strongly correlate with visitation patterns. Management implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1988, Cullition et al. (1988) predicted that coastal population would grow approximately 15% by 2008. The Southeast was predicted by this study to have the largest increase of any region of the nation during this timeframe, with North Carolina counties ranking among those expected to experience some of the greatest increases. By 2003, however, coastal populations had already risen 28% based upon 1980 estimates (Crossett et al., 2004). Currently, approximately 52% of the nation's population lives in coastal counties, and it is anticipated that these populations will increase by nearly 10% by 2020 (NOAA, 2012). Such rapid population growth necessitates the development of physical infrastructure, which can both facilitate and impede recreational access to the public beach. When demand for access to the beach exceeds the available infrastructure capacity, then unacceptable impacts may result, affecting not only the coastal resources themselves, but also the quality of the recreational user experience. If these impacts prove to be substantive, then repercussions to the economic base of coastal economies may occur as prospective tourists select alternate destinations.

The loss of tourist revenue can have a ripple effect on coastal economies, as it provides a fundamental economic foundation for many U.S. coastal regions (US Commission on Ocean Policy, 2004). Beach recreation has been found to be one of the most popular and rapidly growing outdoor recreational activities in the U.S. (Pogue and Lee, 1999; Scholle et al., 2005; US Commission on Ocean Policy, 2004), accounting for nearly half of the ocean-based economy in 2000, and generating over \$170 billion dollars of revenue annually (Silva et al., 2007). "About two billion trips a year are made by people to American beaches" (Mangone, 2010, p. 454).

Therefore it is economically imperative to provide adequate access to coastal resources while insuring the integrity of the natural resources themselves. The former aspect is afforded a significant amount of attention at federal, state, and local levels of government. For example, the Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) (1972) made public beach access a priority, and facilitated collaborative efforts at state and local levels to provide such access. Additionally, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers requires consideration of public beach access in any federally-funded beach nourishment project (US Army Corps of Engineers, 1989), and cooperates with state and local governments to facilitate and maintain it. In North Carolina, the oceanfront beach is held in public trust for the citizens of the state (North Carolina General Statutes, 1985)

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and access to the public beach is a legal right (North Carolina Administrative Code, 2005).

Despite this legal framework, some North Carolina communities have attempted to impose constraints on parking as a mechanism to indirectly restrict the public's access to oceanfront beaches (Kalo, 2000). Provision of public beach access therefore remains a difficult, and ongoing, challenge for managing agencies. This is particularly true in the U.S. where the availability of public parking is frequently tied to beach access in both policy (e.g., US Army Corps of Engineers, 1989) and practice (Pogue and Lee, 1998).

Limitations in public parking are therefore not only inconsistent with U.S. public policy and practice, but may also have significant impacts upon local economies dependent upon coastal tourism. If potential tourists are discouraged from visiting a beach due to parking and access constraints, then not only is there a loss of opportunity for the tourists themselves, but there is a loss of local economic input as well. It is important to note that it is not simply the actual number of parking spaces at any given location that may affect the willingness of tourists to visit and revisit a site, but also their perceptions of parking availability at the site. The salient questions, then, are (1) whether tourists' perceptions of parking accurately reflect the actual parking condition at a site, and (2) whether prospective visitors' perceptions of adequate public parking and beach access do indeed affect their beach visitation behavior or the intent to visit the public beach. Knowing answers to these two questions can be extremely useful both in terms of site management and site marketing. The current study was designed to address these questions.

## 2. Review of literature

In the United States, the private automobile plays a central role in transportation. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (2003), approximately 90% of the 1.1 billion trips made each day in the U.S. are in private automobiles. It is therefore rational to assume that in the U.S., parking is as critical a determining factor in beach visitation decisions as it is at other types of tourism destinations, such as National Parks (White et al., 2011).

The question then remains as to the importance of parking to visitors in outdoor recreational settings in the U.S. Tarrant and Smith (2002) provided an intriguing insight into the importance of parking to the touristic experience. In their examination of an extremely large sample size of over 11,000 subjects in 31 outdoor recreational settings, the authors found that adequate parking was important within developed, water-based, or winter recreational settings. Yet, visitors in dispersed settings found parking to be unimportant. As beach visitation is water-based and typically concentrated, one might predict that parking is important to beachgoers. Brower and Dreyfoos (1979) even argued that it is access to the beach that, to some extent, controls crowding at the beach. Thus, parking, as a crucial component of access, may be a decisive factor to beachgoers.

In line with this reasoning, several studies have indicated that beach visitors tend to express a high preference for better parking and access. For example, King (2001) reported that survey respondents in southern California stated that they would visit the beach 17.18 days more often per year on average if parking was easier and 34.38 days more often per year if it took half as much time to reach the beach. Work by Parsons et al. (2000), covering dozens of beaches in the northeastern U.S., also suggested that beaches with limited access receive less visitation. Oh et al. (2009) also found that coastal visitors in South Carolina preferred beaches with a greater access. Related work revealed strong support for the projection that increasing beach access would also increase beach

visitation (Oh et al., 2010) even if visitors had to pay for additional access sites (Oh et al., 2008). Ellis and Vogelsong (2002) found that return visitors displayed significantly higher satisfaction with the site than first-time visitors in North Carolina, and that site-specific variables including available space and facility condition played an important role in visitors' overall satisfaction with the site. In light of these findings, Oh et al. (2009) proposed that availability of access to the beach is a primary factor that inhibits visits to public beaches, along with parking fees, crowding and noise levels, development, and rules and regulations.

However, other studies, mainly outside the U.S., have indicated that parking may not be as critical to beach visitation experience as presumed. For example, Devesa et al. (2010) found that Spanish tourists seeking tranquility and rest through contact with nature, did not consider parking a decisive factor, but visitors seeking proximity (close-by sites), gastronomic offering, and cultural activities did deem the availability of parking as decisive. As beach tourists may primarily seek tranquility, rest, and contact with nature in their beach visits, parking availability may not be critical to their beach experience and intention to revisit. In support of this prediction, Roca and colleagues (Roca et al., 2008), working in Spain, reported that the overall enjoyment of beach experience was not necessarily diminished by parking condition and density, and that the traditional "sun, sand, and sea" beach model was still valid. Similarly, Vaz et al.'s (2009) analyses based on reports of beach users in Portugal and Wales, UK showed that environmental amenities, specifically clean water, safety, and scenery quality, were deemed to be more important than adequate access and parking. This finding nicely replicated results from previous studies (Morgan, 1999; Tudor and Williams, 2006) in consistently suggesting that parking is not a crucial factor in decisions regarding beach visitation.

It therefore seems that the importance of parking and access to beach tourism varies. What is more intriguing is the general association between perceptions of a recreational site during the current visit and in return visitation. Traditionally, it has been argued and confirmed that higher satisfaction with the current visit is linked to a stronger desire to revisit, across many types of recreational sites (Alegre and Cladera, 2006; Ellis and Vogelsong, 2002). However, other studies have questioned the validity of this link. For example, Bigné et al. (2001) found mixed support for perceived quality and satisfaction of their site visit experience as predictors of return beach visitation in Spain: although perceived quality had a positive effect on satisfaction and revisit intention, the association of satisfaction and revisit intention was not evident. Likewise, Um et al. (2006) found that while perceived attractiveness of tourist destinations, perceived quality of service, and perceived value for money all significantly predicted satisfaction, perceived quality of service was not a significant antecedent of return visitation in Hong Kong. Moreover, satisfaction, together with these three perceived aspects of the visit, could only account of 14% of the variance in revisit intention. This suggests a large gap between tourists' evaluation of the current visit and their intent to revisit.

Thus, it appears that the general understanding of the relationship between perceptions of parking availability and access, beach visitation satisfaction, and revisit intention is debatable at best. Moreover, previous research has two major limitations: First, it exclusively relied on tourists' self-report of (perceived) parking availability or access and has not examined to what degree their perceptions were in fact accurate and based upon actual conditions on-site. Second, while the studies conducted in the U.S. have examined tourists' preferences for beach parking and access, they have not examined the association between perceptions of parking and access and actual return visitation—research on this topic has been limited to European nations. Given the auto-centric nature of

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