

ANALYZING AN ECOTOURISM DESTINATION: GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract: *Grand Canyon National Park, established since 1919, entered the list of world natural heritage for its rarity and uniqueness. The canyon of the Colorado River has a depth of 1.6 km, an average width of 15 km and extends over an area of 450 sq. km. Its evolution and complex geology, its biologic, pedologic, climatic levels and its landscapes (the colors and canyon atmosphere change depending on day moments and seasons) make the Grand Canyon a unique tourist attraction. The park receives over 4 million ecotourists annually, providing professional and qualitative services, as well as possibilities to practice various ecotourism activities. This paper presents Grand Canyon National Park as a model to analyze an ecotourism destination, summarizing a large amount of information into relevant conclusions, graphs, and chart presentations.*

Key words: *Grand Canyon National Park, ecotourism destination, ecotourism flow, ecotourism management.*

INTRODUCTION

Grand Canyon National Park, established since 1919 (celebrating its 95th anniversary this year), entered the list of world natural heritage for its rarity and uniqueness. The canyon of the Colorado River has a depth of 1.6 km, an average width of 15 km and extends over an area of 450 sq. km. Its evolution and complex geology, its biologic, pedologic, climatic levels and its landscapes (the colors and canyon atmosphere change depending on day moments and seasons) make the Grand Canyon a unique tourist attraction. The local communities are descendants of the Amerindian tribes Pueblos, Hopi, Cerbat and of Spanish settlers.

Among the 59 park units that fall under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, Grand Canyon National Park is the second most popular (after Great Smoky Mountains NP), with 4.4 million visitors in 2012. It provides professional and qualitative services, as well as possibilities to practice various ecotourism activities. In addition, there are substantial funds for investments, diversified and ecologic infrastructure, or promotion of environmental education. Grand Canyon is certainly deserving of being among the most visited national park worldwide and remains, for its spectacular environment, a mainstay for backpackers, hikers, campers and other travelers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theoretical research is based on the works mentioned in references. The study was based on analysis, processing and interpretation of statistical data from trusted sources, with updated data: U.S. National Park Service (www.nps.gov/grca, www.grandcanyonlodges.com). This paper is an model to analyze an ecotourism destination following logical steps (general overview of the ecotourism destination, location and accessibility, ecotourism attractions and activities, accommodation facilities, ecotourism flow, best practices in ecotourism management), summarizing a large amount of information into relevant conclusions, graphs, and chart presentations.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Position and accessibility – Grand Canyon National Park is located in the intermountain region of the U.S., in the state Arizona. Park area covers 4,869.61 square kilometers in most federal property (table 1). The park may be accessed in the four entrances (fig 1): north - St. George, west - Las Vegas, Montana, east - Camerun, south - Flagstaff and Williams. The park is managed by the National Park Service and Xanterra Parks and Resorts, along with a number of NGOs (as GCA – Grand Canyon Association).

The 466 km long and 1.6 km deep canyon of the Colorado River separates the park into South and North Rims whose scenery, climate and vegetation are different because of differences in elevation.

South Rim Detail



North Rim Detail

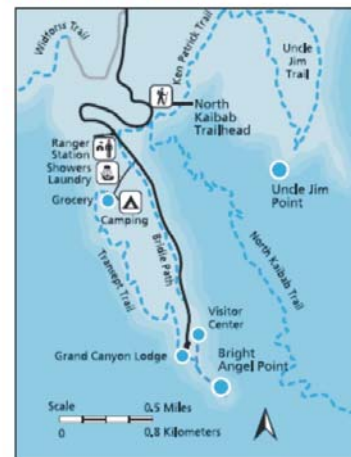


Fig 1 Grand Canyon National Park – ecotourist maps (entrances, visitor centers, main tourist attractions) and Grand Canyon panoramic view

Sursa: „The Guide”, National Park Service, www.nps.gov/grca

The **visiting permits** may be purchased for 7 days (\$ 25 for cars, and \$ 12 for bicycle or by foot). The annual pass for this park costs \$ 50. There are also a few free entrance days. The ecotourists could also choose the Golden Eagle Pass (\$ 65) or the annual pass for all U.S. national parks (\$ 80), with versions for elderly (\$ 10) or free for children (under 15), military, permanently disabled or blind people. 80% of the collected fees are retained by the park administration, while the remaining 20% are deposited in a special account for those parks that do not have sufficient revenues. The NPS Congress allocates the funds for investments in the park, such as roads, drainage systems, erosion control, facilities for disabled, campgrounds, repairs, etc.

The most important **ecotourism attractions** (fig 2) are: the canyon of the Colorado River with its unique combinations of geologic colors and erosional forms resulting in breathtaking views, the natural ecosystems, the great biological diversity (1,500 plant, 355 bird, 89 mammalian, 47 reptile, 9 amphibian, 17 fish species) and many rare, endemic and protected species, the wildlife (mule deers, elks, turkeys, California condors, mountain lions), and the historical sites.

The most important ecotourism trails are Bright Angel Point, Transept, North Kaibab, Ken Patrick, Uncle Jim, Widforss, Arizona, Cape Royal, Cliff Springs, Cape Final, Roosevelt Point, Point Imperial (fig 1).

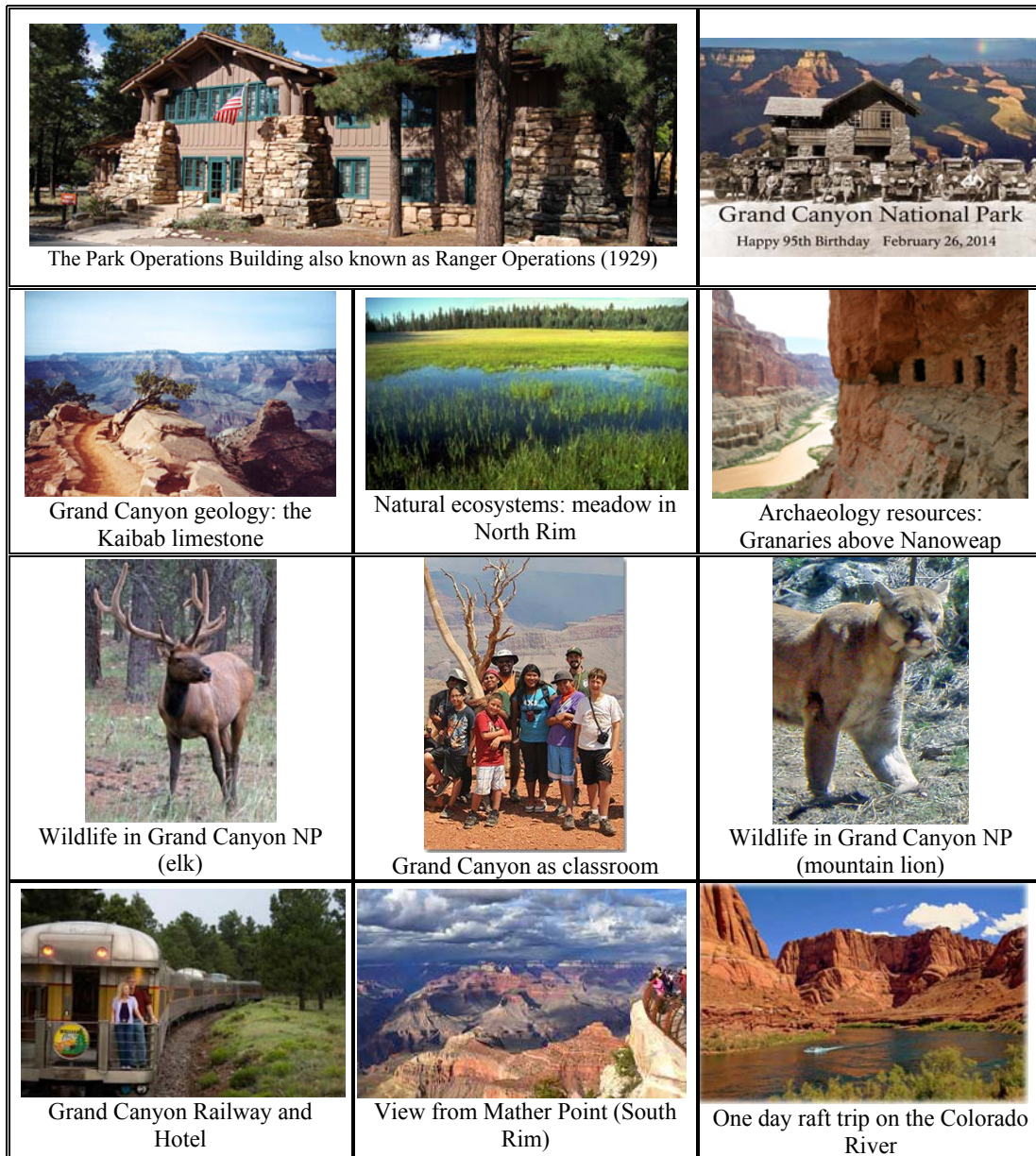


Fig 2 Representative images of the ecotourism attractions and activities in Grand Canyon National Park

Source: <http://www.nps.gov/grca>

The **ecotourism activities** practiced in Grand Canyon National Park (fig 2) are: guided tours, backcountry hiking or walking, bicycle rides, camping, mule riding, river trips (whitewater or smoothwater), learning adventures (geology, history, archaeology, photography), in-school outreach programs, professional development and opportunities for teachers, distance learning (internet-based educational programs), ranger programs (to learn more about the nature, science, history and culture of the Grand Canyon with park rangers as guides), free shuttle bus rides, railway trips, cell phone tours, watching park movies and exhibitions, photography (there are photo hot spots where the lightning of the canyon is more dramatic in the morning or late afternoon).

The **accommodation facilities** are hotels (El Tovar), lodges, campgrounds (Mather Campground on the South Rim, North Rim Campground, Desert View Campground), contacting Forever Resorts, Xanterra Parks and Resorts for reservations, grandcanyonlodges.com (for online reservations), TDD (telephone booking).

Add guide **services**, and visitor centers and museums for ecotourism education and information (Desert View, Canyon View Information Plaza, Verkamps Visitor Center, The North Rim Visitor Center, Yavapai Museum of Geology, Tusayan Museum and Ruin), food, medical, financial, and religious services, advertising materials (The Guide, Trip Planner) and souvenir stores (the Gift Shop), fitness opportunities, a series of websites, weather information telephone lines, or special events (The North Rim Star Party, The Days of Western Art, The Native American Culture Days, The Canyon's Symphony, The Archeology Day).

In case of the **ecotourist flow** in Grand Canyon National Park (table 1, fig 3) we noticed the followings: a growing trend in arrivals in 2003-2005 (up to 4.4 million ecotourists), a slight decrease in 2006, followed by recovery in 2007-2008 (4.4 million ecotourists). Due to the economic crisis, the visits decreased slowly in 2009-2011 (about 4.3 million ecotourists annually), but recovered to 4.4 million in 2012.

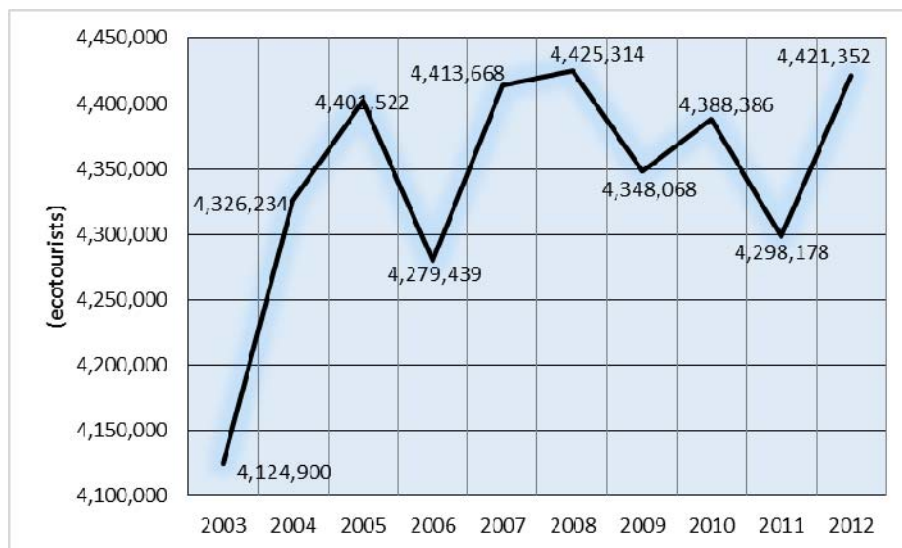


Fig 3 Grand Canyon ecotourism flow over the latest decade

The park received an average number of 11.500-12.000 ecotourists per day, during the past 5 years. The tourist traffic density (892 ecotourists/sq.km) is high enough to require proper environmental protection measures and limit overcrowding.

Although most ecotourists visit the park in the summer (42% of total arrivals), with the seasonal peak in July (over 650,000 ecotourists). The visiting season begins in early March and lasts until October inclusive, due to the mild climate (fig 4).

Table 1

Ecotourism indicators used in analyzing ecotourism destinations

1	Name	GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK					
2	Position	Country	State			Region	
		USA	Arizona			IM intramontaneous	
3	Total area of the national park	km ²		hectars		acres	
		4,869.61		486,961.32		1,217,403.32	
4	National park area by property (hectars)	Federal area		Public area		Private area	Total
		472,345.11		4,744		9,872.21	486,961.32
5	Ecotourism flow in the latest 5 years	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Yearly average
		4,425,314	4,348,068	4,388,386	4,298,178	4,421,352	4,376,259
6	Multiannual average of ecotourists (latest 10 years, 2003-2012)	4,342,706					
7	Average ecotourists per day	2008	2009	2010		2011	2012
		12124.15	11912.52	12022.98		11775.83	12113.29
8	Total overnight stays in 2011	1,357,679					
9	Overnight stays by accommodation type in 2011	Concessioner		NPS Campgrounds		Backcountry	Non-Rec.
		Lodging	Campgrounds	Tents	RV's	291,833	62,265
		639,661	57,185	206,850	126,310		
10	Ecotourism seasonality in 2011	January	February	March	April	May	June
	Number of ecotourists	139,029	120,726	304,583	388,363	419,569	544,089
	Share (%)	3.23	2.81	7.09	9.04	9.76	12.66
	Ecotourism seasonality in 2011	July	August	September	October	November	December
	Number of ecotourists	654,871	595,265	410,636	348,203	201,809	171,035
	Share (%)	15.24	13.85	9.55	8.10	4.70	3.98

Source: data taken and processed from Street B., 2012, Statistical abstract: 2011. Natural Resource Data Series, NPS/NRPC/SSD/NRDS—2012/422. National Park Service, Fort Collins, Colorado.

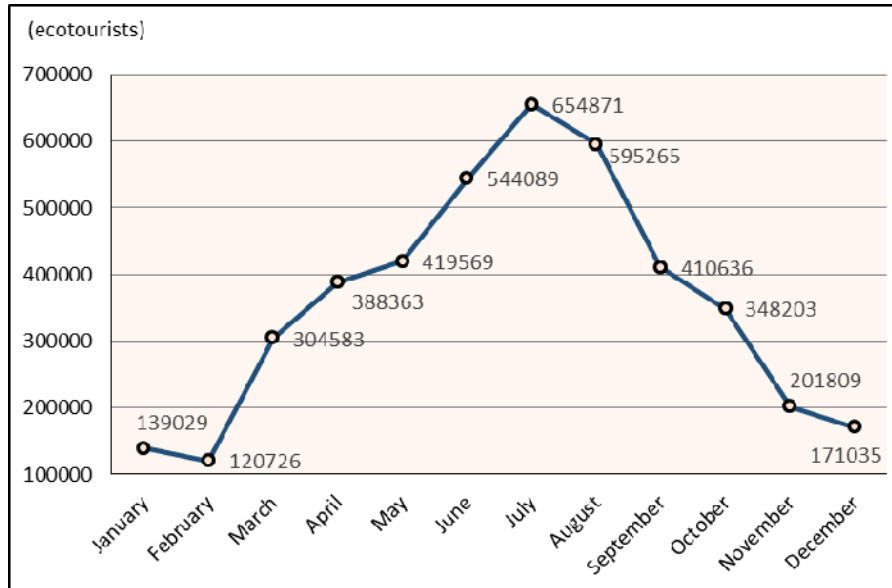


Fig 4 Ecotourism seasonality in Grand Canyon NP (2011)

The overnight stays recorded 1,357,679 in 2011 (fig 5) and were 50% ensured in accommodation units located outside the park (lodging 46%, campgrounds 5%), with lower shares for overnight stays in tents and RV's located in the park campgrounds (24%) and backcountry (21%).

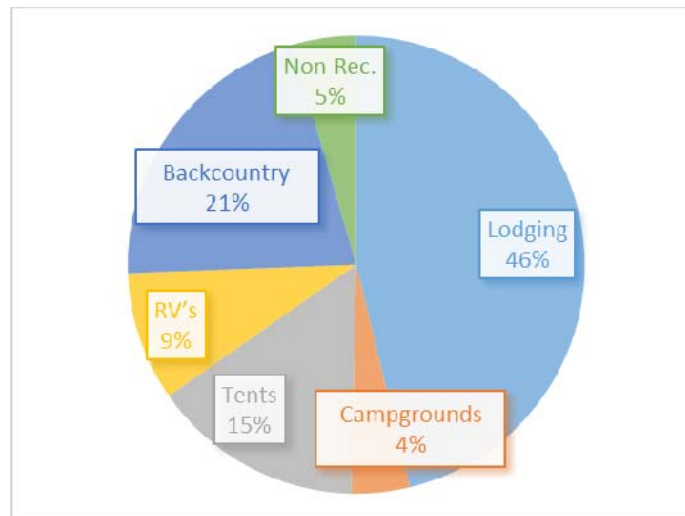


Fig 5 Overnight stays by accommodation type in Grand Canyon NP (2011)

CONCLUSIONS

The park administration had to implement alternative strategies to deal with the economic crisis, as a more aggressive marketing on the internet, a new design of the web sites that are more interactive and provide more information on the parks, online guides, and online programs for the low season.

There are ecotouristic marketing strategies, based on original and connected ecotourism activities, programs and services: Cell Phone Audio Tours (tours of the Grand Canyon accompanied by short vocal messages on the mobile phone, explaining different

aspects regarding the canyon, from geology and local Amerindian history to the starry arch description during the night), painting exhibitions showing the Grand Canyon, free shuttle bus services, and horse or mule back rides, quarterly publications (The Guide is available in many languages), very suggestive and easy to read online brochures, online advertising (webcams in the areas with beautiful sceneries or rare animals), niche services (religious ceremonies, fitness opportunities), various services (emergency calls, information on weather, roads and traffic, events, self-guiding, first aid kit, ecologic toilet, and other on-line information), social media pages (Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter).

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