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The actual study in question was conducted by Patricia Winter at the National Park Service. The title of the resulting report is "The impact of normative message types on deprecative activities." This link <http://science.nature.nps.gov/research/ac/iars/search/iarView?reportId=32303> provides details about the report. It looks like it might be necessary to contact the author directly to obtain a complete copy of the study. There are various other discussions about this article on the web.

Trends

Sign Language

A word to the wise for outdoor stewards

Signs can be an effective way to keep visitors on the trail in environmentally sensitive areas, but a growing body of research indicates that visitor behavior varies markedly depending on how the sign is worded.

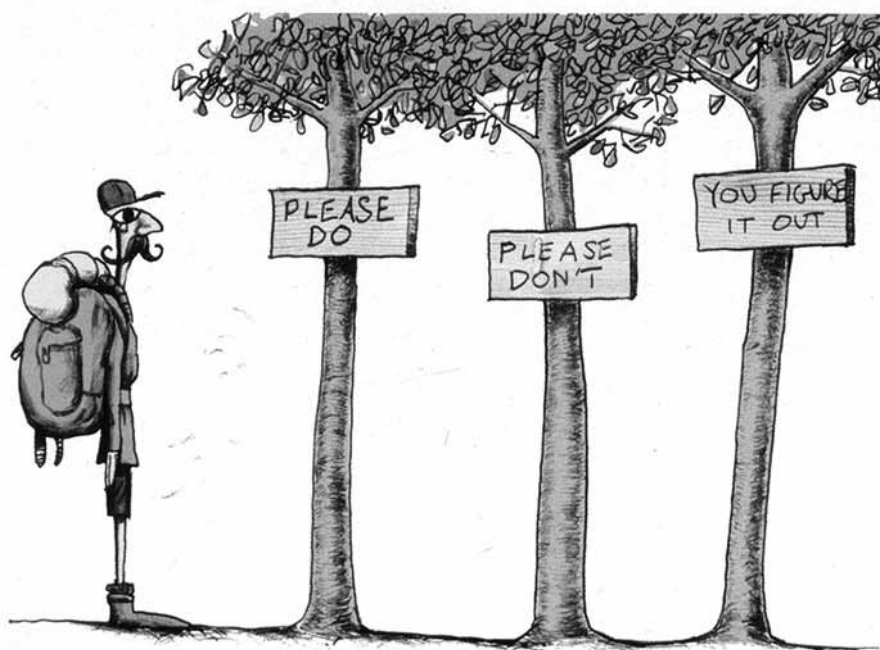
So let's test your sign I.Q. In a recent study conducted in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, which of the following signs was found to be most effective at keeping visitors from straying off-trail, and why?

1. PLEASE STAY ON THE ESTABLISHED PATHS AND TRAILS, IN ORDER TO PROTECT THE SEQUOIAS AND NATURAL VEGETATION IN THIS PARK.
2. PLEASE DON'T GO OFF THE ESTABLISHED PATHS AND TRAILS, IN ORDER TO PROTECT THE SEQUOIAS AND NATURAL VEGETATION IN THIS PARK.
3. THE VAST MAJORITY OF VISITORS HAVE STAYED ON THE ESTABLISHED PATHS AND TRAILS, HELPING TO PRESERVE THE NATURAL STATE OF THE SEQUOIAS AND VEGETATION IN THIS PARK.

4. MANY PAST VISITORS HAVE GONE OFF THE ESTABLISHED PATHS AND TRAILS, CHANGING THE NATURAL STATE OF THE SEQUOIAS AND VEGETATION IN THIS PARK.

These wordings vary in two ways. Messages can *tell* visitors what they should do, as in the first two examples, or *describe* what other visitors do, as in the latter examples. The message can further be framed positively, as in the first and third samples, or negatively, like in examples 2 and 4.

To test hiker response to these different formulations, Patricia Winter, a research social scientist with the U.S. Forest Service, placed the signs along four popular trails in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. All four signs were uti-



lized individually at each site at different times, and the behavior of 2,897 hikers was observed with the help of a video camera. The number of people wandering off-trail was then tabulated for each wording.

The results? Most effective was example number two, with only 5.1 percent of visitors going off-trail. Least effective was number four, with 18.7 percent straying from the established path. In between were examples one (15.9 percent) and three (11.8 percent). All of the signs were more effective at keeping people on-trail than when no sign was present (30.9 percent wandered off).

"The marked variation between these wordings illustrates an important lesson for land managers," says Winter. "What we found is that messages telling people what *not* to do are most effective at preventing unwanted behavior." A similar study in Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park found the same results—visitors were least likely to steal pieces of petrified wood when presented with a sign that read: "PLEASE DON'T REMOVE THE PETRIFIED WOOD FROM THE PARK, IN ORDER TO PRESERVE THE NATURAL STATE OF THE PETRIFIED FOREST."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, visitors were most likely to go off-trail (or steal wood) when presented with a message indicating that the activity was

commonly done by others. "Such wordings indicate that there is a degree of social acceptance for such behavior," explains Winter. "People are more likely to do something if they think it is commonly done by others, which helps explain why [example four] was the least effective. By extension, when the message implies that the behavior is socially unacceptable [as in example 2], visitors are less likely to engage in that activity."

Interestingly, this finding has implications when it comes to crafting messages that encourage people to *do* something, such as recycle or use bear-proof containers, rather than to *not* do something, like head off-trail or steal wood. "It seems that if you want people to do something, or take a particular action, presenting the actions of others positively is the best way to encourage such behavior."

To support this claim, she cites studies that evaluated different messages encouraging people to recycle and re-use hotel towels. In both cases, messages emphasizing the fact that other people were doing it proved most effective.

So in conclusion: Please don't ignore these findings. Join the tremendous number of people who are creating more effective messages every day.

—Matt Heid is Senior Editor of AMC Outdoors.