

SOME MANAGERS' VIEWPOINTS ON CAMPERS AND CAMPGROUND OPERATION

Nine managers of public campgrounds comment on camper relations and management problems, including such topics as registration procedures, camping fees, reactions to survey interviews, campers' pets, and facility maintenance. By Herbert E. Echelberger, Research Forester and Elwood L. Shafer, Jr., Project Leader, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Syracuse, N.Y. Reprinted from U.S. Forest Service Research Note NE-88, 1968.

What would you say if someone woke you at 2 a.m. and asked: "Will you please organize a search party to find my cat?" This request may seem a bit unusual to most of us, but not to a campground manager. After many contacts with campers, the experienced campground manager becomes well educated in camper behavior and attitudes.

Recently nine public-campground managers in New York State were asked to give their impressions about campers, and to describe their campground-management problems. Their replies may be useful to both public and private campground operators in successfully meeting the demand for camping.

Problems involving people and public relations were the main concern of managers at campgrounds near metropolitan centers, which served noncampers as well as campers. Preservation and maintenance of the natural environment were the principal management problems at campgrounds that had secluded surroundings located a day's drive or more from urban centers. This difference in management problems occurred even when the two different types of campgrounds accommodated approximately the same number of campers. The managers generally felt that each campground has its own unique set of conditions that attracts a particular type of camper.

Agreement between our results and those of past studies suggests that certain kinds of planning and research information may be more easily obtained from managers than from campers.

MANAGERS' OBSERVATIONS

Why People Camp.—When asked to give the most important reason why people camp, managers of campgrounds located near tourist attractions said "to avoid the expenses of hotels and motels during vacation." Managers of the more secluded out-of-the-way campgrounds said "enjoyment of the outdoor environment." Responses to this question agree roughly with those of a camper-interview survey at some of the same campgrounds.¹

We also asked each manager if there was anything that attracted campers to his particular campground. Seven managers said that campers like the way each site is separated from surrounding sites by a vegetative screen. Four managers said that campers are impressed by campground cleanliness. Another important feature mentioned was that campers enjoy campsites located near water. In this the managers' answers agreed favorably with results from interviews with campers.¹

Camping Fees.—In reply to a question about camping fees, all the managers said that campers do not feel that present fees are too high. Four managers indicated that most campers probably would be willing to pay \$2 to \$3 per party when facilities such as electricity and hot showers are available. In this too, the managers' opinions agreed with results of a recent study of campers in New Hampshire.²

Interviewing Campers.—Because recreation research studies sometimes use personal-interview techniques, we asked managers how they think campers react to such surveys. All nine managers felt that campers usually do not object to interviews that last less than 30 minutes, if the interview is conducted when the camper is relaxing. Three managers felt strongly that campers welcome the opportunity to discuss their camping experiences. One manager said that no more than 5 percent of his campers considered personal interviews to be a nuisance. This response also agrees very closely with independent research on the subject.³ In fact, fewer than 1 percent of the campers asked in recent surveys by the Northeastern Station refused to be interviewed.⁴

One manager mentioned that campers may be indifferent to interviews because they never see the results of the survey. In this respect, camper interest and cooperation may be stimulated if articles about recreation research results are occasionally distributed at campgrounds.

MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

The managers briefly discussed several rules that some public campground users complain about. In this respect, private campground owners might consider avoiding or eliminating some of these rules at their campgrounds.

Registration Procedures.—A big management problem dealt with registration and check-out procedures. Incoming campers are anxious to find a spot to set up camp, but some campers who plan to leave are reluctant to vacate their sites before noon—the required check-out time. Many campers would like to stay until 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon. However, if this practice were permitted, it would be impossible for managers to efficiently reassign sites to incoming campers. To avoid the confusion that would undoubtedly result, the managers interviewed were in favor of maintaining the earlier check-out deadline. An alternative might be to require the departing camper to vacate the site by 1 p.m., but still allow him to have complete access to the picnic area, swimming beach, and other day-use facilities until some later hour.

Another problem related to registration and check-out procedure is the no-reservation policy. In the campgrounds we visited, campers are not allowed to reserve sites before arrival. Managers reported that some campers feel they should be allowed to register in person, pay

for 2 or 3 days' use of a site, but not occupy it until the weekend. If a large number of campers did this, it is possible that all the campsites would be reserved for a weekend. Consequently, campers who arrive during a weekday and plan to stay through the weekend could not do so because of the preregistered campers. Thus a first-come, first-served procedure seems equitable in a public campground.

Campers are usually allowed to select their own sites, but when the campground becomes nearly full, incoming campers are usually assigned sites. A problem arises because the manager does not always know which sites are vacant. An inexpensive intercom system throughout the campground might help alleviate this problem. By phoning the site number they select, campers would not need to drive back to the registration booth for this purpose. Also, such a system could be used to let managers know when a campsite had been vacated and thus avoid the possibility of assigning an occupied site to an incoming camper. In addition, emergencies could be reported to the manager without delay.

Several managers suggested the need for an alphabetical file or bulletin board listing the name and location of each camping party. Visitors would then have much less trouble locating camping friends. At present managers must search the entire registration file of sites to find a specific name.

Other related regulations that campers find objectionable are the length-of-stay limit and the rules that limit use of a tent site to either one family or six people.

Pets.—Certain states permit pets in their campgrounds as long as they are tied. However, the presence of pets, usually dogs, in the campground causes much work for managers. Many campers who bring dogs want to let them run, whereas those campers who have no pets approve of the present rule of tying pets. But tied dogs create a disturbance by barking and by littering the sites. Untied, wandering dogs can cause endless disturbance and safety hazards. The fact that some states exclude dogs from their campgrounds probably has helped increase campground use-intensity in states that permit pets.

We suggest that the presence of a pet in the modern American family may significantly affect that family's vacation plans. In this respect, one manager mentioned a situation where a married couple left their children at home with a babysitter and took their dog with them on a camping trip! The private campground manager may be able to capitalize on this aspect of family camping by providing special facilities for dogs—such as large fenced-in areas where dogs can run free but not disturb other campers.

Facilities.—The managers generally approved of campground design; however several suggestions for improvement were made. One manager said that his picnic area is located too close to the camping area, and that picnickers sometimes annoy campers. Another manager thought that every campground should have a large parking area near the registration booth to avoid traffic at the park entrance. All managers felt it was necessary to provide more sites with electrical outlets to accommodate use of modern camping equipment.

Several managers suggested that an indoor play area was needed for children to use during inclement weather. All managers felt that flush toilets were needed, and one manager suggested that attendants, stationed in centralized sanitation facilities, would help reduce vandalism.

Managers varied in their opinions about how to preserve vegetation and prevent soil compaction, but the general consensus seemed to be that campsites should be built initially to withstand the wear and tear of heavy use. (In this too our results agree with those of others who have discussed campground design in more detail.)⁵ As a result, construction costs might be higher but subsequent maintenance costs would be lower. Information-and-education programs that point out the effect of vandalism on aesthetics were also suggested as a means to preserve the natural beauty of a campground. One manager suggested that campers be given a brochure that would help them understand and preserve the natural environment.

Finally, all nine managers felt that a successful campground manager must be able to communicate well with people as well as to manage the facilities under his control. Managing people and coping with the recreation equipment explosion will pose the greatest challenge for the campground manager of tomorrow.

¹Shafer, E. L., Jr. EFFECTS OF SAMPLING LOCATION, PERIOD, AND METHOD ON CAMPER SURVEY RESULTS. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation on file at New York State University College of Forestry, Syracuse, N.Y. 245 pp. 1966.

²LaPage, Wilbur F. THE ROLE OF FEES IN CAMPERS' DECISIONS. In press, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station. 1968.

³Cannell, C., and M. Axelrod. THE RESPONDENT REPORTS ON THE INTERVIEW. Amer. J. Sociol. 62(2): 177-181. 1956.

⁴LaPage, Wilbur F. THE CAMPER VIEWS THE INTERVIEW. In press, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station.

⁵Bohart, C. V. GOOD RECREATION AREA DESIGN HELPS PREVENT SITE DETERIORATION. J. Soil and Water Conserv. 23(1): 21-22. 1968.

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