

Arches

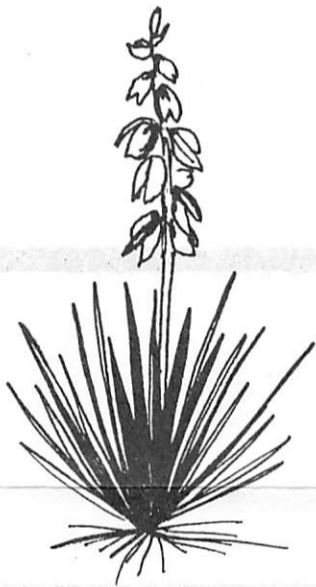
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VERP???

If you have heard a Park Ranger use that word lately, and thought maybe it was a new flower, it isn't. It's a new National Park Service program being tested here at Arches National Park. VERP means *Visitor Experience and Resource Protection*.

WHY VERP? WHY ARCHES?



It all goes back to the legislation that created the National Park Service. It says that our purpose is "... to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." We're supposed to keep the parks unimpaired, **and** help you enjoy them at the same time. Sometimes that is a challenge.

For years, we've tried to accomplish this by the seat of our pants, and overall, it's worked pretty well. But just as you can't fly the space shuttle by the seat of your pants as you could a kite, old methods won't work with today's increasing flood of visitors and our dwindling budgets.

We needed a better way to look at the amount of visitor use the park can handle while keeping it in good condition and allowing visitors to have a pleasant experience. So, the VERP program was developed to give us a scientific way to do our job better.

The problem here isn't parkwide yet; it's the concentration of cars and people at certain places and at certain times. The crowding spoils visitors' experiences and damages the resources, when people spill off the trails and trample the cryptobiotic crust and other plants. But how much is too much? Can we measure, and not just guess?

WE ASKED VISITORS

We asked hundreds of visitors about their experiences and what made them good or bad. We showed them computer-generated pictures of the same scene with different numbers of people, from few to many, and asked for reactions to those photos. We held public meetings on the problems, and shared our

worry that it would be harder to solve later, after the damage becomes worse. From these comments, with help from social scientists, we learned what visitors want. Some important things include the number of people at one time at an arch or on a trail, and traffic congestion on major roads.

WE ASKED SCIENTISTS

Scientists showed us things they can measure, that are good indicators of damage. It turns out that one of the most important measurements is the health of the cryptobiotic crust that forms on desert soils. It's fundamental for all plant life in the desert –

and therefore, for the rest of us too. Yet it is destroyed simply by stepping on it, and it takes decades to recover. Other major indicators of damage are soil compaction and the formation of "shortcut" trails off designated paths.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT YOU?

With all this public help, we've developed standards for different areas. Now we can count people, check the cryptobiotic soil, and measure a few other things. Then we'll compare the results against the established standards to see if the park's special places, or visitors' experiences, are being damaged.

When the impact on the visitors' experiences, or on the park, exceeds these standards, it triggers some sort of action to relieve it. We might construct fences to keep people on trails, require permits to enter certain areas at certain times, widen and harden trails for heavy use, or elevate trails or edge them with rocks to discourage visitors from leaving the trail.

The results should be better visits for you and improved protection for the park. It means we'll be able to monitor the soil and plants of the park, and be able to take action – more or less restrictive – as needed.

It means that when a parking lot is full, enough people are at that area. You should go to another place and return to the first one later. Rangers will ticket cars parked illegally. (It's not a ranger's favorite duty, but they'll do it if necessary.)

WHAT TO DO NOW

Park rangers can help you avoid busy times at the most visited arches. Ask at the visitor center or anywhere in the park that you encounter a ranger.

THE FUTURE

Although the VERP process has focused on management actions for different sections of the park, the entire park's overall limit may need to be addressed in the future. If more and more people come, eventually some will not be able to find parking at **any** of the primary attractions.

At that point, the park will have exceeded its total carrying capacity. We would then take further actions to manage use, such as using a reservation system or limiting the number of groups entering the park.

We asked many people to help us develop this process, and comments are still welcome. For further information on the VERP program, contact the superintendent at the address on this brochure.

