



GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

Visitor Experience Stewardship Newsletter

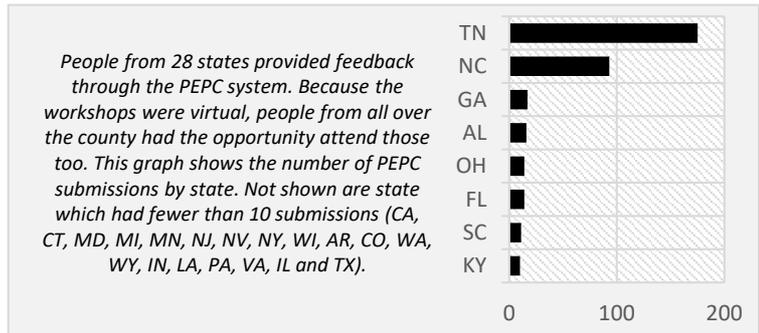
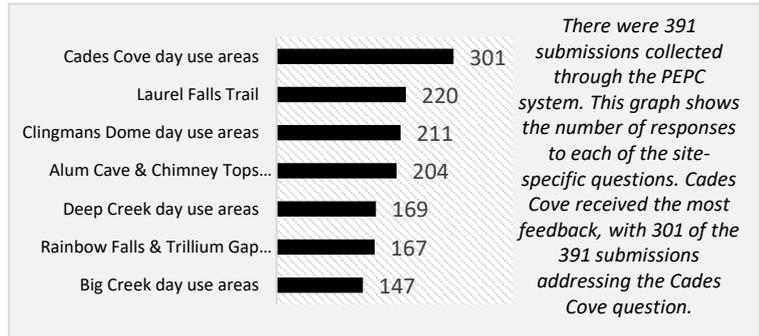
January 2021



Vehicles backed-up on Cades Cove Loop Road.

Over the last decade, visitation to Great Smoky Mountains National Park has increased by 32%. During this time, park managers have applied several band-aid fixes to address congestion like managing traffic with volunteer groups, utilizing limited shuttle services, and mitigating resource damage through programs like Trails Forever. With increasing visitation trends, park management is focused on addressing access and resource issues associated with congestion.

During the fall of 2020, park staff held eight virtual workshops with the public, employees, volunteers, and partners to collect their input on congestion and crowding. As part of the workshop, park staff presented information about the current state of the park and a visitor use expert presented congestion management solutions that have been implemented on public lands across the country and globe. Over 200 people attended the workshops and provided input on their ideal park experiences as well as their opinions on how sites could be better managed. Additionally, park staff collected feedback via the Planning, Environment & Public Comment (PEPC) system.



BIG CREEK DAY USE AREA

Spotlight on the area & issues

Big Creek, as the name implies, is one of the largest creeks in the Smokies and boasts many waterfalls. Big Creek is a popular area in the park due to its amenities and access to destinations like Mouse Creek Falls. During the summer of 2020, visitation in this area increased by over 50%. The park uses signs and split-rail fencing to deter roadside parking in the area, but these obstacles were disregarded and sometimes moved. Feedback through civic engagement showed that easily finding parking, experiencing quiet, and hiking uncrowded trails were important to visitors in this area.

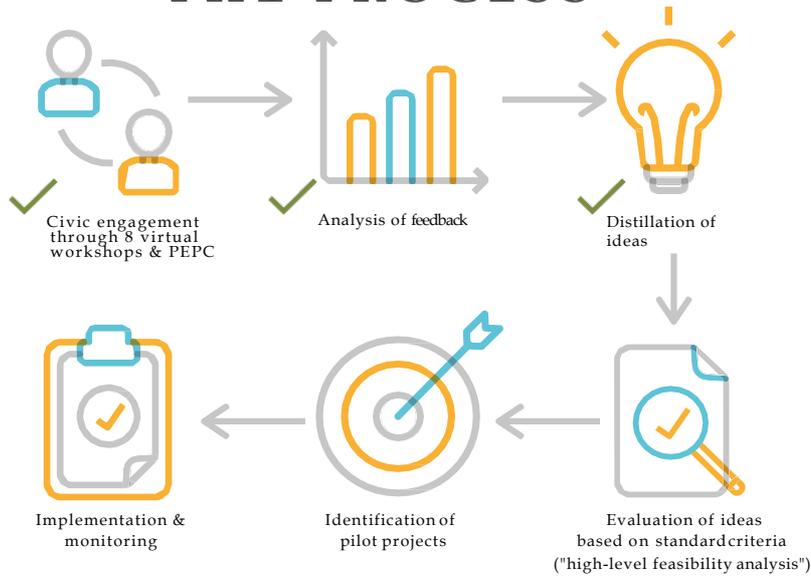


Muddy, rutted area along Big Creek parking area with a 'no parking' sign knocked over on the ground.



Muddy, rutted area along Big Creek Road.

THE PROCESS



YOUR IDEAL VISIT

Desired conditions and why they are so important

When you close your eyes and think about your next visit to your favorite spot in the Smokies, what do you envision? When you paint the picture of your ideal experience, you are designing one of the most important components of a visitor experience planning process - desired conditions.

Desired conditions are statements of aspiration. They describe resource conditions, visitor experiences and opportunities, as well as facilities and services that an agency strives to achieve and maintain in a particular area. They don't necessarily describe the conditions that exist today; rather, they paint a picture of what you would like a particular area to look like, feel like, sound like, and function like in the future.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

High-level feasibility analysis

Now that the park has a wealth of information about what visitors, partners, and employees see as ideal experiences for some of our busiest sites, what comes next? Feedback received through civic engagement, was closely reviewed by park staff. Some of the most prevalent solutions for each sites are being further analyzed based on a variety of criteria, including how much it may cost to implement the solution and the likelihood of the solution impacting sensitive species. This analysis will allow park managers to select one or more pilot projects to implement this year.

While feedback varied across the sites that were analyzed during this process, some themes did emerge. Banning or physically blocking roadside parking was suggested frequently for many park areas. Participants cited damage to roadside plants as well as safety concerns for visitors - namely walking long distances along busy road shoulders to access a trailhead. Participants also frequently requested more information about where and when congestion occurs in the park so that they could better plan for their ideal experience in the Park. This process also underscored what park managers already knew to be true: different people have different ideal experiences - one-size does not fit all.



Hikers enjoying Chimney Tops Trail.

Desired conditions provide the basis for managing sites effectively. Park managers measure conditions at the site to assess whether desired conditions are being achieved or not.

A sample of summarized desired conditions for Alum Cave Trail based on the feedback received through civic engagement are shared below.

- Visitors easily find a parking space at the trailhead.
- Visitors are able to view native plants and wildlife as they hike up a trail free of litter and waste.
- Visitors experience low to moderate social interaction on the trail, depending on the time of day, days of the week, and season.
- Visitors are able to learn about the trail resources through brochures or other mediums if they so choose.
- Visitors experience mostly natural sounds like wind, birds, and leaves rustling.



Visitors gathered at Laurel Falls on Wednesday, January 6, 2021