



Serving the Visitor 1995



A Report on Customers of the National Park Service
The NPS Visitor Services Project



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Design and printing:

University of Idaho, Printing & Design Services

Photos courtesy of:

Tom DuRant, National Park Service, Harpers Ferry
Center Historic Photograph Collection

Rosa Wilson, National Park Service, Office of
Public Affairs

University of Idaho Natural Resources
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The University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit
is a research unit under cooperative agreement be-
tween the Seattle System Support Office of the Na-
tional Park Service and the University of Idaho.

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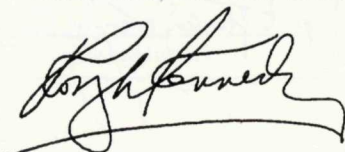
Foreword

Adolph Murie, the renowned Alaska naturalist, once wrote, "The national park idea represents a far-reaching cultural achievement, for here we raise our thoughts above the average, and enter a sphere in which the intangible values of the human heart and spirit take precedence..." From the battlefields of a nation in formation and re-formation, to the expanses of wilderness uninterrupted by human intrusions, the National Park Service preserves and protects the places where exhilarating experiences can take place.

Each of the sites within the national park system serves the needs of the "human heart and spirit." Indeed, the central idea of service to people unifies the many responsibilities of the National Park Service. Whether it is preserving cultural artifacts, protecting species' habitats, providing inspiration for artists, developing educational programs, documenting national heritage, undertaking rescues, or simply providing solace and sanctuary, the diverse needs of an ever-changing clientele help define the NPS mission.

Individual park visitors are not the only "customers" served by the National Park Service—we serve many people who never come to a park by our education programs in history and conservation—but visitors are important to us. Their experiences can do more to protect park resources and foster the national park idea than books or tapes or broadcasts. Park visitors who have been inspired by positive experiences are likely to share their enthusiasm with family and friends, some of whom may never visit a park. This shared enthusiasm can contribute to broad-based support for the national park system, and thus sustain the support for the places—"resources" as the Service language puts it—we serve.

Serving the Visitor, 1995 is a "report card" on how visitors think we are doing, in the first instance to satisfy their expectations, and implicitly, to enlist them to protect the parks. I urge all NPS employees to read and learn from this report, so that with pride and exuberance the National Park Service can renew its commitment to serve each visitor well, and thus serve the parks.



Roger G. Kennedy
Director

Introduction

A visitor stops at the trailhead to Emerald Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park and asks the park ranger what awaits if she continues up the trail. At Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, New Jersey, an interpreter demonstrates one of Edison's phonographs; older visitors are visibly moved by their memories and his story. At Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, a maintenance employee cleans the visitor center in preparation for the day's guests, while at Mount Rainier National Park, a ranger patrols the campground in the early evening. All are examples of serving the visitor.

The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve the nation's natural and cultural heritage and to provide for its enjoyment by the public. Because the national park system includes such a diversity of places (from Aniakchak National Preserve in Alaska to the Statue of Liberty, 368 units in all), the customers and services of the NPS are dramatically varied. Among the customers of the NPS, park visitors are perhaps the most important.

Serving the Visitor, 1995 is a "report card" on how well the NPS is serving its primary customers. Such reporting is timely. Under Vice President Al Gore's leadership, the National Performance Review is directing federal agencies to "put customers first." This means developing customer service plans and standards, encouraging customers to evaluate agency services, and monitoring agency performance. The goal is to create a government that works better and costs less.

In response, the NPS has prepared its *Customer Service Plan*. The plan includes a pledge of public service, specific performance standards, and a commitment to survey park visitors and report their opinions about important visitor services. *Serving the Visitor, 1995* is part of this effort.

The Visitor Services Project of the NPS has conducted visitor studies in over 58 units of the national park system. The primary purpose of these studies has been to provide park managers with accurate information about visitors—who they are, what they do, their needs and opinions. Park managers have used this information to improve visitor services, protect resources, and manage parks more efficiently.

In 1994, information from these studies was used to prepare a first report on NPS customer service. *Serving the Visitor, 1995* is the second annual report. It contains two kinds of information. The first is baseline data on 12 important visitor services, from park personnel to campgrounds and picnic areas. The data is taken from surveys conducted during 1988-1992 in 34 parks. Over 15,000 visitors are included. The second kind of information is current data on the same services. This information is taken from surveys conducted during 1993-1994 in 18 parks. Over 8,000 visitors are included. A description of the research methods is in the appendix.

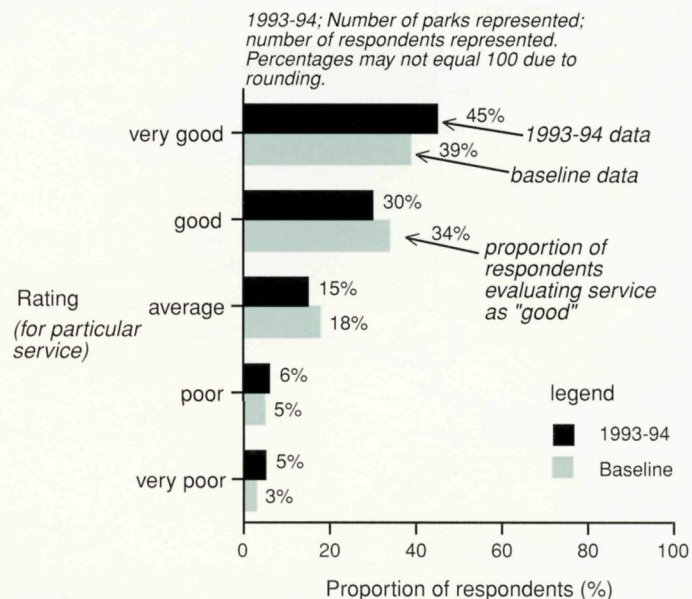
A visitor's comment:

We thoroughly enjoyed our visit to the park,
took lots of pictures!!
Thank you for letting us respond
& provide input for an even better park.

On the following pages, each graph provides a comparison between the baseline data for a specific visitor service (shown in green) and the current data (shown in black). Current customer service evaluations can be compared against the baseline data from past years. Because the NPS has published specific service standards for visitor centers, a special section of the report is devoted to evaluations of these important facilities.



Visitors receive a questionnaire



Sample graph

The survey results in *Serving the Visitor, 1995* are indicators of customer service—only a few of the services provided by the NPS, and only a sample of visitors at selected parks are included. Yet these customers of the national park system have an important message to share. Their evaluations are candid, thoughtful and important. Wise park managers will listen.

General Services

Park personnel

Park visitors are likely to encounter park employees during their visit, such as rangers at entrance stations or at campfire programs, maintenance employees, or law enforcement officers. Visitors at 15 parks were asked to rate the quality of park personnel. 68% rated the quality of park personnel as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 59%. 18% of visitors rated park personnel as “good,” and 6% rated them as “average.” 8% rated park personnel as “poor” or “very poor.”

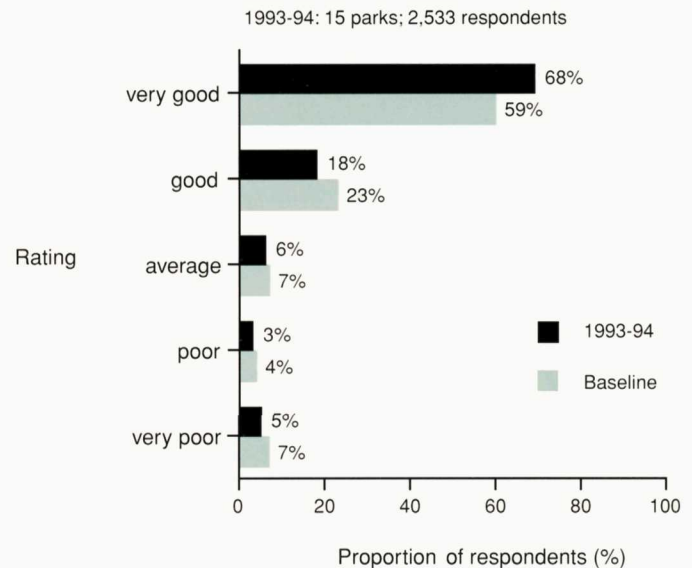


Figure 1: Quality of park personnel

Visitor centers

Visitor centers offer information, publications for sale, emergency assistance and other services to help visitors make the most of their park visit. Visitors to 5 parks rated the general quality of visitor centers. 62% rated visitor centers as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 43%. 21% felt the visitor centers were “good,” and 10% felt they were “average.” 7% rated visitor centers as “poor” or “very poor.” (For evaluations of specific visitor center services related to the NPS customer service standards, see pages 12-14.)

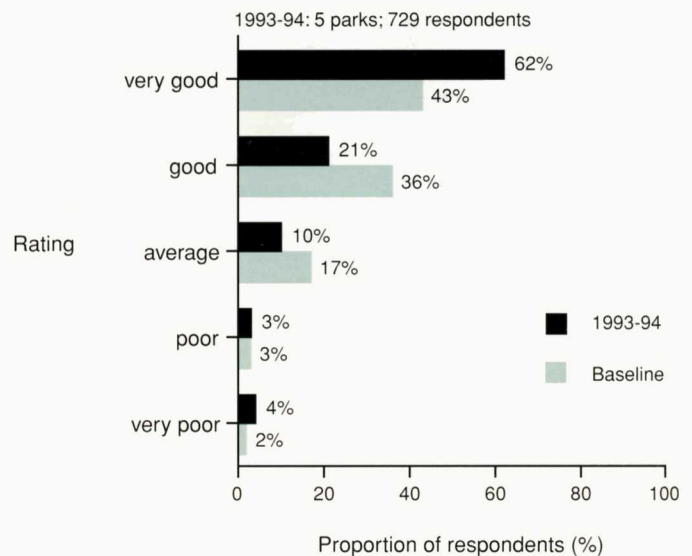


Figure 2: Quality of visitor centers

Directional signs

Park visitors depend on directional signs to guide them to park entrances and help find points of interest, services, and facilities. Visitors to 10 parks evaluated the quality of directional signs. 47% rated the directional signs as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 46%. 25% of visitors felt the directional signs were "good," and 16% rated them as "average." 12% rated the directional signs as "poor" or "very poor."

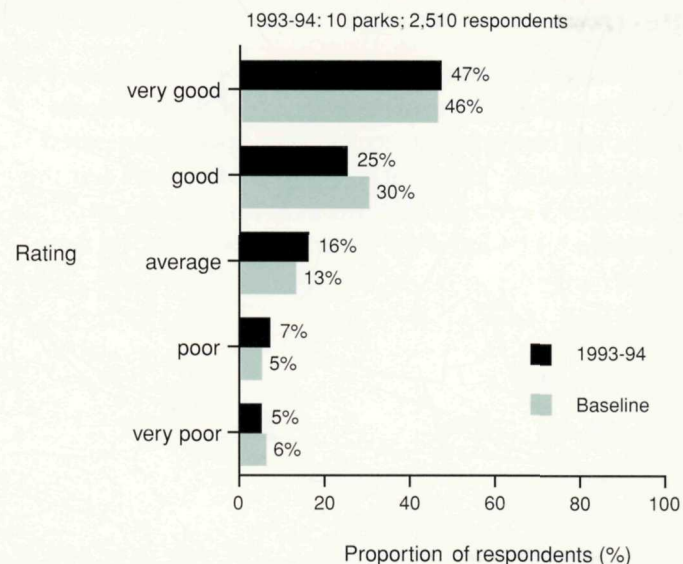


Figure 3: Quality of directional signs

A visitor's comment:

The three days (we wish it were more) will remain in our memory for a long time - we found everybody very helpful and the enthusiasm for the park shown by ALL the Rangers was so amazing as to be almost unbelievable. We hope that it will continue like this for many years.



Mount Rainier National Park

NPS Facilities

Restrooms

Restrooms are important to park visitors. Visitors to 14 parks were asked to rate the quality of the restrooms. 39% rated restroom quality as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 33%. 28% of visitors felt the restrooms were "good," and 21% rated them as "average." 12% rated the restrooms as "poor" or "very poor."

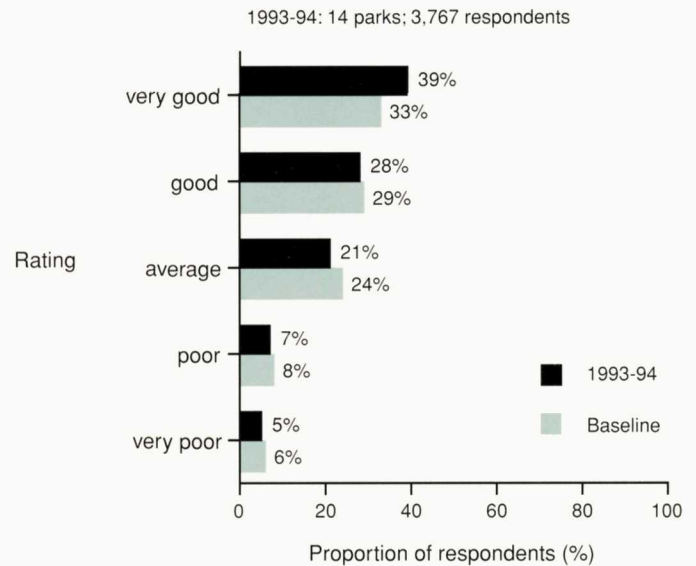


Figure 4: Quality of restrooms

Campgrounds

For visitors who camp, campgrounds may be an important part of their park experiences. Visitors camping in 8 parks were asked to rate the quality of NPS campgrounds. 39% rated the campgrounds as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 37%. 34% responded that the campgrounds were "good," and 16% felt they were "average." 11% rated the campgrounds as "poor" or "very poor."

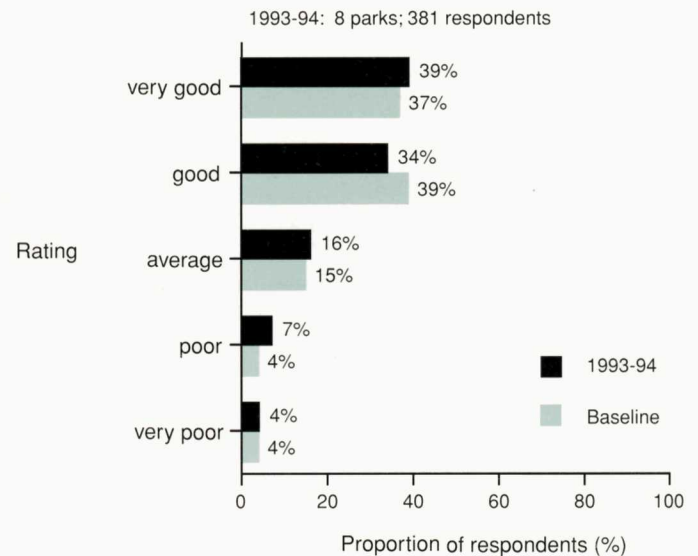


Figure 5: Quality of NPS campgrounds

Picnic areas

Picnicking is a traditional park activity enjoyed by many park visitors. Visitors to 12 parks were asked to rate the quality of picnic areas. 41% rated the picnic areas as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 40%. 31% felt the picnic areas were "good," and 15% rated them as "average." 13% felt the picnic areas were "poor" or "very poor."

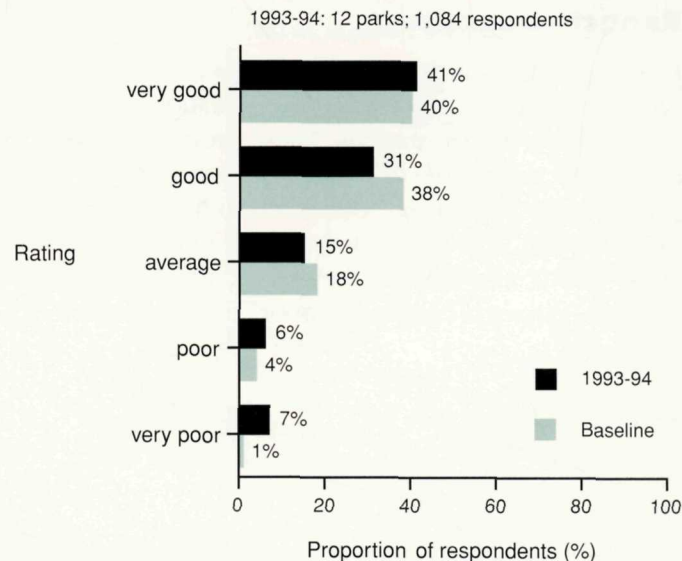


Figure 6: Quality of picnic areas

A visitor's comment:

Each time we use any of the facilities at the park we are happy with them. Over the years I have seen several improvements. Especially nice is the new restroom facility. Thanks!



Glacier National Park, 1932

Interpretive Services

Ranger programs

Ranger programs include guided walks and tours, campfire programs, audiovisual presentations, and living history demonstrations. These programs were rated in 16 parks. 60% of visitors rated the ranger programs as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 45%. 20% responded that the ranger programs were “good,” and 11% felt they were “average.” 9% rated the ranger programs as “poor” or “very poor.”

Exhibits

An important interpretive service offered in parks is exhibits, both inside museums and visitor centers, and along roads or on trails. Visitors to 14 parks evaluated the quality of these exhibits. 54% rated the exhibits as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 40%. Exhibits were rated as “good” by 28% of visitors, and 9% felt the exhibits were “average.” 9% rated the exhibits as “poor” or “very poor.”

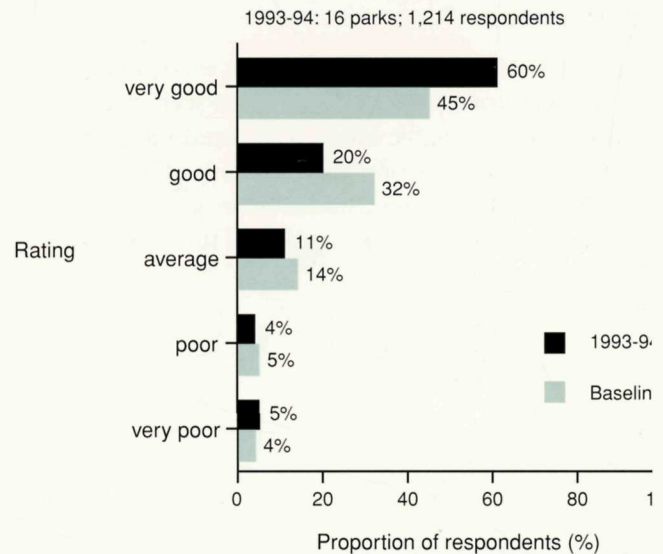


Figure 7: Quality of ranger programs

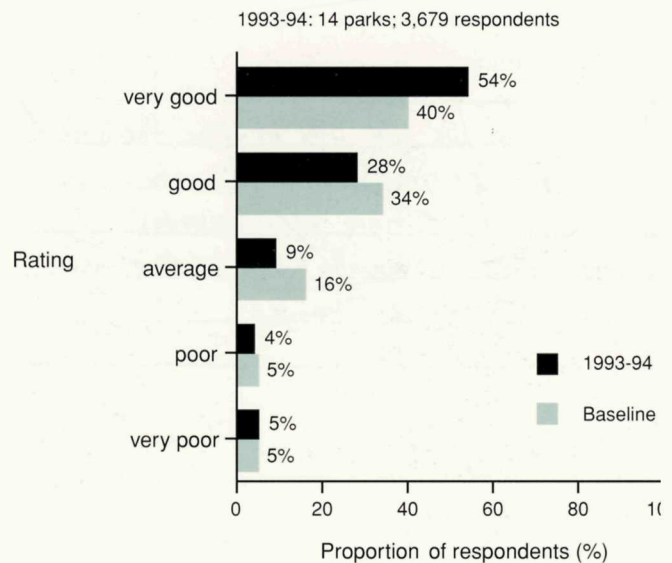


Figure 8: Quality of exhibits

Park brochures

Most parks have a brochure containing a map and basic park information to help orient visitors. The brochure is usually distributed to visitors as they enter the park. Visitors to 15 parks were asked to rate the quality of these brochures. 50% rated the brochures as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 52%. 30% rated the park brochures as "good," and 12% rated them as "average." 8% felt the park brochures were "poor" or "very poor."

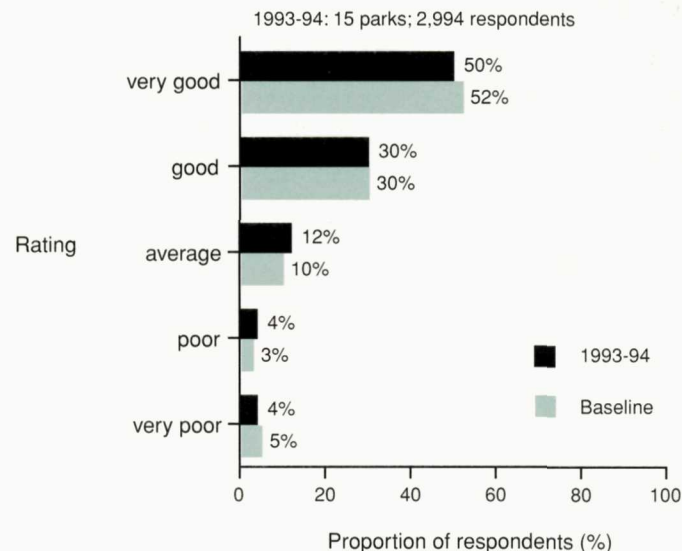


Figure 9: Quality of park brochures



Frederick Douglass National Historic Site

A visitor's comment:

This was one of the best-planned exhibits we have visited! But the lighting on the exhibits needs improvement. I found it too dim to do justice to the items displayed.

Concession Services

Lodging

Although not every park has a hotel or motel within its boundaries, they are essential services to the visitors that use them. Visitors to 7 parks were asked to rate the quality of overnight accommodations. There is not sufficient data from 1993-94 to make a comparison with the baseline. Figure 10 represents the combined data from 1988-1994. 32% of visitors rated the quality of park lodging as “very good,” while 41% felt the lodging was “good.” 19% of visitors rated the lodging as “average,” and 9% felt it was “poor” or “very poor.”

Food services

The restaurants, cafeterias, snack bars, and other food services offered in parks can be important to visitors. Visitors to 5 parks with food services were asked to rate their quality. 24% rated the quality of food services as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 17%. 34% rated the food services as “good,” and 31% felt these services were “average.” 11% rated the food services as “poor” or “very poor.”

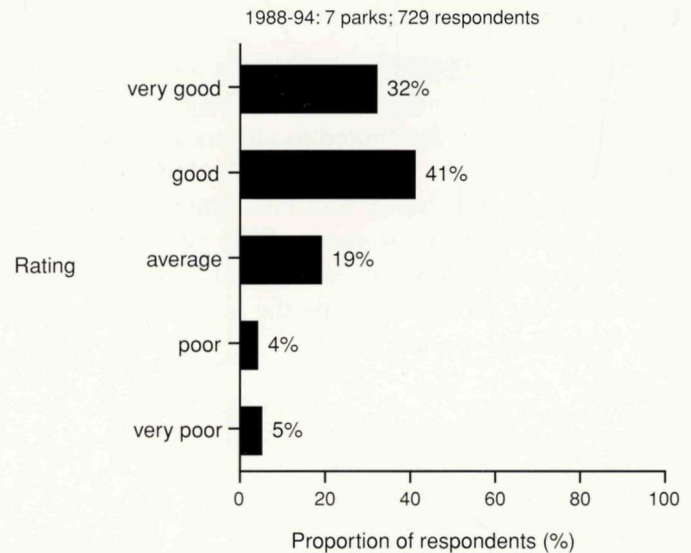


Figure 10: Quality of lodging in parks

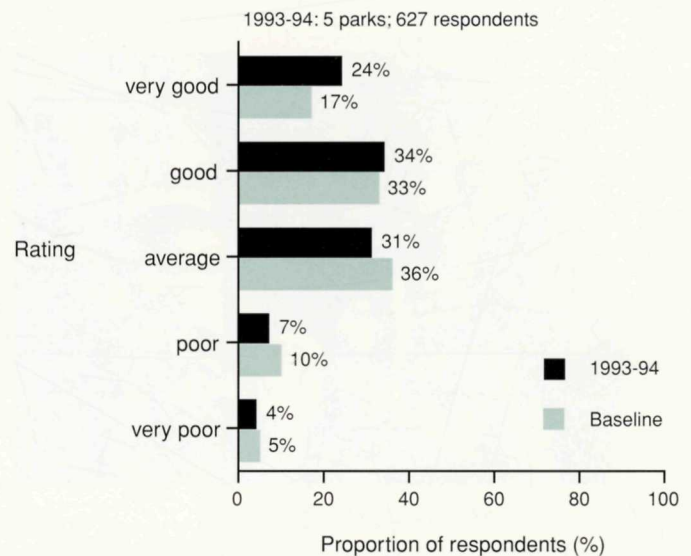


Figure 11: Quality of food services in parks

Gift shops

Gift shops in parks are important to many visitors, as they offer an opportunity to bring home mementos of their park visit. Visitors to 6 parks rated the quality of gift shops. 38% responded that the gift shops were “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 25%. 30% rated the gift shops as “good,” and 22% rated them as “average.” 9% felt the gift shops were “poor” or “very poor.”

A visitor's comment:

We had a nice visit & have always been very pleased. A feature that would have been nice would have been a snack bar since there didn't seem to be any restaurants open the day we visited.

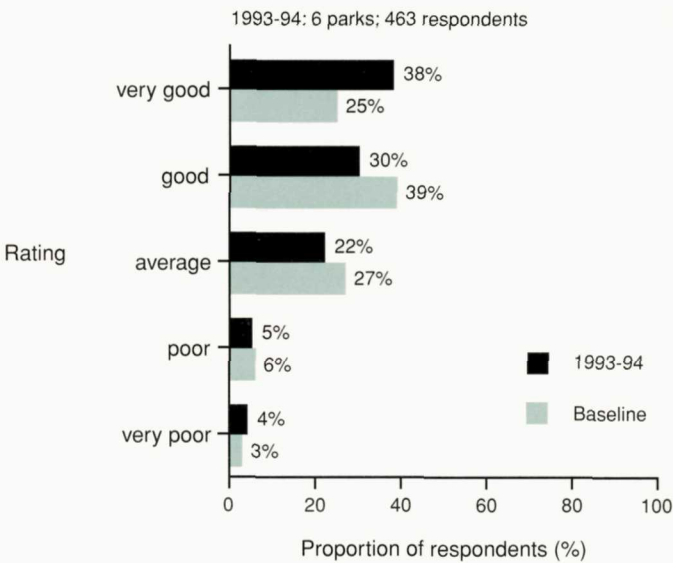


Figure 12: Quality of gift shops in parks



Shenandoah National Park, 1940

Special Section: Visitor Centers

Visitor centers offer information, publications for sale, emergency assistance and other services to help visitors make the most of their park visit. Approximately two-thirds of all NPS units have visitor centers; some parks have more than one.

The *National Park Service Customer Service Plan* includes customer service standards for these visitor centers. The *Customer Service Plan* states that in each visitor center, employees pledge to “meet or exceed” the standards shown to the right.

Visitor centers are important to most visitors who use them. Figure 13 shows the importance visitors place on visitor centers in 7 parks. 70% of the visitors that used a visitor center felt they were “very important” or “important,” and 15% rated them as “moderately important.” 9% of visitors felt that visitor centers were “somewhat important” and 6% rated them as “not important.”

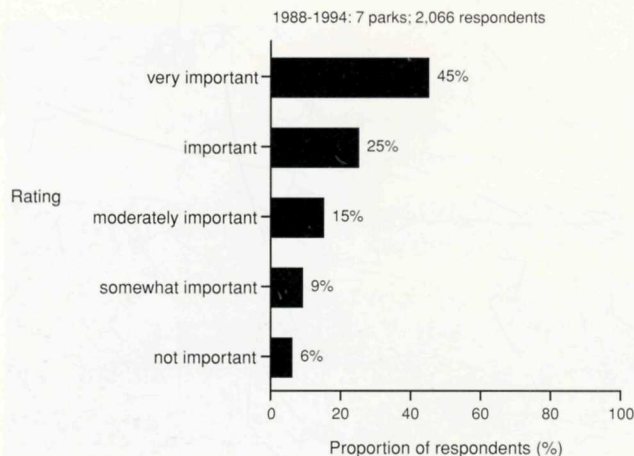


Figure 13: Importance of visitor centers

National Park Service Visitor Center Standards

- ▼ We will keep the center open during peak hours and seasons and provide alternative sources of information when the center is closed.
- ▼ We will maintain the facility in a clean, safe condition.
- ▼ We will answer your questions or refer you to additional sources of assistance.
- ▼ We will make special efforts to inform you of hazards and situations that may adversely affect your visit.
- ▼ We will provide and maintain exhibits and audiovisual programs that impart understanding and stimulate appreciation of the park and its significant natural, historical, cultural and recreational values.
- ▼ We will display schedules of programs and activities available throughout the park.
- ▼ We will offer a wide range of quality, park-related educational items at fair market value sold in well-maintained outlets.

(from the *National Park Service Customer Service Plan*)

The Visitor Services Project has collected data on how park visitors evaluate specific services associated with visitor centers, including information desks and personnel, exhibits, audiovisual programs, and publication sales areas. This information is presented below.

Visitor center information desks and personnel

The information desk is usually the hub of activity in a visitor center. The quality of information desk services is related to the quality of the personnel that staff the desk, so ratings for both have been combined. Visitors to 6 parks rated the quality of information desks and personnel. 62% of visitors rated the information desks and personnel as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 57%. 23% rated the information desks and personnel as “good” and 6% rated them as “average.” 9% felt that the information desks and personnel were “poor” or “very poor.”

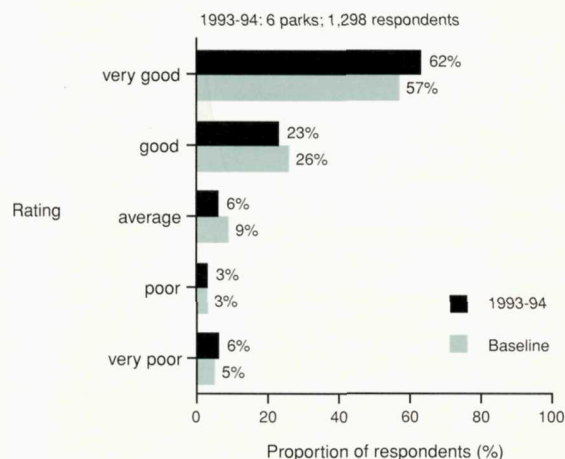


Figure 14: Quality of visitor center information desks and personnel

Visitor center exhibits

Visitor centers often have exhibits and displays to help visitors better understand the natural, cultural and historical resources within a park. Visitors to 15 parks rated these exhibits. 54% rated the exhibits as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 45%. 27% of visitors felt the visitor center exhibits were “good,” and 10% felt they were “average.” 9% rated the visitor center exhibits as “poor” or “very poor.”

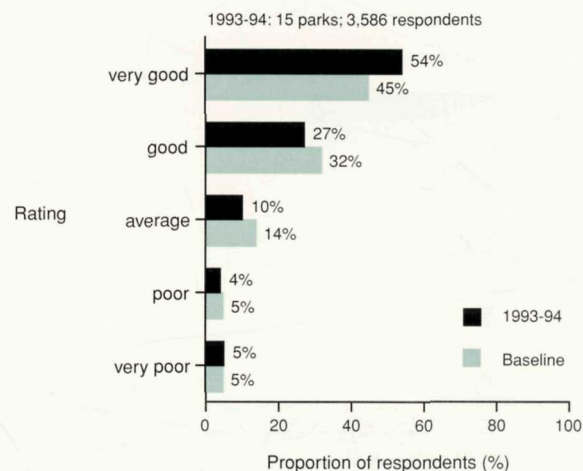
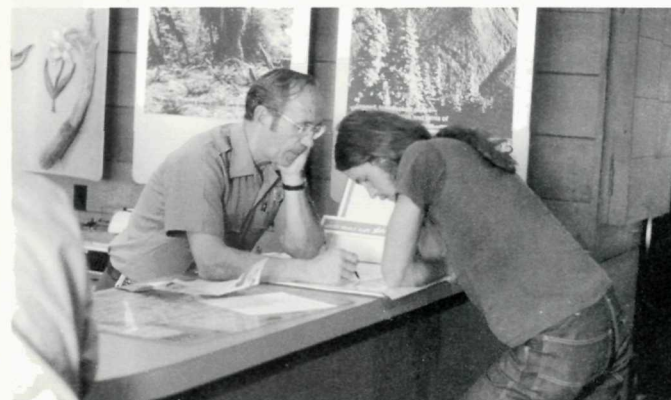


Figure 15: Quality of visitor center exhibits



Olympic National Park

Visitor center audiovisual programs

Many visitor centers have auditoriums or viewing areas where visitors may watch movies, slide shows, or videos about the park. The audiovisual programs in 12 visitor centers were evaluated by park visitors. 55% rated these programs as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 54%. 25% of visitors rated the audiovisual programs as "good," and 11% rated them as "average." 9% felt the audiovisual programs were "poor" or "very poor."

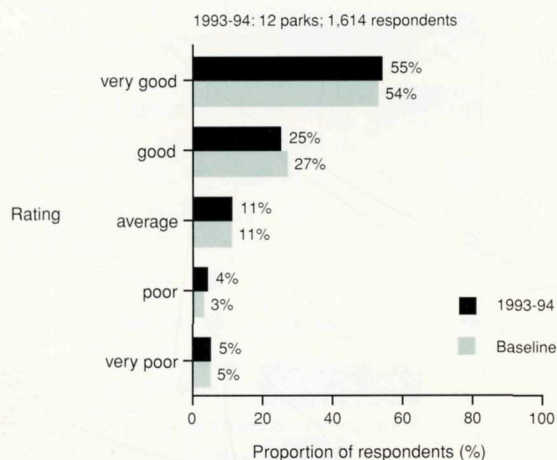


Figure 16: Quality of visitor center audiovisual programs

Visitor center sales areas

The sales areas in visitor centers are usually run by cooperating associations. They offer park-related educational materials, including books, tapes, slides, posters, and other items. Visitors to 12 parks were asked to rate these sales areas. Figure 17 shows that 45% rated the visitor center sales areas as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 38%. 31% of visitors felt that the sales areas were "good," and 16% felt they were "average." 7% rated the visitor center sales areas as "poor" or "very poor."

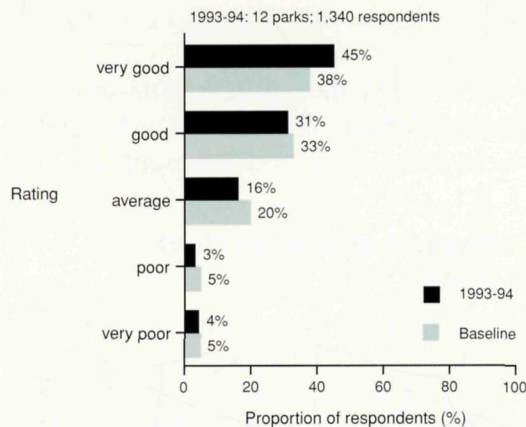


Figure 17: Quality of visitor center sales areas

Overall Rating

An overall rating of the services provided in national park visitor centers was obtained by combining visitors' ratings of information desks and personnel, exhibits, audiovisual programs, and sales areas. Overall, these visitor center services were rated as "very good" by 54% of visitors, compared to the baseline rating of 46%. 27% rated visitor center services as "good" and 10% felt these services were "average." 9% rated visitor center services as "poor" or "very poor."

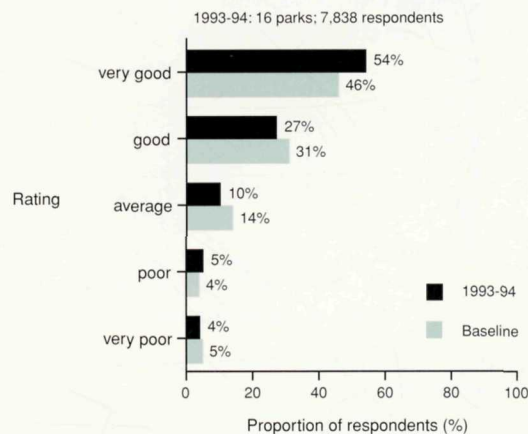


Figure 18: Overall quality of visitor center services

Conclusion

In a speech delivered March 1829, Henry Clay said, "Government is a trust, and the officers of the government are trustees; and both the trust and the trustees are created for the benefit of the people." Our nation's most treasured natural and cultural resources have been entrusted to the National Park Service. Its trustees are the NPS employees whose collective efforts preserve park resources and provide for public enjoyment. It is an important trust.

As stated earlier, the visitor services evaluated in this report are *indicators* of how well the NPS is serving the public. An overall indicator of customer service can also be calculated. Figure 19 shows the combined ratings of twelve visitor services, based on 8,219 respondents in 18 parks. 50% of the current visitors surveyed rated the services provided by the NPS as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 42%. An additional 27% rated the services as "good," and 14% rated the services as "average." 10% of the visitors rated the services as "poor" or "very poor."

Based on evaluations by park visitors, there is both evidence of excellent customer service by the NPS, and clear opportunities for improvement. And in most cases, specific visitor services received higher ratings for the 1993-1994 data than the baseline of earlier years—an indicator of improvement already underway.

There are many reasons for customer evaluation, and certainly one of the most valuable is to provide better customer services. Serving the visitor is an appropriate goal for the National Park Service, and this brief report is a small part of that larger and important effort.

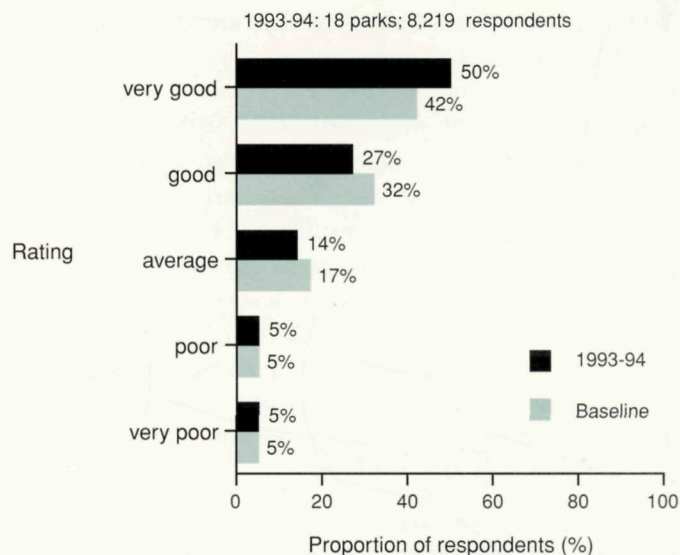


Figure 19: Overall quality of services



Everglades National Park

Research Methods

The Visitor Services Project studies are based on systematic surveys of park visitors. A random sample of visitor groups are chosen to represent the general visitor population during a one week study period. The sample is usually “stratified” or distributed by entrance or zone, depending upon park characteristics. Sample size is based upon estimates of the previous year’s visitation. The results are usually accurate within 4 percentage points for simple questions, and are somewhat less accurate for more complex ones. The results are statistically significant at the .05 level, meaning that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar 95 out of 100 times.

VSP personnel hold an on-site workshop with park staff to develop the survey questionnaire and plan the study. A standard set of demographic questions are included in each survey, and park managers can include additional “customized” questions to reflect their information needs. In addition, visitors are asked to write comments regarding their visit.

Brief interviews are conducted as visitors enter the area. The purpose is to collect data, obtain mailing addresses for follow-up reminders, and distribute the mail-back questionnaires. The refusal rate (the proportion of visitors contacted that decline to participate) currently averages 6%. At least two reminders are sent. The response rate (the proportion of visitors that return their questionnaires) currently averages 80%. Data are coded and prepared by the Washington State University Social and Economic Sciences Research Center Public Opinion Lab. The data are analyzed using a standard statistical analysis program. A check on key variables is conducted to see if those visitors who did not respond were significantly different from those who returned their questionnaires (non-response bias).

Open-ended questions (where visitors write in comments) are summarized and organized into tables.

The surveys have several limitations. Responses to mail-back questionnaires may not reflect actual behavior or opinions. The results cannot always be generalized beyond the study periods. Visitor groups that do not include an English-speaking person may be underrepresented.

To create a comprehensive database, data from the individual surveys were entered into a standard relational database program. The information in this report is derived from that database.



Saratoga National Historical Park, 1945

List of Selected Parks

The data in this report comes from visitor studies in the following NPS units:

Anchorage Alaska Public Lands Information Center, Alaska

Arlington House/Robert E. Lee Memorial, Virginia

Belle Haven Park/Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve, Virginia

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, Colorado

Big Bend National Park, Texas

Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah

Canaveral National Seashore, Florida

Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona

Canyonlands National Park, Utah

Channel Islands National Park, California

City of Rocks National Reserve, Idaho

Death Valley National Monument, California

Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, Pennsylvania

Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska

Edison National Historic Site, New Jersey

Everglades National Park, Florida

Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, DC

Gateway National Recreation Area, New York

Gettysburg National Military Park, Pennsylvania

Glacier National Park, Montana

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Arizona

Glen Echo Park, Virginia

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, Indiana

Jean Lafitte National Historic Site, Louisiana

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, Missouri

John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, Oregon

Joshua Tree National Monument, California

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, Indiana

Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska

Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Site, Alaska

Lincoln Home National Historic Site, Illinois

Muir Woods National Monument, California

Natchez Trace Parkway, Mississippi

National Mall (Jefferson Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument), Washington, DC

New River Gorge National River, West Virginia

Nez Perce National Historical Park, Idaho

North Cascades National Park, Washington

Pecos National Historical Park, New Mexico

Petersburg National Battlefield, Virginia

Redwood National Park, California

San Juan Islands National Historical Park, Washington

Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, California

Scotts Bluff National Monument, Nebraska

Sitka National Historical Park, Alaska

Statue of Liberty National Monument, New York

The White House Tours, President's Park, Washington, DC

White Sands National Monument, New Mexico

Whitman Mission National Historic Site, Washington

Wolf Trap Farm Park, Virginia

Yellowstone National Park, Montana

Zion National Park, Utah

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