NATIONAL
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Serving
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1996

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A Report on Customers of the National Park Service

The NPS Visitor Services Project

Serving the Visitor
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Foreword

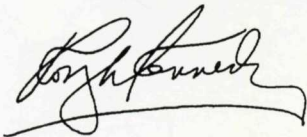The National Park System preserves some of the finest examples of America's scenic lands, as well as historic sites recording the diverse heritage of the American people. The parks belong to all citizens—the nation's common ground. Last year, the men and women of the NPS, from the seasonal interpreter at Gateway National Recreation Area to the maintenance worker at Pecos National Historical Park to the law enforcement ranger at Yellowstone National Park, hosted over 269 million visitors.

Now more than ever, the NPS needs the support and partnership of the American people in protecting and preserving the parks for the future. During his Earth Day (April 22, 1996) speech, President Clinton observed that "the remarkable resurgence in support...for standing up for our national parks...has come from those of you who are the citizens who live in our neighborhoods and walk our streets and climb our mountains and walk our trails day in and day out. You have given America back its soul, its conscience, and its commitment on the environment."

Citizens are helping park managers recognize ways to improve visitor services and facilities. Visitors are influencing the long term direction of the national parks by recommending changes in operations, development and maintenance. Like any well-run enterprise, the NPS is listening to its customers—giving visitors a voice.

One way that visitors are providing direct feedback to park managers is by completing visitor surveys, such as those conducted by the Visitor Services Project at the Cooperative Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho. I am proud to recognize the Visitor Services Project. This team recently received Vice President Gore's Hammer Award for helping the National Park Service improve government efficiency and better serve the public.

This report, *Serving the Visitor 1996*, is the third annual "report card" prepared by the Visitor Services Project. To the visitors that provided us feedback, thank you. To the men and women of the NPS, you have much to be proud of in this report. I urge you to read, consider and act upon this "voice of the visitor."

Roger G. Kennedy, Director

Introduction

A park interpreter helps a third grade teacher arrange a tour of Manassas National Battlefield Park for his class. The National Park Service (NPS) home page is downloaded by a computer user who is planning her vacation to several national park areas. A ranger at Zion National Park answers a child's questions about the Junior Ranger program. A waiter shares information about birds in the park with visitors eating in a restaurant at Everglades National Park. 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. One of the best ways to determine whether visitors are enjoying the parks is to ask them. By having visitors evaluate their park experiences, managers can learn useful information to improve park operations and better protect resources. Reports such as this one give visitors a collective, and therefore stronger, voice in their national parks.

Serving the Visitor 1996 is the third annual "report card" on how well the NPS is serving its customers. It is part of the continuing effort to meet the requirements outlined in the 1995 NPS *Customer Service Plan*. This plan includes a public service pledge, specific performance standards, and a commitment to survey park visitors and report their opinions about important visitor services.

The NPS Visitor Services Project has conducted visitor studies in over 60 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.

A VSP Database has been created to allow comparison of the study results from 1988-1995. The Database was used to create this report. The current Database contains data from over 24,000 visitors. Its purposes include providing the NPS and other clients with comparative data about park visitors and their opinions, and monitoring visitor trends over time. The VSP Database will continue to be updated as new study results become available. To access the VSP Database, contact the Visitor Services Project.


Visitors receive a questionnaire

On the following pages are visitors' evaluations of 12 important services, from visitor centers to campgrounds to ranger programs. Each graph compares the baseline data (1988-1993), shown in green, with the current data (1994-1995), which is shown in black. Graphs which display the results for less than 5 parks are labeled with "CAUTION," since the results may vary when more parks are included. A special section in this year's report discusses the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), and ways the NPS is meeting GPRA requirements.

The survey results in *Serving the Visitor 1996* 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. An appendix at the end of this report describes the research methods.

1994-95: Number of parks represented; number of respondents represented. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Sample graph
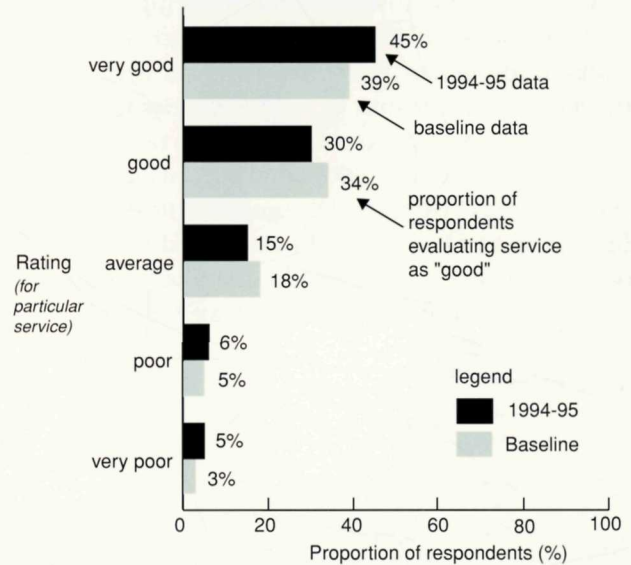
Everglades National Park

A visitor's comment:

I GO OUT OF MY WAY TO VISIT ANY PARK OR MONUMENT RUN BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE. KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK.

General Services

Park personnel

Park visitors are likely to encounter park employees during their visit, such as rangers at entrance stations and campfire programs, maintenance employees, emergency response teams, or law enforcement officers. Visitors at 14 parks were asked to rate the quality of park personnel. 69% rated the quality of park personnel as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 61%. 17% of visitors rated park personnel as "good," and 5% rated them as "average." 8% rated park personnel as "poor" or "very poor."

1994-95: 14 parks; 2,382 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
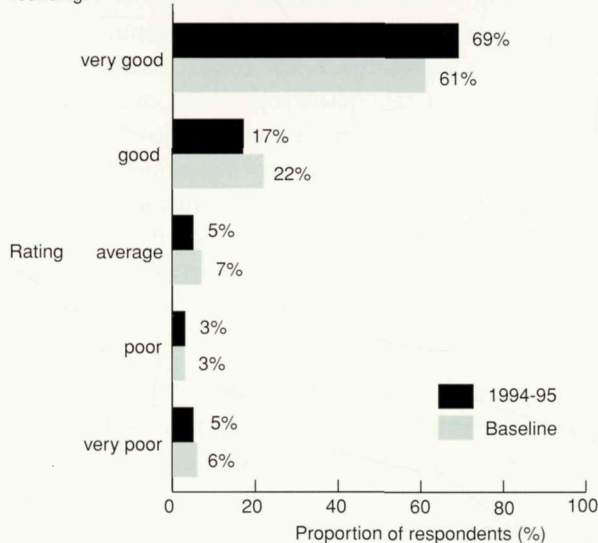

Figure 1: Quality of park personnel

Visitor centers

Visitor centers offer information, publications for sale and other services to help visitors make the most of their park visit. Visitors to 9 parks rated the general quality of visitor centers. 53% rated visitor centers as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 49%. 29% felt the visitor centers were "good" and 11% felt they were "average." 7% rated visitor centers as "poor" or "very poor."

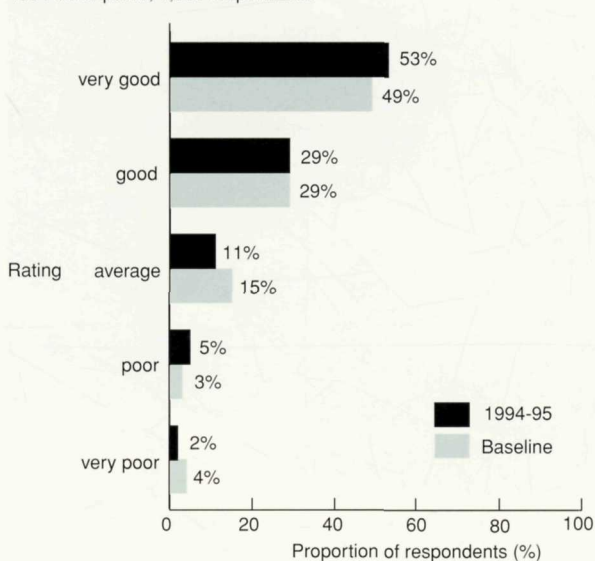1994-95: 9 parks; 1,869 respondents

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 8 parks evaluated the quality of directional signs. 49% rated the directional signs as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 46%. 25% of visitors felt the directional signs were "good" and 15% rated them as "average." 10% rated the directional signs as "poor" or "very poor."

1994-95: 8 parks; 2,099 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
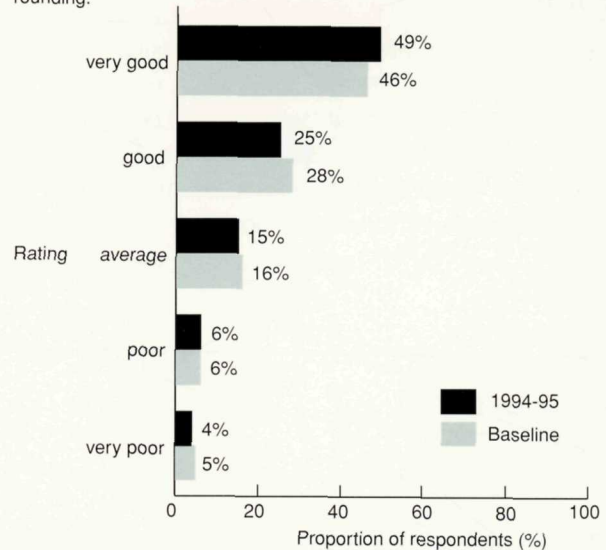

Figure 3: Quality of directional signs

Sequoia National Park, 1929

A visitor's comment:

We were very impressed with the overwhelming, outgoing, friendly, helping "spirit" of every single employee we encountered. This made for a most enjoyable experience.

NPS Facilities

Restrooms

Restrooms are important to park visitors. Visitors to 14 parks were asked to rate the quality of the restrooms. 37% rated restroom quality as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 35%. 28% of visitors felt the restrooms were "good" and 23% rated them as "average." 12% rated the restrooms as "poor" or "very poor."
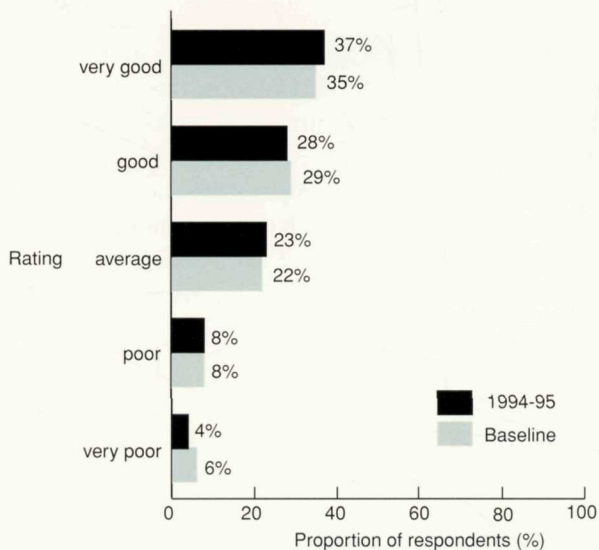
1994-95: 14 parks; 4,126 respondents

Figure 4: Quality of restrooms

Campgrounds

Camping is a central part of some visitors' park experience. Visitors camping in 5 parks were asked to rate the quality of NPS campgrounds. 42% rated the campgrounds as "very good," compared to the baseline of 40%. 25% responded that the campgrounds were "good" and 17% felt they were "average." 16% rated the campgrounds as "poor" or "very poor."

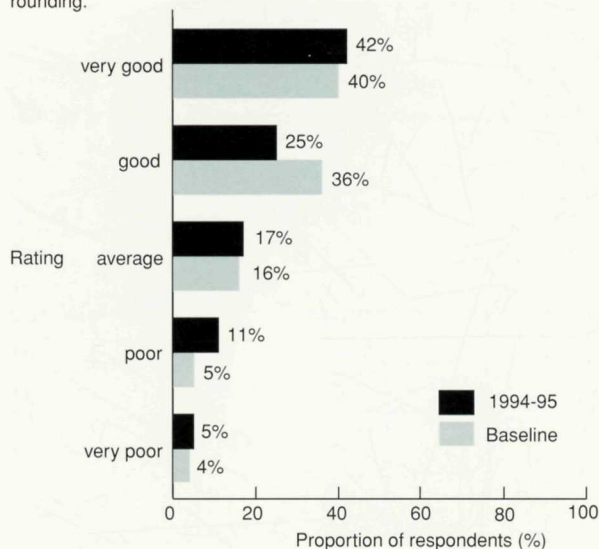1994-95: 5 parks; 225 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Figure 5: Quality of NPS campgrounds

Picnic areas

Picnicking is a traditional park activity that many park visitors enjoy. Visitors to 9 parks were asked to rate the quality of picnic areas. 45% rated the picnic areas as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 39%. 32% felt the picnic areas were "good" and 14% rated them as "average." 9% felt the picnic areas were "poor" or "very poor."

1994-95: 9 parks; 698 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
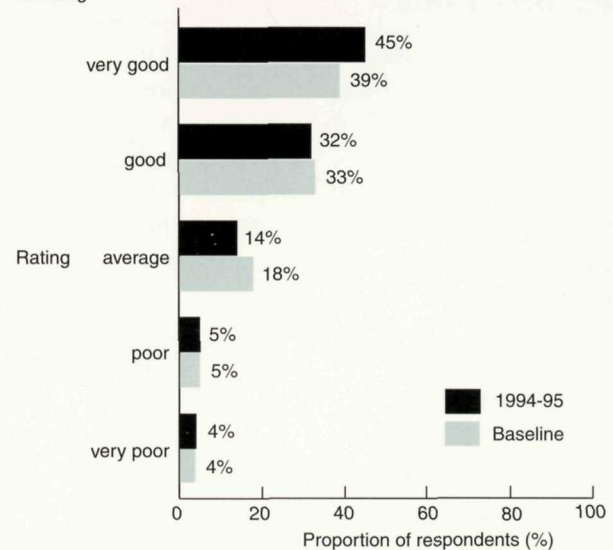
very good 45% / 39%
good 32% / 33%
average 14% / 18%
poor 5% / 5%
very poor 4% / 4%

Rating — Proportion of respondents (%)

1994-95 / Baseline

Figure 6: Quality of picnic areas

A visitor's comment:

You need nicer bathroom facilities — flushing commodes. Purchase of slow water use toilets — like those used in California — would be appreciated.

Sequoia National Park, 1926

Interpretive Services

Ranger programs

Ranger programs include guided walks and tours, campfire programs and living history demonstrations. These programs were rated in 16 parks. 63% of visitors rated the ranger programs as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 53%. 20% responded that the ranger programs were "good" and 8% felt they were "average." 9% rated the ranger programs as "poor" or "very poor."

1994-95: 16 parks; 1,478 respondents

Figure 7: Quality of ranger programs

Exhibits

Exhibits are a valuable interpretive service offered in parks, and are found inside museums and visitor centers, and along roads or trails. Visitors to 14 parks evaluated the quality of exhibits. 51% rated the exhibits as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 44%. Exhibits were rated as "good" by 30% of visitors, and 12% felt the exhibits were "average." 8% rated the exhibits as "poor" or "very poor."
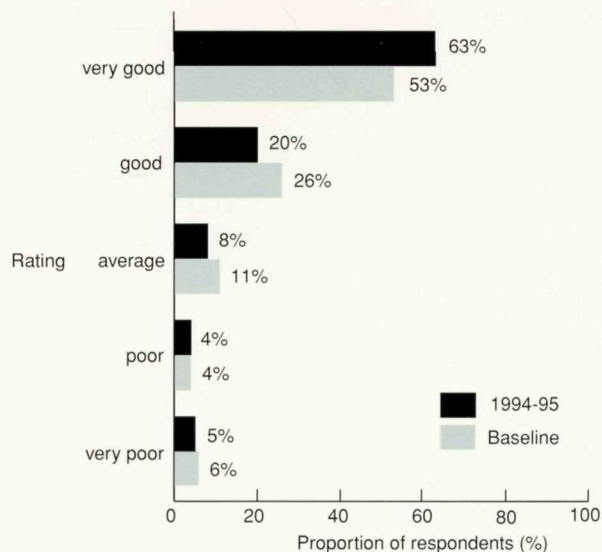
1994-95: 14 parks; 4,309 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
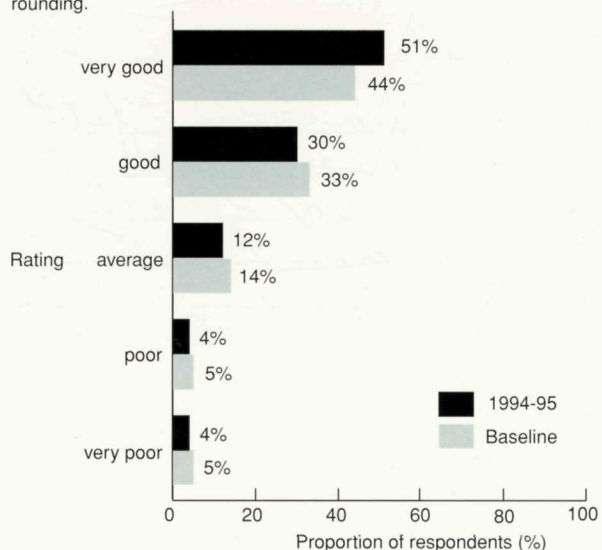

Figure 8: Quality of exhibits

Park brochures

Most parks have a brochure containing a map and basic information to help visitors plan their visit. The brochure is usually distributed to visitors as they enter the park. Visitors to 13 parks were asked to rate the quality of these brochures. 56% rated the brochure as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 51%. 27% rated the park brochures as "good" and 10% rated them as "average." 6% felt the park brochures were "poor" or "very poor."

Grand Teton National Park, 1953
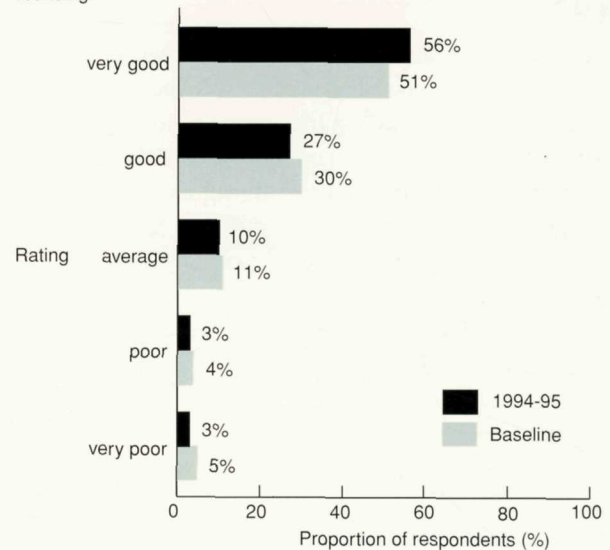
1994-95: 13 parks; 3,080 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Figure 9: Quality of park brochures

A visitor's comment:

Personally, I think the educational signs could be more interesting — perhaps also more accessible for children and people like me who know little about maritime history.

Concession Services

Lodging

Although not every park has a hotel or motel within its boundaries, they are essential services to the visitors who use them. Visitors to 3 parks were asked to rate the quality of overnight accommodations. 39% of visitors rated the quality of park lodging as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 32%. 35% of visitors felt the lodging was "good" and 18% rated it "average." 8% rated the lodging as "poor" or "very poor." Because so few parks are included in the data, caution should be taken in interpreting these results.

1994-95: 3 parks; 268 respondents

Rating	1994-95	Baseline
very good	39%	32%
good	35%	36%
average	18%	22%
poor	5%	6%
very poor	3%	4%

CAUTION!

■ 1994-95
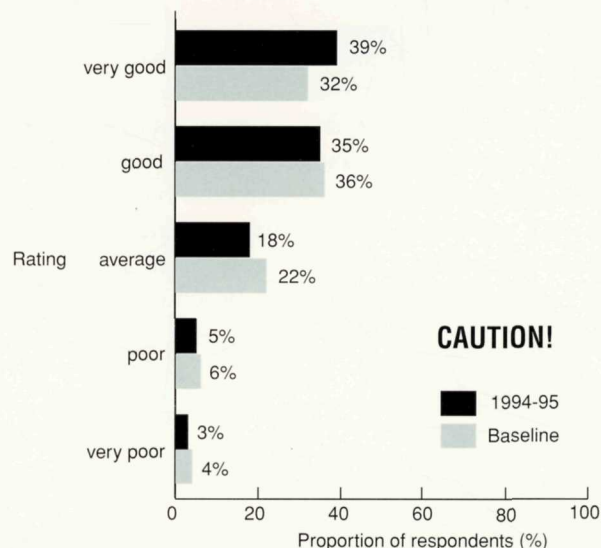▨ Baseline

Proportion of respondents (%)

Figure 10: Quality of lodging in parks

Food services

The restaurants, cafeterias, snack bars and other food services offered in parks can be important to visitors. Visitors to 6 parks with food services were asked to rate their quality. 28% of visitors rated the quality of food services as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 17%. 33% rated the food services as "good" and 28% felt these services were "average." 12% rated the food services as "poor" or "very poor."

1994-95: 6 parks; 1,021 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Rating	1994-95	Baseline
very good	28%	17%
good	33%	33%
average	28%	35%
poor	8%	10%
very poor	4%	5%

■ 1994-95
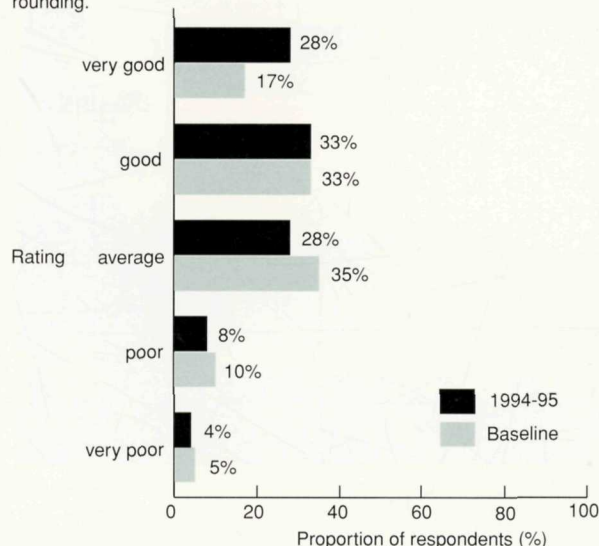▨ Baseline

Proportion of respondents (%)

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 take home mementos of a park visit. Visitors to 4 parks rated the quality of gift shops. 37% responded that gift shops were "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 27%. 30% rated the gift shops as "good" and 25% felt they were "average." 7% rated the gift shops as "poor" or "very poor." Because so few parks are included in the data, caution should be taken in interpreting these results.

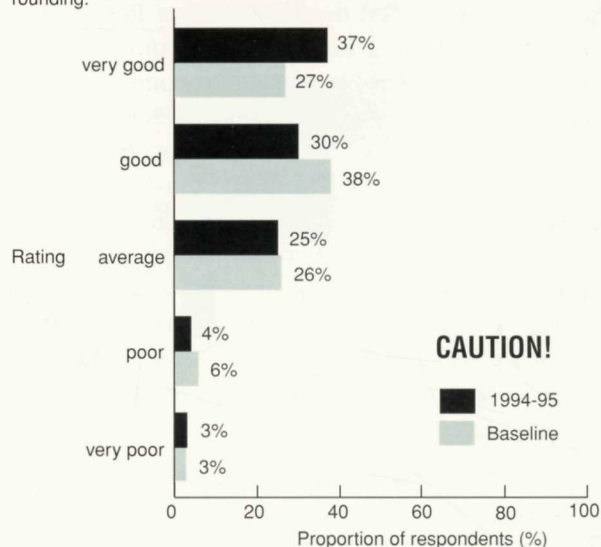1994-95: 4 parks; 423 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Figure 12: Quality of gift shops in parks

A visitor's comment:

THERE SHOULD BE SOME CONCESSION, BE IT A SMALL STRUCTURE OR A VAN OR TRUCK TO SELL SOFT DRINKS, SNOW CONES, HOT DOGS, BEER, ETC.

IT'S APPROXIMATELY 15 MILES TO THE NEAREST STORE, SO THE PARK SERVICE & THE CONCESSIONAIRE COULD MAKE A NICE PROFIT AND PROVIDE A SERVICE WHILE NOT RUINING THE ENVIRONMENT.
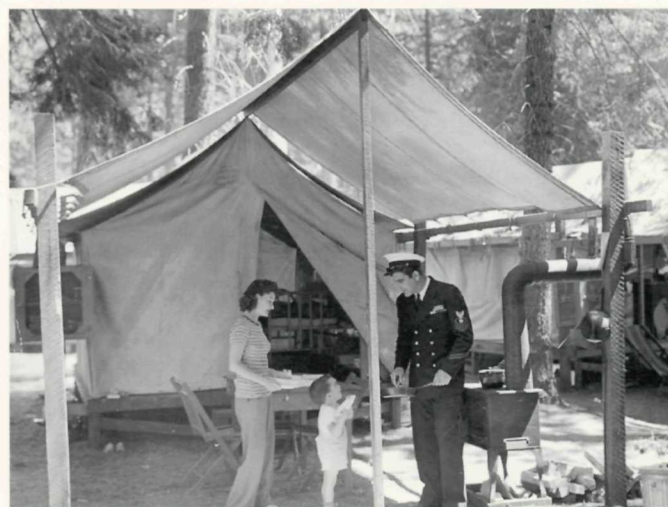
Yosemite National Park, circa 1950

Special Section: GPRA

In 1993, Congress enacted the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). The law requires all federal agencies to set goals and report progress towards those goals. For the past year, the National Park Service (NPS) has been working to implement GPRA, to make it "fit" our agency and mission and to make it useful to us. GPRA holds federal agencies responsible for our *results*, rather than simply for our efforts. It provides a way to measure the value we create for the American people. The NPS has taken the position that we will use GPRA to help set priorities and manage better, rather than simply comply with the law.

Using GPRA means developing a management system with a somewhat different approach. For the resources the NPS cares for—natural, cultural and recreational— and for the people we serve, GPRA requires that we show the outcomes accomplished by our efforts. These come either in the quality of the resources or in visitors' experiences. One way to measure performance is to survey visitors and ask them about the quality of their experiences while visiting parks.

Hence, the surveys conducted by the Visitor Services Project, and summarized in this report, are useful tools for accomplishing the objectives of GPRA. By asking for visitor feedback, we are increasing the American people's involvement with parks and partnerships that belong to all citizens. This involvement is central to GPRA and to *Serving the Visitor 1996*. After all, the very best protection for the parks is the public's support for their protection.

A visitor's comment:

I was impressed with the quality of services and support. You do an outstanding job of supporting and meeting diverse needs

The NPS is moving forward to meet GPRA requirements and to measure visitor satisfaction. To help achieve this, a new question was added to VSP questionnaires beginning in 1995. Visitors were asked, "Overall, how would you rate the quality of the visitor services provided to you and your group at (park name) during this visit?"

Visitors at 8 parks were asked to rate the overall quality of the services that were provided to them (see Figure 13). 53% of the visitors surveyed rated the services provided as "very good." 37% rated the services as "good" and 8% rated the services as "average." 2% of the visitors rated the services as "poor" or "very poor." Since 1995 was the first year this question was asked, there is no comparison with baseline data.

Another way to assess the overall quality of services is to examine the average ratings for the 12 specific services included in this report. See the next page for the results.

1995 parks: N=8 parks; 2,975 respondents

Rating	
very good	53%
good	37%
average	8%
poor	1%
very poor	1%

Proportion of respondents (%)

Figure 13: Overall quality of services, 1995 parks

A visitor's comment:

You guys are doing a great job the roads and parking lots are freshly paved. there are ample trash cans that are cleaned regularly. and since you started to build that rest room it is the closest thing to utophia!
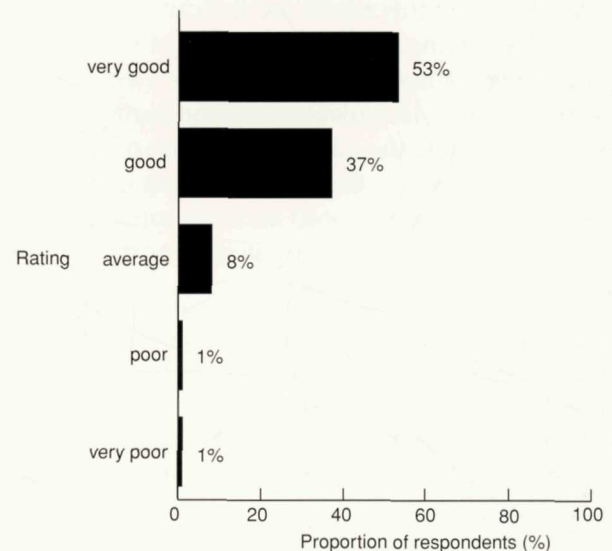
San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park

Conclusion

How well are park visitors being served? The visitor services evaluated in this report are indicators of how well the NPS is serving the public. Figure 14 shows the combined ratings of twelve visitor services, based on 7,979 respondents in 18 parks. 50% of the current visitors surveyed rated the 12 services in the parks as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 44%. 27% rated the services as "good" and 14% rated the services as "average." 9% 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. All visitor services received higher ratings for the 1994-1995 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.

A visitor's comment:

Put up more trailside exhibits to entice people from the trails and car-parks to the features. We went past several things but didn't bother to stop because we didn't know what was there.

1994-95: 18 parks; 7,979 respondents

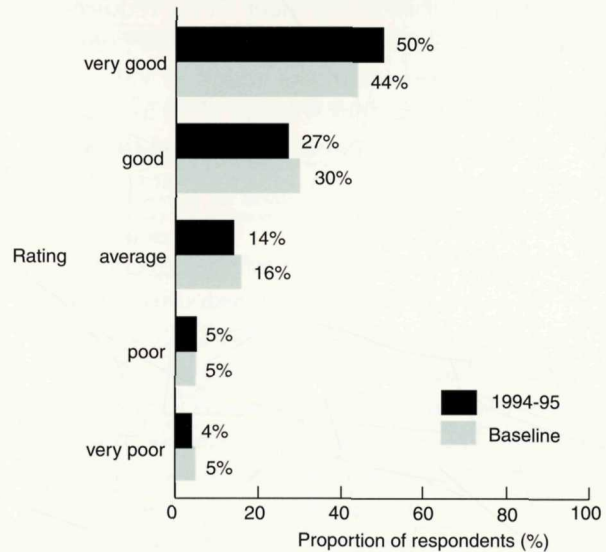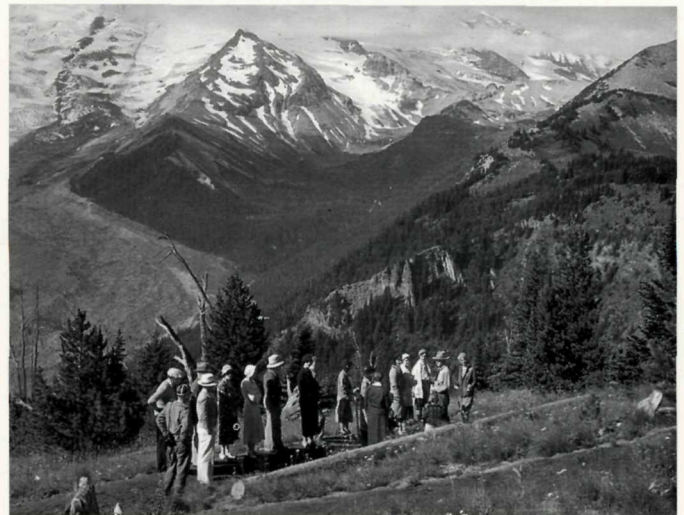| Rating	1994-95	Baseline
very good	50%	44%
good	27%	30%
average	14%	16%
poor	5%	5%
very poor	4%	5%

Figure 14: Overall quality of 12 services

Mt. Rainier National Park, 1932

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%. One or more 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.

Colonial National Historical Park, 1964

List of Selected Parks

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

Adams National Historic Site, Massachusetts

Anchorage Alaska Public Lands Information Center, Alaska

Arlington House/Robert E. Lee Memorial, Virginia

Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico

Belle Haven Park/Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve, Virginia

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, Colorado

Big Bend National Park, Texas

Booker T. Washington National Monument, Virginia

Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah

Canaveral National Seashore, Florida

Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona

Channel Islands National Park, California

Devils Tower National Monument, Wyoming

Dry Tortugas National Park, Florida

Edison National Historic Site, New Jersey

Everglades National Park, Florida

Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, D.C.

Gettysburg National Military Park/Eisenhower National Historic Site, Pennsylvania

Glacier National Park, Montana

Glen Echo Park, Virginia

Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, Indiana

Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, Louisiana

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, Missouri

John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, Oregon

Joshua Tree National Park, California

Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Site, Alaska

Manassas National Battlefield Park, Virginia

Muir Woods National Monument, California

Natchez Trace Parkway, Mississippi

National Mall (Jefferson Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument), Washington, D.C.

New River Gorge National River, West Virginia

Nez Perce National Historical Park, Idaho

Pecos National Historical Park, New Mexico

Redwood National Park, California

San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Texas

San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, California

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, D.C.

White Sands National Monument, New Mexico

Whitman Mission National Historic Site, Washington

Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts, Virginia

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

Zion National Park, Utah

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Notes

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