



# Serving the Visitor 1997



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



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1997



# Foreword

The first director of the National Park Service, Stephen Mather, once wisely remarked that those who visit the national parks will find themselves “a better citizen with a keener appreciation of the privilege of living here...” As the newest director of the National Park Service, I have a keen appreciation of the privilege of serving both the fine men and women of the National Park Service and the citizens—of our nation and the world—who visit the National Park System. The employees of the National Park Service, from a maintenance worker at Yellowstone National Park to an interpreter at Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, welcomed over 265 million visits last year.

The American people are proud and supportive of their national parks. Yet the National Park Service is confronted with major challenges in assuring the protection and appropriate use of our natural and cultural heritage for this and future generations. Meeting these challenges will require the continued effort of every NPS employee, since park management, by definition, is interdisciplinary and demands teamwork. In addition, this is a time of great change and innovation in government. We are asked to be more productive, to reinvent our ways of working, create partnerships and to measure our results. It is an extraordinary time for the national parks and the National Park Service.

Simply put, how well have we done in meeting our responsibilities? *Serving the Visitor 1997*, the fourth in a series of reports by the NPS Visitor Services Project, helps answer that question. As this report indicates, visitors to the National Park System are highly pleased with the visitor services they are receiving in the parks. The employees of the NPS can be proud of their customer service. At the same time, there is always room for improvement, and we must embrace innovation, collaborate with partners, value hard work and find new solutions to common challenges.

We must also remember that visitors have much to tell us about their park experiences. Our emerging social science program is designed to provide such important, usable knowledge. I urge all employees to give this report a careful read, and a thoughtful response. In doing so, we can do an even better job of serving the visitor.



Robert Stanton  
Director

## Introduction

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 information that is useful for improving park operations and providing better protection for natural and cultural resources. Reports such as this one give visitors a collective, and therefore stronger, voice in the management of their national parks.

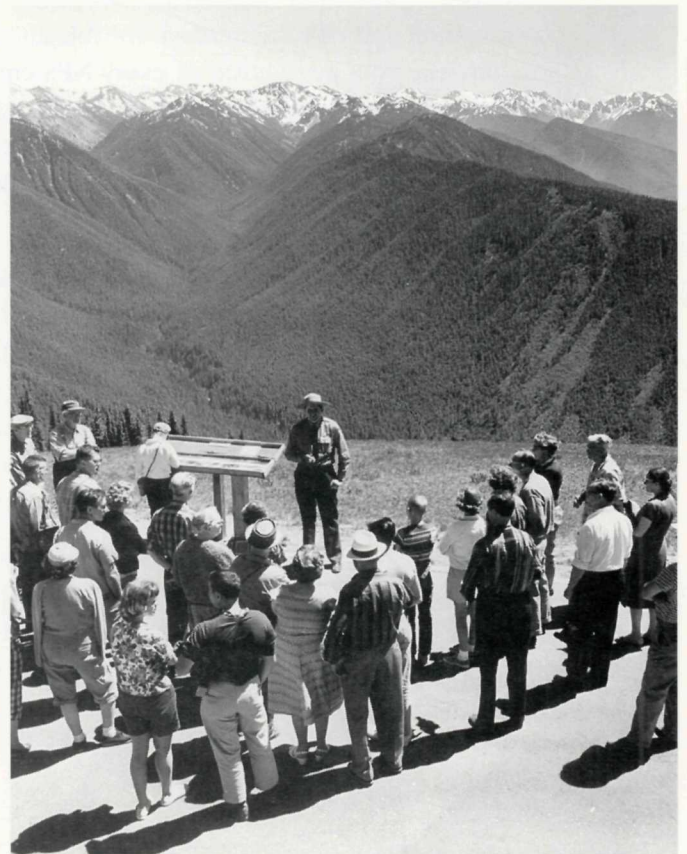
*Serving the Visitor 1997* is the fourth annual "report card" on how well the NPS is serving its customers. It is part of the continuing effort to meet the requirements outlined in the 1995 NPS *Customer Service Plan*. This plan includes a public service pledge, specific performance standards and a commitment to survey park visitors and report their opinions about important visitor services.

The NPS Visitor Services Project (VSP) has conducted visitor studies in over 70 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 results from studies conducted from 1988 to 1996. The database, which currently contains data from over 32,700 visitor groups, was used to create this report. Its purposes include providing the NPS and the

public 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.

On the following pages are visitors' evaluations of 12 important services, from visitor centers to campgrounds to ranger programs. Each graph compares two



Olympic National Park



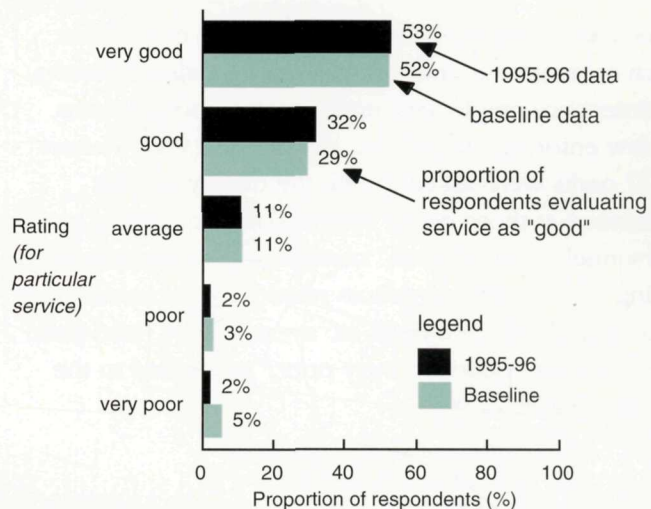
years of current data (1995-1996), shown in black, with a five year baseline of data (1990-1994), which is shown in green. The five year baseline that is used in this report is a rolling baseline that will move forward one year in each annual issue of this report. Graphs which display results for less than 5 parks are labeled with "CAUTION!", since data gathered from such a small number of parks may not be reliable. Following the evaluations of these 12 individual services is an index created by combining the ratings for those services. Finally, there is an overall rating of the services provided to park visitors which is linked to NPS performance standards.

The survey results presented in *Serving the Visitor 1997* are *indicators* of customer service—only a few of the services provided by the NPS, and only a sample of visitors to parks where studies have been conducted, are included. An appendix at the end of this report describes the research methods utilized in Visitor Services Project studies, as well as the limitations that are presented by these methods.

A visitor's comment:

We really have enjoyed our visits  
to the Park - we will continue  
visiting!  
Thank you for the opportunity of  
the questionnaire - it shows that you have  
a commitment to keeping the Park at  
its best!

1995-96: Number of parks represented; number of respondents represented. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.



Sample graph



Padre Island National Seashore

# General Services

## Park personnel

Park visitors are likely to encounter park employees, such as rangers at entrance stations and visitor centers, maintenance employees, emergency response teams, or law enforcement officers, during their visit. Visitors at 17 parks were asked to rate the quality of park personnel at those parks. 66% rated the quality of park personnel as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 64%. 22% of visitors rated park personnel as “good” and 6% rated them as “average.” 7% rated park personnel as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 9%.

1995-96: 17 parks; 2,789 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

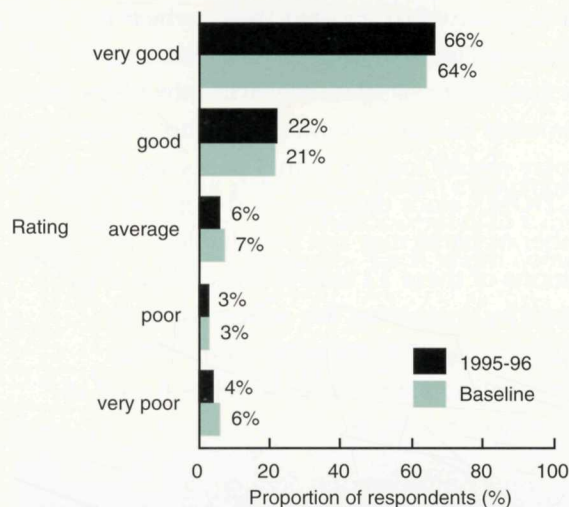


Figure 1: Quality of park personnel

## Visitor centers

Visitor centers offer information, publications for sale and other services to help visitors make the most of their park visit. Visitors at 9 parks rated the general quality of visitor centers in those parks. 50% rated visitor centers as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 55%. 32% rated visitor centers as “good” and 12% rated them as “average.” 6% rated visitor centers as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

1995-96: 9 parks; 2,246 respondents

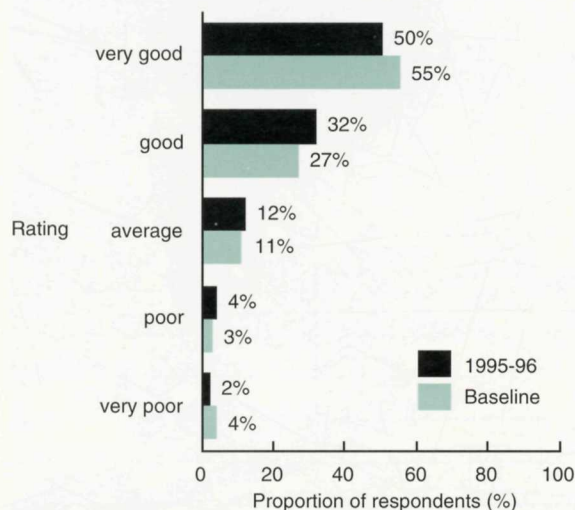


Figure 2: Quality of visitor centers



## Directional signs

Park visitors depend on directional signs to guide them to park entrances and help them find services, facilities and points of interest. Visitors at 12 parks evaluated the quality of directional signs in and around those parks. 48% rated the directional signs as “very good,” equal to the baseline rating of 48%. 29% of visitors felt the directional signs were “good” and 15% rated them as “average.” 8% rated the directional signs as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 11%.

1995-96: 12 parks; 2,746 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

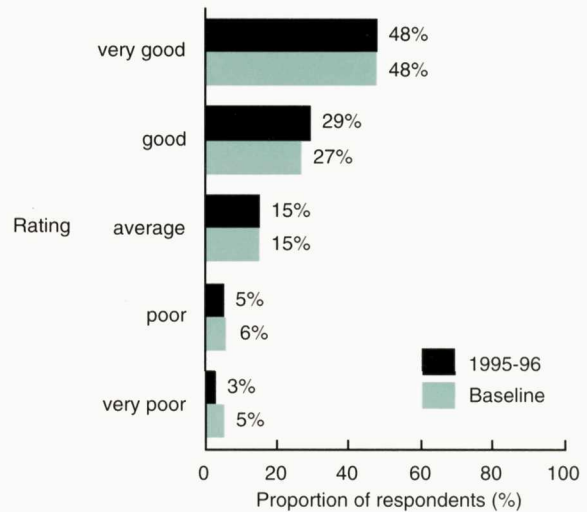


Figure 3: Quality of directional signs

A visitor's comment:

on the trail signs add how far  
you have come from.... <sup>what elevation</sup> are you.  
put some benches in the parking  
lot.  
the trails are great - the  
grading system really helps.



Everglades National Park



# NPS Facilities

## Restrooms

Restrooms are a necessity for park visitors. Visitors at 16 parks were asked to rate the quality of the restrooms in those parks. 37% rated restroom quality as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 36%. 29% of visitors felt the restrooms were “good” and 23% rated them as “average.” 12% rated the restrooms as “poor” or “very poor,” equal to the baseline rating of 12%.

## Campgrounds

Camping is a central part of some visitors’ park experience. Visitors at 9 parks were asked to rate the quality of NPS campgrounds in those parks. 45% rated the campgrounds as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 40%. 26% responded that the campgrounds were “good” and 18% felt they were “average.” 10% rated the campgrounds as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 9%.

1995-96: 16 parks; 4,652 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

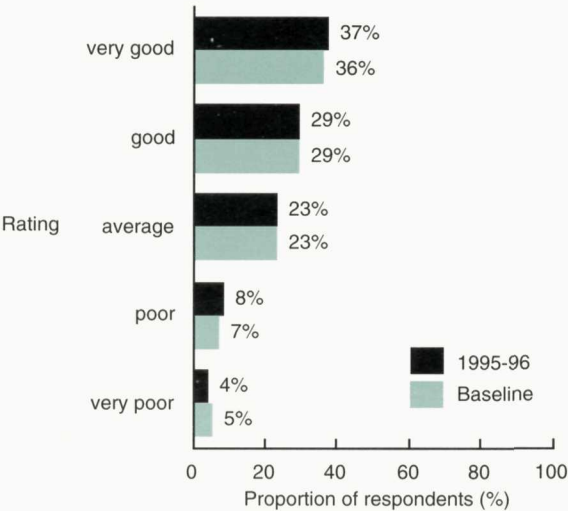


Figure 4: Quality of restrooms

1995-96: 9 parks; 601 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

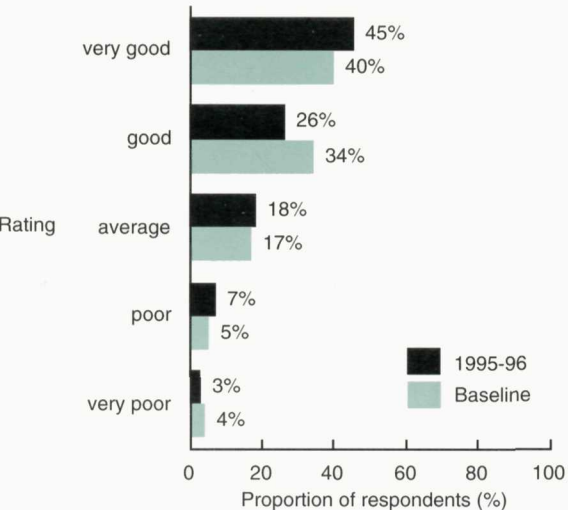


Figure 5: Quality of NPS campgrounds

## Picnic areas

Picnicking is a traditional park activity that many visitors enjoy. Visitors at 10 parks were asked to rate the quality of picnic areas in those parks. 45% rated the picnic areas as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 41%. 32% felt the picnic areas were “good” and 17% rated them as “average.” 6% felt the picnic areas were “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 9%.

1995-96: 10 parks; 853 respondents

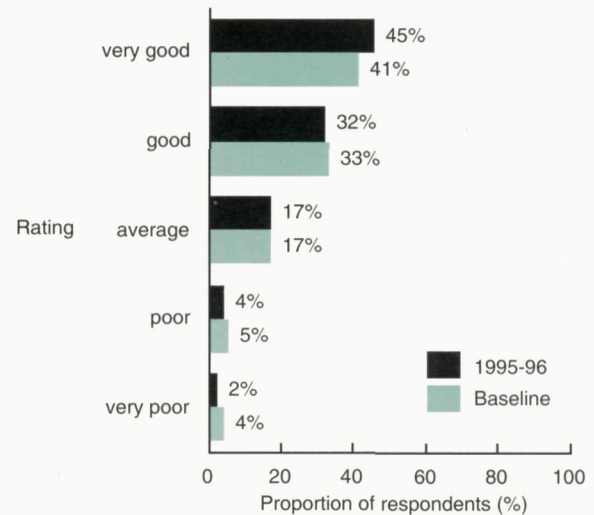


Figure 6: Quality of picnic areas

A visitor's comment:

Cleaner Restrooms would be nice  
& Keep Restrooms open later in  
evenings - especially in Summer  
when picknickers stay til dark  
Otherwise excellent



Yellowstone National Park, 1923

# Interpretive Services

## Ranger programs

Ranger programs include guided walks and tours, campfire programs and living history demonstrations. Visitors at 15 parks were asked to rate ranger programs in those parks. 66% of visitors rated the ranger programs as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 55%. 20% responded that the ranger programs were “good” and 7% felt they were “average.” 7% rated the ranger programs as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 10%.

1995-96: 15 parks; 1,119 respondents

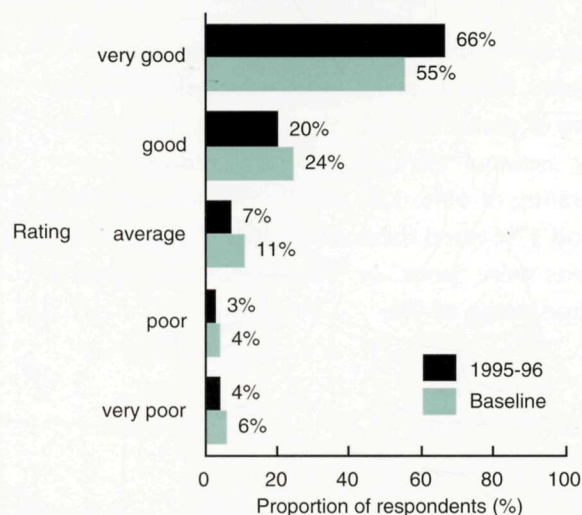


Figure 7: Quality of ranger programs

1995-96: 15 parks; 4,322 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

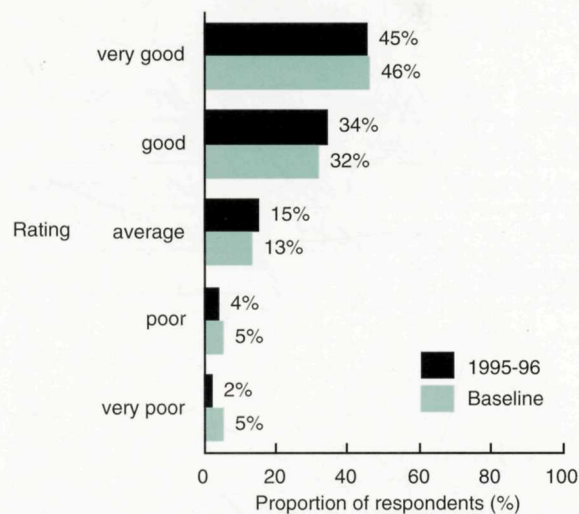


Figure 8: Quality of exhibits

## Exhibits

Exhibits, which are found inside museums and visitor centers and along roads and trails, are a valuable interpretive service offered in parks. Visitors at 15 parks evaluated the quality of exhibits in those parks. 45% rated the exhibits as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 46%. Exhibits were rated as “good” by 34% of visitors and 15% felt the exhibits were “average.” 6% rated the exhibits as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 10%.



## 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 or arrive at visitor centers. Visitors at 16 parks were asked to rate the quality of these brochures. 53% rated the brochures as “very good,” equal to the baseline rating of 53%. 32% rated the park brochures as “good” and 11% rated them as “average.” 4% felt the park brochures were “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 8%.

1995-96: 16 parks; 4,003 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

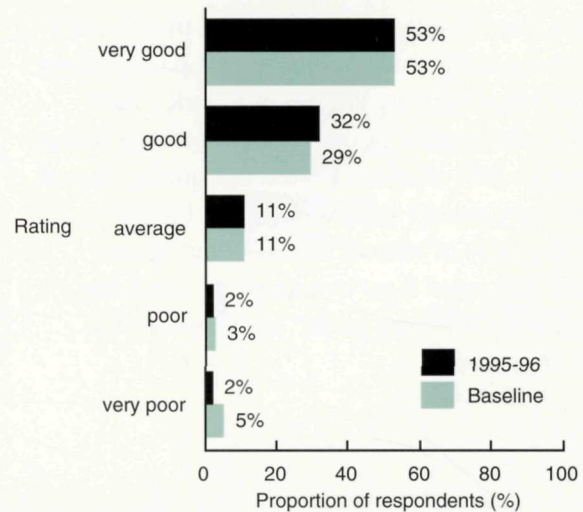


Figure 9: Quality of park brochures

A visitor's comment:

All of the personnel with whom we had contact, were friendly and helpful. The park ranger who lead our instruction was thorough & terrific with kids!



Nez Perce National Historical Park, 1973

## Concession Services

### Lodging

Many parks have hotels or motels within their boundaries and these facilities are an important part of some visitors' park experiences. Visitors at 5 parks were asked to rate the quality of overnight accommodations in those parks. 38% of visitors rated the quality of park lodging as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 33%. 37% of visitors felt the lodging was "good" and 18% rated it as "average." 8% rated the lodging as "poor" or "very poor," compared to the baseline rating of 10%.

1995-96: 5 parks; 461 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

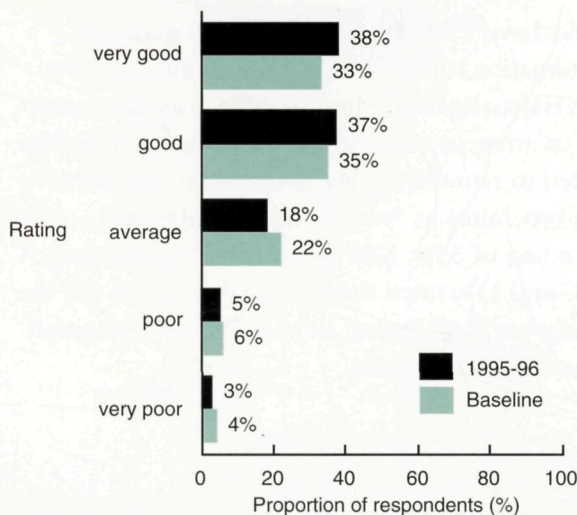


Figure 10: Quality of lodging in parks

### Food services

The restaurants, cafeterias, snack bars and other food services offered in parks can be important to visitors. Visitors at 8 parks with food services were asked to rate the quality of those services. 26% of visitors rated the quality of food services as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 18%. 32% rated the food services as "good" and 29% felt these services were "average." 13% rated the food services as "poor" or "very poor," compared to the baseline rating of 14%.

1995-96: 8 parks; 1,261 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

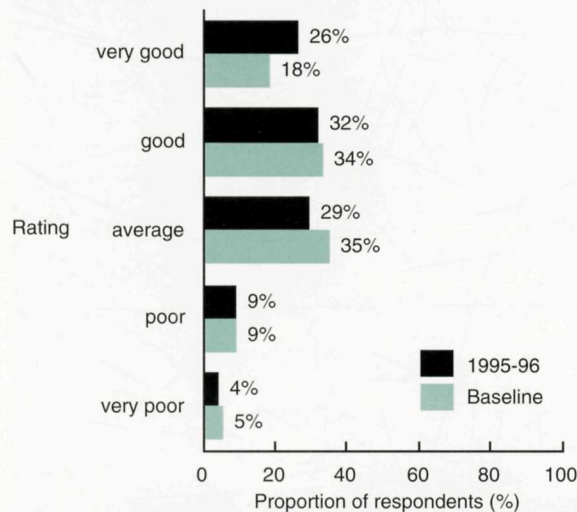


Figure 11: Quality of food services in parks



## Gift shops

Gift shops in parks provide visitors with an opportunity to bring home mementos of their park visit. Visitors at 2 parks rated the quality of gift shops in those parks. 28% responded that gift shops were “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 31%. 35% rated the gift shops as “good” and 31% felt they were “average.” 6% rated the gift shops as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 8%. Because so few parks are included in the data, caution should be taken in interpreting these results.

1995-96: 2 parks; 365 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

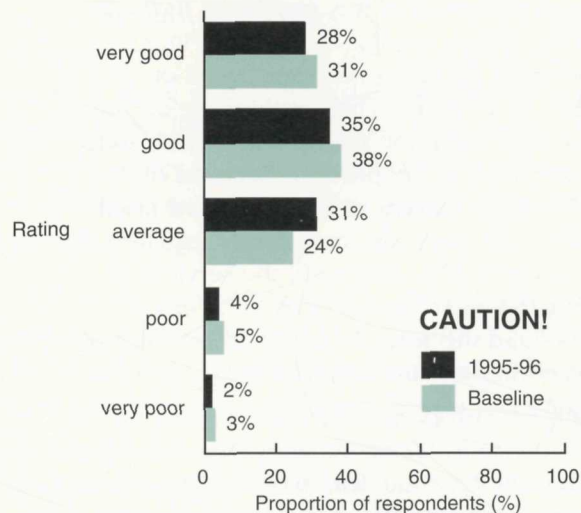


Figure 12: Quality of gift shops in parks

A visitor's comment:

Continue to provide adequate, but not necessarily  
luxurious accommodations. Don't add any  
kind of "fast food" facilities. What restaurants  
and food services you now have provide the  
necessary element without detracting from  
the natural surroundings.



Blue Ridge Parkway



## 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 13 shows ratings of 12 visitor services, based on 25,418 respondents in 18 parks. These ratings are an *index* created by combining the ratings for the individual services described in the previous sections of this report. 47% of the current visitors surveyed rated the 12 services in the parks as “very good,” equal to the baseline rating of 47%. 30% rated the services as “good” and 15% rated the services as “average.” 8% of the visitors rated the services as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 10%.

Significantly, the proportion of visitors rating an individual service as “poor” or “very poor” decreased, compared to the baseline, for 10 of the 12 services. Of the two remaining services, one was equal to the baseline and the other increased by 1%.

In 1995, a new question was added in an effort to measure general visitor satisfaction. This question asks visitors to rate the overall quality of services provided to them during their visit. Figure 14 shows that in 1996, 49% of visitors to 8 parks rated the overall quality of services as “very good,” compared to the 1995 total of 53%. 42% rated services as “good” and 8% felt that services were “average.” Less than 2% of the visitors rated the overall quality of services as “poor” or “very poor.” As more data are collected, these ratings will serve to help the NPS meet Government Performance and Results Act requirements and better serve its customers.

Based on evaluations by park visitors, there is evidence of excellent customer service by the NPS as well as clear opportunity for improvement. 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.

1995-96: 18 parks; 25,418 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

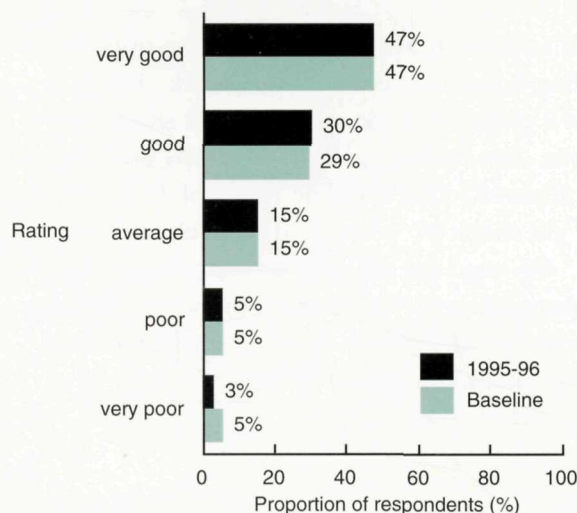


Figure 13: Overall quality of 12 services

1996: 8 parks; 3,725 respondents; 1995: 8 parks; 2,975 respondents;  
percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

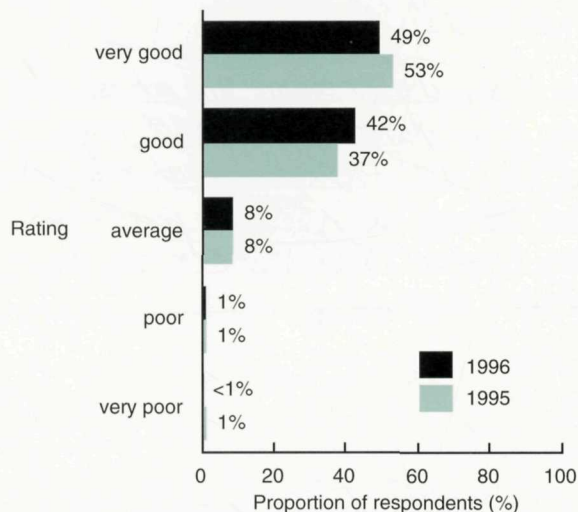


Figure 14: Overall quality of services

## Research Methods

Visitor Services Project (VSP) studies are based on systematic surveys of park visitors. A random sample of visitor groups is 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 and sampling intervals are based upon estimates of the previous year's visitation. Results are usually accurate to within 4 percentage points for simple questions, but 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.

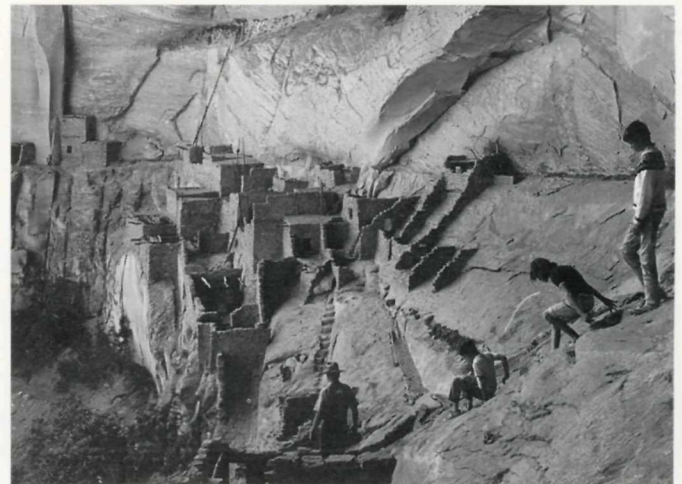
VSP personnel hold an on-site workshop with park staff to develop the survey questionnaire and plan the study. A standard set of demographic questions is included in each survey, and park managers can include additional "customized" questions to reflect their information needs. In addition, questionnaires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

Brief interviews are conducted as visitors arrive at a sampling site. The purpose of the interviews 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%. The response rate (the proportion of visitors that return their questionnaires) currently averages 79%. The data are coded and prepared by the Public Opinion Lab of the Washington State University Social and Economic Sciences Research Center. The data are analyzed using a standard statistical analysis program. A respondent,

for the purposes of this report, is a member of a visitor group that provided a response to a particular questionnaire item. 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). Responses to open-ended questions (where visitors write in comments) are categorized and summarized by VSP staff.

VSP 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. These limitations apply to all studies of this type.

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.



Navajo National Monument



## 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, The 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  
Chamizal National Memorial, Texas  
Channel Islands National Park, California  
Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona  
Death Valley National Park, California  
Devils Tower National Monument, Wyoming  
Dry Tortugas National Park, Florida  
Edison National Historic Site, New Jersey  
Everglades National Park, Florida  
Fort Bowie National Historic Site, Arizona  
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  
Great Falls Park, Virginia

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee/  
North Carolina  
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 Historical Park, Alaska  
Manassas National Battlefield Park, Virginia  
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  
Prince William Forest Park, Virginia  
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  
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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