A Report on Visitors to the National Park System

The NPS Visitor Services Project
Serving the Visitor
2000

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The National Park Service Visitor Services Project
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2001
Congress, in creating the National Park Service (NPS) in 1916, gave the agency a clear mandate to follow in managing the parks: preserve the resources in the diverse park units while providing for compatible enjoyment of the parks by people. Recent court decisions have reinforced this interpretation. As we enter the 21st century, there is increased recognition that park management decisions must be based on a broad spectrum of science.

It has long been recognized that in order to manage natural and cultural resources, managers must know and inventory those resources. Park managers must learn about species that are endangered in order to protect their habitats. For cultural resources, managers need to learn what historic buildings/objects are in both park and museum collections in order to properly conserve and protect them. The NPS is trying to correct the lack of natural resource information which has existed in many parks since they were created, through a new initiative: *Natural Resource Challenge—The National Park Service’s Action Plan for Preserving Natural Resources* (1999). This plan directs the NPS to use technology, cooperative efforts with universities and scientists, and improved science techniques to increase awareness of and information about NPS resource management issues in planning efforts.

National Park System visitation has steadily increased from 33 million recreational visits in 1950 to over 286 million recreational visits in 2000. Obviously, large increases in visitors require more skill in management if impacts to park resources, both natural and cultural, are to be avoided. The NPS must take a leading role in helping visitors learn about park resources and teaching visitors how they can help protect those resources. Visitor studies provide park managers with a tool to learn about visitor understanding of and opinions about natural resource issues. To help protect park resources, it is also useful to combine data about visitor use with data about critical park resources.

*Serving the Visitor 2000* is the seventh annual report that examines visitor satisfaction with park services and facilities. The data are gathered from in-depth visitor studies and customer survey cards conducted by the NPS Visitor Services Project (VSP). How well is the NPS providing for the enjoyment of the visitors? Visitors to the National Park System continue to be very satisfied with the services they receive. The NPS needs to encourage visitors to take an active and participatory role in preserving park resources for future generations. The challenge, at the beginning of the 21st century, is to continue preserving park resources while providing high quality service.

Michael A. Soukup
Associate Director, Natural Resource Stewardship & Science
Each year, the National Park Service (NPS) asks visitors to provide feedback on how well they are being served while they visit units of the National Park System. The results of these Visitor Services Project (VSP) surveys are then used to produce this annual “report card”—Serving the Visitor. By encouraging visitors to evaluate their park visits, the NPS can better provide for visitor enjoyment, increase visitor understanding of parks and better protect critical park resources.

The NPS Visitor Services Project is based at the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit (UI CPSU). This seventh annual report—Serving the Visitor 2000—uses data gathered from 2 types of VSP visitor surveys in which visitors comment on the quality of services provided in units of the National Park System. The VSP surveys include:

- in-depth visitor studies and
- a customer satisfaction card.

Since 1988, the VSP has conducted over 100 in-depth visitor studies in over 90 units of the National Park System. Through these studies, park managers obtain accurate information about visitors—who they are, what they do, their needs and opinions. Managers have used this information in a variety of ways to learn from and about visitors. Ultimately, the parks are managed more efficiently as a result of this usable knowledge.

A customer satisfaction card has also been used for the past three years to survey visitors to over 300 units of the National Park System. The card will continue to be used annually by NPS units to measure performance related to visitor satisfaction. The survey results allow park managers to report performance in accordance with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). In addition, the results can be applied to management needs, such as improving the design of park facilities, identifying general strengths and weaknesses in visitor services, and employee training. Results are compiled into park, cluster, regional, and national reports.

The first section of this report describes visitors’ evaluations of 12 important services, taken from the in-depth visitor studies in selected parks. The quality ratings by visitors in Serving the Visitor 2000 are indicators of customer service—only a few of the services provided by the NPS, and only a sample of visitors are included. In this section, each graph...
compares 2 years of current data (1999-2000), shown in black, with 5 year baseline data (1994-1998), shown in green.

The second section includes visitors' evaluations of important services from the customer satisfaction card surveys conducted in most NPS units. Included are 3 important service categories—park facilities, visitor services and recreational opportunities—as well as the overall rating used in reporting GPRA performance. In this section, each graph compares current data (2000) shown in black, with a 2 year baseline of data (1998-1999), shown in green.

An appendix at the end of this report describes the research methods and limitations of both types of studies.

A visitor's comment:

**WHAT A WONDERFUL THING TO BE ABLE TO VISIT A NATIONAL PARKLAND OUR COUNTRY PROTECTS FOR US! I DON'T MIND PAYING AN ENTRY FEE FOR THE PRESERVATION.**
General Services

Park personnel

Park employees, such as rangers at entrance stations, maintenance employees, emergency response teams and law enforcement officers are an important part of many visitors' park experience. Visitors at 10 parks were asked to rate the quality of park personnel at those parks. 62% rated the quality of park personnel as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 65%. 24% of visitors rated park personnel as "good" and 10% rated them as "average." 5% rated park personnel as "poor" or "very poor," equal to the baseline rating of 5%.

Visitor centers

Visitor centers offer information, publications for sale and other services to help visitors make the most of their park visit. Visitors rated the general quality of visitor centers in 11 parks. 51% rated visitor centers as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 53%. 30% rated visitor centers as "good" and 13% rated them as "average." 5% rated visitor centers as "poor" or "very poor," equal to the baseline rating of 5%.
Directional signs

Directional signs are important in helping visitors find their way around parks and to locate services, facilities, and points of interest. Visitors at 10 parks evaluated the quality of directional signs in and around those parks. 45% rated the directional signs as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 49%. 32% of visitors felt the directional signs were "good" and 15% rated them as "average." 8% rated the directional signs as "poor" or "very poor," equal to the baseline rating of 8%.

Figure 3: Quality of directional signs

A visitor's comment:

Excellent trained employees on education of public on park issues extremely polite, kind personnel very helpful!

Petersburg National Battlefield, circa 1960
NPS Facilities

Restrooms

Restrooms are a necessity for park visitors. Visitors at 15 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 39%. 32% of visitors felt the restrooms were "good" and 22% rated them as "average." 10% rated the restrooms as "poor" or "very poor," compared to the baseline rating of 9%.

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. 43% rated the campgrounds as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 47%. 33% responded that the campgrounds were "good" and 13% felt they were "average." 10% rated the campgrounds as "poor" or "very poor," compared to the baseline rating of 7%.
**Picnic areas**

Picnicking is a traditional park activity that many visitors enjoy. Visitors at 6 parks were asked to rate the quality of picnic areas in those parks. 42% rated the picnic areas as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 44%. 36% felt the picnic areas were “good” and 16% rated them as “average.” 6% felt the picnic areas were “poor” or “very poor,” equal to the baseline rating of 6%.

A visitor's comment:

Better wheelchair accessible restrooms, ramps & facilities would enhance our visits.

**Figure 6: Quality of picnic areas**

Theodore Roosevelt National Park, 1928
Interpretive Services

Ranger programs

Ranger programs include guided walks and tours, campfire programs and living history demonstrations. In 15 parks, visitors were asked to rate ranger programs. 62% of visitors rated the ranger programs as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 64%. 24% responded that the ranger programs were “good” and 9% felt they were “average.” 5% rated the ranger programs as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 6%.

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 13 parks evaluated the quality of exhibits in those parks. 43% rated the exhibits as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 48%. Exhibits were rated as “good” by 35% of visitors and 17% felt the exhibits were “average.” 5% rated the exhibits as “poor” or “very poor,” equal to the baseline rating of 5%.

Figure 7: Quality of ranger programs

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 or arrive at a visitor center. Visitors at 13 parks were asked to rate the quality of these brochures. 49% rated the brochure as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 53%. 34% rated the park brochures as "good" and 13% rated them as "average." 5% felt the park brochures were "poor" or "very poor," compared to the baseline rating of 4%.

A visitor's comment:

*Additional Park Rangers who would be "out and about... not necessarily to police, but to assist with information if and when needed. Perhaps small one person nucleated structures placed in strategic areas with info for these areas. Specific "open" times could be set.*
Concession Services

Lodging

Many parks have hotels or motels within their boundaries and these facilities are an important part of some visitors' park experience. Visitors at 5 parks were asked to rate the quality of overnight accommodations in those parks. 44% of visitors rated the quality of park lodging as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 39%. 31% of visitors felt the lodging was “good” and 18% rated it as “average.” 6% rated the lodging as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

Food services

The restaurants, cafeterias, snack bars and other food services offered in parks can be important to visitors. Visitors at 5 parks with food services were asked to rate the quality of those services. 31% of visitors rated the quality of food services as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 30%. 37% rated the food services as “good” and 23% felt these services were “average.” 9% rated the food services as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 11%.
Gift shops

Gift shops in parks provide visitors with an opportunity to bring home mementos of their park visit. Visitors at 13 parks rated the quality of gift shops in those parks. 36% responded that gift shops were “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 38%. 33% rated the gift shops as “good” and 24% felt they were “average.” 6% rated the gift shops as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

A visitor's comment:

- Improve lodging information (it is hard to book any lodging close to the NP since information is not available when you aren’t in the area).
- Improve lodging quality.
Overall Quality of Services

The services evaluated by the in-depth visitor studies are indicators of how well the NPS is serving the public. Figure 13 shows ratings of 12 visitor services, based on 26,556 respondents at 15 parks. These ratings are an index created by combining the ratings for the individual services. 45% of the current visitors rated the 12 services in the parks as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 49%. 32% rated the services as “good” and 16% rated the services as “average.” 6% of the visitors rated the services as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

A visitor's comment:

"It was again very enjoyable and educational. We, as visitors appreciate the way the park is maintained. Thank you to all who work there to provide services, maintenance, and especially to those who oversee the preservation and conservation of the whole area."

Figure 13: Overall quality of 12 services
In 1993, Congress enacted the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). This law requires all federal agencies to set goals and report progress toward those goals. One of GPRA's purposes is to promote "...a new focus on results, service quality and customer satisfaction" for the American people. The NPS is following the lead set forth by GPRA by setting agency goals to better manage its resources and services.

For the natural, cultural, and recreational resources in NPS care, and for the people served, GPRA requires the NPS to report how its goals are being met. One way to measure these goals is to survey visitors and ask them about the quality of their experiences while visiting NPS units (i.e., measure visitor satisfaction).

The NPS is moving forward to meet GPRA requirements by measuring visitor satisfaction. In early 1998, the NPS completed the development of a standardized customer satisfaction card. The card has been used annually (since 1998) by most NPS units to measure performance related to visitor satisfaction. In 2000, the customer satisfaction card was completed by a sample of visitors at 324 national park units. At year's end, a total of 27,791 visitors had completed and returned the customer satisfaction card.

On the following pages are graphs showing visitor evaluations of the quality of services within 3 important service categories—park facilities, visitor services, and recreational opportunities. These ratings are an index created by combining the ratings for individual indicators within the service category. For this section, and for GPRA requirements, a visitor is "satisfied" when he or she rated a service as either "good" or "very good."
Park Facilities

Visitor opinions of 5 key indicators are used to measure visitor satisfaction with park facilities. These indicators are:

- visitor centers,
- exhibits,
- restrooms,
- walkways, trails and roads, and
- campgrounds and/or picnic areas.

88% of visitors are satisfied with these park facilities provided within the National Park System, compared to the baseline of 89%.

A visitor's comment:

I appreciated the availability of a wheel chair at the Mission San Jose in San Antonio!
Visitor Services

Visitor opinions of 4 key indicators are used to measure satisfaction with visitor services provided in the parks. These indicators are:

- assistance from park employees,
- park maps or brochures,
- ranger programs, and
- commercial services in the park.

90% of visitors are satisfied with these services provided within the National Park System, equal to the baseline rating of 90%.

A visitor's comment:

Keep up the good work. I know money is tight, but you are providing a great service. Thanks

Figure 15: Combined index for satisfaction with visitor services

Badlands National Park, 1958
Recreational Opportunities

Visitor opinions of 3 important indicators are used to measure visitor satisfaction with recreational opportunities provided in the parks. These indicators are:

- learning about nature, history or culture,
- outdoor recreation, and
- sightseeing.

91% of visitors are satisfied with these recreational opportunities provided within the National Park System, compared to the baseline rating of 93%.

A visitor's comment:

I'm here to Mountain Bike. We need more trails, or there's a huge demand.
Overall Quality of Facilities, Services & Recreational Opportunities

NPS units are required to annually report performance related to a broad list of GPRA goals. Visitor satisfaction is one of these goals. The NPS 1999 GPRA goal IIa1 (visitor satisfaction) stated that "95% of park visitors are satisfied with appropriate park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities."

For GPRA reporting purposes, the customer satisfaction card includes an overall quality question used as the primary measure of visitor satisfaction. This question asked visitors to rate the "overall quality of facilities, services, and recreational opportunities." Visitor responses to this question are used to calculate each park's visitor satisfaction rating. Again, a visitor is considered "satisfied" if their response to this overall quality question was either "very good" or "good."

Figure 17 shows the overall quality rating based on 26,401 respondents in 305 units in the National Park System. In 2000, this satisfaction level (95%) remained equal to the 95% baseline rating.

The customer satisfaction card results show strong evidence of excellent visitor service across the National Park System. The NPS has demanding GPRA goals for visitor satisfaction. Of the 305 parks which successfully completed a 2000 visitor satisfaction survey, 183 (60%) met the annual servicewide goal of 95% visitor satisfaction. 264 parks of the 305 parks (87%) had a visitor satisfaction rating of 90% or greater.

A visitor's comment:

The results from the customer satisfaction card surveys at individual parks were combined to produce a satisfaction rating for each individual region. Figure 18 shows the 7 regions and the percentage of park visitors satisfied overall with appropriate facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. Regional overall visitor satisfaction scores are very similar, ranging from 93% to 95%.

The customer satisfaction card results can provide parks with benefits beyond simply meeting annual GPRA reporting requirements. These results can be useful in planning, operations, management and research related to the national parks. The results allow park managers to better understand visitor needs, protect natural and cultural resources, and improve visitor services.

Figure 18: Percentage of visitors satisfied overall, by NPS region, 2000
The study results included in this report show that visitors are largely satisfied with the quality of services they are receiving in the National Park System.

Both the in-depth visitor studies and the customer satisfaction card asked visitors to rate the overall quality of the services provided during their visit.

By monitoring visitor satisfaction through different types of visitor studies, and using the information to improve all aspects of park operations, the NPS can continue to protect resources and provide high quality visitor service.
VSP Visitor Studies

The in-depth visitor studies conducted by the VSP are based on systematic surveys of park visitors. A random sample of visitor groups is chosen to represent the general visitor population during a 1 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 using the previous year’s visitation statistics. Results are usually accurate to 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. This means 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. Standard demographic questions are included in each survey, and park managers can include additional “customized” questions to reflect their information needs. In addition, questionnaires include open-ended questions in which visitors are asked to provide comments about their visit.

Short (2 minute) interviews are conducted as visitors arrive at a sampling site. The interviews are to collect data for a non-response bias check, 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 7%. The response rate (the proportion of visitors that return their questionnaires) currently averages 79%. The data are coded and prepared by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University. 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 (from initial interview data) were significantly different from those who returned their questionnaires (non-response bias). Responses to open-ended questions (in which visitors write comments) are categorized and summarized by VSP staff.

In-depth visitor studies 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 under-represented. These limitations apply to all studies of this type.
VSP Customer Satisfaction Card Surveys

The customer satisfaction card surveys have a somewhat different methodology than the in-depth visitor studies. For each survey, park staff select an interval sampling plan based on the previous years' visitation. 400 customer satisfaction cards are distributed to a random sample of visitors in each park during a 30-day study period. Results are usually accurate to within 6 percentage points. For individual park reports, results are statistically significant at the .05 level. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar 95 out of 100 times. For the National Park System as a whole, results are accurate to within 1 percentage point. These results are statistically significant at the .01 level.

Park staff are trained to distribute cards according to a standard set of survey instructions and guidelines. A standardized customer satisfaction card which includes the same set of service-related questions is used for each survey. In addition, the card includes an open-ended question to evaluate visitor understanding.

Returned cards were electronically scanned, and the data coded and prepared by Visual Input Systems Analysts, Incorporated, located in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The response rate (the proportion of visitors that return their survey card) for the 305 customer satisfaction card surveys averaged 25%. A test for non-response bias was conducted by comparing the results for the same question from both the customer satisfaction card and the in-depth visitor studies. The data were gathered in the same parks, seasons and survey locations. The results of this test suggest that non-response bias was not significant.

For individual park reports, frequency distributions are calculated for each indicator and category. At the end of the calendar year, responses from individual park surveys are combined to create reports at the cluster, region, and systemwide levels. Data from parks with less than 30 returned cards, or from parks with discrepancies in data collection methods, are omitted from these reports and Serving the Visitor.

The customer satisfaction card surveys have several limitations. The data reflect visitor opinions about the NPS unit's facilities, services and recreational opportunities during the survey period. The results do not necessarily apply to visitors during other times of the year, or park visitors who did not visit one of the survey locations. Visitor groups that do not include an English-speaking person may be under-represented. These limitations apply to all studies of this type.
List of Selected Parks

VSP Visitor Studies
The data for in-depth visitor studies in this report come from the following NPS units:

- Acadia National Park, Maine
- Adams National Historic Site, Massachusetts
- Anchorage Alaska Public Lands Information Center, Alaska
- Badlands National Park, South Dakota
- Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico
- Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida
- Booker T. Washington National Monument, Virginia
- Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah
- Canaveral National Seashore, Florida
- Chamizal National Memorial, Texas
- Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, Georgia
- Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona
- Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, Tennessee
- Cumberland Island National Seashore, Georgia
- Death Valley National Park, California
- Devils Tower National Monument, Wyoming
- Dry Tortugas National Park, Florida
- Edison National Historic Site, New Jersey
- Eisenhower National Historic Site, Pennsylvania
- Everglades National Park, Florida
- Fort Bowie National Historic Site, Arizona
- Gettysburg National Military Park, Pennsylvania
- Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve, Alaska
- Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming
- Great Falls Park, Virginia
- Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee/North Carolina
- Haleakala National Park, Hawaii
- Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, Indiana
- Iwo Jima/Netherlands Carillon Memorials, Washington, D.C.
- Jean Lafitte National Historical Park & Preserve, Louisiana
- Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska
- Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Alaska
- Lassen Volcanic National Park, California
- Lincoln Boyhood Home National Memorial, Indiana
- Lowell National Historical Park, Massachusetts
- Manassas National Battlefield Park, Virginia
- Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site, Georgia
- Mojave National Preserve, California
- National Monuments & Memorials (National Mall), Washington, D.C.
- New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, Massachusetts
- Nez Perce National Historical Park, Idaho
- Olympic National Park, Washington
- Prince William Forest Park, Virginia
- Rock Creek Park, Washington D.C.
- San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Texas
- San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, California
- San Juan National Historic Site, Puerto Rico
- St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, Wisconsin/Minnesota
- USS Arizona Memorial, Hawaii
- Virgin Islands National Park, Virgin Islands
- Voyageurs National Park, Minnesota
- Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, California
- White House Tour and White House Visitor Center, Washington D.C.
- Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts, Virginia
- Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve, Alaska
- Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

VSP Customer Satisfaction Card Surveys
The data for customer satisfaction card surveys in this report come from 305 NPS units.
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