Serving the Visitor 2001

A Report on Visitors to the National Park System
NPS Visitor Services Project
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National Park Service Visitor Services Project
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2002
Foreword

A message from the Director

The National Park System has long been recognized as containing places of great beauty and national significance. Now, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, many visitors are seeking out America's parks as places of "unity, hope and healing." Even in less stressful times, visitors seek the connection to the land and our history that is an integral part of what the National Park System offers.

As employees of the National Park Service, part of our calling is to serve these visitors. The other part of our calling is the "great central task" of preserving the land as we found it. With the increasing number of units and the increasing number of visitors, that is not easy to do. Partnerships with volunteers, corporations, foundations, and state and local agencies will continue to play an increasing role in the operation of the National Park System and are a central theme of the Secretary's Four C's—conservation through consultation, cooperation, and communication. The importance of sharing information and working together to solve challenges cannot be underestimated. Not only should this 'usable knowledge' about the parks be shared with partners, but also with the public we are committed to serving.

Park managers need all of the 'usable knowledge' they can obtain to make better decisions, operate the parks, protect resources, manage visitors, and plan for the future. One tool for obtaining information about visitors is the Visitor Services Project (VSP). Since 1988, the VSP has provided a consistent source of visitor information. Visitor opinions about the quality of services provided in the parks furnish an important measure of how well the public is being served.

This eighth annual report, Serving the Visitor 2001, measures the quality of service that the National Park Service is providing to the visiting public. As you will see throughout this report, visitor quality ratings are consistently high. While there is always room for improvement, National Park Service employees and volunteers are to be commended for the outstanding job they do. Sustainable partnerships are another critical component in achieving the "great central task" and in meeting visitor expectations. Our common goal is our commitment to the resources and our visitors. I urge you to review carefully the information in Serving the Visitor 2001, and share it with your staff and partners.

Fran P. Mainella
Director
Introduction

Each year, the National Park Service (NPS) asks visitors to provide feedback on how well they are being served while visiting 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 eighth annual report—Serving the Visitor 2001—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 110 in-depth visitor studies in over 95 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 four 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, and visitor understanding. 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 2001 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 (2000-2001), shown in black, with 5-year baseline data (1995-1999), shown in green. Graphs that show results for less than 5 parks are labeled with "CAUTION!" since data gathered from such a small number of parks should be interpreted and used cautiously.

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 (2001) shown in black, with a 3-year baseline of data (1998-2000), 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:

_A visitor's comment:_

_As usual, we had an extremely enjoyable visit to the park. We would both be more than willing to pay higher entrance fees to the park, if we knew it would help keep the park operating at this level of quality._

_Thanks to the whole staff, keep up the good work!_
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 8 parks were asked to rate the quality of park personnel at those parks. 64% rated the quality of park personnel as "very good," equal to the baseline rating of 64%. 23% of visitors rated park personnel as "good" and 8% rated them as "average." 4% rated park personnel as "poor" or "very poor," equal to the baseline rating of 4%.

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 10 parks. 52% rated visitor centers as "very good," equal to the baseline rating of 52%. 30% 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 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 6 parks evaluated the quality of directional signs in and around those parks. 48% rated the directional signs as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 47%. 32% of visitors felt the directional signs were "good" and 13% rated them as "average." 6% rated the directional signs as "poor" or "very poor," compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

A visitor's comment:

**Better road markers to get there would be nice.**

Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, 1980s
NPS Facilities

Restrooms

Restrooms are a necessity for park visitors. Visitors at 11 parks were asked to rate the quality of the restrooms in those parks. 39% rated restroom quality as “very good,” equal to the baseline rating of 39%. 33% of visitors felt the restrooms were “good” and 20% rated them as “average.” 8% 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 5 parks were asked to rate the quality of NPS campgrounds in those parks. 47% rated the campgrounds as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 45%. 32% responded that the campgrounds were “good” and 12% felt they were “average.” 9% rated the campgrounds as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 8%.
Picnic areas

Picnicking is a traditional park activity that many visitors enjoy. Visitors at 3 parks were asked to rate the quality of picnic areas in those parks. 44% rated the picnic areas as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 43%. 33% felt the picnic areas were “good” and 16% rated them as “average.” 7% felt the picnic areas were “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 6%. Because few parks are included in the 2000-2001 data, caution should be taken in interpreting these results.

Figure 6: Quality of picnic areas

A visitor’s comment:

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Provide more accessible showers within the campground areas.

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Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, 1913
Interpretive Services

Ranger programs

Ranger programs include guided walks and tours, campfire programs, and living history demonstrations. In 11 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 10% felt they were "average." 5% rated the ranger programs as "poor" or "very poor," equal to the baseline rating of 5%.

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 11 parks evaluated the quality of exhibits in those parks. 45% rated the exhibits as "very good," equal to the baseline rating of 45%. Exhibits were rated as "good" by 34% of visitors and 16% felt the exhibits were "average." 5% rated the exhibits as "poor" or "very poor," equal to the baseline rating of 5%.
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 11 parks were asked to rate the quality of these brochures. 52% rated the brochure as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 51%. 33% rated the park brochures as "good" and 11% rated them as "average." 3% felt the park brochures were "poor" or "very poor," equal to the baseline rating of 3%.

Figure 9: Quality of park brochures

A visitor's comment:

More ranger talks on the history of the area, aspects of nature found here, etc.
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 4 parks were asked to rate the quality of overnight accommodations in those parks. 40% of visitors rated the quality of park lodging as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 41%. 37% of visitors felt the lodging was "good" and 16% rated it as "average." 7% rated the lodging as "poor" or "very poor," compared to the baseline rating of 6%. Because few parks are included in the 2000-2001 data, caution should be taken in interpreting these results.

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. 32% of visitors rated the quality of food services as "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 30%. 33% rated the food services as "good" and 25% felt these services were "average." 11% rated the food services as "poor" or "very poor," equal to the baseline rating of 11%.

Figure 10: Quality of lodging

Figure 11: Quality of food services
Gift shops

Gift shops in parks provide visitors with an opportunity to bring home mementos of their park visit. Visitors at 12 parks rated the quality of gift shops in those parks. 40% responded that gift shops were "very good," compared to the baseline rating of 35%. 35% rated the gift shops as "good" and 20% felt they were "average." 5% rated the gift shops as "poor" or "very poor," compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

A visitor's comment:

outstanding quality of food, great staff
and a very clean restaurant.

Figure 12: Quality of gift shops

Shenandoah National Park, 1940
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 7,201 respondents at 12 parks. These ratings are an index created by combining the ratings for the individual services. 48% of the current visitors rated the 12 services in the parks as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 47%. 32% rated the services as “good” and 15% rated the services as “average.” 6% of the visitors rated the services as “poor” or “very poor,” equal to the baseline rating of 6%.

A visitor’s comment:

It was better than we had expected! We appreciate the authentic and detailed efforts of the National Park Service. At every site we have visited, people have been polite and helpful.
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 2001, the customer satisfaction card was completed by a sample of visitors at 327 national park units. At year's end, a total of 28,783 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 were satisfied with these park facilities provided within the National Park System, equal to the baseline of 88%.

A visitor's comment:

The employees were very knowledgeable, helpful, and cheerful. They should be applauded for their outstanding customer service.
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 were satisfied with these services provided within the National Park System, compared to the baseline rating of 91%.

A visitor's comment:

Excellent, Effective, well designed campground with level, easily accessible sites. Thank you.

Figure 15: Combined index for satisfaction with visitor services

Yosemite National Park, 1970
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.

92% of visitors were satisfied with these recreational opportunities provided within the National Park System, equal to the baseline rating of 92%.

A visitor's comment:

"I believe you should set up a bike trail!"
Overall Quality of Facilities, Services, and 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 IIai (visitor satisfaction) states 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 27,448 respondents in 303 units in the National Park System. In 2001, 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 303 parks which successfully completed a 2001 visitor satisfaction survey, 192 parks (63%) met the annual servicewide goal of 95% visitor satisfaction. 259 parks (85%) of the 303 parks had a visitor satisfaction rating of 90% or greater.

A visitor’s comment:

"An opportunity to use public funds for a reasonable cost. Retention of these types of areas is essential to understand and enjoy nature at its best. Service of the park headquarters was exceptionally good. The park custodian was equally informative and friendly."

Figure 17: Overall quality of facilities, services, and recreational opportunities
The results from the customer satisfaction card surveys at individual parks were combined to produce a satisfaction rating for each individual NPS 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 91% to 96%.

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, 2001
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.

George Washington Birthplace National Monument, 1924

A visitor's comment:

As a Canadian visitor, I think you are doing an excellent job here.
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 78%. The data are coded and entered on a computer 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 year's 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 303 customer satisfaction card surveys averaged 26%. 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.
VSP Visitor Studies

The data for in-depth visitor studies in this report came from the following NPS units:

Acadia National Park, Maine
Adams National Historic Site, Massachusetts
Badlands National Park, South Dakota
Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico
Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida
Biscayne National Park, Florida
Booker T. Washington National Monument, Virginia
Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah
Chamizal National Memorial, Texas
Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, Georgia
Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona
Colonial National Historical Park-Jamestown Island, Virginia
Crater Lake National Park, Oregon
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
Eisenhower National Historic Site, Pennsylvania
Everglades National Park, Florida
Fort Bowie National Historic Site, Arizona
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
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 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
Olympic National Park, Washington
Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Michigan

VSP Customer Satisfaction Card Surveys

The data for customer satisfaction card surveys in this report came from 303 NPS units.

Prince William Forest Park, Virginia
Rock Creek Park, Washington D.C.
San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, California
San Juan National Historic Site, Puerto Rico
Shenandoah National Park, Virginia
St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, Wisconsin/Minnesota
USC Arizona Memorial, Hawaii
Virgin Islands National Park, Virgin Islands
Voyageurs National Park, Minnesota
Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, California
White House Tours and White House Visitor Center, Washington, D.C.
Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve, Alaska
Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming
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