



The Visitor Services Project-- 20+ years later





Park Studies Unit



Park Studies Unit



University of Idaho

The Park Studies Unit (PSU) operates under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the University of Idaho

It consists of:

- Visitor Services Project (VSP)
- Visitor Survey Card Project (VSC)

Through visitor surveys, these two projects gather data about national park visitors and their opinions about park services and facilities



Visitor Services Project

A brief history

- 1979: • National Park Service (NPS) and University of Idaho (UI) cooperated to create the Cooperative Park Studies Unit
- 1982-1987: • Dr. Gary Machlis created the Visitor Services Project (VSP) and conducted 16 pilot visitor studies
- 1988: • Two NPS employees hired to learn the VSP
- 1989: • Chartered the VSP Advisory Committee (11 members) to advise NPS Associate Director, Resource Stewardship and Science concerning the VSP and to review park nominations

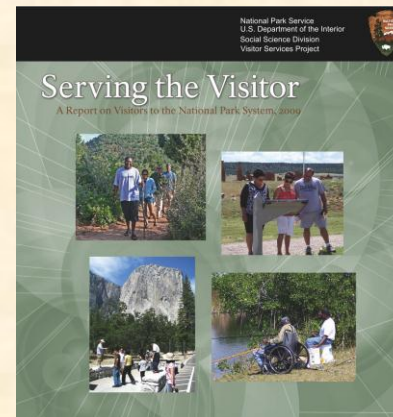
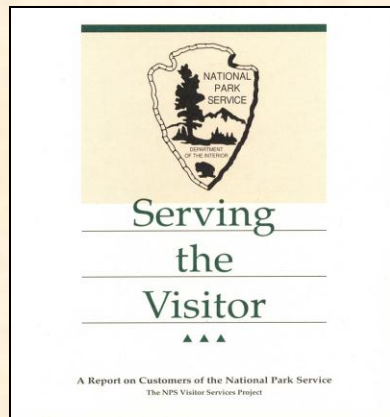


VSP Advisory Committee meeting



Visitor Services Project

- 1994:
- One NPS employee left the VSP; funding for his position was used to hire UI employees to fill in behind him.
 - Produced first edition of *Serving the Visitor annual report*



- 1995: • Dr. Gary Machlis became NPS Visiting Chief Social Scientist
- 1998: • First year of Visitor Survey Card (VSC or GPRA card)
- 2000: • Hired first professor to help oversee VSP visitor studies



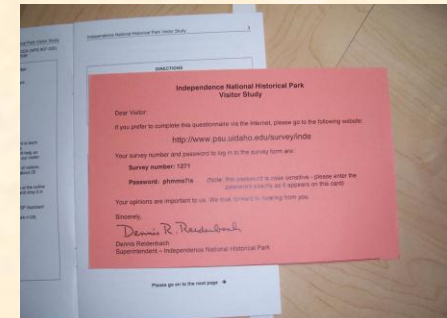
Visitor Services Project

- 2002: • Dr. Steve Hollenhorst, professor in Conservation Social Sciences, became Director of the Park Studies Unit, replacing Dr. Machlis
- 2005: • Conducted survey at first “small park”
• VSP started doing data entry instead of subcontracting
- 2005-2007: • Tested online option for completing questionnaires at 4 parks (Timpanogos, Independence, Yellowstone, Katmai-- each received 9% online responses)



Nicodemus NHS

Password card
for online survey





Visitor Services Project

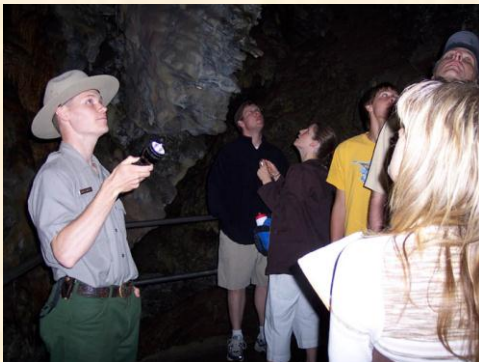
VSP continues to evolve, improve efficiency, and research new methods:

2006: • Added option for multiple season surveys in same park

- Started building question database

2007: • VSP did data entry for all VSP studies

- Tested scanning with 4 parks' questionnaires
- Conducted permit holder/camp owner survey



Timpanogos Cave NM



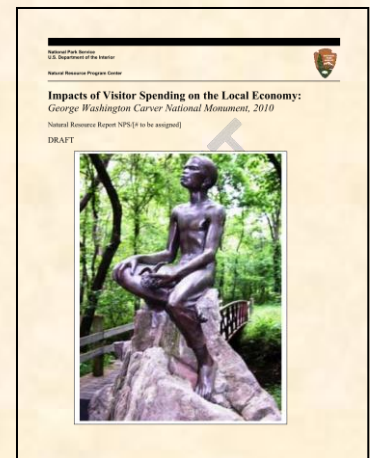
Visitor Services Project

- 2008: • Conducted nearby resident survey for one park
- 2009: • Increased capacity to 15 parks/year using scanning
• PSU moved under new NPS Social Science Division
- 2010: • Increased capacity to 19 parks/year
• Took over production of MGM2 reports from Michigan State U.



Data entry

MGM2 report





Park Studies Unit studies

Types of visitor studies offered by the PSU

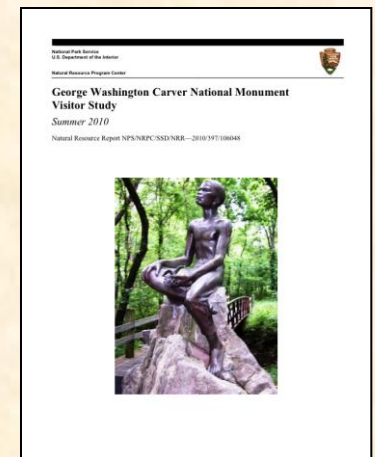
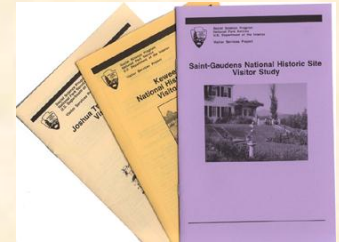
- Traditional in-depth **VSP studies**
- Annual **Visitor Survey Card** or GPRA survey card
- Online **Focus Group** training package. VSP also conducts focus groups for parks.
- **Special group studies**—for local residents, potential visitors and other special groups, such as backcountry permit holders, in-holding landowners, other permit holders, and children
- **Other types of studies** focus on one critical park issue/problem, such as ticketing systems, commuter practices, etc.



Visitor Services Project

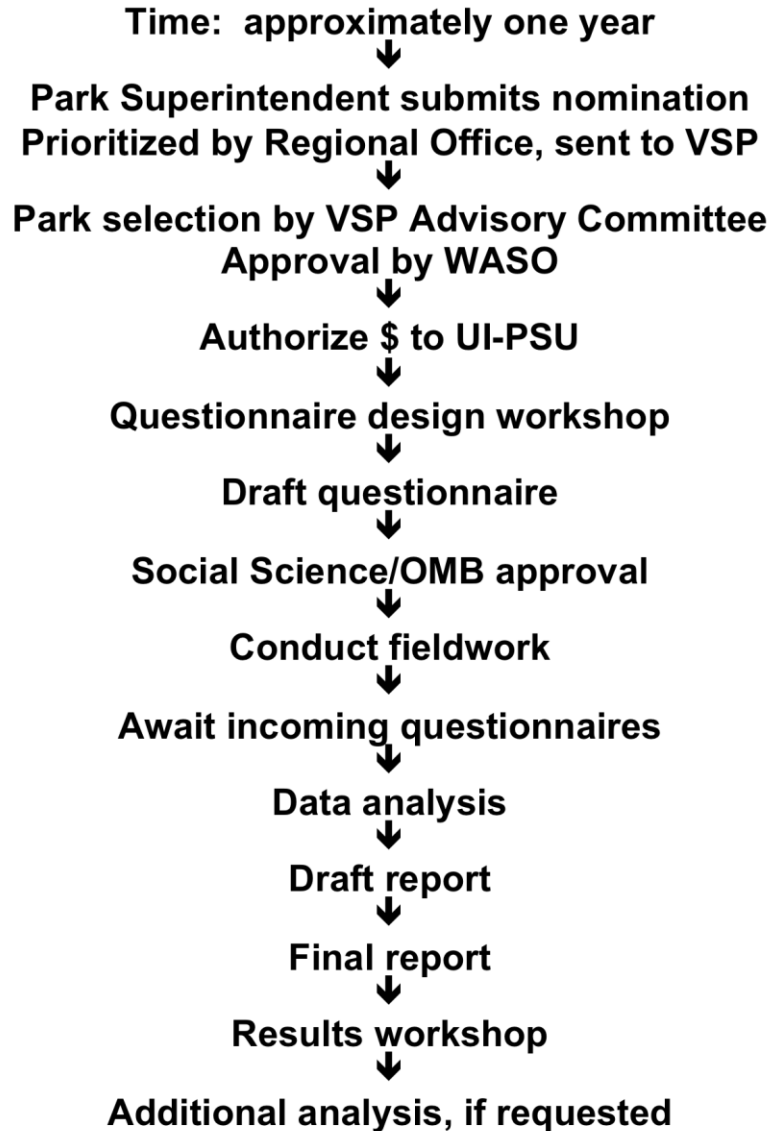
VSP synopsis

- 228 visitor studies conducted in 178 parks since 1988
- Responses from over 102,000 visitors
- Average response rate is 73%
- Average refusal rate is 9%
- Managers learn about visitors--who they are, what they do, their needs and opinions.
- Results allow managers to improve services, better protect resources, and manage parks more efficiently. Also an important tool for working with local communities and park partners.
- VSP now produces MGM2 economic reports using VSP data





Visitor Services Project process





VSP visitor studies

Strengths of VSP:

- provides 'usable knowledge' for park managers
- gathers park-specific visitor demographics and opinions
- relatively inexpensive survey cost compared to general market surveys
- online questionnaires and reports: psu.uidaho.edu
- data has improved visitor services and experience
- annual report, *Serving the Visitor*, shares data results with Congress, NPS directorate and managers
- continued efficiencies (e.g. focus groups, online surveys)
- researches new methods; expands survey capabilities



VSP visitor studies

Limitations/challenges of VSP methodology:

- length of time to produce results from mail surveys
- low response from online survey option
- perception that questions and survey methods are not flexible to park needs—need for continued marketing
- gathering adequate and scientific data for “small parks”
- meeting field needs for survey information
- obtaining feedback from ALL types of users





Visitor Services Project



NPS Photo

The results are useful and many of our partners are already utilizing the information from the study, such as our local chamber of commerce and their various tourism committees. We have also implemented changes at the park level to improve our signage and wayside exhibits. Many of the changes will enhance a visitor's experience at our park, and are cost-effective for us to implement.

Superintendent
Knife River Indian Villages NHS

Continue surveying visitors. It is important for us to know that our opinions are being considered in your plans for the future of the park.

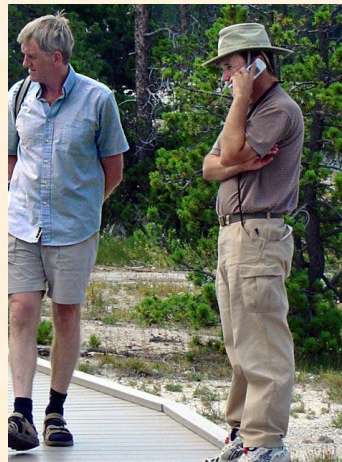
- a visitor's comment



Visitor Services Project—What's New?

Major changes in past 20 years:

- increased workload from 10 to 20 park studies/year
- trained 11 university professors and others as survey supervisors
- created question database, and now, results database
- designed scannable questionnaires
- average response rate dropped from 80% to 73%, following marketing survey trends





In-depth VSP visitor studies

Future challenges:

- continue marketing the VSP
- provide visitor data for very small parks that cannot afford surveys
- find more ways to put data to use
- provide comparisons with current marketing/tourism data
- provide data on under-served visitors
- need for better integration into NPS planning/policy
- decreasing response rates
- use of internet surveys





Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

VSP database

Began development in 2004:

1. Combined old data files into a single, networked database system
2. Built corresponding question database to allow data to be linked to specific questions
3. Built master catalog that allows searching based on category types
4. Cleaned data and standardized labeling


The VSP Online Database

Visitor Services Project University of Idaho

Social Science Program

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior



[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Contact Us](#) [Terms and Conditions](#)

Feedback Form:

The VSP Database

Welcome to the prototype of the NPS Visitor Services Project Online Database. This database contains more than 225 in-depth visitor satisfaction surveys conducted since 1988 throughout the National Park Service system. With this online database you can:

- Browse through the survey questions,
- View the metadata for each study (response rates, etc.),
- Search for specific question categories or keywords,
- View the results for each question and create charts,
- Download data, labels, formats, and compiled frequencies,
- Download similar data across date ranges, park types, regions, etc.,
- Download Questionnaires, Final Reports and Project Summaries, and
- View and download the [VSP Question Catalog](#) containing over 80 common questions asked in our studies

Look in

Sign In: Email Password Not Registered? [Sign up!](#)

University of Idaho • Park Studies Unit • College of Natural Resources

P.O. Box 441139 • Moscow ID 83844-1139 • 208 885 2585

admin at psu uidaho edu



Visitor Services Project database vsp.uidaho.edu

Database:

- Contains all VSP data gathered since 1988
- Can be queried for any information that has been asked
- Can provide data for a single park, several surveys at one park, across selected parks, for a region, by park type, or other parameters
- Contains open-ended question responses from 2000 to present; adding previous years





Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

The VSP Online Database

Visitor Services Project University of Idaho

Social Science Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Contact Us](#) [Terms and Conditions](#)

Feedback Form:

Send

The VSP Database

Welcome to the prototype of the NPS Visitor Services Project Online Database. This database contains more than 225 in-depth visitor satisfaction surveys conducted since 1988 throughout the National Park Service system. With this online database you can:

- Browse through the survey questions,
- View the metadata for each study (response rates, etc.),
- Search for specific question categories or keywords,
- View the results for each question and create charts,
- Download data, labels, formats, and compiled frequencies,
- Download similar data across date ranges, park types, regions, etc.,
- Download Questionnaires, Final Reports and Project Summaries, and
- View and download the [VSP Question Catalog](#) containing over 80 common questions asked in our studies

Look in

- ✓ [select a database]
- NPS Units (VSP Project Database)
- Master Question Catalog
- VSP Survey Questions

Sign In: Email

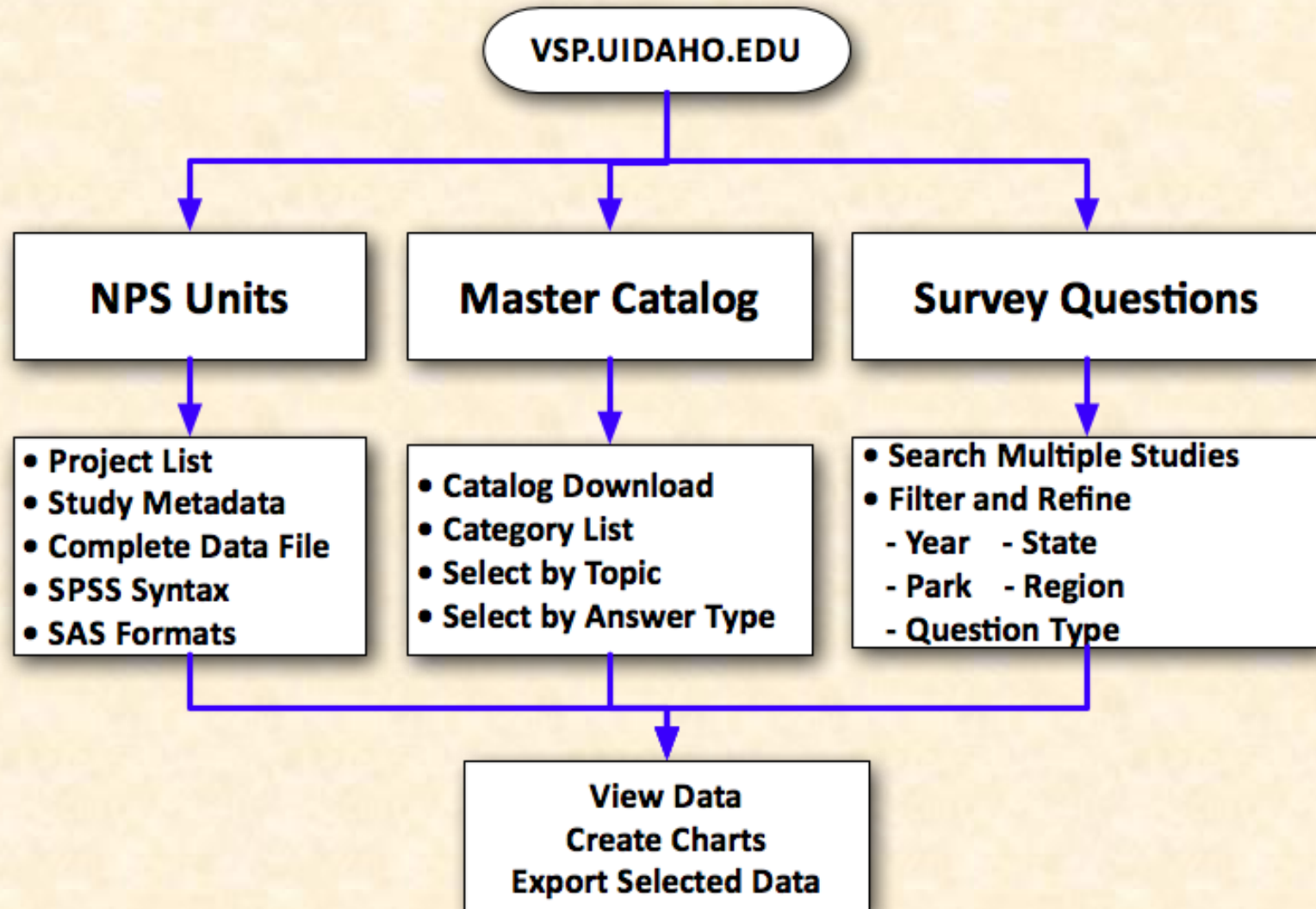
Password

Not Registered? [Sign up !](#)

University of Idaho • Park Studies Unit • College of Natural Resources
P.O. Box 441139 • Moscow ID, 83844-1139 • 208 885 2585
admin at psu.uidaho.edu



Visitor Services Project database vsp.uidaho.edu





Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

The VSP Online Database

Visitor Services Project University of Idaho
A LEGACY OF LEADING

Social Science Program
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Contact Us](#) [Terms and Conditions](#)

[Feedback Form:](#)

Send

Look in

Follow the links below to see the related questions and their results from VSP studies.

You may download a PDF version of the entire catalog here: [VSP Question Catalog](#).

Filter your results:

Year: From: - To: (yyyy)

VSP Project Number:

State: (enter state abbreviation)

Region:

Park type:

☐ Core ☐ MGM ☐ Demographic ☐ Common

☐ Select all data from results (Warning - this could take a while for a long list!)

Apply Filter

Reset

← Decide what data
you want

Preferred question format (actual wording varies):



Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

Park type:

☐ Core ☐ MGM ☐ Demographic ☐ Common

☐ Select all data from results (Warning - this could take a while for a long list!)

Apply Filter

Reset

- ☐ Activities and Programs
 - ☐ [Activities this visit](#)
 - ☐ [Activity as primary reason for visit](#)
 - ☐ [Expected but not able to do](#)
 - ☐ [Activities on future visits](#)
- ☐ Age
 - ☐ [Age \(all responses\)](#)
- ☐ Appropriateness
 - ☐ [How appropriate for activities](#)
- ☐ Crowding Perceptions
 - ☐ [Rating at locations](#)
- ☐ Disabilities/Impairments
 - ☐ [Prevented access](#)
 - ☐ [Services unable to access](#)
 - ☐ [Type of impairment](#)
- ☐ Education
 - ☐ [Education \(respondent\)](#)
 - ☐ [Education \(all group members\)](#)
- ☐ Park Entries
 - ☐ [Number of entries](#)
 - ☐ [Entered the park more than once](#)
- ☐ Ethnicity
 - ☐ [Hispanic or Latino \(individual group members\)](#)
 - ☐ [Hispanic or Latino \(respondent\)](#)
 - ☐ [Race \(individual group members\)](#)
 - ☐ [Race \(combined group members\)](#)
 - ☐ [Race \(respondent\)](#)
 - ☐ [Arab or Middle Eastern \(individual group members\)](#)
 - ☐ [Asian race category \(individual group members\)](#)
- ☐ Evaluation of Fees

Examples of question categories



Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

Preferred question format (actual wording varies):

For you and your personal group on this visit, please provide the following information. (If you do not know the answer, leave blank.)

a) Current age

Yourself _____
Member #2 _____
Member #3 _____
Member #4 _____
Member #5 _____
Member #6 _____
Member #7 _____

Question wording

243 question records found.
Age: Age (all responses)

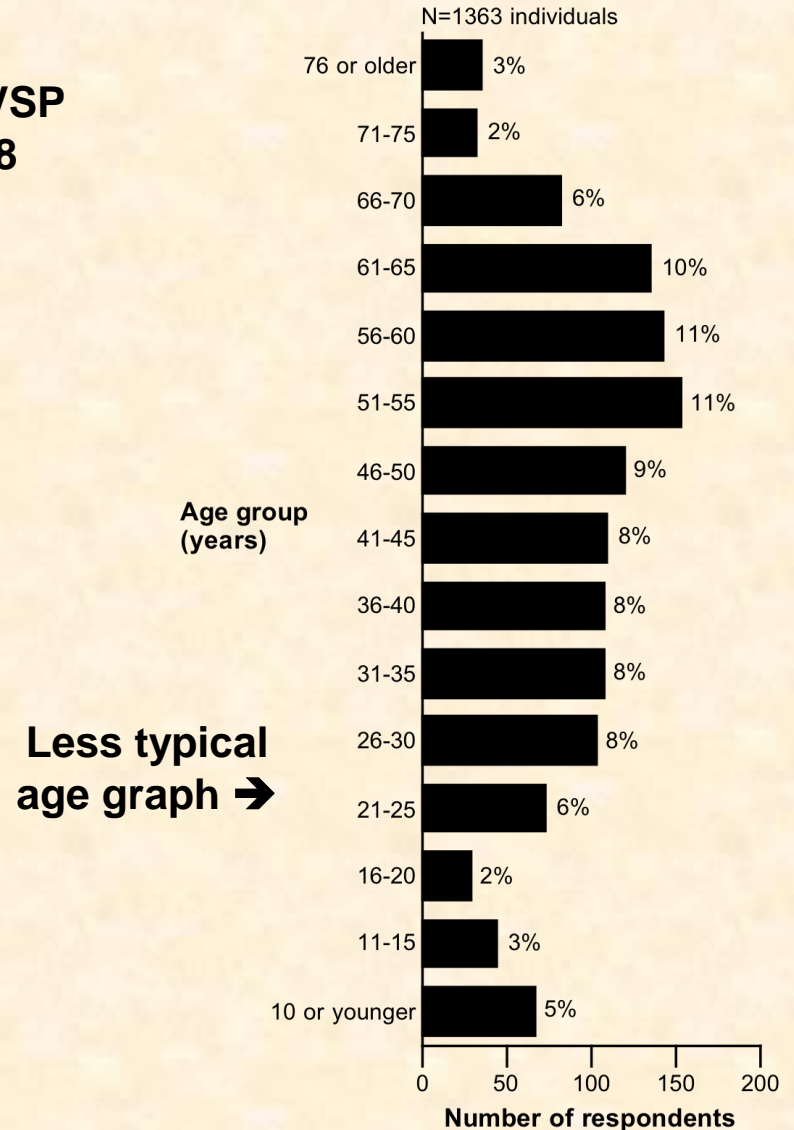
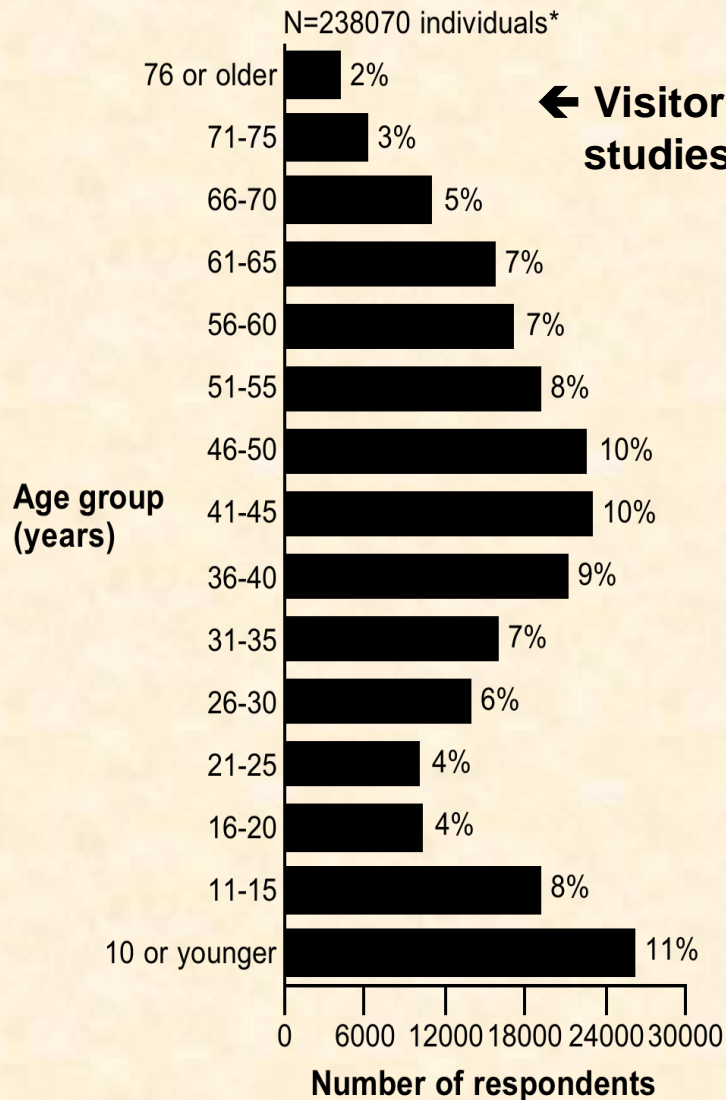
Project	QCode	Category	Question Text
1988 [GLCA-17]	Q4A	(Core)(Dem.)	For yourself and each member of your group, please indicate: Your age on your last birthday.
Export	QCode	Answer - Data	Master Label
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Q4AA - Chart	YOURSELF AGE	209.85: Respondent only
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Q4AA - Chart	YOURSELF AGE	209.85: Respondent only
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Q4AB - Chart	MEMBER #2 AGE	209.86: Group members
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Q4AC - Chart	MEMBER #3 AGE	209.86: Group members
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Q4AD - Chart	MEMBER #4 AGE	209.86: Group members
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Q4AE - Chart	MEMBER #5 AGE	209.86: Group members
1988 [DENA-18]	Q4A	(Core) (MGM)(Dem.)	For yourself and each member of your group, please indicate: Your age on your last birthday.
Export	QCode	Answer - Data	Master Label
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Q4AA - Chart	YOURSELF AGE	209.85: Respondent only

← Data that is available



Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

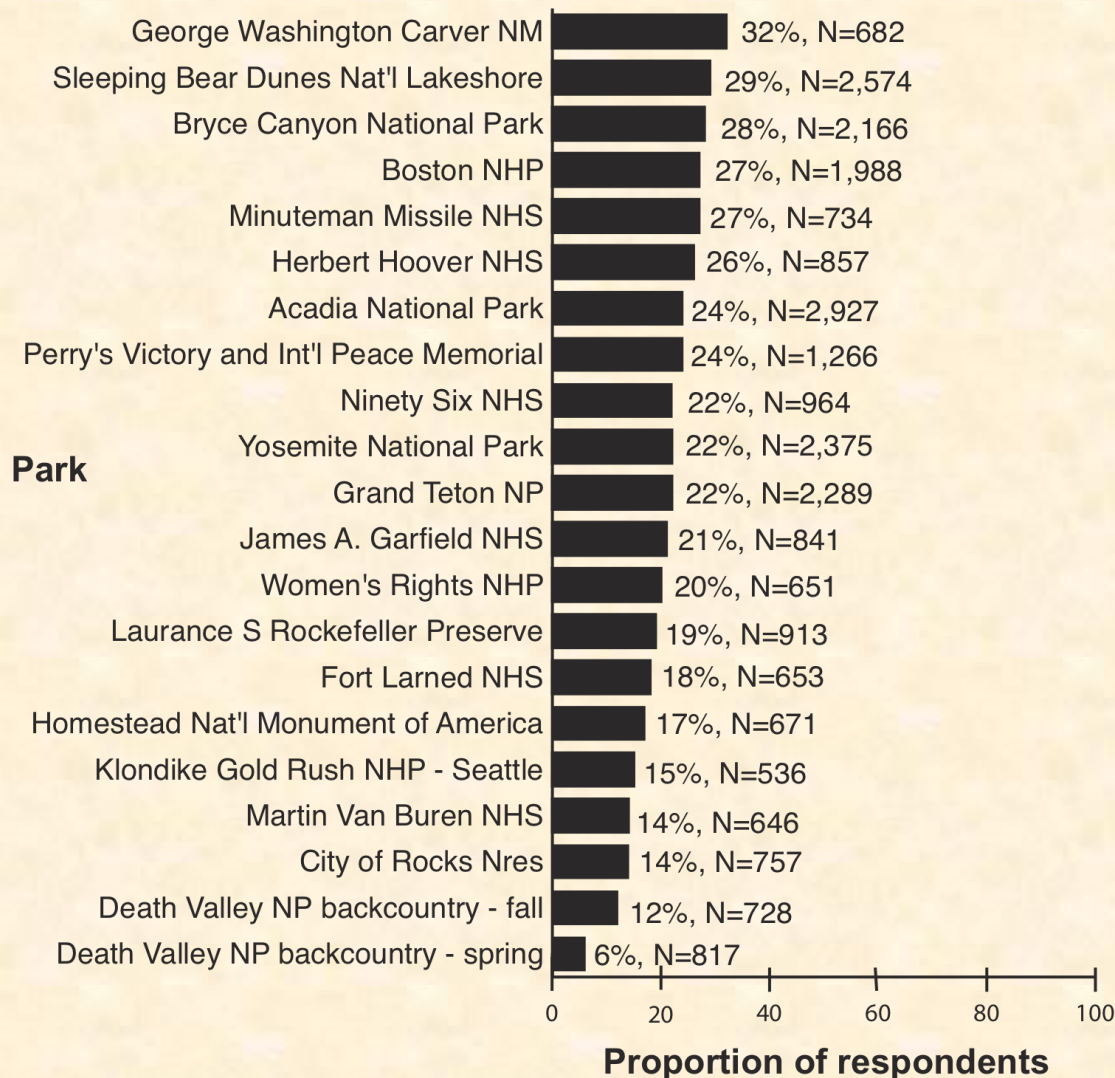




Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

N=number of individuals who responded to the question.



Proportion of children under 18 years of age

20% average for 228 VSP visitor studies

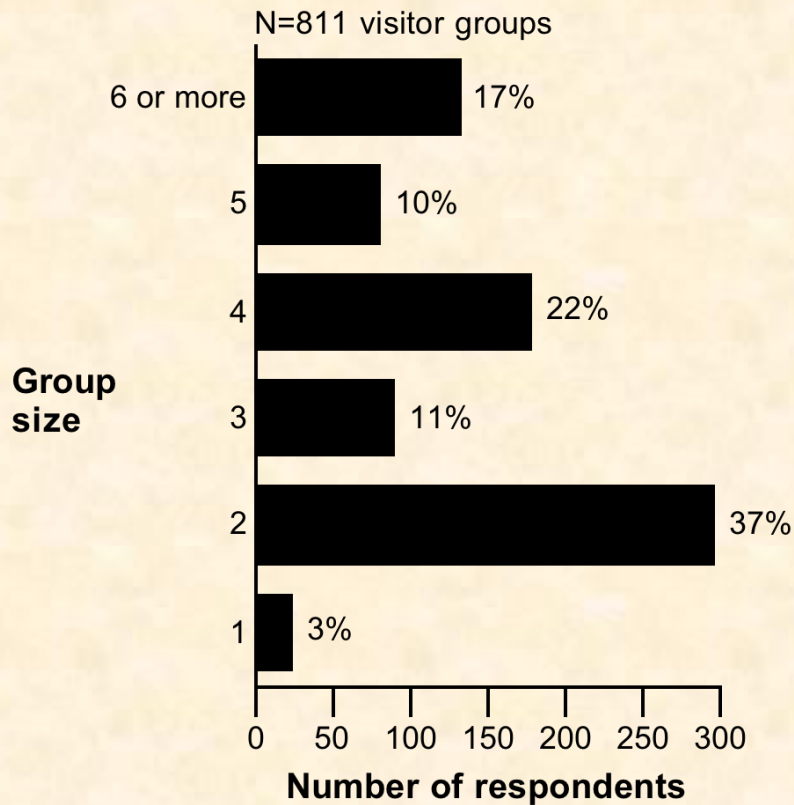
24% of U.S. population under 18 years of age in 2009 (U.S. census)



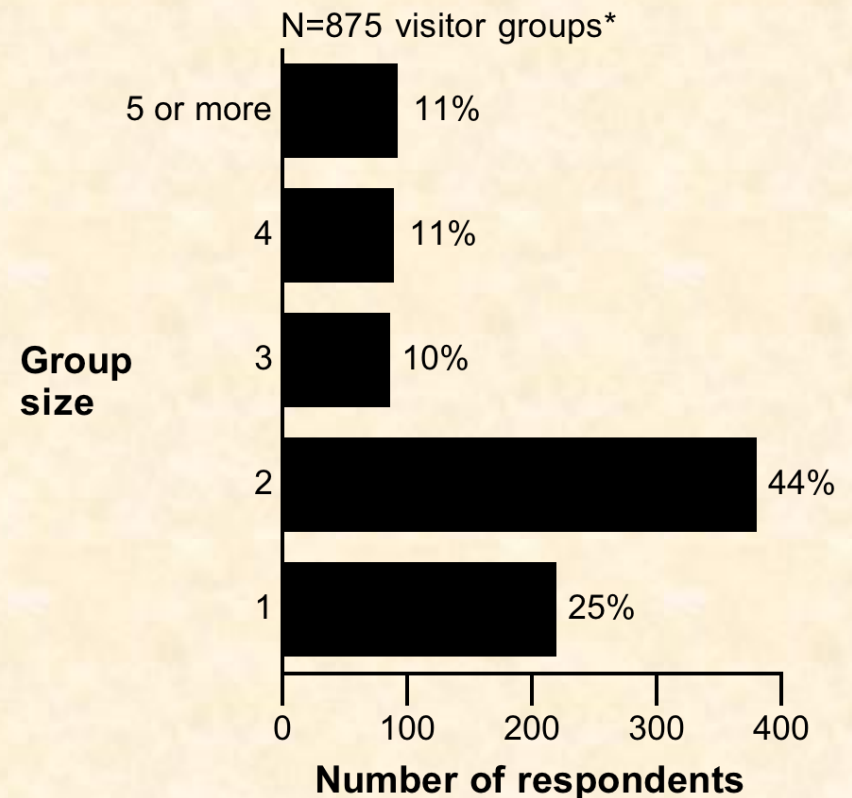
Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

**Typical group size graph
for national park visitors**



**Less typical group size graph
for national park visitors**

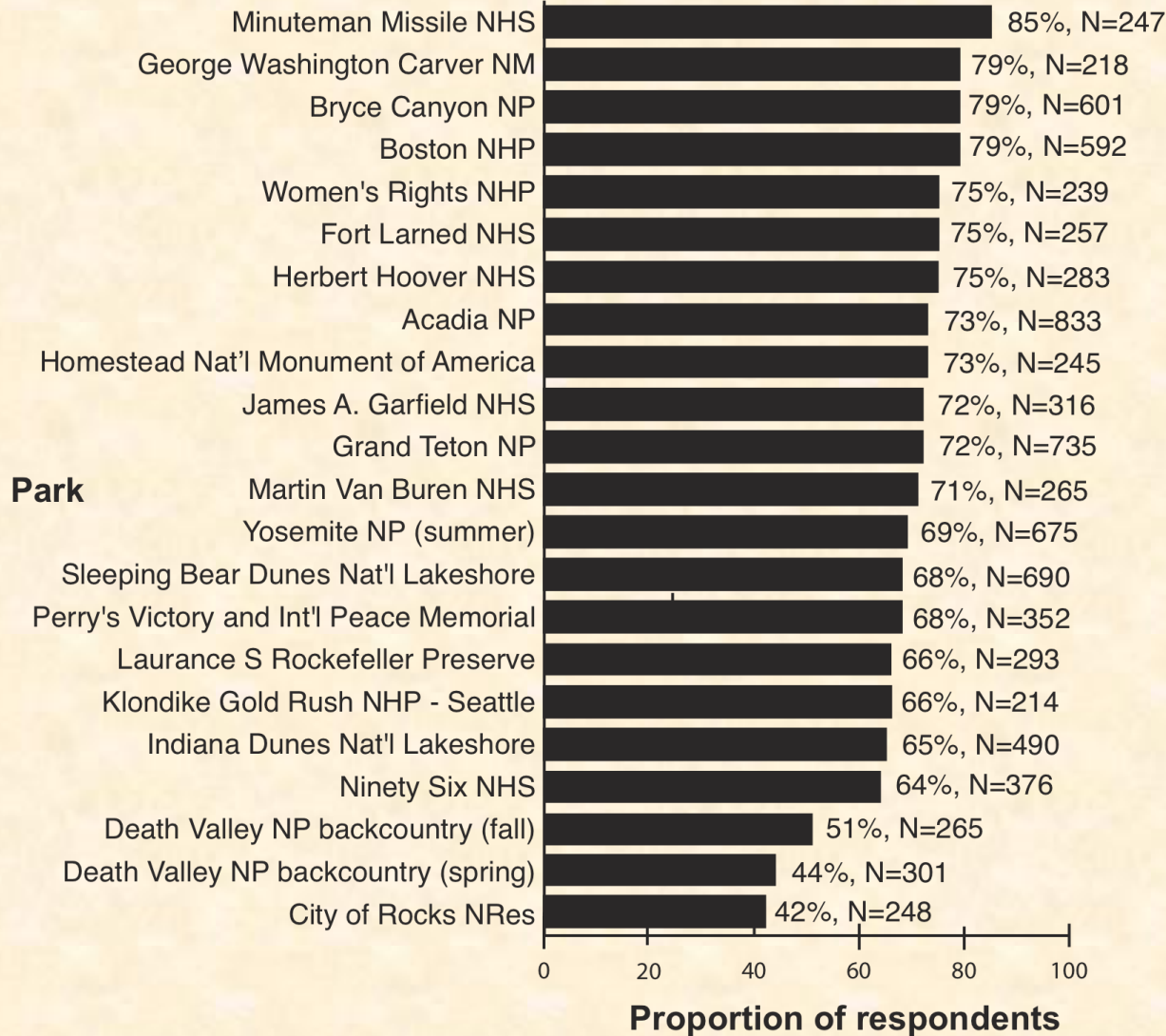




Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

N=number of visitor groups who responded to the question.



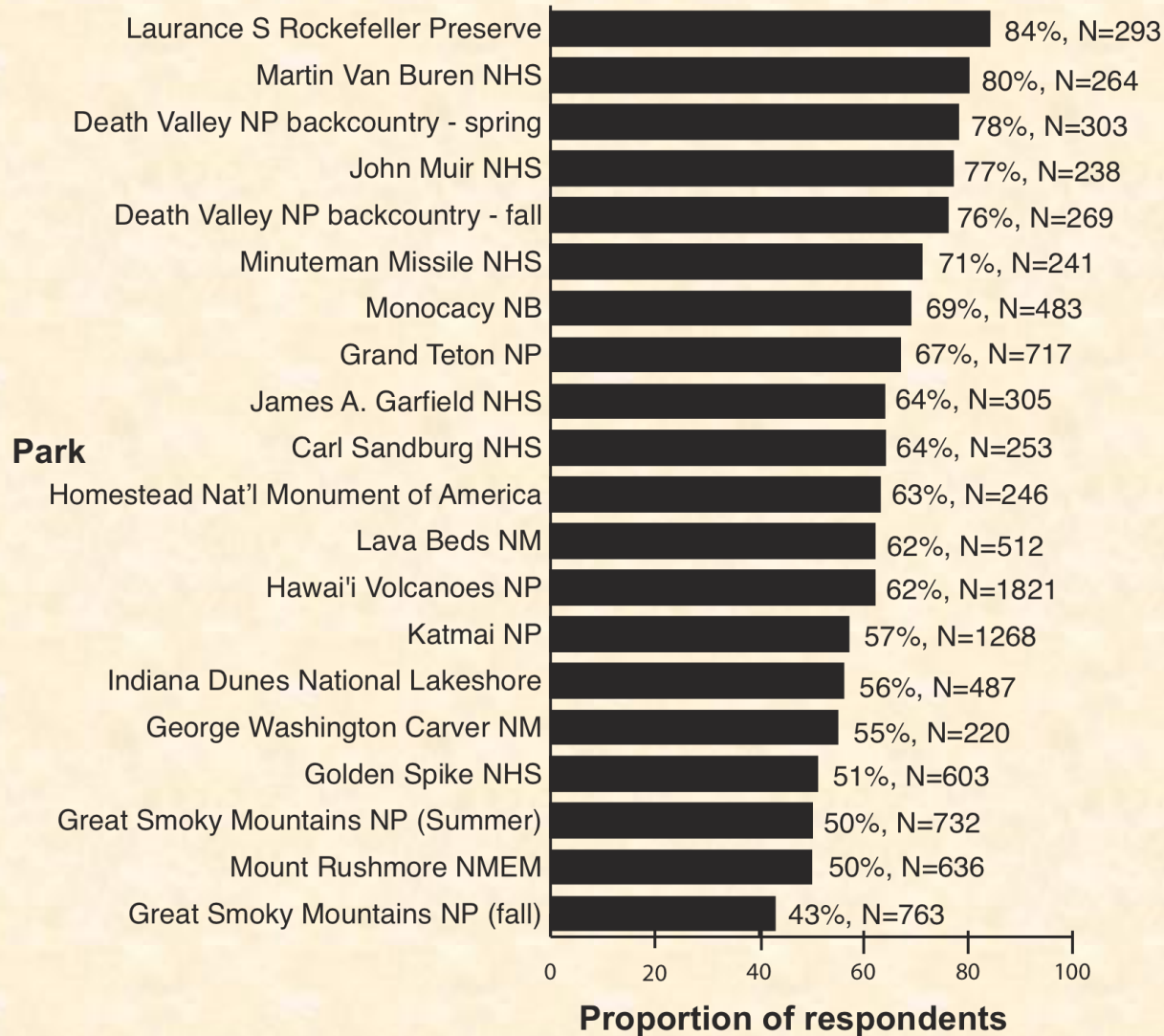
Proportion of family groups



Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

N=number of visitor groups who responded to the question.

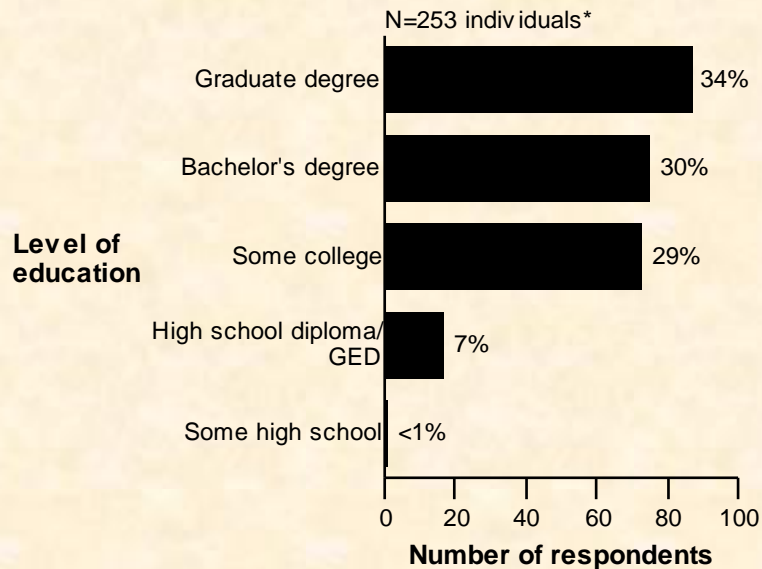


**Highest education level:
Proportion of visitors
with graduate or
bachelor's degrees**

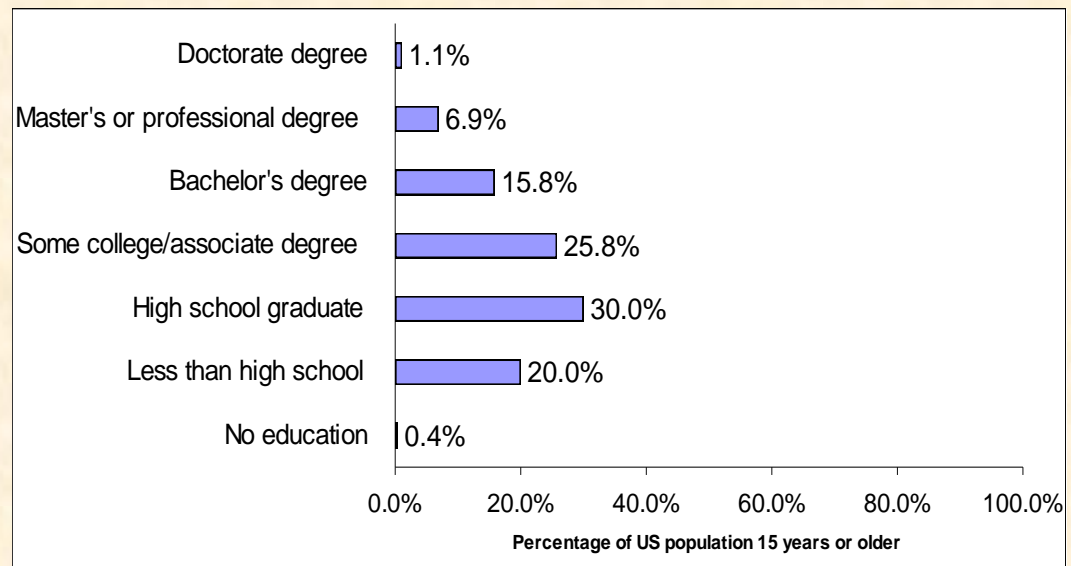


Visitor Services Project database vsp.uidaho.edu

Highest level of education



Educational Attainment of Population 15 Years and Over



Source: U.S. Census Bureau,
Current Population Survey, 2004.



Visitor Services Project database vsp.uidaho.edu

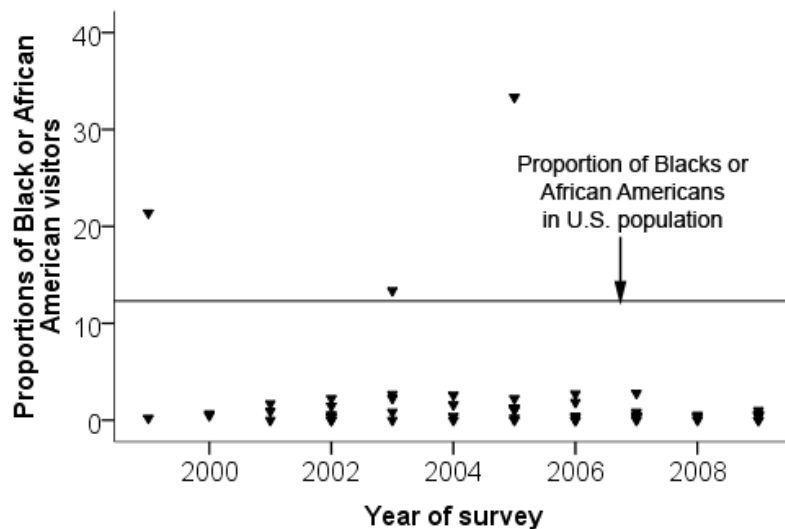
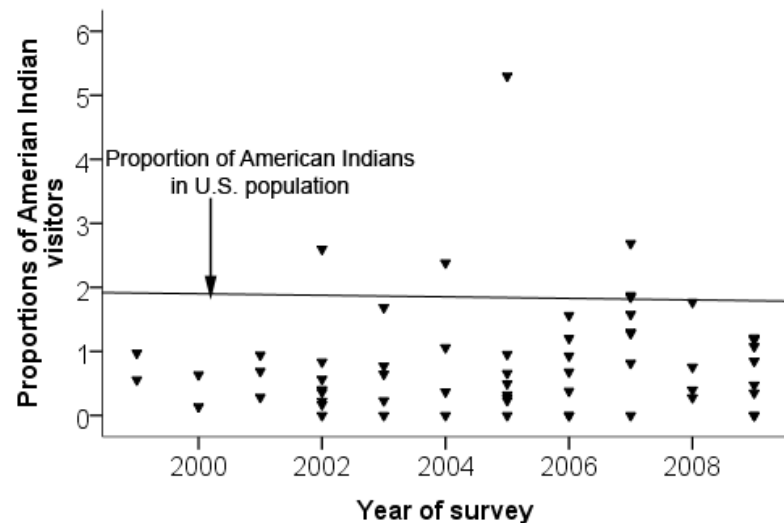
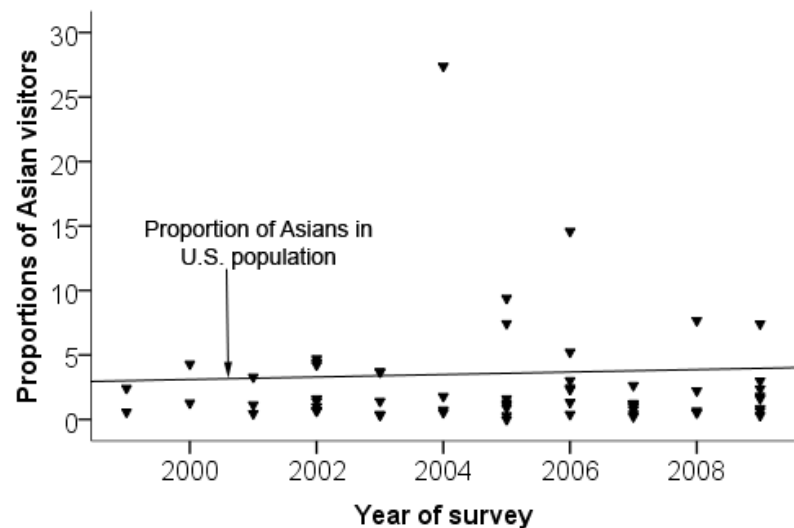
Proportion of U.S. vs international visitors – selected examples

	% U.S.	# of states	% Internat'l	# countries
Death Valley NP	18%	31	72%	19
Cuyahoga Valley NP	99%	30	1% caution	7
Grand Teton NP - LSR	97%	43 + D.C.	3% caution	6
James A. Garfield NHS	97%	35 + D.C.	3% caution	6
Agate Fossil Beds NM	94%	40	6%	10
Mount Rushmore NMEM	95%	46	5%	12
Grand Canyon NP South Rim	91%	39	9%	28



Visitor Services Project database vsp.uidaho.edu

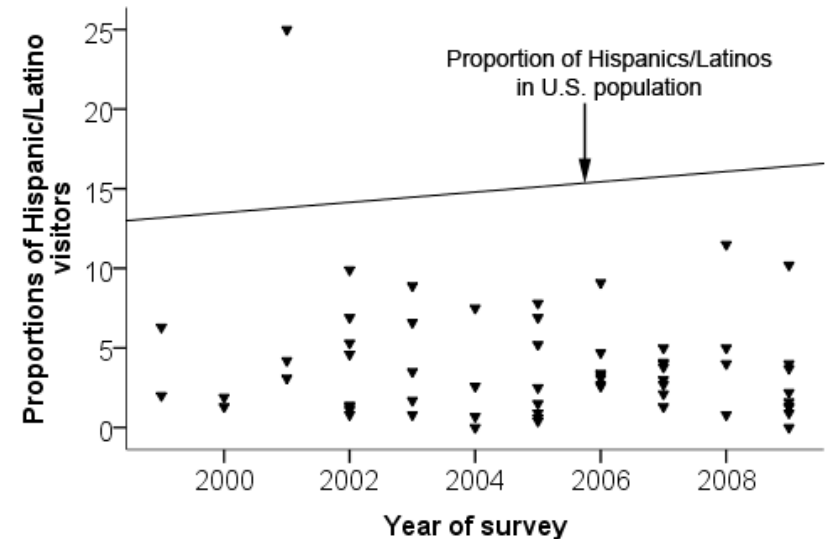
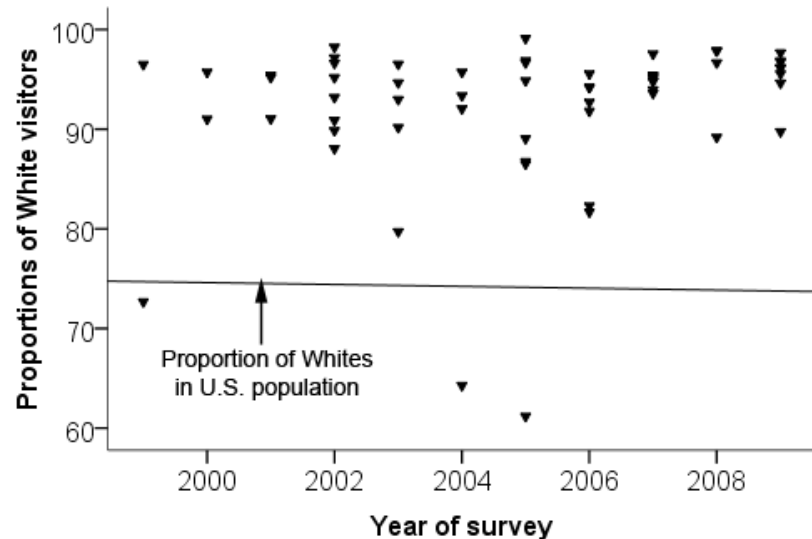
Race/ethnicity





Visitor Services Project database vsp.uidaho.edu

Race/ethnicity

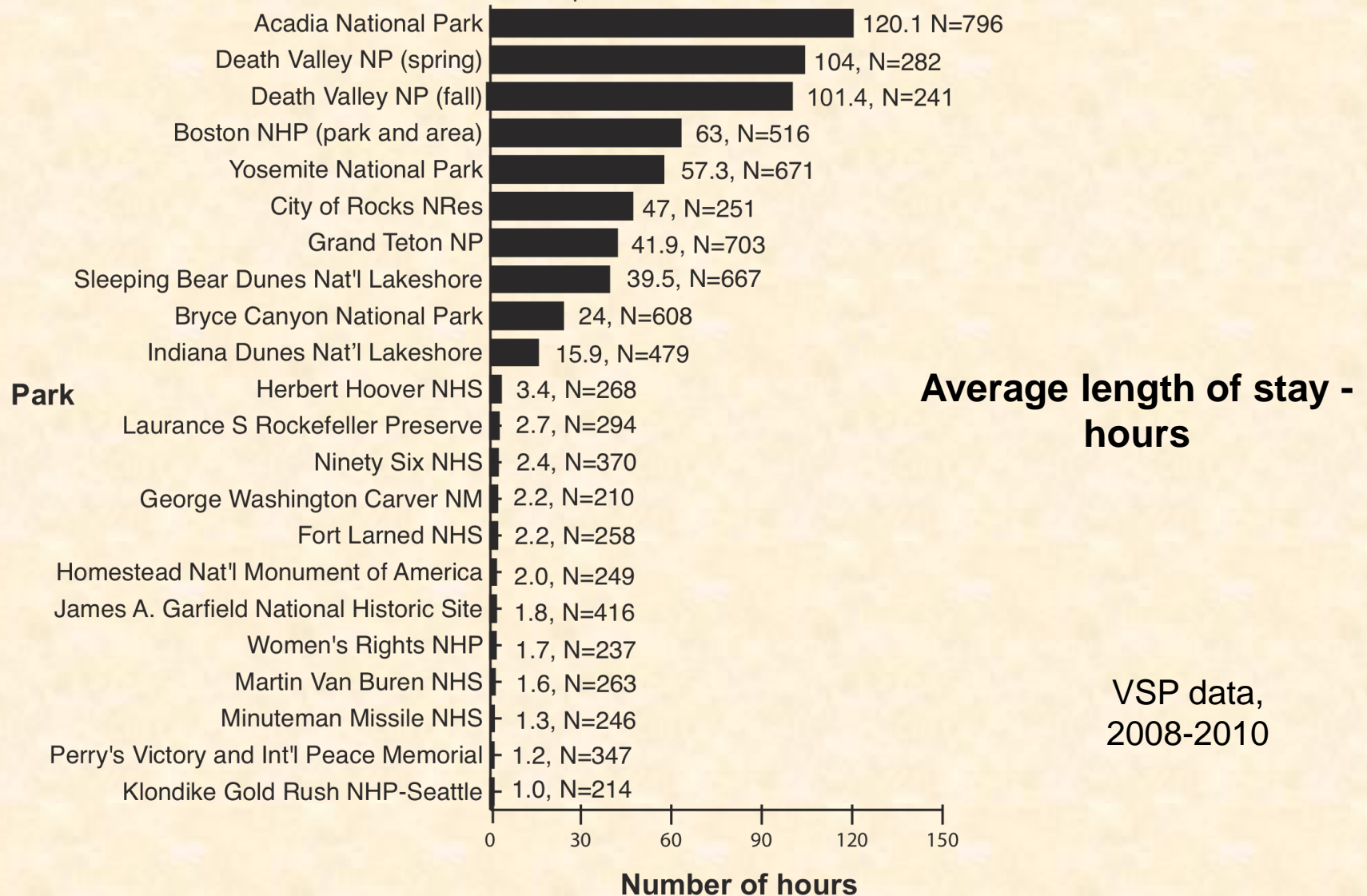




Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

N=number of visitor groups who responded to the question.



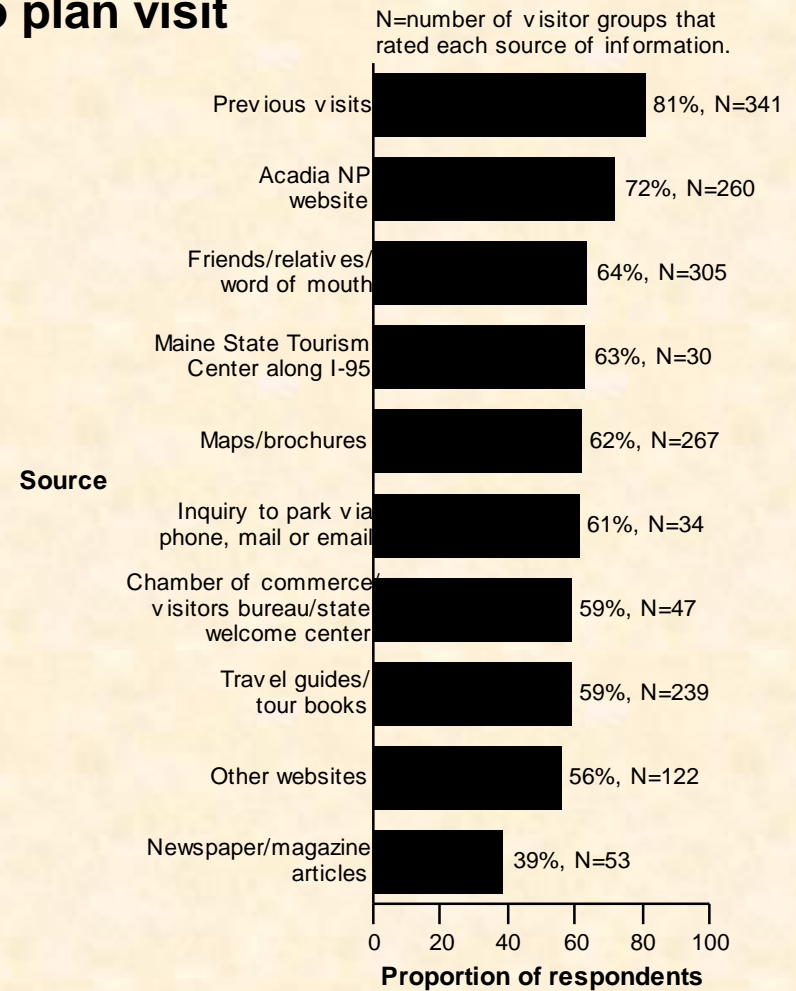


Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu



Sources of information used to plan visit



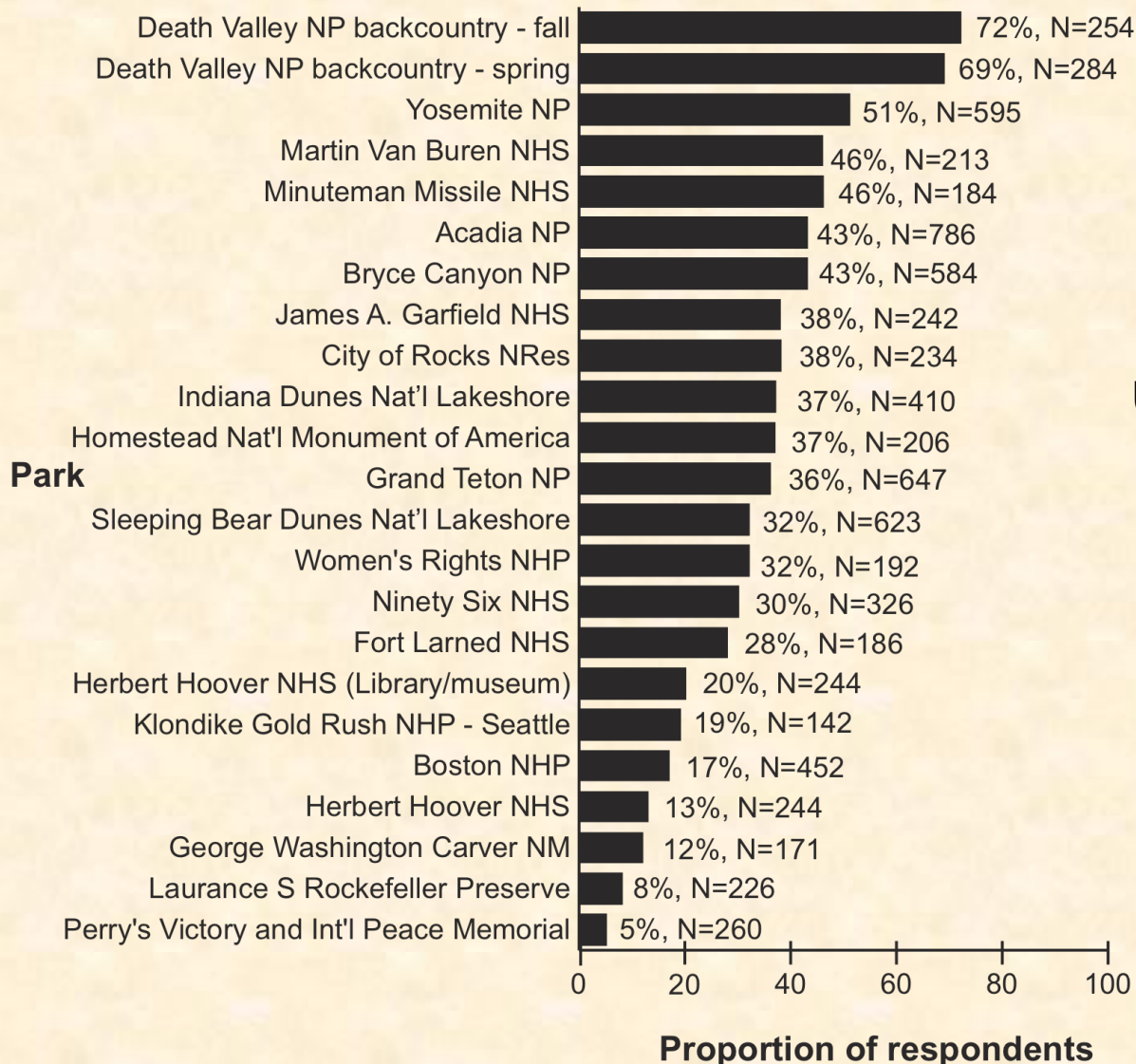
Importance of sources of information used



Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

N=number of visitor groups who responded to the question.



**Use of park website as
source of information
to plan visit**

VSP data,
2008-2010



Visitor Services Project database

vsp.uidaho.edu

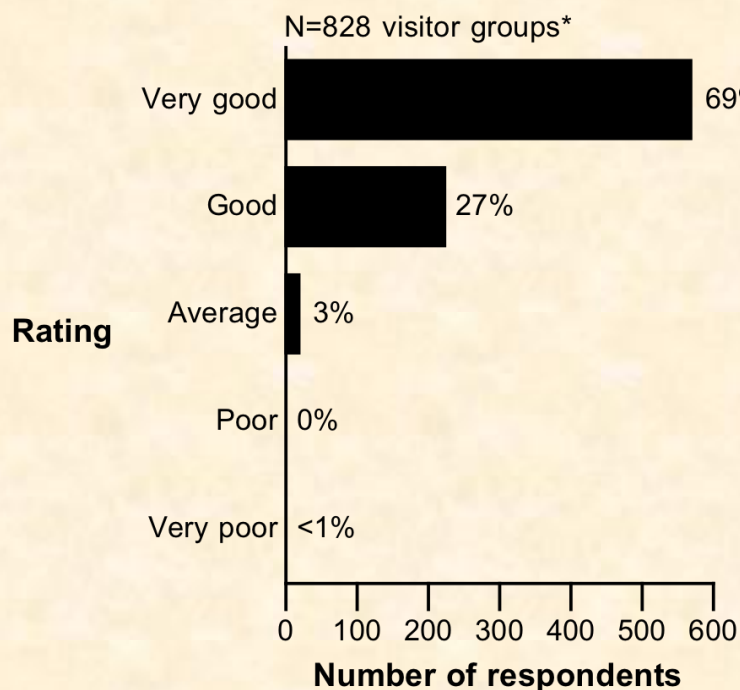
Average expenditures

Park	Year	Average \$ per group	Median \$ (1/2 spent more; 1/2 spent less)	Average \$ per capita	Area of influence
Grand Teton NP	2008	\$1,388	\$673	\$472	100 miles
Glen Canyon NRA - summer	2007	\$1,240	\$595	\$223	120 miles
Glen Canyon NRA- spring	2007	\$914	\$435	\$339	120 miles
Yosemite NP	2009	\$874	\$490	\$242	50 miles
Sleeping Bear Dunes NL	2009	\$702	\$300	\$199	one-hour drive
Perry's Victory & International Peace Memorial	2009	\$433	\$271	\$128	S. Bass Island + 10 miles
Capitol Reef NP	2008	\$350	\$236	\$150	100 miles
Minuteman Missile NHS	2009	\$316	\$133	\$119	30 miles
Ebey's Landing NHR	2008	\$273	\$86	\$95	Whidbey Island
Women's Rights NHP	2009	\$237	\$83	\$91	20 miles
Agate Fossil Beds NM	2007	\$215	\$154	\$50	100 miles
Lava Beds NM	2007	\$206	\$113	\$71	100 miles
Fort Union Trading Post NHS	2007	\$200	\$116	\$79	100 miles
Fort Larned NHS	2009	\$172	\$100	\$72	60 miles
Golden Spike NHS	2006	\$164	\$60	\$67	one-hour drive
James A. Garfield NHS	2009	\$156	\$60	\$64	one-hour drive
Homestead National Monument of America	2009	\$110	\$55	\$49	60 miles



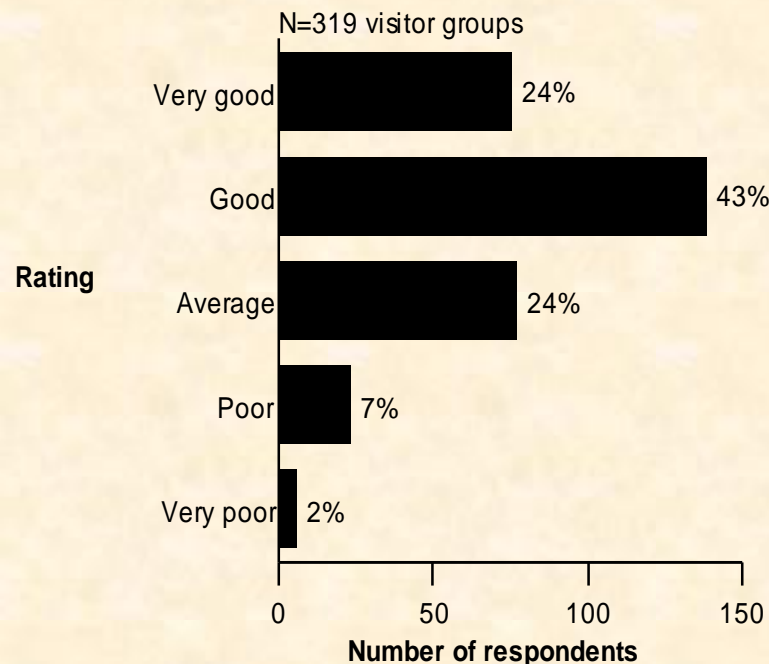
Visitor Services Project database vsp.uidaho.edu

Overall quality rating



Combined “very good” and
“good” quality=96%

Average overall quality for
160 park studies: 90%



Combined “very good” and
“good” quality=67%

Range of overall quality ratings
for 160 park studies: 63% to 99%



Visitor Services Project database vsp.uidaho.edu

**VSP database is still under development
but available for testing
Official release in Spring 2011**

Questions/problems/provide feedback on database?
Click "Contact us"

Margaret Littlejohn
NPS VSP Director
208-885-7863
littlej@uidaho.edu

PSU website: psu.uidaho.edu