



Harding Icefield Trail Hiker Encounter Survey Summary 2008



Photo by Debbie Kurtz, NPS

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Abstract

During the 2008 field season Harding Icefield Trail Hiker Encounter surveys were conducted as a part of the Indicators and Standards Draft Plan for the second year. The number of hikers encountered on the trail was identified as a social indicator in the Visitor Experience Resource Protection (VERP) planning process for the Exit Glacier Area Plan. The HIT Hiker Encounter Survey identifies how many hikers are encountered (defined as passing another park user on the trail/or being passed by another park user on the trail, including other recreationists, researchers, or park staff) by a visitor who hikes the total length of the trail at a pace representative of the typical hiker. For corridor areas, such as trails, encounter rates are a pertinent measure of the quality of hiker experience.

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Acronyms:

GIS	Geographic Information System
KEFJ	Kenai Fjords National Park
NPS	National Park Service

Introduction

The Harding Icefield Trail (HIT) Hiker Encounter Survey was conducted for the second year in 2008 as part of the Indicators and Standards Draft Plan. Numbers of hikers encountered on the HIT was identified as a social indicator in the Visitor Experience Resource Protection (VERP) planning process for the Exit Glacier Area Plan (Kenai Fjords National Park, 2006). The Exit Glacier Area Plan defines a social indicator as visitor impacts on the visitor experience (NPS, pg.2). Although the Indicators and Standards monitoring program has not been fully implemented, the HIT Hiker Encounter Survey was conducted a second year to document hiker encounter numbers and assist with establishment indicators and standards for the draft plan.

The HIT Hiker Encounter Survey identifies how many hikers are encountered (defined as passing another park user on the trail/or being passed by another park user on the trail, including other recreationists, researchers, or park staff) by a visitor who hikes the total length of the trail at a pace representative of the typical hiker. For corridor areas, such as trails, encounter rates are a pertinent measure of the quality of hiker experience. For a low or medium volume trail, such as the HIT, encounter rates are an appropriate indicator of visitor experience (NPS, 2006). By monitoring the number of encounters a visitor has on the trail, quality of experience can be identified.

Methods

Surveys were conducted one day a week on randomly selected days during July and August. In most years the snow has melted on the trail by then and hikers can more easily reach the end of the trail. However, in the summer of 2008 snow remained on much of the upper part of the trail throughout the entire summer. The large amount of snow accumulated over the winter and a cooler than normal summer left snow on the trail through September when it began to accumulate once again. Two potential survey days were randomly selected during each week of July and August. Surveys were conducted on one of the random days to accommodate the busy work schedules of employees conducting the surveys. Weekends were included in the randomly selected days, and four weekend days were surveyed this year. Surveys were completed between the peak hours of 10:00 to 16:00. Surveyors did not wear park uniforms so that the survey could be completed as a “typical” hiker.

They counted every person that they passed or that passed them going either up or down the trail. The number of people in the group and the time the hikers where encountered when they passed the surveyor was recorded on the data sheet. Surveyors recorded if hikers were going up, down or stopped as they were encountered. Codes were assigned to sections of the trail and used to document the location of the encounter on the trail. Often the surveyor would pass and be passed multiple times by the same hiker(s). All hikers met on the trail were recorded, including hikers that were encountered repeatedly. It was noted if it was a repeat encounter.

Surveyors followed a hiking schedule that set an allotted amount of time to reach three specific points on the trail that are commonly used as resting places by hikers. They stopped at these points for a specified amount of time and continued counting hikers at these locations. After

reaching the end of the trail, surveyors hiked down the trail counting hikers on the way down, but did not make any scheduled stops along the way, reaching the trailhead by the allotted time.

Results

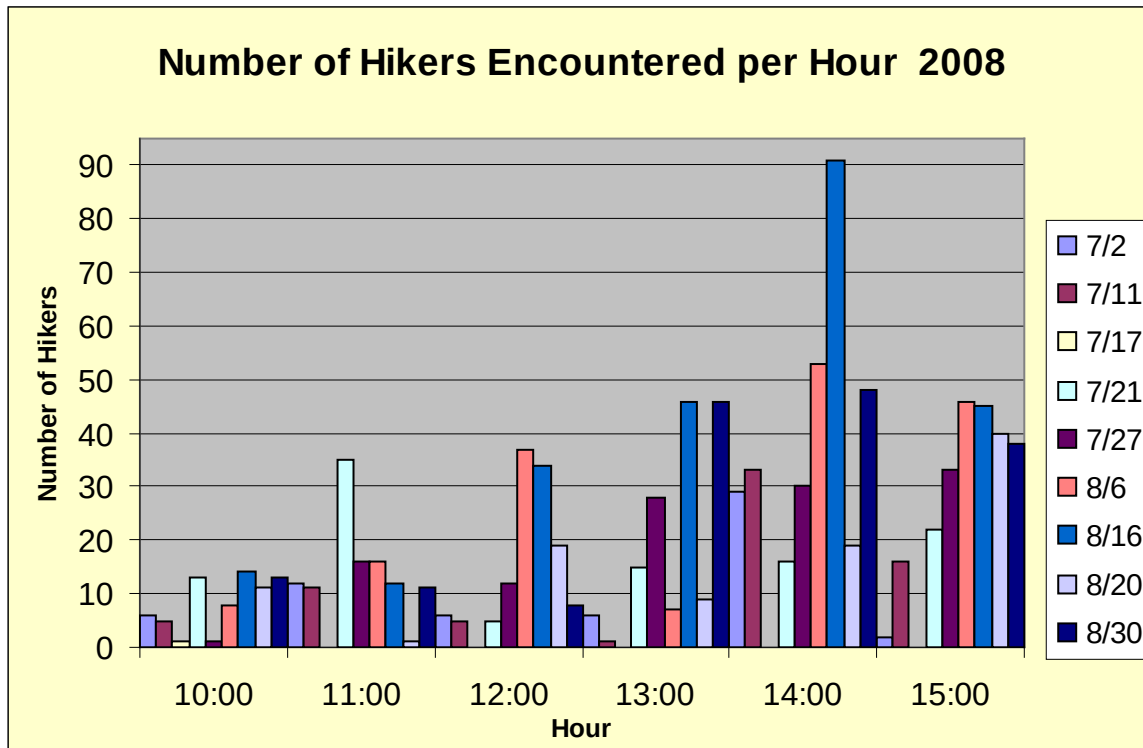
Nine random surveys were completed in the 2008 field season. The data in Table 1 was collected during July and August of 2008. The numbers of groups and people encountered in the 2008 survey were very similar to the numbers encountered in the 2007 survey. In 2007, 440 total groups were encountered and 1252 total people were encountered during the combined surveys.

Table 1.

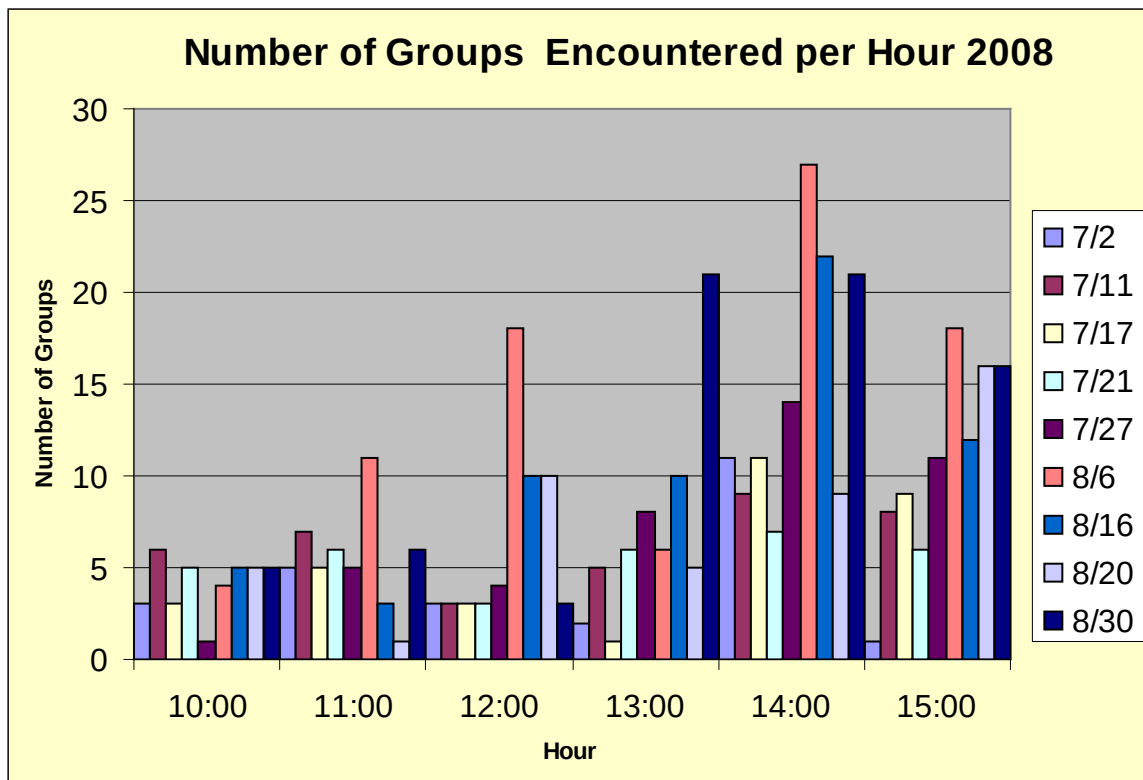
Visitor Encounter Data Summary 2008					
Date	Number of Groups	Number of People	Repeat Encounters	Groups Minus Repeat Encounters	# of People Minus Repeat Encounters
Combined	440	1096	117	323	810
7/2/08	25	61	7	18	54
7/11/08	38	84	11	27	61
7/17/08	32	71	5	27	63
7/21/08	34	106	8	26	85
7/27/08	43	120	10	33	94
8/6/08	84	167	24	60	124
8/16/08	66	224	28	38	116
8/20/08	46	99	9	37	85
8/30/08	72	164	15	57	128

Graph 1 contains the number of individual hikers encountered during each hour on each day the survey was conducted and Graph 2 contains the number of groups encountered each hour on each day the survey was conducted. The number of hikers scale is quite different on the graphs, so keep this in mind when comparing them. It can be deceptive.

Graph 1



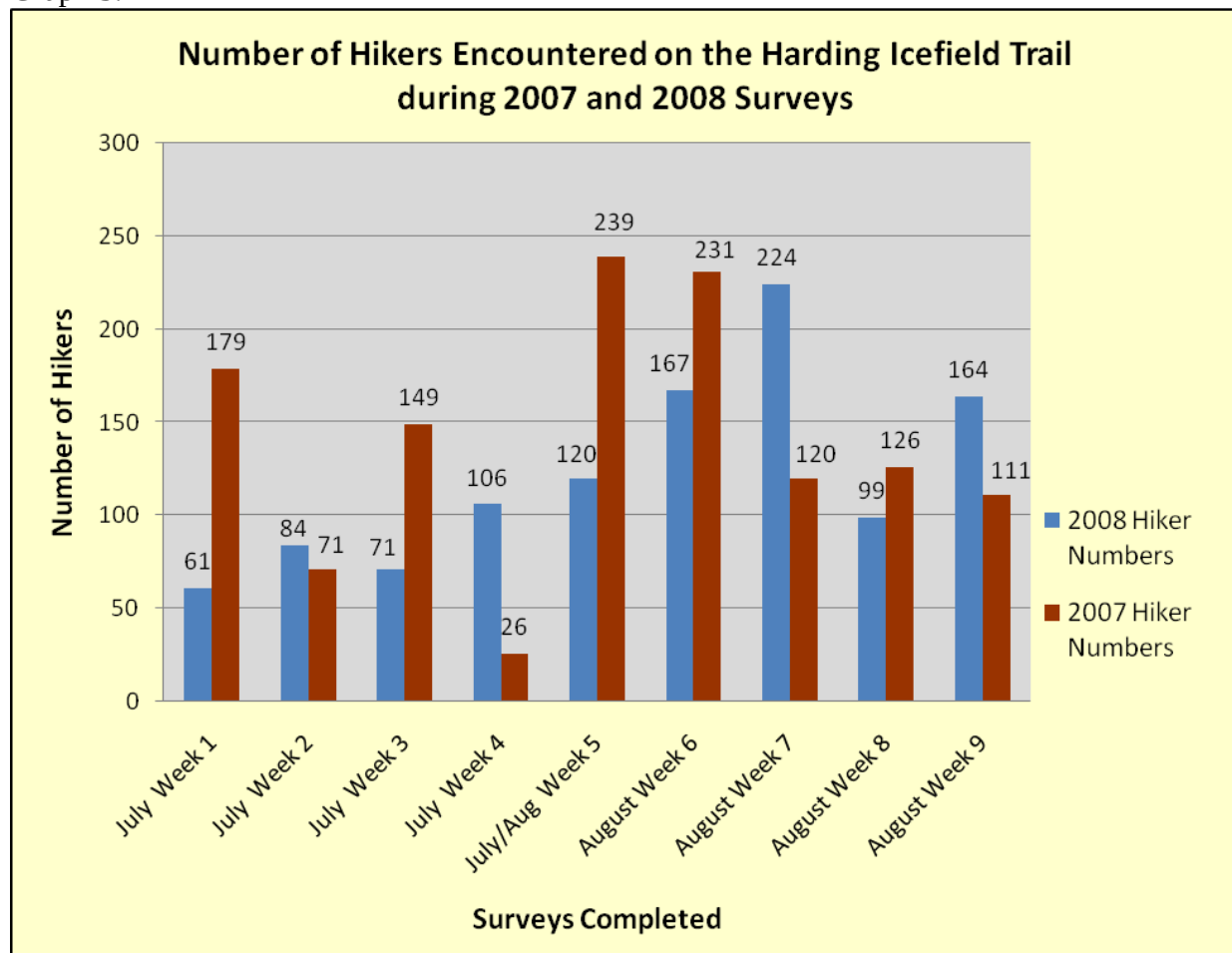
Graph 2



Number of hikers or number of groups encountered per hour for a specified percentage of the time may be a good indicator of social conditions on the Harding Icefield Trail. In the Exit Glacier Area Plan (Kenai Fjords National Park, Pg.6), the social conditions in the Hiker Zone describes encounters with visitors and park staff as being “occasional” during daylight hours and the potential for solitude as “moderate”. “Occasionally groups of 12 or more individuals may be encountered (NPS, 2004).”

Graph 3 illustrates the total number of hikers encountered during each survey on each day during 2007 and 2008. This data includes repeat encounters and does not reflect the number of individual hikers encountered during each survey. This data gives a general look at the number of hikers encountered on the trail during the days surveyed. There are still a relatively large number of hikers on the trail during the last survey at the end of August. 2008 survey numbers start low in the beginning of July and grow steadily through the August, while the 2007 survey numbers jump around more without much pattern related to the date the survey was conducted.

Graph 3.



973 total hikers were on the trail during surveys in 2007 and 797 hikers were on the trail during the 2008 survey for a difference of 176, a slight decrease in hikers actually on the trail not including repeat encounters.

Both visitation at Exit Glacier and hiker numbers on the Harding Icefield Trail in 2008 were down slightly from the previous year, although the visitor numbers in 2008 are not totally accurate because vehicle counters had to be removed for most of August because of a chip seal project, so August 2007 data was used to fill in for the lost data in August of 2008. Exit Glacier vehicle counter was down by 2,081 vehicles and the Harding Icefield sign-in register was down by 561 hikers in 2008.

Discussion

The 2008 protocol seemed to work well with adjustments made in 2007. Surveys were conducted primarily by two people from the Resource Management Team, which seemed to reduce problems that came up in 2007 when people unfamiliar with the trail and protocol conducted the surveys. Both individuals conducting surveys participated in a training survey, which gave them the opportunity to ask questions and become familiar with the trail.

It may be useful to extend the survey later in the field season through the first in September, to capture relatively large number of hikers still on the trail late in the summer season reflected in data collected from the Harding Icefield sign-in register. Hiker numbers documented in the sign-in register dropped off after September 7th. One more week could be added to the end of the survey to capture hiker encounters up until Labor Day weekend. Visitor numbers generally drop off after that weekend.

The lower number of hiker encounters during the July 2008 data may reflect the lingering snow pack on the middle and top portions of the trail. This was due to the above normal snow fall in the winter of 2007/2008, which made hiking on the trail more difficult.

Indicators and Standards continue to be developed for Hiker Encounters on the Harding Icefield Trail in 2009. The data collected in both 2007 and 2008 will be used to compare to previously collected data on hiker experience on the trail to develop standards based on social conditions described in the Exit Glacier Area Plan.

References

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