

Visitor Data Facilitates Resource Management

By Laura B. Szwak

During the summer of 1983, a pilot project was conducted in three National Capital Region parks to gain planning information about park visitor composition and activities. Mapping was used to record observable characteristics of visitors and their activities. The pilot project was to develop a procedure for obtaining

statistics for the Statement for Interpretation (SFI) . . . an annual report that requires a listing of visitor use statistics. As a program development tool, the SFI should identify shifting trends in the visiting public and show adjustments in programming response.

The bases created to store data from this project included ENTRANCE and ONSITE. An auxiliary data base housed necessary control information (date, day of the week, observer, weather, time of day). Data in ENTRANCE came from stationing observers at park entrances to record the characteristics of groups as they entered. Variables in the ENTRANCE data base included group size, age composition, ethnicity, gender, mode of entry, HP or the international handicap symbol on the license plate, and state, also from the license. Since a description of activity onsite also was needed, the ONSITE data base repeated the same variables and added activities pursued by the group.

Observers followed a systematic path through the park, recording the visitors by group. Group size varied depending on the mode of entry and activity pursued. Since an axle counter was used to computer visitation, group size by mode of entry confirmed or determined an appropriate multiplier. Group size also was limited by the mode of entry or size of vehicle, so group size was expected to differ onsite. Only observable visitor characteristics and activities were determined through this system. The number of handicapped was expected to be underrepresented, since only observable handicaps could be recorded. Success also depended on training given observers so that similar definitions were used by all.

A WANG word processor was used to analyze the data. Its List Processing function stored and retrieved data on any variable contained in the system and allowed creation of certain subsets of the visitor population, such as "children," "females," or "picnickers." The system could select subset data by four variables in ranges or by specific values, using and/or logic. As an example, one data set contained (1) children who (2) picnic in (3) groups of over 4 persons (4) on Sundays.

Once the population was selected, it could be output to a word processing document so that other statistics, primarily simple mathematical functions, could be applied. The major limitation was selection by only four variables. Processing time also increases with the number of entries.

Major use of the system was to provide a consistent mechanism for recording visitor use information over time and to select and analyze certain subsets of the park population. The use of a WANG is only a mechanical means to achieve this objective. For elaborate data analyses requiring computation of statistics other than percentages, this system is not recommended. It is also not recommended for data bases with more than 5,000 records.

Szwak is with the Recreation Resources Assistance Division, NPS, Dept. of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.



One female, one male, and one dog . . . the "group composition" of one data set in the National Capital Region's pilot project to gain planning information about park visitors.