

'The Visitor Experience' — What Do We Really Mean?

By Jill Cowley and Richard Schreyer

An NPS planner and a park superintendent are discussing an undeveloped area of a hypothetical park. "Well," says the superintendent, "as for the visitor experience, we were thinking of providing an access trail to the lower ruin. If we take it around this way they'll experience the enclosure of the canyon ... and perhaps we need to think about handicapped access" "Let me see" the planner says, "I think we could keep it at 5 percent along here ... and we could enhance the interpretive experience by putting in some waysides"

Four years later, at the same site, a visitor approaches the park ranger: "I used to come here when all the signs weren't here — it's all different now. Are there any other ruins I can go to where it's not so developed?" A visitor study shows that 60 percent of visitors to the site were dissatisfied with the changes, and 20 percent said they would go somewhere else. The staff and planners tried to enhance the visitor experience — what went wrong for the 60 percent?

The value of planning and managing for visitor experiences is becoming more and more widely realized, and the term "the visitor experience" is coming into wide use in NPS documents. There is increasing concern within applied recreation research for the quality of the park visit, what visitors are getting out of their visit, and whether or not they are satisfied. So we plan in terms of the visitor experience. But what does this really mean? Are we talking about the experience offered by the resource or the internal experience of the visitors — what they are thinking and feeling? Park resources, in addition to their intrinsic value, provide elements to be experienced, for example the expansiveness of a view or the fine masonry work of a prehistoric pueblo. Resources also provide settings for experiences. As NPS employees we see it as our responsibility to identify and provide access to those resources we think visitors will enjoy the most. We determine to a large degree what visitors experience.

How the resources are experienced also is important. The kind of internal experience visitors want — how they want to feel within the resource — determines to a large extent how they want to experience the resource. For example, if visitors want to feel challenged and independent rather than safe and guided, they may prefer to experience the resources in a setting with fewer facilities, without structured interpretation, and with a more difficult trail. When we presume to provide for visitors, we need to be aware of what internal experiences they want.

How do we plan and manage for these kinds of experiences, which may seem too personal, too individualistic, or too intangible to deal with? Because activities are easier to understand and visualize, we may find ourselves describing an experience in terms of an activity, for example, a "backpacking experience." However, people interested in the same activity (e.g. hiking) may be seeking very different experiences (e.g. relaxation vs. risk and discovery) and therefore desire very different kinds of settings. Planning would be more effective if we could describe experiences in a way more manageable than considering each person as unique, but without oversimplifying the diversity groupings. Is it possible to categorize visitor experiences in the same way we do activities?

Visitor preference research completed at Bandelier

National Monument during the summer of 1984 indicates that it is possible to categorize a range of experiences at cultural resource sites.

More background on the experience range concept and more details on this study can be found in "The Role of Visitor Preference Information in the Planning, Design and Management of Archeological Resource Areas in the National Parks," a Masters thesis completed by Jill Cowley in January 1987, at Utah State University.

The purpose of this research was (1) to determine the range of visitor preferences for experiences and, in order to give planners and managers an indication of how to provide for these experiences, (2) to see if visitors associated different facilities and interpretive media with the different experiences. A total of 395 visitors completed on-site questionnaires which asked (1) how important were certain experiences to you on this trip? and (2) how much did different types of facilities or interpretive media add to or detract from your overall experience?

Because Bandelier is a park rich in archeological resources, experiences such as "to understand how the prehistoric people who used to live here compare with other Indian groups in the southwest" and "to enjoy the special way the ruins make me feel" were included as well as experiences such as "to take risks" and "to feel my independence." The list of facilities included signs, toilets, picnic tables, and handicapped access. The list of interpretive media included both personal media (e.g. ranger-guided walks and cultural demonstrations) and impersonal media (e.g. waysides and trailguides).

Factor analysis was used to determine which experiences visitors grouped together, that is, wanted at the same time. Four groupings were found:

- 1 INTERPRETATION — visitors wanting this group rated highly experiences such as:
— "finding out facts and figures"

- "comparing with other cultures"
- "to feel like the prehistoric people"
- SR STRESS-RELEASE
- e.g. — "to relieve my tensions"
- "for tranquility"
- SF SELF-FULFILLMENT
- e.g. — "to develop my skills and abilities"
- "to increase my self-worth"
- S SOCIAL
- e.g. — "to be with the other members of my group"

It was possible for visitors to rate more than one of these groups or types of experiences as important. Although there were visitors who wanted all the possible combinations, most visitors wanted one of six combinations:

- I Interpretation
- I/S Interp/Social
- I/S/SR Interp/Social/Stress-release
- ALL Interp/Social/Stress-release/Self-fulfillment
- SR/SF Stress-release/Self-fulfillment
- SR Stress-release

These combinations can be arranged along a continuum from an emphasis on interpretation to an emphasis on stress-release, with mixtures in between. According to the results, when visitors want one of these combinations of experiences, they are also looking for certain facilities and interpretive media, as shown in Table 1.

Research results such as these indicate the range of desired experiences which, ideally, are provided for either within the park or within the region. They also suggest how opportunities and settings can be structured to enhance specific experiences. For example, if an area is being planned to include a self-guided interpretive trail which will encourage those seeking a stress-release experience to be involved with interpretation, any development or facilities would be put at the trailhead and not at the archeological site itself, since facilities at the site is very unpopular with this group.

Even more useful than knowing these kinds of preferences is knowing "critical preferences," that is, knowing what facilities and media can "make or break" an experience. Critical preferences were not directly tested for in this study, but this can be done in future

Table 1 — Summary of Visitor Preferences

Experience Preference Range						
I	I/S	I/S/SR	All	SR/SF	SR	
Interpretation	Interp/ Social	Interp/ Social/ Stress- release	All four	Stress- release/ Self- fulfillment	Stress- release	
Added to a lot*	trail & road signs	trail & road signs	FACILITIES — (no strong responses)	trail signs	—	—
Detracted from a lot	—	—	—	—	—	facilities at the archeological site
INTERP. MEDIA						
Added to a lot	self or ranger- guided trails, dem- onstrations	As in I plus visitor center & slide talks	self- guided (trailguide or wayside)			
Detracted from a lot	—	—	—	—	—	—

research. Critical preferences may make enough difference to change a visitor's behavior, as was the case in the scenario at the beginning of this article. We can return to the planning stage and "replay" the conversation between the planner and superintendent as it might have been if they had had access to research results on the range of visitor experiences:

"Well, as for the visitor experience," the superintendent says, "we know that out of the range of experiences wanted by visitors, the intermediate one – where they want less structured interpretation – is the one we really haven't planned for in the park. We were thinking that this area might be a good one . . ." "Now, for that experience," the planner continues, "we'd need to plan a trail, one that's good for self-guided interpretation – no facilities, though." "And the resources in this area can't take a lot of visitation, which will fit in with the kind of numbers we would expect for that experience . . ."

Basic research can be used to test the experience categories described here. Important questions are: do these categories represent real people? Do the categories apply to all types of parks or just archeological parks? Park-specific visitor surveys completed during planning can determine how many visitors to that park want which type of experiences. The results can be combined with resource information to determine how and where to best provide for the different experiences. In the absence of research, planners and managers can continue to use their observations of visitors and existing preference studies to develop a range of experience types. The more accurate and realistic our understanding of the range of experience preferences, the more effective and responsive we can be in providing opportunities for enriching park visits.

Cowley is a Landscape Architect at the NPS Denver Service Center; Schreyer is a Professor in the Utah State University Department of Forest Resources at Logan, Utah.