

Public Response to the Fee Program At Fort Clatsop National Memorial

Editor's Note: In 1986 and 1987, a sociological pulse was taken at Fort Clatsop National Memorial by Donald R. Field, NPS Sociologist, and Marty Lee, a Research Associate with the NPS-CPSU at Oregon State University. The project was a joint endeavor with the park staff. Here, Supt. Frank Walker reports on the study of public response to the initiation of entrance fees at his park.

Fort Clatsop National Memorial began collecting entrance fees in 1987 for the first time since its establishment in 1958. The U.S. Congress had legislated that 134 additional NPS sites would either begin collecting fees or raise existing fees.

Fort Clatsop is a small, rural historical site about 5 miles from Astoria, Ore. It commemorates the winter encampment of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1805-06 at the mouth of the Columbia River, and has about 170,000 visitors a year. The primary orientation is the interpretation of cultural history. Public response to the fee program was expected to be positive because:

- Fees would enhance interpretation by providing new programs.
- Fees would allow the staff to expand both interpretive offerings and the season when they were offered.
- Fees would allow expansion of other visitor services.
- Fees would add to our resource management capability and research initiative.
- Fees would enable the staff to measure public response to our programs, facilities and services.

1987 Action Plan

Our first step was a plan of action for fee collection and informing the public about it. A general press release went out in mid-December and was carried in three local area papers and in the statewide *Oregonian*. As superintendent, I was interviewed on two local radio stations. Our fee collection rationale focused on improving visitor services over a longer season, and the local newspaper printed an editorial supporting the park fee concept.

The second step was to insure that each staff member knew the fee issue and could explain it to visitors and local residents. Most early reactions were "Okay, if we have to . . . you do a good job out there . . . the fee might eliminate some of the frequent local visitors . . . we really support and parks and are happy to help . . ." Even many of the Golden Age Passport visitors contributed their dollar entrance fees to the Historical Association's donation box.

Our third step involved my public relations role as superintendent. I presented talks about the fees to the Astoria Kiwanis Club, the Seaside Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Astoria Area Chamber of Commerce's tourism promotion committee and the Fort Clatsop Historical Association. We also published information in the National Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation publication. All of this occurred at least three months before actual fee collection began in mid-April.

The fourth step was to assign the Chief Park Ranger responsibility for the fee program. A returning seasonal Park Ranger was hired one month early to establish the system. The information desk was modified to accommodate a cash register, necessary fee collec-

tion signs were constructed, the new fee collectors were sent to Mount Rainier NP to examine their operation, and fee information was included in the materials available at the 15 to 20 visitor information centers in the area and in the park's own summer interpretive schedules.

Fee Allocation

The daily fee at Fort Clatsop, \$1 per person, was collected at the visitor center. Visitors under 13, those 62 or older, and school groups on educational field trips were exempt. There was a \$3 maximum limit per family and a \$10 annual Fort Clatsop pass for area residents. In addition, the park sold federal Golden Eagle Passports and issued Golden Age and Golden Access passes.

The fees were deposited directly into the U.S. Treasury, but Congress appropriated special FY 1987 "fee enhancement funds" specifically for improvements in park interpretive programs, resource management, and research activities. At Fort Clatsop, the \$19,200 thus available was used as follows:

Interpretation

1. Initiated new spring and fall living history demonstrations April 1 - September 30, using two additional seasonal park rangers. \$7,300
2. Provided salary for 6 weeks of outreach interpretive "Ranger on the Road" living history programs in Oregon and Washington schools. Matched \$2,000 donation from Fort Clatsop Historical Association as support for this effective program. \$2,000
3. Hired one additional summer park ranger for additional special programs during the summer at Fort Clatsop and once-a-week evening programs at Fort Stevens State Park. \$3,500
4. Developed an off-site Bicentennial of the Constitution school exhibit, and new site bulletins on the Saltworks and the Fort Clatsop replica. \$2,400
5. Constructed and installed interpretive bulletin board at the Saltworks site in Seaside, Ore. \$1,000

Research

1. Conducted follow-up survey on 1986 Fort Clatsop visitor study by OSU/NPS Cooperative Park Studies Unit. \$1,000

Resource Protection

1. Hired seasonal landscape architect and developed Landscape Management Plan to guide historic scene development back to the 1805-1806 time period when Lewis and Clark were here. \$2,000
- Total \$19,200

Visitor Profile

In June 1987, a weekend visitor pulse was conducted to gain information about park visitors and their assessment of programs and services, including fee collection. A combination of on-site interviews and mailback questionnaires was used. Based on estimates of visitor numbers, a random sample of 200 groups leaving the visitor center was contacted over a 3-day weekend. The interview, conducted by a CPSU researcher or a Fort Clatsop park ranger, included a brief description of the purpose of the study,

and a request for cooperation and choice of a group spokesperson to facilitate completion of the postage-paid mailback questionnaire. The questionnaire asked visitors about their satisfaction with Park programs and facilities, their knowledge of the history surrounding Fort Clatsop, their travel patterns, and demographic characteristics, as well as their feelings about the collection of fees. Follow-up reminders were sent a week after the initial interview as needed. At the survey closing date, 80 percent had returned the questionnaires. Data on visitor characteristics have not been summarized at this writing.

Visitor Response to Fees

Three questions focused on visitors' opinions about collection of fees:

Fort Clatsop began charging an entrance fee in April 1987. A substantial portion of the money goes back into visitor services for the park. Did you know before you came that there was an entrance fee being charged at Fort Clatsop? (check one)

Yes 25%

No 75%

Despite major public awareness efforts, a majority did not know about the entrance fee, probably because many came from out-of-region.

How do you feel about paying a fee to visit Fort Clatsop?

5% I shouldn't have to pay

88% I don't mind paying

7% I don't know how I feel about paying a fee

The need to pay a fee obviously is not a problem for almost 90 percent of those contacted. Whether the nominal fee amount was part of the reason visitors did not object is unknown.

How do you feel about being charged? (check one)

4% One dollar is too little

92% One dollar is just right

4% One dollar is too much

Summary

Overall, Fort Clatsop visitors did not object to having to pay a fee to enter the park. Very few visitors appeared upset and only a few left when asked to pay. Fee collection rangers made every effort to make people feel welcome and to explain the programs and visitor services available. It was time-consuming to explain repeatedly all the various fee options, although signs helped alleviate the problem. At times the visitor center lobby became congested, with visitors paying fees at one end of the information desk and buying books and historical items at the other end. Although fee collection rangers were rotated to other duties, some boredom did set in towards the end of the summer.

The park collected a total of \$31,116 from April 13 through September 30. It cost \$14,800 to set up and collect fees; \$19,200 in funds were used to enhance interpretive, research, and resource management programs. It is interesting to note that the donation box collections were down 18.5 percent compared to the same period the year before (FY86 = \$2,386, FY87 = \$1,944).

Strict accountability, well-followed operating procedures, and good internal controls helped give the operation credibility. The effort paid for itself and the Park gained from collection of the fees.

Our experience and visitor pulse survey results show the value of maintaining the on-going personal information effort with park visitors, even after an intensive media campaign.