

The Use of National Parks by Older Americans Suggests New Service Patterns Needed

By Francis McGuire and Joseph O'Leary

The greying of America is a well documented phenomenon. The increasing numbers of older Americans are having an impact on all areas of society. The approximately 29 million individuals aged 65 or over, representing one out of every eight Americans, touch every aspect of life in the United States. And contrary to myth, the vast majority of older adults are active, healthy, and independent.

National Park Service areas are not immune from the influence of the changing population pyramid. The NPS, through its Golden Age Passport program, has invited this growing portion of the population into the nation's parks. However, not a great deal is known about the use of parks by older visitors. More information on the program and facility adaptations necessary to serve older visitors is needed.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of older users of parks, a study was initiated in 1987. Funding for the project was provided by the AARP Andrus Foundation. The Eastern National Park & Monument Association supported the project by providing copies of *Passport to your National Parks* to individuals participating in the study. Technical assistance and support were provided by the chief scientist from the Southeast Region of the National Park Service.

The study had three major purposes:

1. To examine the services and facilities used by older visitors to national parks;
2. To assess the satisfaction of older visitors with the range of services and facilities available in parks;
3. To identify use patterns of older visitors.

Three hundred individuals who had used Golden Age Passports during 1987 evaluated the parks they had visited. In all, 804 Park Evaluations were completed and 140 parks were represented. Participants

were drawn from lists of individuals who had obtained their Passports in parks in the Southeastern Region between 1984 and 1986. Therefore, respondents were over-representative of states in this region and all were relatively new Golden Age Passport users. Most of the participants were veteran park users who had visited more than 30 different parks.

What services and facilities are important to park users?

The data indicated that older visitors were primarily interested in using services and facilities considered traditional to the mission of the parks. Respondents were asked to indicate how important each of 34 attributes was in making a park "ideal." The most important areas to older park users were: upkeep of facilities (identified as either "very important" or "extremely important" by 95.5 percent of the respondents); information signs (94.1 percent); upkeep of grounds (91.8 percent); staff (89.3 percent); information sources such as maps and brochures (89.3 percent); restrooms (87.4 percent); parking (85.9 percent); visitor center (85.4 percent); scenic overlooks (81 percent); and exhibits (80.6 percent). The least important areas in an ideal park were activities such as swimming, hunting, horseback riding and boating. Auxiliary services such as food, gift shops, and lodging were not perceived as important.

Data related to motivations for choosing a park to visit also provided information on services and facilities sought by older visitors. Having lots of different things to do and see was very important to over 53 percent. Other important motivations were the opportunity to spend time with someone special (very important to 48 percent of the respondents), a feeling of security (43 percent), and being physically active (46 percent).

How satisfied are park users with the range of services and facilities available at national park service areas?

Results indicated an extremely high level of satisfaction on the part of Golden Age Passport users. Areas where performance was below a "very satisfied" standard were campgrounds, food service, picnic areas, souvenir/gift shops, lodging, medical services, and the provision of specific activities such as swimming and hunting. Of these, only campgrounds and lodging were viewed as being important.

Respondents were asked to indicate what they liked best and least about the parks they visited. A high number of respondents liked the scenery, nature and wildlife, as well as programs such as lectures. Some areas, such as staff and maintenance, received mixed reviews. Staff members sometimes were described as non-responsive to the needs of older visitors, for instance by not speaking loudly enough or by walking too fast; however, in other cases staff received high praise. There was clearly park by park variation in this area.

A major area frequently identified as "least liked" related to information in the parks. Golden Age Passport users expressed dissatisfaction with road signs, trail signs, and signs at facilities. The fact that even veteran park users were confused by poor or inadequate information indicates that the matter of "signing" may be a major problem area.

Another area frequently identified in the "least liked" category was campsite problems. This included things such as no electricity, campsites too close, not enough campsites, campsites which were not level, and no

dumping station. These responses are consistent with the finding that of those respondents staying overnight in a park the most common shelter was a motor home (28.3 percent of the overnight visitors stayed in a mobile home). This was followed by a lodge/motel (25.4 percent), and a travel trailer (18.8 percent). The qualities many of the older overnight visitors sought in a campground were related to their mechanized accommodations.

What use patterns do Golden Age Passport users display?

The participants in this study, as with the general population, were most likely to visit a park in July. However, unlike the general trend, August was not a high visitation month for older visitors. May and September were more likely visitation times than August, contrary to the use patterns displayed by general public. In over 60 percent of the cases the respondent's primary destination was somewhere other than the park visited.

Recommendations

Part of the difficulty in designing research projects to examine the needs of older park users is the individuality of the elderly. There is no one accurate model of aging. As a result, there is no single approach to serving this population group. The problem is further exacerbated by the uniqueness of each National Park Service area. Generalization therefore is speculative and suggestive rather than definitive. The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study. Further study is needed in individual parks to verify them.

1. As more older individuals visit National Park System areas there will be increasing interest in interpretive programs, guided tours, museums, and other information and education programs. Increasingly, these programs will need to be tailored toward older visitors. For example, the pace of such programs, distances walked, speaking volume of staff, physical accessibility of facilities, use of multi-media programs to compensate for sensory deficits, and staff attitudes toward the elderly will demand new consideration.

2. Services such as parking, security and informational signs may become increasingly important. Older visitors rely on such services to make their visits enjoyable and safe. Increased attention to the availability of accessible and safe facilities and programs is warranted.

3. Activities such as swimming, boating, and fishing are not very important to most older visitors. Although they want to be active while in the park, most older visitors do not participate in outdoor recreation activities. There may be a growing need for more attention to educational programs focused on natural and cultural resources and less on recreation activities.

4. May and September are months when older visitors are more likely to be visiting National Park areas than are the general public and therefore may be opportune times for programs and services designed specifically for such visitors.

5. Overnight facilities could be modified to meet the needs of older visitors. Campgrounds and lodges may need to be redesigned. Many older visitors in recreation vehicles find the current campgrounds unsuitable for their needs.

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