

Surveys of National Park Experiences by the Visitor Services Project

By Dana Dolsen

The Visitor Services Project (VSP) conducts surveys to gather information about visitors and visitor services that park managers can easily use. At least three kinds of sociological information are useful to park managers. The first is knowledge about the kinds of services, activities and opportunities available to the public. The second is knowledge about the visitors: who they are, where they go, what they do, and so forth. The third is understanding the relationship between services and visitors; i.e., are visitor needs being met in the most efficient way, while protecting resources?

The VSP is based at the University of Idaho's Cooperative Park Studies Unit (UI/CPSU) in Moscow, Idaho. The VSP's technical development began with pilot studies in 1982. Figure 1 shows that by the end of 1990, 37 visitor studies will be completed in 34 parks. In 1988 the VSP was incorporated into NPS Operations. Currently two NPS employees are stationed at the UI/CPSU: Margaret Littlejohn is western coordinator, Dwight Madison is eastern coordinator.

The Chief of Interpretation, Washington Office (WASO), holds VSP administrative responsibility. VSP study funding comes from the park being studied, regional offices, and WASO. The VSP has an advisory committee; its membership provides Service-wide guidance from parks, regional offices, and Service Centers. The committee meets annually, recommends parks for studies from regional nominations, guides VSP development, and approves special projects.

Study Process and Methods

Figure 2 presents the VSP study process. After a park's selection, VSP personnel hold an on-site questionnaire design workshop to determine the park's information needs about its visitors. In the field a trained team contacts visitors, conducts interviews, and distributes mail-back questionnaires. Completed questionnaires are received at the UI/CPSU; data definition, input, verification, and analysis are completed. A draft report is prepared, reviewed by park staff, and revised by the VSP. A results workshop on how the data can be used is held for each park's staff. Sometimes a separate session is held for local media, the chamber of commerce, and others. The final report is then printed and made available from the superintendent. For the next six months, upon request, additional data analyses are provided to the park at no additional cost. In 1989, the average cost to parks was approximately ten thousand dollars.

VSP visitor studies are based on a systematic sample of park visitors during a specific week chosen by park staff. The sample is usually stratified by entrance or zone, depending on park characteristics. Sample size is based upon past visitor statistics, with a minimum accuracy of ± 4 percent for simple dichotomous variables at the .05 level. The VSP and park staffs jointly formulate the appropriate questions, which must then be approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). A core unit of standardized questions is in most VSP studies (i.e., demographics, use of routes/sites, activities, and general comments); OMB approval of these is commonplace. New questions on unique park issues need specific OMB clearance.

As visitors enter the area, interviews are conducted to distribute the mail-back questionnaire, collect data

1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
	Development Studies			Operational Studies				Studies Underway
Grand Teton	Yellowstone	Glacier	Crater Lake	Geddyburg	Harpers Ferry	Craters of the Moon	Everglades	Death Valley
	McCormick				Grand Teton		Statue of Liberty	Glacier
			North Cascades	Independence	Yellowstone	Bryce Canyon	Delaware Water Gap	White Sands
				Valley Forge	Mesa Verde	Glen Canyon	Lincoln Home	Kenai Fjords
					Independence	Denali	Yellowstone	John Day Fossil Beds
				Colonial			Muir Woods	Canyonlands
				Shenandoah			White House	National Capitol Region Mall
								Petersburg
								Gateway
								Scotts Bluff
								Agate Fossil Beds

Figure 1: VISITOR SERVICES PROJECT 1982-90

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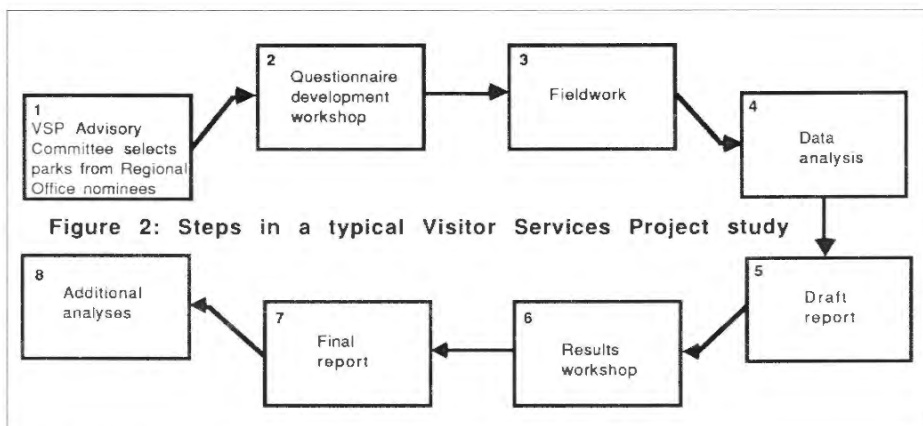


Figure 2. Steps in a typical Visitor Services Project study.

for response bias checks, and gain mailing addresses for follow-ups. The 11 studies conducted in 1988-89 have averaged an 81 percent response rate. Response bias checks on key demographic variables are conducted; the data are converted into graphic displays. Charts and figures with low sample sizes are identified with cautions for managers to consider. Open-ended questions are content-analyzed and organized into tables, and the actual comments included in a separate appendix to the final report.

The surveys have several limitations, described in each final report. Responses to mail-back questionnaires may not always reflect actual behavior. The results cannot be generalized beyond the study period. Visitor groups that do not include an English-speaking person may be under-represented.

Following are examples of what parks learned from visitors about services and facilities offered, plus visitor opinions on topics of interest to park managers.

STUDY RESULTS, MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Interpretation

Managers question whether interpretive programs meet real needs. Do they effect changes in visitor awareness, attitudes, or even behavior? Tour managers at the White House may question whether separate tour needs for programs and services exist by

comparing their Congressional and public tour results. For example, public tour visitor groups used the map/brochure twice as much as did Congressional tour visitor groups (see Figure 3). To ensure its continued use and usefulness for each tour, a detailed evaluation may be desired.

Concessions

Park managers question how useful and important particular services or facilities are to visitors: VSP surveys can provide such data. A park can then evaluate a company and the need for a product or service.

Managers at the Statue of Liberty NM measured visitor use of several concession services' facilities, as well as their quality ratings. Figure 4 shows that visitor opinions varied on the quality of the restaurant. Potentially, a variety of alternatives to improve quality may be considered.

Maintenance

Increasingly diverse park visitors demand a range of accessible, quality facilities. Visitors frequently criticize trash build-up or a lack of upkeep at park sites. By seeking and listening to visitors' views, managers can improve facility maintenance programs, thus providing clean and well-maintained settings for quality experiences.

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Visitor Services (Cont. from p. 5)

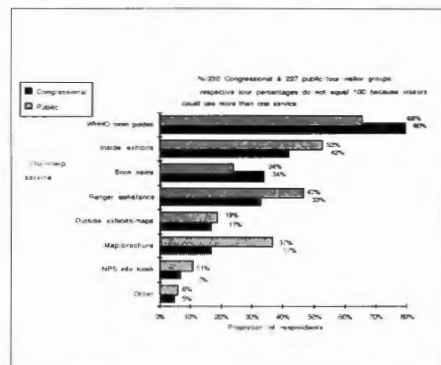


Figure 3. Congressional and public tour use of White House interpretive/information services, Summer, 1989.

For example, Muir Woods NM's trails are congested in the summer. Managers could schedule maintenance personnel on popular trails according to the proportion of visitors (see Map 1), peak hours, or busiest days.

Resource Management

Determining ecologically appropriate and socially acceptable levels of intervention in natural processes is a constant challenge and struggle for land management agencies. The NPS is learning that people do not have a basic understanding of natural phenomena, which in turn affects the acceptance of resource management policies. Land managers may gain policy insights for the future by assessing visitors' perceptions of natural and man-made phenomena and their impacts.

For example, Yellowstone NP visitors were asked if the 1988 fires were beneficial to Yellowstone's natural systems (plants, animals, soil, water, etc.). Figure 5 shows that 48 percent of visitors thought fire benefitted Yellowstone's ecosystem. Such results could help all land management agencies make more informed policy decisions.

OTHER PROJECT UPDATES

Projects underway include: a report on 1982-90 VSP progress - *A Diversity of Visitors*, a VSP training manual, an OMB report on survey follow-up methods, and several journal articles. The Pacific Northwest Regional Office funded a 1989 VSP database development to profile NPS visitors; data may be available from approximately 20 park studies by the end of 1990.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND INITIATIVES

The database will provide information on park visi-

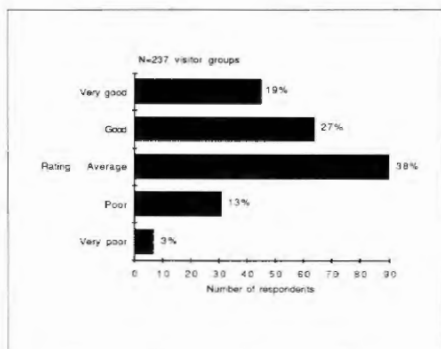


Figure 4. Visitor quality ratings of restaurant, Statue of Liberty NM, 1989.

tors studied nationwide and, possibly, data sets of each park's seasonal visitor information. For example, Map 2 shows the proportion of first-time visitors to various parks throughout the national park system. A large database will accrue, as 10-15 park studies could be added early.

The VSP is developing the capability to provide data on the economic contribution (i.e., jobs supported, sales and income generated) of park visitors during the study. Initial efforts began with an economic impact analysis of visitation to Lincoln Home NHS using IMPLAN, a computer modeling system developed by the U.S. Forest Service.

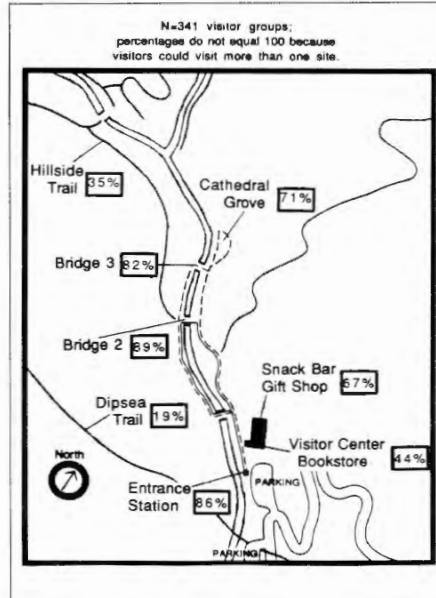
The VSP initiative is an interdisciplinary tool that can help the NPS constantly improve managerial efficiency and applicability. For example, visitors touring the White House strongly confirmed the need for a visitor center. Similarly, visitors to Lincoln Home NHS endorsed a new combination of first-come, first-served and advance reservations for tour tickets. And Denali NP was able to show support for the shuttle bus system because the service enabled a high proportion of users to view key wildlife species.

Through systematic baseline surveys of visitors, such as those conducted by the VSP, new management strategies may be developed. The potential for the consistent application of these data to a broad range of park management issues shows that visitors' views are important and beneficial.

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Map 1. Proportion of visitor groups visiting each site, Muir Woods NM, 1989.

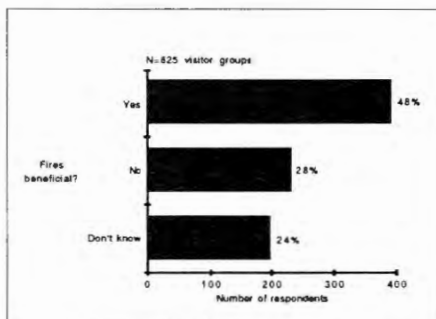
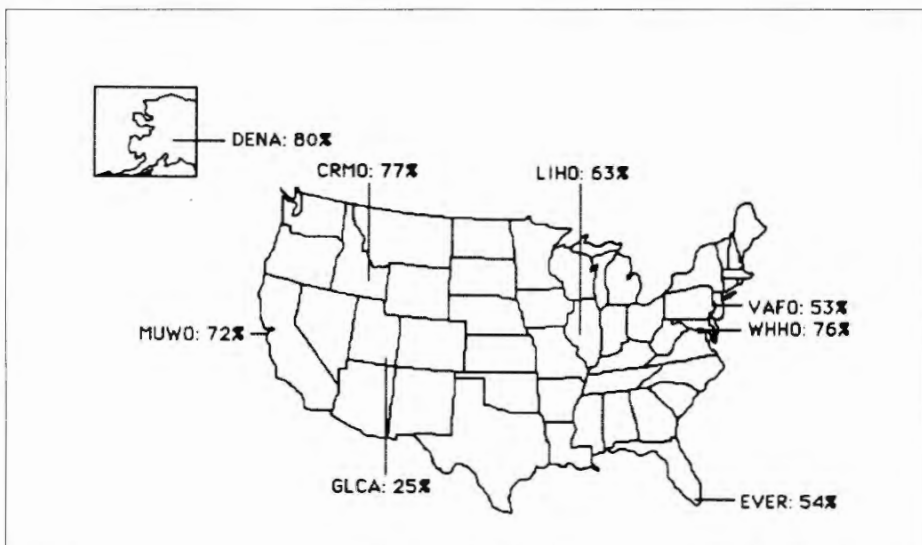


Figure 5. Proportion of visitors who viewed fire as beneficial to natural systems, Yellowstone NP, 1989.



Map 2. Proportion of first time visitors to various parks, VSP studies, 1986-89.