

Visitor opinions and park resources

By MARGARET LITTLEJOHN

How many park resource managers have used visitor opinions in making a management decision about park resources and the quality of their national park visits vary, as do the visitors themselves. Visitors sometimes share verbal feedback or write letters to National Park Service (NPS) employees. Often, these comments are not scientifically collected, sometimes not compiled, and therefore have little impact on improving park operations. Many park managers, recognizing the importance of obtaining more scientific and collective feedback on how well visitors are being served, request visitor studies.

Resource managers are beginning to realize that through visitor studies, visitor opinions about resource management issues can be scientifically gathered. Managers often choose to query visitors about issues such as crowding, the importance of park qualities (such as air quality, recreational activities, solitude, and wilderness), resource issues that interest visitors, and the impacts of other visitors and their activities on people's visits.

One NPS research program that conducts visitor studies is the Visitor Services Project (VSP), based at the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit. The VSP develops different tools that provide the National Park Service with valuable visitor feedback. One of these tools, the in-depth visitor studies at individual park units, began in 1982. Up to 10 in-depth visitor studies have been conducted each year since 1988. Since then, over 85 VSP in-depth visitor studies have been conducted, with an average response rate of 79%.

VSP in-depth visitor study questionnaires are customized to allow park managers to ask visitors questions about the most important issues facing the park. The questionnaires gather standardized demographic information, and customized information about trip planning, opinions about park visits, park issues, and feedback on individual and overall service quality. This direct and collective feedback from visitors is valuable information for

park managers, who can use it to make operational changes or better plan for the future, ultimately benefiting the visitors.

Recent VSP in-depth visitor studies reveal some interesting information about visitors' views on natural and cultural resources and use of those resources in the parks. Some comments show visitors' increasing awareness and concern for park resources. Several examples follow.

A visitor's comment:

"This park is a magnificent treasure, which merits bold and even controversial measures to safeguard it for future use as a natural haven, protecting the environment and enriching the people who experience it."

Crowding

A number of VSP visitor studies have addressed visitor opinions about crowding in parks. During a 1998 VSP visitor study, Cumberland Island National Seashore (Georgia) visitors were asked to give their opinion about the current limit of 300 people per day allowed on the island. As shown in figure 1, most visitors (82%) felt that the current limit is "about right."

Resource management objectives

Visitors have occasionally been asked whether they support particular resource management objectives in parks. At Fort Bowie National Historic Site (Arizona) in 1996, visitors were asked if they supported the following objective: "The current National Park Service objective is to manage Fort Bowie National Historic Site in its remote setting with minimal improvements." Most visitors (88%) said they supported that objective, while 5% did not support that objective and 7% were not sure. When asked if they felt the Park Service has achieved that objective, 92% said "yes," 4% said "no," and 4% were "not sure."

Impact of modern conveniences on historic setting

Park managers may be interested in finding out if visitors perceive certain resource-related issues as problematic. For example, during the 1997 Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial (Indiana) visitor study, visitors were asked, "Do you feel that automobile and train traffic within the park impacts the historic setting of the Living History Farm?" Many visitors (63%) said that automobile and train traffic did not impact the historic setting. Twenty-two percent were not sure and 14% said automobile and train traffic did impact the historic setting.

Appropriateness of activities

Park managers may want to gauge visitors' knowledge of the appropriateness of certain activities in a park setting. In the 1995 visitor study questionnaire at Bandelier National Monument (New Mexico), visitors were asked to rate how appropriate certain activities were in the monument. The activities visitors were asked to rate included: walking or sitting on ruin walls, collecting artifacts (such as potsherds), walking off trail among the ruins, exploring ruins in caves, feeding animals, and collecting plants (picking flowers, collecting pine cones, etc.). Visitors used a 4-point scale to rate the appropriateness as follows: 1=always, 2=usually, 3=sometimes, 4=never. Figures 2 and 3 show examples of the responses. More visitor groups feel that collecting artifacts in the park is never appropriate (91%) than walking off trail in the ruins (65%).

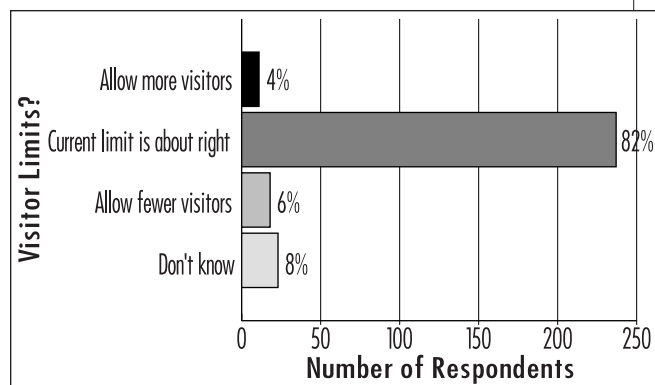


Figure 1. Visitor opinions about current visitation use limit, Cumberland Island National Seashore, 1998. (n=289 visitor groups.)

Importance of park features or qualities

How important are selected park features or qualities to visitors at the parks they visit? At Grand Teton National Park (Wyoming) in the 1997 visitor study, visitors were asked to rate the importance of native plants and animals using a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important). Most visitor (87%) rated native plants and animals as "extremely important" or "very important."

Visitor Services Project visitor studies were conducted at Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Tennessee and North Carolina) during July and October 1996. Visitors were asked to rate the importance of the following park features and qualities to their visit to the park: native plants and animals, clean air, scenic views, recreational activities (such as hiking, camping, fishing, etc.), solitude, and historic buildings. In the summer study, visitors gave the highest "extremely important" or "very important" ratings to scenic views (95%), clean air (90%), and native plants and animals (80%), as shown in figure 4. In the fall survey, the same three features or qualities received the highest importance ratings from visitors: scenic

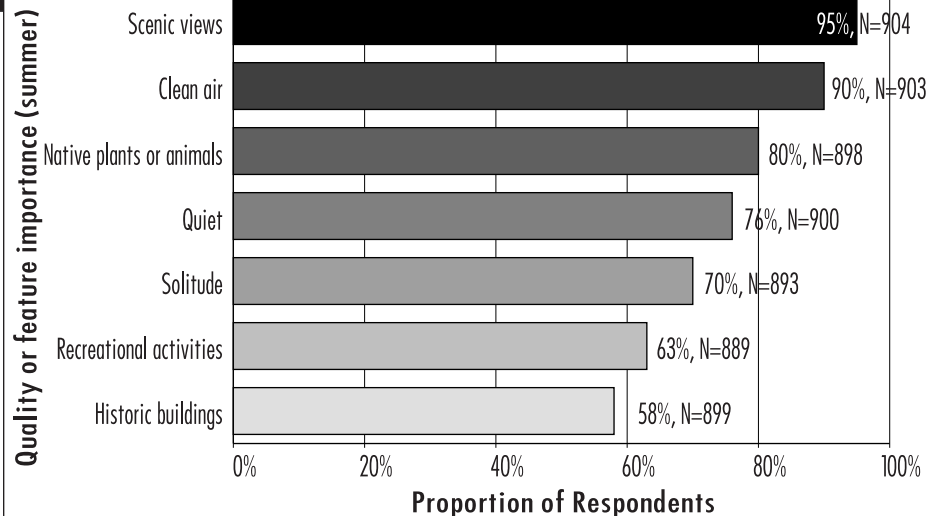


Figure 4. Combined proportions of "extremely important" or "very important" ratings of park qualities or features at Great Smoky Mountains, summer, 1996.

views (95%), clean air (87%), and native plants and animals (74%). In both of the studies, the two features that received the highest "not important" ratings were recreational activities and historic buildings.

Other visitors' impacts

Sometimes, visitors' enjoyment of park resources is impacted by other visitors and their activities. During 1997, Voyageurs National Park's (Minnesota) visitor study showed that visitors were disturbed by other visitors using personal watercraft. Noisy people, loud music, or motorboats were also cited as ways visitor groups disturbed others.

Resource subjects of interest

Resource issues are often discussed in interpretive programs with the recognition that informed visitors are less likely to damage resources. Having visitors identify the resource subjects that they are most interested in learning about results in more informed visitors and more wisely spent park funds. In the spring 1996 Chiricahua National Monument (Arizona) visitor study, visitors were asked to identify subjects they were most interested in learning about from the following list: threatened and endan-

gered species, animal protection, air quality, wilderness, historic resources, role of fire, or any other subject the visitor wanted. The most common answers were wilderness (67%), historic resources (61%), and threatened and endangered species (46%). Air quality (23%) was the least requested subject.

Using visitor opinions

These examples show a few types of resource management information that park managers can learn from visitors. While visitors cannot be expected to make management decisions regarding park resources, they can provide information that is useful for park managers to incorporate into their decisions regarding resources. Some visitor responses may point out the need for better visitor education on resource management issues, while others support management objectives of protecting park resources. In designing survey questionnaires, it is important to recognize that visitors do not always come to parks with preconceived expectations—many visitors are not subject experts and may not be well informed about specific subjects. Ultimately, resource management decisions need to be made by well-informed managers who incorporate visitor opinions into their decisions. *P_S*

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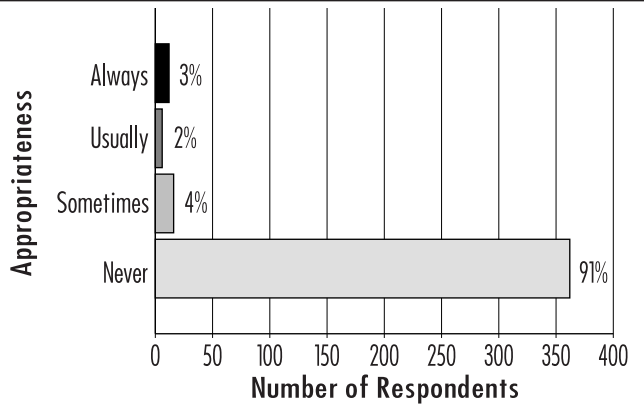


Figure 2. Appropriateness of collecting artifacts in the monument, Bandelier National Monument, 1995. (n=396 visitor groups.)

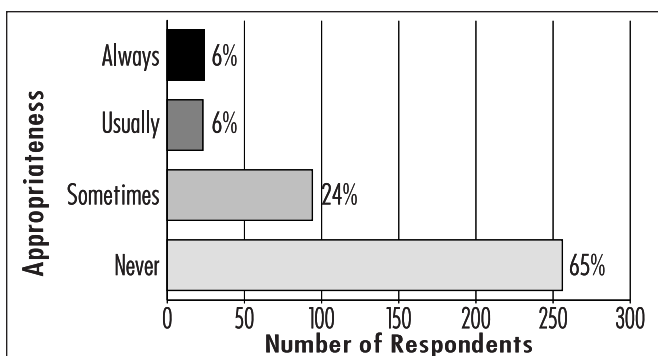


Figure 3. Appropriateness of walking off trail in the ruins, Bandelier National Monument, 1995. (n=397 visitor groups.)