

National Park Service managers' views of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program

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As part of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program, the National Park Service (NPS) and the three other federal land management agencies (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management) are required to evaluate the impact of this new program on park visitors and park operations. The Park Service is the only agency that has initiated a detailed study of how management personnel at individual park units evaluate the effects of the program on their units, and how these individual units are responding to the program. A study team represented by social scientists from The Pennsylvania State University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Utah State University was commissioned to conduct a three-year survey of managers' perceptions of impacts from the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program on park operations.

This article reports on the methodologies utilized and findings from the FY1997 evaluation, which had three purposes. These were to assess NPS management personnel reactions to the implementation and operation of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program on their park units; assess management perceptions of the program's efficiency, including costs of management, revenues, and impact on visitation; and assess how funds generated from the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program were used within individual participating units.

Methodology

In May 1998, questionnaires were mailed to all national park system units participating in the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. Follow-up letters and phone calls were made until a 100% response rate from participating parks was achieved. While 100 individual projects had been authorized in the NPS Recreation Fee Demonstration Program, in some cases two or more park units par-

ticipated jointly in the program. Therefore, a total of 109 surveys were returned for analysis.

Findings

Key findings include the following highlights from park managers' opinions and perceptions of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program's effects on park visitation and management. First, most managers perceived no overall effect on visitation patterns. Seventy-five percent of the managers felt that the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program had not affected visitation patterns, such as the number of visitors coming to their park by season of the year, or on weekends versus weekdays. Fifteen percent believed the fee increase caused a shift in visitation patterns, and 10 percent did not have an opinion.

Second, community and visitor reaction to the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program was perceived to be favorable. Managers believed the local business community, local area citizens, and local park users were most likely to shift their views about the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program, with 11%-15% of managers indicating that these constituencies' views had shifted from initially negative to positive. However, for these three local area constituencies, managers were most likely to indicate consistently positive (24%-29%) or consistently neutral (25%-37%) opinions. According to managers, visitors supported the fee program under two conditions: (1) if the funds collected remained in the unit where they were generated, and (2) if these funds were used to improve facilities and visitor services. Ninety-four percent of the parks were engaged in public information and communication activities to explain the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program to park visitors and the general public.

Third, the fee program was perceived to have a positive effect on park base budgets. Sixty percent of the managers had a positive view of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program's contribution towards their park's base budget situation.

These managers indicated that the program allowed for greater flexibility in budget allocations. Thirty-four percent indicated that the program had no effect on their base budget, attributing this to the program's newness. Six percent indicated somewhat negative effects on base budgets, citing start-up costs and program operating expenses.

Fourth, managers were beginning to perceive a positive effect of the fees on the quality of visitor services. Forty-three percent of the managers indicated that the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program improved the quality of visitor information services at their parks. These managers believed there was general improvement in funding availability and spending flexibility, which they attributed to the program. Twenty-eight percent indicated improvements in visitor facilities. Twenty-nine percent said visitor center operations had improved.

Fifth, it was found that initial delays in the transfer of fee revenue to parks were a source of some concern, though in most cases these problems appeared to be reduced by the end of the program's first year of operation. Sixty-three percent of the managers said they did not receive funds in time to spend them during FY1997, a key problem in implementing the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. Of this group, 25% attributed allocation delays to park-level management, 25% attributed delays to regional-level management, and the remaining 50% attributed these fiscal problems to national-level management. Nevertheless, 60% of participating units reported receiving their FY1997 funds in sufficient time to allocate them effectively for use in FY1998.

Finally, the study found that fee program funds were used for priority projects as determined by park staff. At the beginning of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program, park managers were required to identify proposed projects for which to use additional fee revenues. Eighty percent indicated desires to expend funds on priority, maintenance, infrastructure, and resource management projects.

Two areas of park operations in 1997 stood out in terms of receiving funding emphasis from the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program: infrastructure and information services (figure 1). In addition, 67% of the units utilized some funds to support the operation of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program, and 25% of these parks reported that the projects funded had been identified in their general management plan.

Utility of findings

There are several benefits of this study for park management. First, it meets an important need for sharing information about the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program with the public. Such information can help the individual units, as well as the National Park Service, maintain an active dialogue with the public about their responses to the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. It helps foster an environment based on public awareness about the program and the many positive effects it is having on park services, facilities, and programs. Further, it is apparent that there is generally widespread support for and acceptance of this program by the public, as evidenced by managers' reports of only minor adverse effects on visitation patterns. Such information should prove invaluable in making the case to the Congress for continuation of the program.

At the same time, by engaging in an evaluation process from the outset of the program, this study provides insights into aspects of the National Park Service's Recreation Fee Demonstration Program that require attention and fine-tuning. Our study revealed concerns with fiscal problems and allocation delays, particularly with those viewed as originating at the national level. These issues suggest the need for some restructuring and streamlining of procedures to help insure more timely fund allocations and more efficient program administration procedures.

At the unit level, this study allows park managers to share information or results with their staff on how the program has been perceived by other units in the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. As a result, it can act as a barometer on how any given unit is doing relative to other participating units. Similarly, the study provides managers with a window into

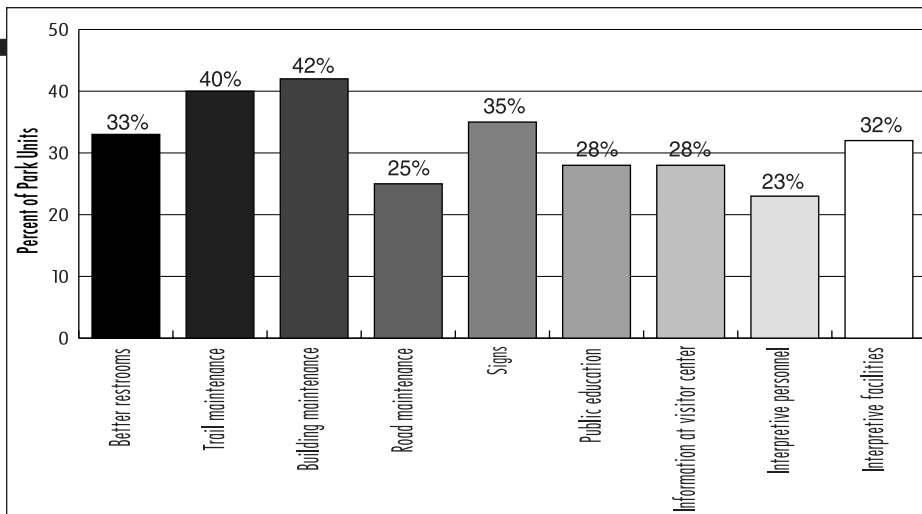


Figure 1. Managers' responses indicating various uses of FY97 Fee Demonstration Program revenues.

how different units are allocating their fee-related resources and the kinds of problems being encountered in these units.

Next steps

Our project is responsible for examining changes over time in the perceptions of managers toward the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program and its operation. To accomplish this task, we have completed a second study of participating units (in October 1998) and have compared the results of this study with those reported here. We have provided senior park management with the results of this comparison for their report to Congress. Finally, we are completing the design of the final survey (to be conducted in October 1999), which will be used to compare manager perceptions of program operation over a two-year period. The results from this analysis will be available in late spring 2000. *P_S*

Related Literature

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