

Social Science Needs Assessment:

A survey of NPS urban park managers

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A needs assessment is a process for gauging the current situation in an organization (or a community), reaching value-based judgments, and prioritizing the status of needs (Carter and Beaulieu 1992). The Social Science Needs Assessment (SSNA) is a survey instrument developed by the Urban Recreation Research Center (URRC) for assessing the social science needs of urban park managers in the National Park Service. The Urban Recreation Research Center was established on October 1, 1998, at Southern University and A&M College, Baton Rouge, and is part of the NPS Social Science Program.

Survey approach

The survey is a commonly utilized approach to assess need. Visiting every urban park to interview the superintendents would be very costly. Instead, all NPS urban park managers were surveyed to minimize data collection costs. The Social Science Needs Assessment is a 108-item survey designed to assess the social science needs of NPS urban park managers. The Social Science Needs Assessment asked managers to rate their current need for (1) research tasks, (2) technical assistance activities, (3) training opportunities, and (4) delivery methods. Many of the research items on the survey came from *Usable Knowledge* (Machlis 1996).

The first 107 items in the instrument are scaled from 2 to -1. Respondents were asked to rate the importance to their park of the items that were described by circling the most appropriate number. The rating scale is 2 for *very important* (VI), 1 for *important* (I), 0 for *don't know/no opinion* (DK), and -1 for *not important* (NI). Ratings indicate the manager's "intensity" of need. When a manager marks an item "very important," we infer that he or she really needs this social science item. The responses were rank-ordered by average weight, using the mean for each item. The

calculation includes all responses to the survey items: positive, negative, and zero values. Discussion of these results follows.

These results are limited to NPS urban park managers with sites that are either inside or within 100 miles of metropolitan statistical areas or else consolidated metropolitan statistical areas. The national park system had 377 total sites when the survey was distributed on December 10, 1998, and completed by February 9, 1999. One-hundred sixty (42%) park sites were classified as urban parks (n=120) or parks adjacent to urban areas (n=40). The response rate to the survey is 83% (133 of 160). This high response rate supports our statistical inferences about NPS urban park managers. We suspect that superintendents often delegated responsibility for completing the survey to key informed staff members, which remains valid. The few missing responses to the survey make the results reliable.

Survey results

The survey results are presented in sections: (1) research tasks, (2) technical assistance activities, (3) training opportunities, (4) delivery methods, and

(5) comments. Using figures, we discuss the top ten rated items for each part of the survey, with mean ratings.

Research tasks

The NPS urban park managers were asked to rate 49 research tasks on their importance. The top ten rated research tasks are shown in figure 1. The top four items, which follow, have a mean rating, on a scale from -1 to +2, of higher than 1.5—trending towards "very important."

1. Assess interpretive programs, media, and public contact activities in urban parks.
2. Develop strategies for integrating visitor and community-based perspectives into decision making.
3. Analyze visitor expectations and evaluate experiences.
4. Identify critical visitor impacts on natural and cultural resources in urban parks.

For example, item 18 (second item in figure 1) on the survey has a mean response rating of 1.59. Therefore, this item

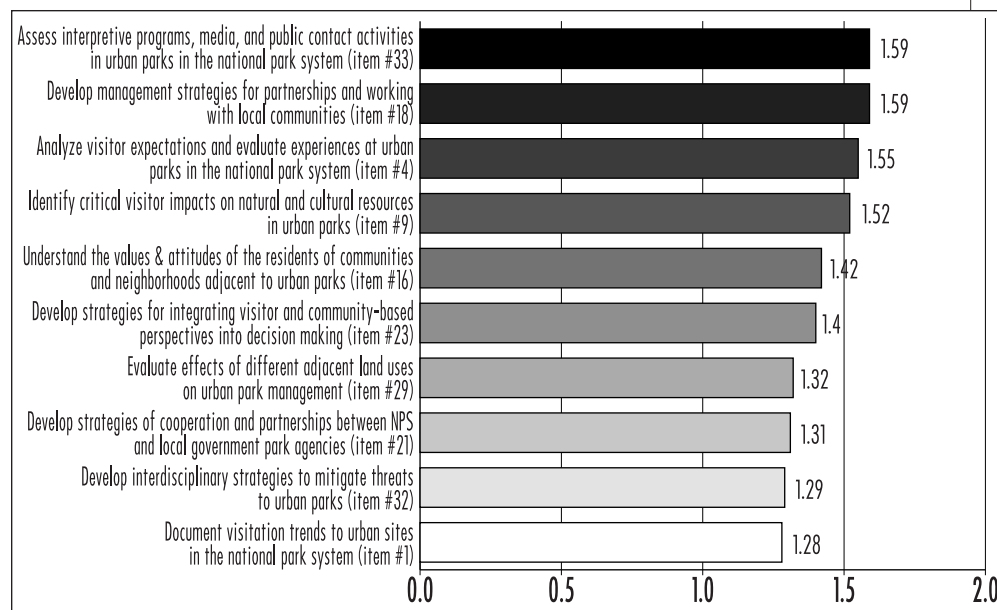


Figure 1. Ten most important research tasks rated by NPS urban park managers.

ranges between “important” and “very important,” according to managers surveyed.

The mean rating for items 18 and 33 (first item in figure 1) reveals a need for research on interactions between and among urban parks and relevant local publics. For example, working with partnerships and local communities, concern with media and public contacts, are shown. The response to items 4 and 9 (third and fourth items in figure 1, respectively) indicate the need for research on visitation. For example, visitor expectations and resource impacts need to be better understood for urban parks.

The managers of urban parks have provided useful information by rating the importance of what they need and do not need among the research task items offered. The managers indicate the importance of partnerships and working with communities toward effective delivery of park programs. There is an overwhelming need to conduct research on analyzing visitor expectations and evaluating their experiences at urban parks.

Technical assistance activities

The respondents were asked to rate a list of 24 technical assistance activities under four main subject areas: (1) social science research methods, (2) information technology, (2) management consultation, and (4) program evaluation. Manager ratings should prove useful for developing technical assistance programs tailored to urban park needs in the national park system. The top ten rated items are shown in figure 2. The four top items that follow have a mean rating greater than 0.9. This suggests that these items are “important” technical assistance needs.

1. Improving visitor relations, e.g., customer service
2. Impact analysis, e.g., measuring outcomes
3. Assistance with conducting visitor surveys
4. Assistance with interpreting survey results

The survey results indicate interest by managers of urban parks in the national park system for technical assistance. The highest-ranking technical assistance needs

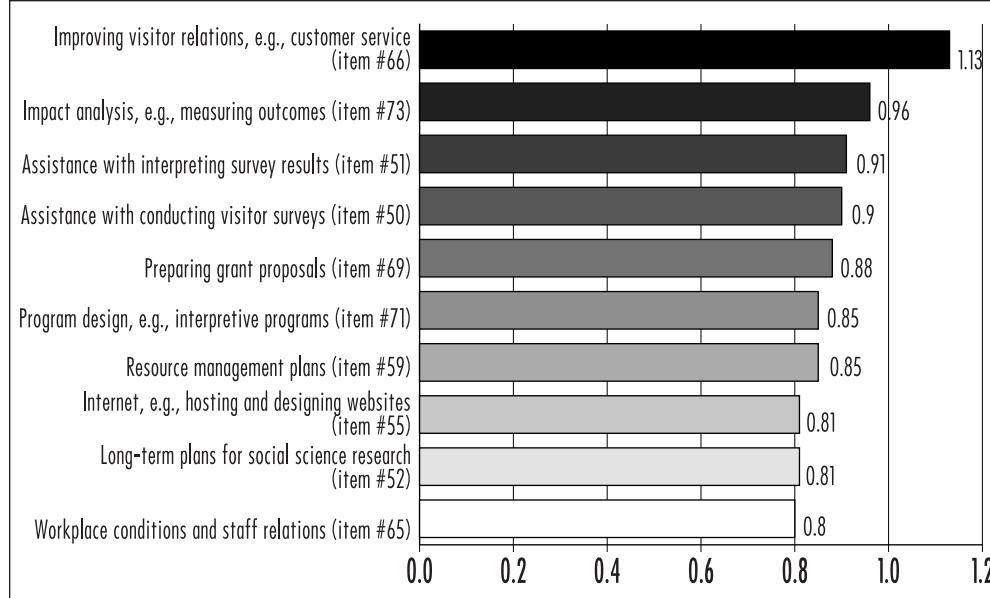


Figure 2. Top ten needs for technical assistance activities rated by NPS urban park managers.

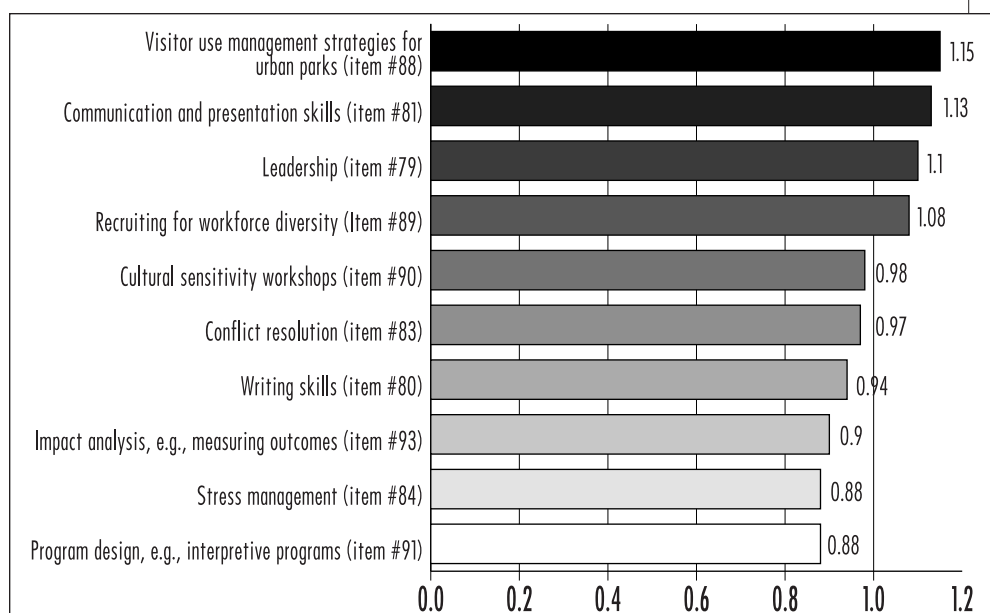


Figure 3. Top ten needs for training opportunities rated by NPS urban park managers.

range from improving visitor relations (i.e., customer service) and measuring outcomes to interpreting survey results.

Training opportunities

The respondents were asked to rate a list of 19 training opportunities in three areas: (1) information technology, (2) short courses in management, and (3) program evaluation. The manager ratings should prove useful for developing specific programs designed to target the training needs of urban parks. The top ten rated training opportunities are shown in figure 3. The four top items, which fol-

low, have a mean rating greater than 1, which suggests they are “important” needs.

1. Visitor use management strategies for urban parks
2. Communication and presentation skills
3. Leadership
4. Recruiting for workforce diversity

The respondents expressed interest in receiving training in all topics, excepting the Internet. The survey results indicate need by NPS urban park managers for

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training opportunities in several areas. Ratings can be used to develop and implement training programs and continuing education opportunities for areas managers deem important.

Delivery methods

The survey respondents were asked to rate 12 delivery methods, ranking their usefulness. The ratings should prove useful for developing programs that will best deliver research findings, technical assistance, and training opportunities to urban parks. The top ten rated delivery methods are shown in figure 4. The top four items, which follow, have a mean rating of 1 or more, indicating that they are "important."

1. Internet
2. Fact sheets
3. Reference handbooks
4. Workshops

Prioritizing preferred delivery methods should help to facilitate a cost-effective transfer of information and technical assistance to urban parks in the national park system. The survey results indicate strong preferences among the respondents for delivery methods. These delivery methods should receive priority for training opportunities, technical assistance activities, and dissemination of research information.

Conclusion

This needs assessment is an important first step by the Urban Recreation Research Center to support the National Park Service and its Social Science Program. Understanding the needs of managers of urban parks in the national park system is vitally important to meeting the NPS legislative mandate to conduct scientific research in social sciences. The survey results will help the URRC prioritize the needs of urban parks to develop its research agenda, provide specific technical assistance and training programs, and improve delivery of usable knowledge, while minimizing costs.

The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents need social science research, technical assistance, and training opportunities. We find overwhelming need for research on visitor expectations and an evaluation of experiences. Just 3% of NPS urban park managers rated this item of need "not important." Urban park managers with the National Park Service agree on the importance of developing partnerships and working with their communities for more effective delivery of park programs. These results reveal managers' needs for technical assistance, such as improving visitor relations and interpreting survey results. Respondents expressed an interest in getting training for every topic, except the Internet. Prioritizing delivery methods should facilitate cost-effective transfer of information and technical assistance to urban parks in the national park system. There are strong

preferences among managers for the delivery methods: Internet, fact sheets, workshops, reference handbooks, and "how-to" information brochures.

The managers' comments indicate need for economic research, impact analysis, and opinion surveys. They also cite the need for technical assistance on management issues. The need for further research on resource impacts from visitation was echoed by many key informants during the interviews that we conducted at the site visits to urban parks. This social science needs assessment of NPS urban park managers provides the Urban Recreation Research Center and the NPS Social Science Program with usable knowledge to develop and deliver research, technical assistance, and training programs. The results prioritize the current needs of NPS urban park managers for social science.

At this juncture, the Urban Recreation Research Center has developed a comprehensive strategic plan based on the survey results. In the next few years, while many of the initial research, technical assistance, and training programs are completed, the Center will resurvey NPS urban park managers to see if any distinguishable changes in the values, priorities, and needs of NPS urban park managers occurred and whether changes can be attributed to URRC programs. **P₅**

Literature Cited

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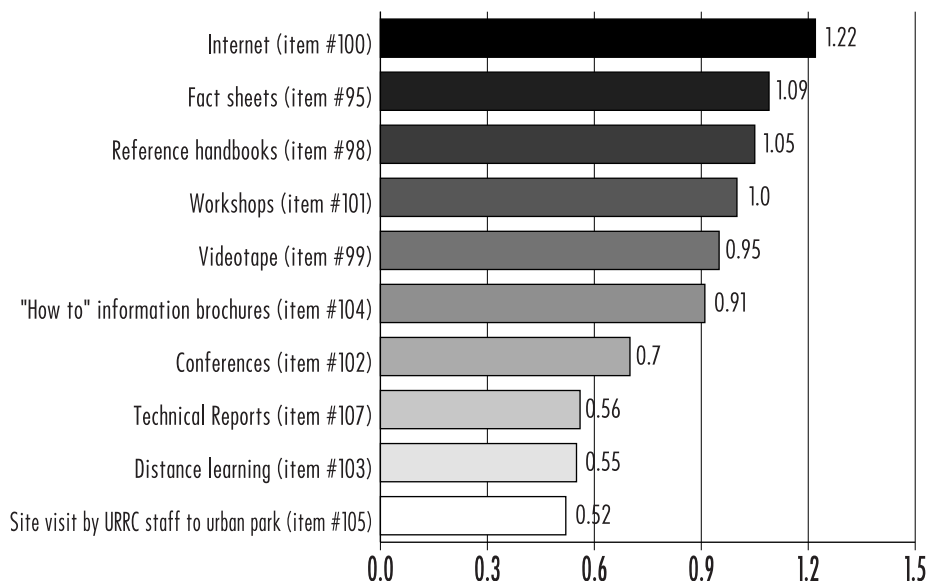


Figure 4. Top ten delivery methods rated by NPS urban park managers.