Serving the Visitor 1998

A Report on Customers of the National Park Service
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The National Park Service Visitor Services Project
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1999
Our National Park System includes a magnificent collection of natural wonders, historic places and recreational areas. Comprised of 378 sites, it represents America’s richly diverse natural and cultural heritage.

Founded on the revolutionary notion of protecting vast natural areas for public enjoyment, the National Park Service (NPS) has a dual mission. We are a conservation agency charged to preserve and to protect the places entrusted to our care. We are also a people-serving agency, charged to provide for the use of these special places in a way that will assure they are here for the enjoyment of future generations.

As we strive to reinforce and enhance our commitment to preserving park resources in today’s constantly changing world, we must continue to provide the best service possible to our visitors. With park visitation at an all time high—over 286 million visits in 1998—it is more important than ever that we hear from our visitors. This annual report is the fifth in a series by the NPS Visitor Services Project. It provides us with the usable knowledge needed to make informed management decisions based upon visitor feedback.

New in this year’s report are the regional and national findings of a new customer satisfaction card. Last summer, visitors at more than 300 national park sites were given the opportunity to rate facilities, services and recreational opportunities. Conducted for the first time as part of the NPS response to the Government Performance and Results Act, the survey measured visitor satisfaction, understanding and appreciation of the parks.

As evidenced in this report, the National Park Service is a superb public service agency. The report also suggests ways we can improve even further. To our employees, I say thank you for your continued professionalism, dedication and leadership. And to our visitors, thank you for caring about your parks. Your voice has been heard.

Robert Stanton
Director
Serving the Visitor 1998 is the fifth annual “report card” on how well the National Park Service (NPS) is serving its customers. It is part of the continuing effort to meet the requirements outlined in the 1995 NPS Customer Service Plan. This plan includes a public service pledge, specific performance standards, and a commitment to survey park visitors and report their opinions about important visitor services.

The Visitor Services Project (VSP) is an ongoing research project and research team housed at the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit (UI CPSU). The VSP includes two main survey tools which provide the NPS with valuable visitor feedback:

- in-depth visitor studies, and
- a customer satisfaction card.

This report includes the results of both types of VSP studies.

A visitor’s comment:

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Since 1988, the VSP has conducted in-depth visitor studies in over 80 units of the National Park System. Through these studies, park managers obtain accurate information about visitors—who they are, what they do, their needs and opinions. Managers have used this information to improve visitor services, protect resources and manage parks more efficiently.

During the summer of 1998, a customer satisfaction card was used for the first time to survey visitors at 281 units of the National Park System. The card is similar to mail-back customer satisfaction cards successfully used by major U.S. corporations. The survey results allow park managers to report performance in accordance with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). In addition, survey results provide the NPS with the ability to transfer the useable knowledge gained from the evaluations into improved customer service at the local, regional and national levels.

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Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, 1954
The first section of this report describes visitors’ evaluations of 12 important services, taken from the in-depth visitor studies in selected parks. In this section, each graph compares two years of current data (1997-1998), shown in black, with a five-year baseline of data (1992-1996), which is shown in green. Graphs which show results for less than 5 parks are labeled with “CAUTION!”, since data gathered from such a small number of parks may not be reliable.

The second section of this report shows visitors’ evaluations of important services, taken from the customer satisfaction card surveys conducted in most NPS units. Included are 3 important service categories—park facilities, visitor services and recreational opportunities—as well as the overall rating used in reporting GPRA performance. Since 1998 was the first year the customer satisfaction card was used, there is no baseline data available.

The survey results in Serving the Visitor 1998 are indicators of customer service—only a few of the services provided by the NPS, and only a sample of visitors are included. An appendix at the end of this report describes the research methods and limitations of both types of studies.
General Services

Park personnel

Park employees, such as rangers at entrance stations, maintenance employees, emergency response teams and law enforcement officers are an important part of many visitors’ park experience. Visitors at 15 parks were asked to rate the quality of park personnel at those parks. 63% rated the quality of park personnel as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 66%. 26% of visitors rated park personnel as “good” and 8% rated them as “average.” 3% rated park personnel as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 8%.

Visitor centers

Visitor centers offer information, publications for sale and other services to help visitors make the most of their park visit. Visitors rated the general quality of visitor centers in 11 parks. 54% rated visitor centers as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 53%. 30% rated visitor centers as “good” and 13% rated them as “average.” 3% rated visitor centers as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

Figure 1: Quality of park personnel

Figure 2: Quality of visitor centers
**Directional signs**

Directional signs are important in helping visitors find their way around in parks and to locate services, facilities and points of interest. Visitors at 14 parks evaluated the quality of directional signs in and around those parks. 49% rated the directional signs as “very good,” similar to the baseline rating of 48%. 31% of visitors felt the directional signs were “good” and 13% rated them as “average.” 7% rated the directional signs as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 8%.

![Directional signs](image)

Everglades National Park, 1950’s

![Figure 3: Quality of directional signs](image)

A visitor’s comment:

**The exhibition and the slide show in the visitor center are pretty rich of information. I enjoyed them both.**
NPS Facilities

Restrooms

Restrooms are a necessity for park visitors. Visitors at 16 parks were asked to rate the quality of the restrooms in those parks. 42% rated restroom quality as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 37%. 31% of visitors felt the restrooms were “good” and 20% rated them as “average.” 8% rated the restrooms as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 11%.

Campgrounds

Camping is a central part of some visitors’ park experience. Visitors at 9 parks were asked to rate the quality of NPS campgrounds in those parks. 49% rated the campgrounds as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 43%. 32% responded that the campgrounds were “good” and 13% felt they were “average.” 6% rated the campgrounds as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 10%.

Figure 4: Quality of restrooms

Figure 5: Quality of NPS campgrounds
Picnic areas

Picnicking is a traditional park activity that many visitors enjoy. Visitors at 8 parks were asked to rate the quality of picnic areas in those parks. 42% rated the picnic areas as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 43%. 33% felt the picnic areas were “good” and 19% rated them as “average.” 5% felt the picnic areas were “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 9%.

A visitor’s comment:

If the park service does not plan on having any drive-in campgrounds, it should provide more boat campsites close to the boat launches. Unless you get an early start, you have to go (by canoe) a long way to find a camp site.

Figure 6: Quality of picnic areas

Yellowstone National Park, 1925
Interpretive Services

Ranger programs

Ranger programs include guided walks and tours, campfire programs and living history demonstrations. In 15 parks, visitors were asked to rate ranger programs. 63% of visitors rated the ranger programs as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 61%. 24% responded that the ranger programs were “good” and 10% felt they were “average.” 3% rated the ranger programs as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 9%.

Exhibits

Exhibits, which are found inside museums and visitor centers and along roads and trails, are a valuable interpretive service offered in parks. Visitors at 17 parks evaluated the quality of exhibits in those parks. 46% rated the exhibits as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 48%. Exhibits were rated as “good” by 34% of visitors and 16% felt the exhibits were “average.” 4% rated the exhibits as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%.
Park brochures

Most parks have a brochure containing a map and basic information to help visitors plan their visit. The brochure is usually distributed to visitors as they enter the park or arrive at a visitor center. Visitors at 16 parks were asked to rate the quality of these brochures. 52% rated the brochure as “very good,” slightly below the baseline rating of 54%. 33% rated the park brochures as “good” and 12% rated them as “average.” 3% felt the park brochures were “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 6%.

Figure 9: Quality of park brochures

A visitor’s comment:

I enjoyed it just the way it was - if there were additional facilities - more historical information or information/gift areas - I would have used them.
**Concession Services**

**Lodging**

Many parks have hotels or motels within their boundaries and these facilities are an important part of some visitors' park experience. Visitors at 3 parks were asked to rate the quality of overnight accommodations in those parks. 41% of visitors rated the quality of park lodging as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 39%. 32% of visitors felt the lodging was “good” and 20% rated it as “average.” 7% rated the lodging as “poor” or “very poor,” equal to the baseline rating of 7%. Because few parks are included in the 1997-98 data, caution should be taken in interpreting these results.

**Food services**

The restaurants, cafeterias, snack bars and other food services offered in parks can be important to visitors. Visitors at 5 parks with food services were asked to rate the quality of those services. 38% of visitors rated the quality of food services as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 23%. 32% rated the food services as “good” and 21% felt these services were “average.” 9% rated the food services as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 13%.
Gift shops

Gift shops in parks provide visitors with an opportunity to bring home mementos of their park visit. Visitors at 14 parks rated the quality of gift shops in those parks. 34% responded that gift shops were “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 32%. 35% rated the gift shops as “good” and 24% felt they were “average.” 7% rated the gift shops as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 8%.

A visitor’s comment:

“More affordable lodging and a better selection for these heaven-thirsty types.”

Figure 12: Quality of gift shops in parks

Park visitors, circa 1920
Overall Quality of Services

The services evaluated by the in-depth visitor studies are indicators of how well the NPS is serving the public. Figure 13 shows ratings of 12 visitor services, based on 32,862 respondents at 17 parks. These ratings are an index created by combining the ratings for the individual services. 48% of the current visitors rated the 12 services in the parks as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 49%. 31% rated the services as “good” and 15% rated the services as “average.” 6% of the visitors rated the services as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 9%.

A visitor’s comment:

Not enough Concession stands.

197-98: 17 parks; 32,862 respondents; percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Figure 13: Overall quality of 12 services

Bandelier National Monument, 1938
In 1993, Congress enacted the Government Performance and Results Act. This law requires all federal agencies to set goals and report progress toward those goals. One of GPRA’s purposes is to promote “...a new focus on results, service quality and customer satisfaction” for the American people. The NPS is using GPRA to help set priorities and better manage its resources and services.

For the resources in NPS care—natural, cultural and recreational—and for the people served, GPRA requires showing the outcomes which are accomplished. One way to measure outcomes is to survey visitors and ask them about the quality of their experiences while visiting parks (i.e., measure visitor satisfaction).

The NPS is moving forward to meet GPRA requirements and measure visitor satisfaction. In early 1998, the NPS completed the development of a standard customer satisfaction card. The card will be used annually by all NPS units to measure performance related to visitor satisfaction. In the summer of 1998, the customer satisfaction card was used by selected visitors at 281 national park units to rate park facilities, services and recreational opportunities. At year’s end, a total of 22,913 visitors had completed and returned the customer satisfaction card.

On the following pages are graphs showing visitor evaluations of the quality of services within 3 important service categories—park facilities, visitor services and recreational opportunities. These ratings are an index created by combining the ratings for individual indicators within the service category. For this section, and for GPRA requirements, a visitor is “satisfied” when he or she rated a service as either “good” or “very good.”
Park Facilities

Visitor opinions of 5 key indicators are used to measure visitor satisfaction with park facilities. These indicators are:

- visitor centers,
- exhibits,
- restrooms,
- walkways, trails and roads, and
- campgrounds and/or picnic areas.

89% of visitors are satisfied with these park facilities provided within the National Park System.

A visitor’s comment:

Would like to see more picnic areas w/tables...

Figure 14: Combined index for satisfaction with park facilities

1998: 21,725 responses (based on 5 indicators); percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Proportion of respondents (%)

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<td></td>
<td>60%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 14: Combined index for satisfaction with park facilities

Grand Canyon National Park, circa 1920
Visitor Services

Visitor opinions of 4 key indicators are used to measure satisfaction with visitor services provided in the parks. These indicators are:

- assistance from park employees,
- park map or brochure,
- ranger programs, and
- commercial services in the park.

91% of visitors are satisfied with these services provided within the National Park System.

A visitor’s comment:

"The employees made us feel very much at home... they were friendly and full of knowledge..."

Figure 15: Combined index for satisfaction with visitor services

Mesa Verde National Park, 1961
Recreational Opportunities

Visitor opinions of 3 important indicators are used to measure visitor satisfaction with recreational opportunities provided in the parks. These indicators are:

▼ learning about nature, history or culture,
▼ outdoor recreation, and
▼ sightseeing.
94% of visitors are satisfied with these recreational opportunities provided within the National Park System.

A visitor’s comment:

If a concrete world, this is an oasis.

Figure 16: Combined index for satisfaction with recreational opportunities
Overall Quality of Facilities, Services & Recreational Opportunities

NPS units are required to annually report performance related to a broad list of GPRA goals. Visitor satisfaction is one of these goals. The NPS 1998 GPRA goal IIa1 (visitor satisfaction) stated that “77% of park visitors are satisfied with appropriate park facilities, services and recreational opportunities.”

For GPRA reporting purposes, the customer satisfaction card includes an overall quality question used as the primary measure of visitor satisfaction. This question asked visitors to rate the “overall quality of facilities, services and recreational opportunities.” Visitor responses to this question are used to calculate each park’s visitor satisfaction rating. Again, a visitor is “satisfied” if their response to this overall quality question was either “very good” or “good.”

Figure 17 shows the overall quality rating based on 22,913 respondents in 281 units in the National Park System. 95% of the park visitors surveyed are “satisfied” with the overall quality of facilities, services and recreational opportunities.

The customer satisfaction card results show strong evidence of excellent visitor service across the National Park System. Of the 281 parks which successfully completed a 1998 visitor satisfaction survey, 275 met the annual servicewide goal of 77% visitor satisfaction.

Figure 17: Overall quality of facilities, services and recreational opportunities

A visitor’s comment:

The facilities are nicely kept; the guides program inside is excellent; and the mosquitoes are gone!
The results from the customer satisfaction card surveys in individual parks are also combined for parks in each region of the National Park Service. Figure 18 shows, for the 7 regions, the percentage of park visitors satisfied overall with appropriate facilities, services and recreational opportunities. Regional overall visitor satisfaction scores are very similar, ranging from 93% to 96%.

The customer satisfaction card results can provide parks with benefits beyond simply meeting annual GPRA reporting requirements. These results can be useful in planning, operations, management and research related to the national parks. The results allow park managers to better understand visitor needs, better protect natural and cultural resources and improve visitor services.

Figure 18: Percentage of visitors satisfied overall, by NPS region, 1998
The study results included in this report show that visitors are largely satisfied with the quality of services they are receiving in the National Park System.

Both the in-depth visitor studies and the customer satisfaction card asked visitors to rate the overall quality of the services provided during their visit. The in-depth visitor studies in 1997-1998 showed that 89% of the visitor groups rated overall services as “good” or “very good.” The customer satisfaction card, used for the first time in 1998 in 281 parks, showed that 95% of the visitor groups rated the overall quality of services, facilities and recreational opportunities as “good” or “very good.”

By monitoring visitor satisfaction through different types of visitor studies, and using the information to improve all aspects of park operations, the NPS can continue to protect resources and provide high quality customer service.

Conclusion

Yosemite National Park

A visitor’s comment:

Some fair method to control overcrowding and maintain the pristine wilderness and park cleanliness. Keep the wilderness experience preeminent by not offering all the comforts of home.
Research Methods

VSP Visitor Studies

The in-depth visitor studies conducted by the VSP are based on systematic surveys of park visitors. A random sample of visitor groups is chosen to represent the general visitor population during a one-week study period. The sample is usually “stratified,” or distributed by entrance or zone, depending upon park characteristics. Sample size and sampling intervals are based upon estimates using the previous year's visitation statistics. Results are usually accurate to within 4 percentage points for simple questions, and are somewhat less accurate for more complex ones. The results are statistically significant at the .05 level. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar 95 out of 100 times.

VSP personnel hold an on-site workshop with park staff to develop the survey questionnaire and plan the study. A standard set of demographic questions is included in each survey, and park managers can include additional “customized” questions to reflect their information needs. In addition, questionnaires include open-ended questions where visitors are asked to provide comments about their visit.

Short (two-minute) interviews are conducted as visitors arrive at a sampling site. The interviews are to collect data for a non-response bias check, obtain mailing addresses for follow-up reminders and distribute the mail-back questionnaires. The refusal rate (the proportion of visitors contacted that decline to participate) currently averages 7%. The response rate (the proportion of visitors that return their questionnaires) currently averages 79%. The data are coded and prepared by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University. The data are analyzed using a standard statistical analysis program. A respondent, for the purposes of this report, is a member of a visitor group that provided a response to a particular questionnaire item. A check on key variables is conducted to see if those visitors who did not respond (from initial interview data) were significantly different from those who returned their questionnaires (non-response bias). Responses to open-ended questions (where visitors write in comments) are categorized and summarized by VSP staff.

In-depth visitor studies have several limitations. Responses to mail-back questionnaires may not reflect actual behavior or opinions. The results cannot always be generalized beyond the study periods. Visitor groups that do not include an English-speaking person may be underrepresented. These limitations apply to all studies of this type.
VSP Customer Satisfaction Card Surveys

The customer satisfaction card surveys have a somewhat different methodology than the in-depth visitor studies. 400 customer satisfaction cards are distributed to a random sample of visitors in each park during a 30-day study period. For each survey, park staffs select an interval sampling plan based on the previous years' visitation. Results are usually accurate to within 6 percentage points. The results are statistically significant at the .05 level. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar 95 out of 100 times.

Park staff are trained to distribute cards according to a standard set of survey instructions and guidelines. A standardized customer satisfaction card which includes the same set of service-related questions is used for each survey. In addition, the card includes an open-ended question to evaluate visitor understanding.

Returned cards are electronically scanned, and the data coded and prepared by Visual Input Systems Analysts, Incorporated, located in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The response rate (the proportion of visitors that return their survey card) for the 281 customer satisfaction card surveys averaged 24%. A test for non-response bias was conducted by comparing the results for the same question from both the customer satisfaction card and the in-depth visitor studies. The data were gathered in the same parks, seasons and survey locations. The results of this test suggest that non-response bias is not a factor.

For individual park reports, frequency distributions are calculated for each indicator and category. At the end of the calendar year, responses from individual park surveys are combined to create reports at the cluster, region and systemwide levels. Data from parks with less than 30 returned cards, or from parks with discrepancies in data collection methods, are omitted from these reports.

The customer satisfaction card surveys have several limitations. The data reflect visitor opinions about the NPS unit’s facilities, services and recreational opportunities during the survey period. The results do not necessarily apply to visitors during other times of the year, or park visitors who did not visit one of the survey locations. Visitor groups that do not include an English-speaking person may be underrepresented. These limitations apply to all studies of this type.
List of Selected Parks

**VSP Visitor Studies**
The data for in-depth visitor studies in this report come from the following NPS units:

- Acadia National Park, Maine
- Adams National Historic Site, Massachusetts
- Anchorage Alaska Public Lands Information Center, Alaska
- Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, Virginia
- Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico
- Belle Haven Park/Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve, Virginia
- Bent’s Old Fort National Historic Site, Colorado
- Big Bend National Park, Texas
- Booker T. Washington National Monument, Virginia
- Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah
- Canaveral National Seashore, Florida
- Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona
- Chamizal National Memorial, Texas
- Channel Islands National Park, California
- Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, Georgia
- Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona
- Cumberland Island National Seashore, Georgia
- Death Valley National Park, California
- Devils Tower National Monument, Wyoming
- Dry Tortugas National Park, Florida
- Edison National Historic Site, New Jersey
- Everglades National Park, Florida
- Fort Bowie National Historic Site, Arizona
- Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, D.C.
- Gettysburg National Military Park/Eisenhower National Historic Site, Pennsylvania
- Glen Echo Park, Virginia
- Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming
- Great Falls Park, Virginia
- Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee/North Carolina
- Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, Indiana
- Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, Louisiana
- Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, Missouri
- Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Alaska
- Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, Indiana
- Lowell National Historical Park, Massachusetts
- Manassas National Battlefield Park, Virginia
- Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, Georgia
- Mojave National Preserve, California
- National Monument & Memorials (National Mall), Washington, D.C.
- New River Gorge National River, West Virginia
- Nez Perce National Historical Park, Idaho
- Pecos National Historical Park, New Mexico
- Prince William Forest Park, Virginia
- Redwood National Park, California
- San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Texas
- San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, California
- Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, California
- Sitka National Historical Park, Alaska
- The U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial (Iwo Jima)/The Netherlands Carillon, Virginia
- Virgin Islands National Park, Virgin Islands
- Voyageurs National Park, Minnesota
- Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, California
- Whitman Mission National Historic Site, Washington
- Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts, Virginia
- Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska
- Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming
- Zion National Park, Utah

**VSP Customer Satisfaction Card Surveys**
The data for customer satisfaction card surveys in this report come from 281 NPS units.
For more information about the Visitor Services Project, contact:

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