Serving the Visitor 1999

A Report on Customers of the National Park Service
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Prepared by:

Dr. Gary E. Machlis  
Visiting Chief Social Scientist  
National Park Service  
and  
Sociology Project Leader  
Cooperative Park Studies Unit  
University of Idaho

Terry Bergerson  
Coordinator, Visitor Survey Card Project  
Cooperative Park Studies Unit

Margaret Littlejohn  
Coordinator, Visitor Services Project  
Cooperative Park Studies Unit

The following organizations and individuals contributed to the preparation of this report:

National Park Service  
University of Idaho  
Visitor Services Project Advisory Committee

and Jen Rogers

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Cooperative Park Studies Unit  
College of Natural Resources, Room 16  
University of Idaho  
Moscow, ID  83844-1133  
(208) 885-7054

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A Message From The Director

The national park concept of setting aside natural tracts of land for the enjoyment of people has been called one of "America’s best ideas." This continues to be validated by the American public and international visitors who flock to our national parks in increasing numbers. In the year 2000, an estimated 291 million people will visit a unit of the National Park System.

The National Park System has grown beyond the original effort to set aside natural areas for visitor enjoyment. The system has expanded to encompass a remarkable array of 379 of the Nation’s greatest natural and historic places and recreational areas. Our challenge is to continue to provide the nation’s diverse public with access to quality recreational and educational experiences at these parks. At the same time, we must maintain unimpaired those unique attributes that contribute to the National Park System. Toward this end, a dedicated workforce of over 20,000 permanent and seasonal employees and over 90,000 annual volunteers strive to serve visitors and protect irreplaceable natural and cultural resources.

How well have we done in meeting this challenge at the end of the 20th century? Serving the Visitor 1999, the sixth in a series of reports by the NPS Visitor Services Project, helps answer that question. As this report indicates, visitors to the National Park System are very satisfied with the visitor services they are receiving in the parks. NPS employees and volunteers should take pride in what our customers are reporting. I would like to challenge the agency to use the valuable information in this report to identify ways we can improve even further.

As we move forward into the 21st century, we can be assured that a tradition of willingness to serve the public is firmly ingrained in the our agency's culture. To our employees, I proudly urge you to keep up the good work. And to our visitors, I offer a pledge that we will continue to provide “world class” customer service while we preserve the resources of the National Park System in years to come.

Robert Stanton
Director
Serving the Visitor 1999 is the sixth 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 on their opinions about important visitor services.

An accurate understanding of the relationship between people and parks is critical to both protecting resources and providing for public enjoyment. One of the best ways to gain insight into this relationship is to ask visitors to evaluate their park visit. The NPS Visitor Services Project (VSP) provides an opportunity for visitors to voice their opinions through participation in visitor surveys. Serving the Visitor 1999 contains results from these surveys relating to visitor services provided in units of the National Park System.

The 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.

Since 1988, the VSP has conducted in-depth visitor studies in over 85 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.

A customer satisfaction card has also been used for the past two years to survey visitors to units of the National Park System. The card is similar to mail-back customer satisfaction cards successfully used by major U.S. corporations. In future years, the card will continue to be used annually by NPS units to measure performance related to visitor satisfaction. The survey results allow park managers to report performance in accordance with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). They can also apply survey results to management needs, such as improving the design of park facilities, identifying strengths and weaknesses in visitor services, and employee training. Results are reported at all NPS levels (park, cluster, regional, and national).

Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, 1980
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 (1998-1999), shown in black, with a five-year baseline of data (1993-1997), 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 should be interpreted and used cautiously.

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. In this section, each graph compares current data (1999) shown in black, with a one-year baseline of data (1998), shown in green.

The survey results in Serving the Visitor 1999 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.

A visitor’s comment:

"Continue surveying visitors! It is important for us to know that our opinions are being considered in your plans for the future of the park."
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 14 parks were asked to rate the quality of park personnel at those parks. 62% rated the quality of park personnel as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 67%. 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 6%.

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 10 parks. 50% rated visitor centers as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 54%. 30% rated visitor centers as “good” and 16% rated them as “average.” 3% rated visitor centers as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 5%.
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 11 parks evaluated the quality of directional signs in and around those parks. 44% rated the directional signs as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 49%. 31% of visitors felt the directional signs were “good” and 17% rated them as “average.” 7% rated the directional signs as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 8%.

Figure 3: Quality of directional signs

A visitor’s comment:

Stay open later at night, especially during the summer where heat and crowds can affect your ability to see and do more. But all the rangers were friendly and smiling. THAT WE LIKED!!!
NPS Facilities

Restrooms

Restrooms are a necessity for park visitors. Visitors at 15 parks were asked to rate the quality of the restrooms in those parks. 36% rated restroom quality as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 40%. 31% of visitors felt the restrooms were “good” and 23% rated them as “average.” 10% rated the restrooms as “poor” or “very poor,” equal to the baseline rating of 10%.

Campgrounds

Camping is a central part of some visitors’ park experience. Visitors at 8 parks were asked to rate the quality of NPS campgrounds in those parks. 46% rated the campgrounds as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 45%. 34% responded that the campgrounds were “good” and 13% felt they were “average.” 8% rated the campgrounds as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 9%.
Picnic areas

Picnicking is a traditional park activity that many visitors enjoy. Visitors at 7 parks were asked to rate the quality of picnic areas in those parks. 37% rated the picnic areas as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 44%. 38% felt the picnic areas were “good” and 21% rated them as “average.” 4% felt the picnic areas were “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 9%.

A visitor’s comment:

It was terrific. The camping was great! Quiet, well-separated sites. We will be back with our young daughter—next time. Love the carriage-trails for biking. We were extremely impressed with the hiking trails & trail building techniques. A 10+ vacation score!
Interpretive Services

Ranger programs

Ranger programs include guided walks and tours, campfire programs and living history demonstrations. In 14 parks, visitors were asked to rate ranger programs. 66% of visitors rated the ranger programs as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 63%. 24% responded that the ranger programs were “good” and 7% felt they were “average.” 4% rated the ranger programs as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

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 14 parks evaluated the quality of exhibits in those parks. 42% rated the exhibits as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 49%. Exhibits were rated as “good” by 36% of visitors and 18% 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 15 parks were asked to rate the quality of these brochures. 48% rated the brochure as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 53%. 34% rated the park brochures as “good” and 14% rated them as “average.” 4% felt the park brochures were “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 5%.

![Figure 9: Quality of park brochures](image)

A visitor's comment:

"I would plan more ranger-led programs for children—and redefine children up to age 16."
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. 49% of visitors rated the quality of park lodging as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 40%. 33% of visitors felt the lodging was “good” and 16% rated it as “average.” 2% rated the lodging as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%. Because few parks are included in the 1998-99 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. 39% of visitors rated the quality of food services as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 27%. 34% rated the food services as “good” and 18% felt these services were “average.” 9% rated the food services as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 12%.
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. 29% responded that gift shops were “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 39%. 34% rated the gift shops as “good” and 28% felt they were “average.” 8% rated the gift shops as “poor” or “very poor,” equal to the baseline rating of 8%.

A visitor’s comment:

I think the gift shops should add more items under the price of $10—and make sure it’s made in the U.S.A.!!

Golden Gate National Recreation Area, 1900
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 25,159 respondents at 15 parks. These ratings are an index created by combining the ratings for the individual services. 45% of the current visitors rated the 12 services in the parks as “very good,” compared to the baseline rating of 49%. 32% rated the services as “good” and 17% rated the services as “average.” 6% of the visitors rated the services as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to the baseline rating of 7%.

A visitor's comment:

It was such a positive experience in every way—not too many people, ranges very friendly, information along the trails was very interesting, etc.

Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, circa 1970
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 has been used annually (since 1998) by most NPS units to measure performance related to visitor satisfaction. In 1999, the customer satisfaction card was completed by a sample of visitors at 307 national park units. At year’s end, a total of 27,267 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.

88% of visitors are satisfied with these park facilities provided within the National Park System (compared to the baseline of 89%).

A visitor’s comment:

"We were disappointed that the campground was full and remained so for our whole stay."
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.

90% of visitors are satisfied with these services provided within the National Park System (compared to the baseline rating of 91%).

A visitor’s comment:

The outstanding Rangers - their friendliness, information, and personal interest in the visitor made my trip outstanding. They are special people.

Figure 15: Combined index for satisfaction with visitor services

Chickasaw National Recreation Area, 1960
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.

92% of visitors are satisfied with these recreational opportunities provided within the National Park System (compared to the baseline rating of 94%).

A visitor’s comment:

I liked the remoteness, natural beauty, quietness, opportunity to see wildlife, and relatively unspoiled landscape.

Figure 16: Combined index for satisfaction with recreational opportunities

Rocky Mountain National Park, 1938
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 1999 GPRA goal IIa1 (visitor satisfaction) stated that “95% 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 26,578 respondents in 307 units in the National Park System. In 1999, this satisfaction level (94%) remained statistically the same as the 95% rating in 1998 (results are accurate to within 1 percentage point).

The customer satisfaction card results show strong evidence of excellent visitor service across the National Park System. The NPS has one of the most demanding GPRA goals for visitor satisfaction. Of the 307 parks which successfully completed a 1999 visitor satisfaction survey, 182 (60%) met the annual servicewide goal of 95% visitor satisfaction. 248 parks of the 307 parks (81%) had a visitor satisfaction rating of 90% or greater.

A visitor’s comment:

the parks facilities and maintenance seem to foster a respect for under stilled nature as well as the history of the country.
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.
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 1998-1999 showed that 88% of the visitor groups rated overall services as “good” or “very good.” The customer satisfaction card, used in 307 parks, showed that 94% 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.

**A visitor’s comment:**

“We truly enjoyed our visit. The interaction with some of the international visitors was a neat experience for our family members as well as theirs. Nice to see the whole world appreciates our wonderful National Parks.”
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. Standard demographic questions are 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. For individual park reports, 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. For the National Park System as a whole, results are accurate to within 1 percentage point. These results are statistically significant at the .01 level.

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 307 customer satisfaction card surveys averaged 25%. 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
- Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico
- Belle Haven Park/Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve, Virginia
- Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida
- 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
- Gettysburg National Military Park/Eisenhower National Historic Site, Pennsylvania
- Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, Alaska
- 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
- Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska
- Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Alaska
- Lassen Volcanic National Park, California
- 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 Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, Massachusetts
- Nez Perce National Historical Park, Idaho
- Pecos National Historical Park, New Mexico
- Prince William Forest Park, Virginia
- Redwood National Park, California
- Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C.
- Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway, Wisconsin/Minnesota
- San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Texas
- San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, California
- San Juan National Historic Site, Puerto Rico
- 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

VSP Customer Satisfaction Card Surveys
The data for customer satisfaction card surveys in this report come from 307 NPS units.
For more information about the Visitor Services Project, contact:

Dr. Gary E. Machlis
Sociology Project Leader
Cooperative Park Studies Unit
College of Natural Resources
University of Idaho
Moscow, ID 83844-1133
(208) 885-7129