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Back to Nature



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In 1916 Congress established the National Park Service within the Department of the Interior. At that time, NPS involved a handful of employees in Washington, DC, 18 national parks, and some two dozen national monuments and historic battlefields. Today the system has grown to include 80.7 million acres and 384 park system units. The crown jewels of the system are the national parks, offering extraordinary recreational opportunities while preserving unique natural systems.

There are a number of designations within the national park system. National Military Parks—battlefields, cemeteries, historic landmarks and memorials—are dedicated to preserving our cultural heritage and memorializing significant events in our history. National Monuments protect landmarks, structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest. National Preserves protect outstanding natural beauty while allowing for such activities as hunting and camping. National Recreation Areas provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and include reservoirs, seashores, lakeshores, rivers, trails and parkways.

Some national parks are enormous, like Grand Canyon National Park, which encompasses 1.2 million acres and has over 4.5 million visitors a year. A number of units are small but well known, such as the historic Ford Theater where President Lincoln was assassinated, or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall in Washington, DC. Other units may be large but remain obscure, such as the 6.5 million acre Noatak National Preserve in Alaska, which had only about 4000 visitors in 1999.

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The national park system is as diverse as America itself, and management decisions require extensive information about what Americans think of their national parks, as well as their policy preferences. The National Park Service regularly surveys park visitors to track visitation trends, obtain ratings of park quality, and measure levels of support for policy decisions. Until recently, however, relatively little information had been gathered from people who do not visit national parks. Yet nonvisitors support park units by paying taxes to the federal government, and NPS is interested in providing opportunities for all Americans.

Last year NPS commissioned its first comprehensive national survey of the American public. The Social Research Laboratory at Northern Arizona University designed the questionnaire and conducted the survey between February 21 and May 21, 2000. Random samples of approximately 500 people within each of the National Park Service's seven regions were surveyed, and the data were combined into a national sample of 3,515 respondents.

One of the most important goals of the survey was simply to gauge the proportion of the American public that visits national park system units. Respon-

dents were asked if they had visited a national park within the previous two years. To rule out those who might have visited public lands outside the system, respondents who said they had visited a park were asked to name the unit they had last entered. This response was checked against a list of all national park system units. If the response corresponded to an actual unit on the list, the respondent was coded as a "recent visitor." Those who could not accurately name a park and those who had not visited a national park within the previous two years were coded as "nonvisitors."

Now, for the first time, we know that at least one-third of US residents recently visited one of 384 units within the national park system, with rates varying significantly along demographic lines. Income and education most strongly affect an individual's likelihood of visiting national park units. Eighteen percent of people living in households with a combined yearly income of less than \$20,000 visited a national park recently, compared with 50% of people from households making more than \$100,000 a year. Only 15% of people with less than a high school education were recent visitors, as opposed to half of people with post-college educations.

Race is also related to who does and does not visit national parks. Thirty-five percent of white respondents visited a national park within the past two years, compared with only 14% of African Americans.

Why are visitation rates not higher? Nonvisitors said they are often too busy to visit, with 38% claiming they just don't have time. A large number of people said national parks are too far away from where they live (37%), while others did not have enough information about what the parks have to offer (15%). For some respondents, the costs associated with visiting national parks are difficult to bear. Eleven percent of nonvisitors found the overall costs of visiting, such as hotel and food costs, to be too high. Another 7% said entrance fees are too expensive, 4% were concerned that the parks are not handicap-accessible, and another 4% worried that parks are unsafe.

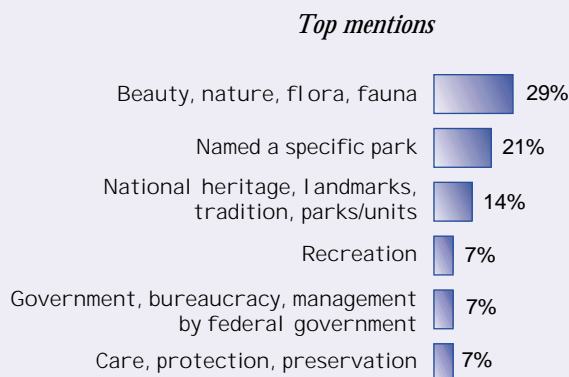
Why isn't the public visiting national parks more often? In the past, park managers have had to guess at the reasons. In this study, the problem most often identified as a barrier to more frequent visitation was a lack of information. More than half those surveyed (59%) said they do not know enough about what parks have to offer. More than half of all respondents indicated that the time it takes to get to parks restricts their ability to visit (51%), and about half said that costs associated with visiting parks are too high. Smaller numbers pointed to crowding, reservations requiring too much advance notice, lack of adequate parking, and high entrance fees.

Of these barriers to visitation, the National Park Service is particularly concerned about entrance fees. In the last few years, NPS has been authorized by Congress to raise entrance fees temporarily in some park units, in what is known as the "Recreation Fee Demonstration Project." The additional revenue generated is to be used by individual units

Figure 1

Impressions of the National Park System

Question: Please tell me what first comes to mind when you hear the words "National Park System."

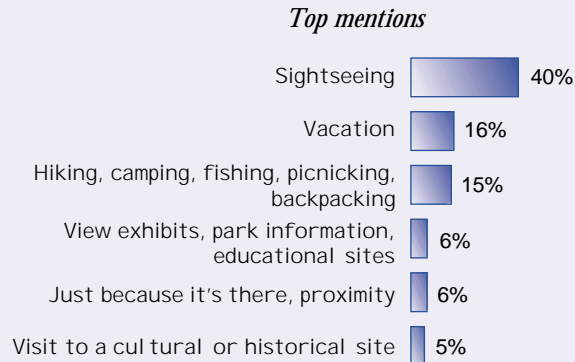


Source: Survey by the Social Research Laboratory, Northern Arizona University, February 21-May 21, 2000.

Figure 2

Playing and Learning

Question: Now I would like to ask you a series of questions about your last visit to a national park system unit.... [W]hat was your main reason for visiting?



Note: Asked of recent visitors.

Source: Survey by the Social Research Laboratory, Northern Arizona University, February 21-May 21, 2000.

for maintenance and upgrades of physical structures and new visitor services.

According to the survey, just over one-quarter of the public thinks entrance fees are too high. Surprisingly, there is very little difference in visitor and nonvisitor attitudes (24% versus 29%, respectively).

However, 80% of visitors who actually paid to enter a park said the amount was just about right for the benefits they received. Another 6% said the entrance fee was too low, and only 11% said they had paid too much.

Attitudes toward entrance fees differ by region. People in the east and midwest are less concerned about fee levels than those in the west and southwest. An average of 24% of respondents living in the eastern and midwestern parts of the country believe fees are too high, compared to 33% living in the Rocky Mountain states, on the west coast and in Alaska. The greatest variation in opinion, however, is by education levels. Thirty-eight percent of people who have not graduated high school think fees are too high, compared with only 18% of those with education beyond a four-year college degree.

An important fee-related issue is how the money should be distributed. The fee demonstration program allows the difference in revenues between old fees and new trial fees to go directly to the unit where the fees are collected.

The National Park Service is currently grappling with alternatives for handling fee revenues. The practice now in place allows for a lower entrance fee, with additional fees charged for activities inside the park. A competing option is for NPS to charge higher entrance fees and make them inclusive of all activities within the park units. This survey found the public preferring the current system of a lower entrance fee two to one over the idea of a higher, all-inclusive entrance fee.

Once again, education was an important factor. While two-thirds of respondents with a post-college education (68%) prefer separate fees, only half of people with less than a high school degree think similarly. Income also plays a role in this preference, with 70% of those making more than \$100,000 a year preferring separate fees, compared with 57% of those making less than \$20,000 a year.

People are very pleased with this nation's system of national parks, but they are somewhat less enthusiastic about the bureaucracy that manages it. When asked to rate the national park system, including national parks, historic or cultural sites and monuments, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being worst and 10 being best, visitors gave an average score of 8.08 to their experience with national parks. Americans as a whole, however, gave only a 6.81 to the National Park Service. The service was defined in this question as an agency that provides for public enjoyment, while ensuring that the parks are left unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. While many people have little actual contact with National Park Service personnel, it would seem that perhaps a general concern about "all things Washington" spills over to the national parks.

As a result of this survey, the National Park Service now has a great deal of data. Information generated in this research will help park managers make more informed decisions about the visitor experience in the near future. The challenge facing the Social Research Laboratory is to provide more in-depth analysis of the data and to produce separate monographs exploring four topics: regional differences in the findings, diversity in the parks, attitudes toward fees with an eye to whether fees limit park visitation, and attitudes toward policies involving the handling of natural species within park boundaries.

There is much more to our national parks than meets the eye. The NPS is charged with preserving and managing natural, historical and cultural resources while providing opportunities to enjoy those resources through recreation and interpretation. For years to come, public opinion data will play a significant role in national park management decisions. ●