

EVALUATION REPORT

CRITICAL APPRAISAL - BYRD VISITOR CENTER EXHIBIT *“Within a Day’s Drive of Millions...”*

SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK VIRGINIA

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Introduction

This report presents the results of an evaluation of the exhibit in the Byrd Visitor Center, “*Within a day’s drive of millions...*” The methodology used for this study is referred to as *critical appraisal*, which is a form of summative evaluation since it is carried out after an exhibit is installed. However, it differs from a typical large-scale summative evaluation in that it is based on the careful analysis of the exhibit’s content and display characteristics rather than an in-depth survey of the actual impact of the exhibit on a statistically based sample of visitors. The critical appraisal analysis is derived from the findings of the large number of visitor-based exhibit studies that have been carried out over the last 30 years. These studies have made it possible to extract a set of criteria that are directly related to the ability of exhibits to communicate with visitors. For example, it has been well established from these studies that visitors in general do not read “long” labels or text material. While the definition of “long” is not precise, the data from these studies strongly suggest that when a label or panel of text exceeds 75 words the number of visitors who read all of it begins to drop off sharply. If that same text is broken up into smaller “pieces” the number of readers has been found to increase significantly. Similar criteria have been established for a large number of other exhibit characteristics. When considered in the aggregate, they constitute the basis for making a judgment about an exhibit on its ability to **attract**, **hold**, and **communicate** with visitors, the three pillars of an effective exhibit.

This report will first look at each of the critical appraisal criteria for exhibit effectiveness as they relate to the Byrd exhibit, followed by a review of comments obtained from a small sample of visitors. The final section will summarize the findings and relate them to possible follow-up actions.

Conceptual Orientation

It has been found that visitors like to be informed about what to expect in an exhibit before committing themselves to it. This is especially important for large exhibits that will consume a major period of time and where there are alternative things to do (e.g., other exhibits/attractions/trails to hike). Such introductory panels are often called “advanced organizers” and frequently consist of questions – “Would you like to know...” or “Have you ever wondered why...” To serve its function this information must be placed where visitors can easily see it as they first enter the exhibit area.

The Byrd exhibit has very distinctive and eye-catching displays in the lobby area outside of the main body of the exhibit that represent its introductory panels. The photos are dramatic and get considerable attention. The primary introductory text, “A National Park in the East,” is where one would normally expect to find out about the subject matter of the exhibit. Is it about the natural history of the area? Is it about the various amenities, facilities and trails along the Skyline Drive? Is it about the various special events that NPS makes available to visitors? Is it about the history and development of the Park? This text obviously does not directly answer these kinds of questions nor was it intended to. What this text and the other panels in this area do very well, however, is give the

visitor the basic rationale that ultimately led to the development of the Park, which is an excellent introduction to the exhibit story that follows, but not a good “advanced organizer” that tells the visitor what the exhibit is about.

Having said this, it should be noted that since there are no alternative exhibits or special attractions in the visitor center itself (but lots of them outside!), it may be the case that not very many visitors would turn away from the rest of the exhibit because they were not adequately informed as to the nature of its subject matter. However, there may be other reasons for not continuing with the exhibit, which are related to the next criterion.

Physical Orientation and Circulation

Well-designed exhibits make it easy and natural for visitors to follow a path through the exhibit that provides the most exposure to its contents. The Byrd exhibit gets high marks on this item with two small exceptions.

Once visitors have spent some time at the introductory panels in the lobby, it is intended that they proceed into the main body of the exhibit. However, there is no signage that clearly notes that the exhibit continues inside the doorway. Several groups of visitors were observed who spent time at the lobby wall panels but that did not go into the rest of the exhibit. It may be that they had other things to do, or that they did not think that the subject matter seemed interesting enough to explore further (the “advanced organizer” issue). Only a tracking study plus visitor interviews would be able to answer such questions. But the important point is that this pattern of behavior should **not** be because they did **not know** that there was more to the exhibit.

There is a standing floor panel just to the left of the wall displays in the lobby that says *EXHIBIT STARTS AT LOBBY*. This was designed primarily to discourage visitors from entering the exhibit at its exit. In addition to the text being small and rather inconspicuous, the panel itself is not located where it would most likely be seen by those who are very close to the exit area. Thus, there are two separate circulation issues – reducing the number of visitors who enter at the exit and informing visitors that the exhibit continues from the lobby through the doorway. While it is never possible (or even desirable) to make visitors go only where we would like them to go, two additional signs would very likely help to deal with these problems more effectively – one over the entrance doorway saying *Exhibit Continues* and one right at the exit from the exhibit that says *Exhibit Exit. Exhibit Entrance In Lobby*.

The circulation flow through the exhibit is very well controlled due to its linear design. Once one is in the main exhibit area there are no alternative pathways to try to follow, as is often the case with large exhibits. This is ideal from a circulation and exhibit exposure point of view. All visitors must pass by all elements of the exhibit. (Of course, they do not have to **pay attention** to all of them.) There are two conditions, however, that detract from this desirable situation - crowding, and the influx of visitors entering from the exit. Both of these conditions can result in a loss of freedom of movement as visitors compete

with each other for space to view the various exhibit elements and read the numerous text materials. Of course, those who enter from the exit also miss the chronology of the story line of the exhibit which is important to its understanding. Crowding is a naturally occurring event and cannot be avoided. The relatively narrow aisle through the exhibit and the numerous things to read and do on both sides can create bottlenecks even with relatively few people. But the jam-ups caused by those who enter from the exit could be at least moderated by adding the signage suggested above. (This problem becomes especially noticeable when exit visitors move through the simulated forest area and meet those moving in the opposite direction.)

Labels and Text Material

It goes without saying that the appropriate use of the written word is fundamentally important to the ability of an exhibit to communicate with visitors (art exhibits may be the exception). The Byrd Center exhibit is about historical events that have many interesting elements to them. The issue facing the exhibit developer is to decide which of those elements should be selected for inclusion in the exhibit and what proportion of the total exhibit should be devoted to each of them. Too many elements and too much about each one, and the exhibit becomes the well-known visitor unfriendly “textbook on a wall” that visitors tend to ignore; too few and too little and one is criticized for leaving out essential elements in the story.

The Byrd Center exhibit, like most history exhibits, is text heavy, but it generally scores high in the criteria that go to make up this component of exhibit effectiveness.

Label length: Many of the labels in the exhibit approach or exceed what is considered to be the upper level of effective length for average readership (75 words). Several of the longer labels are broken up into one or more paragraphs, which has been shown to be an effective way to increase reading levels.

Line-of-sight: It is well established that any text material in an exhibit that is appreciably above eye level will not be seen by most visitors. With a few minor exceptions, this is not a problem in the Byrd exhibit. Given the width of the aisle through the exhibit (as little as 3’4” in many places), some of the text material at the higher levels requires stretching one’s neck a bit to see. A minor problem.

Ease of Reading: Size of letters, contrast with background, and variety of both of these variables, make it easy to read most of the text material. Some of the supporting documents are not as easy to read, but their authenticity makes up for this.

Relation of text to subject of text: Very good. Materials that support the text are easy to locate in relation to that text.

Writing grade level: It is considered desirable to keep the difficulty of text at the 8th grade level. While a reading level analysis was not done of this text material (there are several systems for doing this) my judgment is that level of writing may be a little on the

high side. I would assume that the average educational level of visitors to the Park might also be a little high compared to the general population. Not a problem area.

Text as Subject Matter Organizer: In general, the layout of the text material gives the visitor a very good notion of the hierarchy of information in terms of importance and organization. Major (primary) text is distinguished from secondary and tertiary text in very natural ways. The one exception to this is in the way the major section headings are written. Studies have shown that visitors can use them as subject matter organizers only when they are not only very visible (which these are) but are very explicit and to the point. Movie and book type titles do not work (books frequently have sub-titles to help). There is the tendency in this exhibit to use figures of speech in many of these major section headings that do not communicate the core idea for that section of the exhibit. For example, “An Uphill Climb” at the Lewis Mountain Lodge area does not literally mean what it says. One has to read the text and the sub-heading (which **does** mean what it says – “Integrating the New Park”) to understand what “Uphill Climb” really means. A visitor might be willing to spend time at this area if he or she knew that it was about segregation, but may move on to another area because the existing heading is vague and non-informative. Other major headings that do not communicate directly are:

The Call Goes Out
Hooking Hoover
An Unsettling Question
A New Deal for the Park
A Natural Balance
Bigger Than Its Boundaries
More Than Meets the Eye

Headings that are clear about the subject they are introducing are:

Virginia Vies for the Prize (?)
Assembling the Park’s Pieces
The Park Is Dedicated
A National Park Opens
WW II and its Wake

What is often done when the temptation to use figures of speech cannot be resisted (and I am one of those) is to place sub-headings right below that “translates” the main heading. Often these are in the form of questions. For example, for “The Call Goes Out” one might add just below, “Where is the Best Place to Put a National Park?”

Given the overall quality of the text, this is not a major issue. However, anything that can assist the visitor in making rational “this or that” kinds of decisions is worth paying attention to.

Text Interest Level: This is one of the more difficult areas to assess. Interest lies largely in the eye of the visitor and the exhibit can only do so much to stimulate interest if there is none there. What one can ask is whether or not the exhibit makes the material it has to deliver as lively and exciting as possible. The ability to do this is what turns attracting power into holding power. The Byrd exhibit does an outstanding job of presenting its subject matter in a way that makes the most of what is provocative and exciting about Park early history. Partly this is because the exhibit presents in an unblinking way those elements of the story that raised controversy at the time. There was real drama in how the Park land was taken away from its inhabitants and how the issue of segregation haunted it in its early days. Instead of ignoring or sugarcoating these realities, the exhibit makes them a major part of the story it tells. Emphasizing the role of the CCC in building the Park is another interest-plus factor. In short, I would rate this exhibit very high in relation to other history exhibits in telling its story in a way that would appeal to the typical Park visitor. (Another “target audience” for this exhibit is the Park inhabitants who were forced out of the Park and their friends and relatives. I would have to think that they would be very pleased with the way the exhibit presents their story.)

Glare and Reflection: With all of the essentially positive comments above about the text material it is unfortunate that one has to rate this criterion as unsatisfactory. Way too many text panels and supporting display materials are obscured by the glare from the ceiling lighting. Correcting this problem would probably constitute the single most important improvement that could be made to the Byrd exhibit.

Support Materials

Text material necessarily carries the burden of story-telling in a history exhibit. Often there are not adequate support materials to help tell that story. Such exhibits are likely to hold the attention of only the most dedicated visitor. This is not the case with the Byrd exhibit. The exhibit planners were able to find any number of original source documents and related materials that nicely supplement the text. This includes several videos that show contemporary scenes as well as Roosevelt delivering a speech on the dedication of the Park. All of these support elements give the exhibit a very high level of authenticity. This is especially important in dealing with subjects that have elements of controversy connected with them, like the disenfranchisement of the inhabitants of the Park, or the segregation practiced by the Park operators during its early years. The Byrd exhibit takes a position and backs it up with letters, memos, quotations, etc. The exhibit is factual and not confrontational.

One minor exception to the selection of support materials is the (abused) vintage typewriter that is in the area that deals with the Miriam Sizer story. It adds nothing of substance to her correspondence that is in the typewriter and encourages visitors (especially young ones!) to try to use the typewriter (which is frustrating because the keys are locked). In short, this looks like an interactive display of some kind but is not. It is only a distraction and a potentially negative experience for visitors.

Interactives

There is a sprinkling of interactive/hands-on elements throughout the exhibit. They are generally useful and add a level of visitor participation that is always welcome in an exhibit, especially for the younger audience. There is one interactive that fails to meet the standards of ease of use and meaningfulness, *Myth vs. Reality*. It is designed to show the various proposed boundaries of the Park by means of colored lights that outline the appropriate areas on a large horizontal map. There are three buttons that turn on the lights. The delay between pushing the button and the lights going on is too long, and results in users leaving before the display is fully activated. The display is also rather large and one cannot get the full perspective of the boundaries within the narrow confines of the exhibit aisle. The text labels that go with each button do not seem to coincide with what is being shown on the map. Backlit map text is hard to read.

Cosmetic changes may not be enough to fully correct these deficiencies. What may be required is a re-thinking of what the core message is that is intended to be communicated and how best that message could be represented by a different kind of interactive display.

The County flip panels on the wall around this display are not labeled as such. No doubt more visitors would use them if they knew they were flips.

The display that shows the inside of a settler's home that will be torn down the next day has a long delay time in going from one image to another. The images themselves are dim and difficult to see. The idea behind this display is a good one, but the story that it is meant to convey is not well communicated.

Supplemental Note

The Critical Appraisal technique is designed to be applicable to exhibits of all sizes, types, and subject matter. This "one size fits all" quality is desirable since it allows one to use it independent of the particular exhibit being evaluated as well as make comparisons between the results of different applications. However, there is a down side to these advantages when an exhibit has qualities that do not receive adequate attention in the standard use of the technique. This is the case with the Byrd exhibit that, in effect, has two themes. The first and major one, taking up approximately 4/5 of the exhibit space, deals with the history of the development of the Park and Skyline Drive up through WW II. The remaining and last section deals with current environmental issues as they relate to the Park, weaving in the three "mantras" of the NPS: Sustainability, conservation, and stewardship.

The transition between the two sections of the exhibit is almost seamlessly achieved by the use of a simulated forest area that takes the visitor out of the past and into the present. A further positive element of the final section of the exhibit, *More Than Meets the Eye*, is the incorporation of the view of Big Meadows that can be seen through the large picture

windows from the exhibit site. Thus one can not only learn about Big Meadows but one can look up and actually see it spread out before one's eyes!

This blending of themes and the use of the natural environment of the site to reinforce exhibit messages represents a high level of exhibit planning and design and deserves special mention.

Visitor Responses

As the opportunity presented itself, interviews were conducted with a small number of visitors (9) as they were exiting the exhibit. The size of this sample does not allow one to treat the results as anything but qualitative information. However, it is often the case that insights can be gained from talking to even just a few visitors about their exhibit experience. Each question asked will be followed by a summary of the responses given.

What is your overall impression of the exhibit you just looked at?

This is the standard “ice breaking” question that is often asked to establish rapport with the visitor. It seldom gets anything but very positive answers – “Really good, positive, very educational” were typical of the answers given.

About how much time do you think you spent in the exhibit?

Time is a very important datum since it is a measure of the holding power of an exhibit. If an exhibit would take one hour to “do” and visitors average 30 minutes, then it is obvious that they are selecting certain elements for attention and ignoring many others. A visitor tracking study would be required to reveal the actual pattern of behavior. This “cafeteria” style of behavior is typical for medium and large exhibits. The Byrd exhibit is both large and text heavy, and I believe would require **at least** one hour to completely read and observe. The results of this small sample show a high estimate of 30 minutes (1), a low of 10 minutes (2) and an average of about 15 minutes. Two problems with these data: Visitors are notoriously inaccurate in judging their own times and most of these estimates were given by morning visitors who were very likely scheduled for some type of morning activity. In fact two of those in this sample remarked that they had to meet a group and could not stay in the exhibit. Only a larger sample, with different times of day, days of the week, weather conditions, etc. would be able to provide a reliable range of figures in answer to this important question.

Would you say that there was just about the right amount of things to read and look at in the exhibit, or too many things, or too few?

Everyone said “Right amount” or variations thereof. One said, “I like too much rather than not enough.” I would guess that this kind of answer would be found from a larger study and speaks to the high interest level that most visitors bring to the subject matter.

They do not read everything but they like to be able to pick and choose what they find most interesting to them.

Was there anything that you found difficult to understand or confusing?

All but one person said “Nothing.” The one exception noted the *Myth vs. Reality* display. They could not figure out what it was supposed to do. I feel certain that they were not the only ones who had a problem with this display.

What did you find in the exhibit that was particularly interesting or new to you?

With two exceptions, the visitors said “nothing.” One said that the time it took to establish the Park and build the road surprised him. Another said that the racial issue was new to him. He also mentioned the simulated forest area as a very interesting way of creating the sense of being in the woods. This type of question would get more information if it were presented in a focus group, where a running conversation often brings out more useful answers. I would not interpret the “nothing” responses to mean that these visitors found nothing interesting or new in the exhibit!

Was there anything in the exhibit that touched you emotionally?

This item generated interesting responses. They had to do with: The role of Roosevelt and the CCC; the displacement of landowners and their resettlement; how the Park handled the racial issue. Two visitors had no response to this question.

Was there any information that you expected to find in the exhibit but was not there?

Only one person had a suggestion – more information about the indigenous people who were made to leave their land. (She had a similar experience in Boston.)

Had you been to this exhibit before?

One person had been through the exhibit the day before. I would think that repeat visits would be fairly common. In a larger study, this variable would have to be sorted out.

Any recommendations or suggestions for how the exhibit could be made better, more interesting, more informative, more entertaining?

None. This is a common response in one-on-one interviews right after seeing an exhibit. Focus groups often have much more to say on this subject.

Summary and Recommendations

The Byrd Center exhibit is a very well conceived and executed exhibit. This is revealed in both the Critical Appraisal analysis as well as in the limited visitor interviews. It covers its subject matter comprehensively and in a way designed to be interesting and attractive to its intended adult audience. It is not very likely that the average visitor will pay close attention to all of the text and displays, but whatever he or she decides to attend to, they will be rewarded with a well told story, backed up by well selected supporting documentation.

The exhibit is also a natural history exhibit, segueing from the history of the Park's development to a discussion of its natural assets. This dual role is handled creatively and leads the visitor quite naturally (no pun intended) to a consideration of how and why the Park should be cared for and protected. Making the "live" view of the Big Meadows a part of this section of the exhibit is an especially rewarding way for the visitor to complete the exhibit experience.

There were several elements in the exhibit that were considered to be less than optimal when considered against the criteria of the Critical Appraisal. They are noted in more detail in the body of this report but will be summarized here in the order in which they are believed to be detracting from overall exhibit effectiveness:

- Glare and reflection throughout exhibit
- Directional signage at entrance and exit
- Myth vs. Reality* interactive
- Exhibit orientation (advanced organizer)
- Settler's home scrim display
- Primary section headings
- Vintage typewriter
- Flip labels

With the exception of glare and reflection, none of the other items should be considered major deficiencies. However, their remediation would contribute to the overall effectiveness of what is already an outstandingly effective exhibit.