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Diversity of Visitors



A Report on Visitors to the National Park System

The NPS Visitor Services Project

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A Diversity of Visitors



A Report on Visitors to the National Park System

The National Park Service Visitor Services Project



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A special thanks to the staffs of the parks studied by the Visitor Services Project.

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The Cooperative Park Studies Unit is a research unit under cooperative agreement between the Pacific Northwest Region of the National Park Service and the University of Idaho.

Preface

John Muir once observed that “when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” Our national parks are no exception; they are not isolated from events beyond their boundaries.

National park areas are established primarily to protect natural and cultural resources and to provide for visitors' enjoyment of those resources. Fulfilling that dual mission is becoming increasingly complex as U.S. national parks attract a rapidly increasing number of visitors not only from the U.S., but from around the world. In itself, the increased number of visitors poses new problems—and possibilities—for our national parks and nearby communities. But complicating the issue is the increasing diversity of visitors—with an increasing diversity of expectations, wants, and needs, and increasing pressures on the resources they have come to enjoy.

Above all, managers confronting these issues need information. To protect park resources, they must know those natural and cultural resources and their diversity. That's half the equation. The other half is, of course, people. To provide for visitors' enjoyment—while protecting resources—managers must know their visitors, in all *their* diversity.

To know them is to take a big step toward knowing how our national parks are “hitched” to the rest of the world. An important way of learning about national park visitor diversity is through the studies of the Visitor Services Project (VSP), which the National Park Service has now integrated into its operation. Located at the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit, a research station of the NPS, the VSP provides the opportunity for understanding visitors and their opinions.

Thus far, the VSP has gathered visitor information from studies conducted in over 25 national park areas. Through this information, we are gaining a new perception of our national park areas, not as seen through the eyes of park professionals, but as seen by visitors.

Some aspects of visitors' perceptions are predictable; others surprising. And as the VSP studies more park areas, trends and patterns will emerge with important implications for all levels of park management, for park concessioners, for tourism-dependent businesses in nearby communities, and of course, for the visitors themselves. In helping us more completely understand park visitors, these studies will help us more knowledgeably fulfill the mission of the National Park Service.

I urge everyone connected with the national parks, from regional directors to field employees to concessioners to local business people, to read this Visitor Services Project report. I urge superintendents to discuss its contents with their staffs. The information in this report will encourage more parks to study their visitors, as well as evaluate some of the ways we conduct activities in and around the national parks.



James M. Ridenour
Director, National Park Service

Introduction

Who are park visitors? What do they think about the parks they visit, the facilities they use, the interpretive programs they attend? The Visitor Services Project (VSP) is designed to answer these questions and to help managers make more informed decisions about park operations and park planning.

The VSP began in 1982 when the National Park Service (NPS), recognizing the need to learn more about visitors and their opinions, asked Dr. Gary E. Machlis, Sociology Project Leader at the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit (CPSU), to help. Dr. Machlis and his staff developed a technique that provided an easy-to-use, consistent, and inexpensive means of studying visitors. Since that time, he and his team have continued to expand and refine the technique. Now that the VSP is part of NPS operations, two NPS employees are learning to conduct the VSP studies.

The survey process is tailored to each park, whether natural, historical, or cultural, and follows six simple steps (see Figure 1). VSP personnel hold an on-site workshop with park staff to develop the survey questionnaire and plan the study. In the field, a trained interview team contacts the visitors, distributing the stamped, addressed questionnaires. Visitors fill out the questionnaires, and mail them to the University of Idaho CPSU, where the information is coded and analyzed. VSP personnel then prepare a draft report in an easy-to-use graphic format. A workshop is held to explain the results to the park staff. The final report is prepared. Additional analyses are provided as needed.



Lincoln Memorial

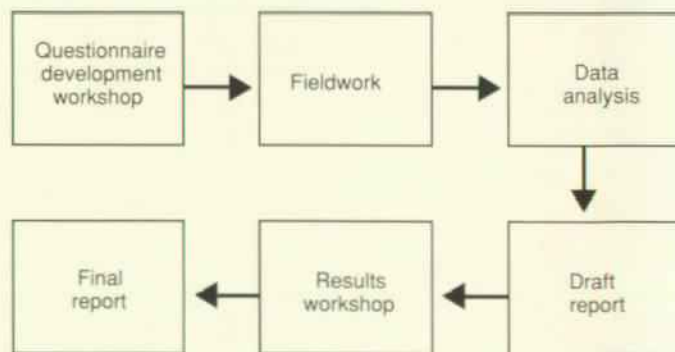


Figure 1: Steps in a typical Visitor Services Project survey

Information yielded by the studies is useful to managers of all park divisions, concessions, and local businesses:

- ▲ Park superintendents can use the information in preparing required planning documents.
- ▲ Planners and designers can use the data in improving the design of visitor facilities such as campgrounds or trails.
- ▲ Interpretive managers can make sure their programs match visitors' interests and needs.
- ▲ Resource managers can combine visitor data with biological data to better protect park resources.
- ▲ Concession managers can determine whether the services they offer are meeting visitors' needs.
- ▲ Local businesses can determine how visitors are contributing economically to the area, and discover new markets.

This report details some of the results of the VSP studies conducted since 1985 and highlights some of the 1988-1989 park studies. Its purpose is to illustrate the rich diversity of visitors to the national park system and to show how such information can be useful to park managers. A short discussion of the future direction of the VSP follows. Finally, an appendix describes the methods used in gathering the VSP data.

Note: This report is based on studies in individual parks, and each study was conducted during a short period in a single season. The data may not apply to all NPS areas or to other seasons (see Appendix). The results can, however, demonstrate the diversity of national park system visitors.



Crack-in-the-Rock Ruin, Wupatki NM



Horseback riding, Rocky Mountain NP

How old are visitors?

People of all ages visit the national parks. Each age group has different needs and interests in activities and services. For example, older visitors are generally interested in exhibits and displays but may need larger lettering, brighter coloring, and better lighting. In contrast, children enjoy special programs, with the individual attention of park staff, such as the Junior Ranger Program.

The VSP studies reflect a wide diversity of age groups in parks:

▲ In several of the park areas studied—like Colonial National Historical Park—visitors were mostly from three age groups (see Figure 2). Children under 16 comprised the largest proportion. Next were adults approaching middle age, followed by younger adults.

▲ Some parks had many visitors in one age group. Nearly one-half of the visitors to Denali National Park and Preserve were senior citizens (see Figure 3). In contrast, young to middle-aged adults made up more than one-half of the visitors to Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (see Figure 4).

▲ At other parks, such as North Cascades National Park, visitors of all ages were more equally represented (see Figure 5).

By observing trends in visitor populations, park managers, concessioners, and local businesses can determine the best ways to provide services. For example, as the visitor population ages (along with the U.S. population in general), there may be an increasing need for recreational vehicle campsites with hookups.

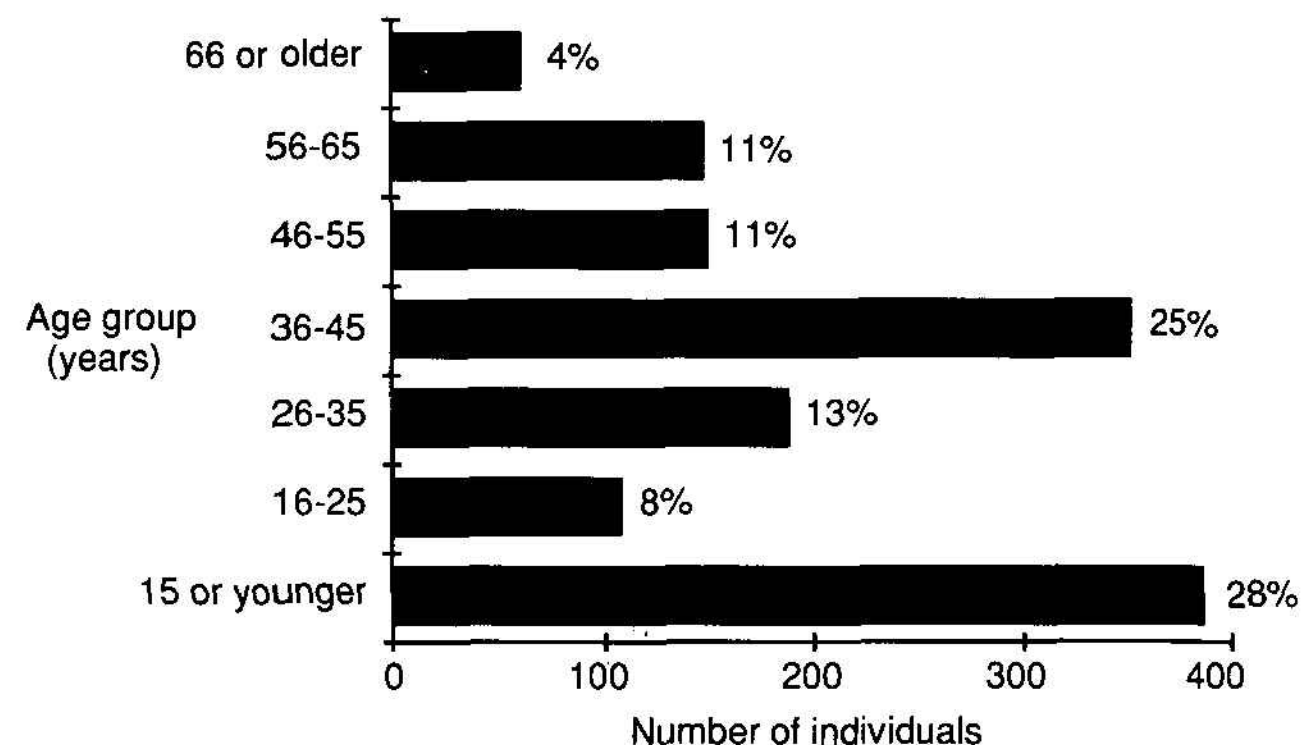


Figure 2: Visitor ages, Colonial NHP, 1987

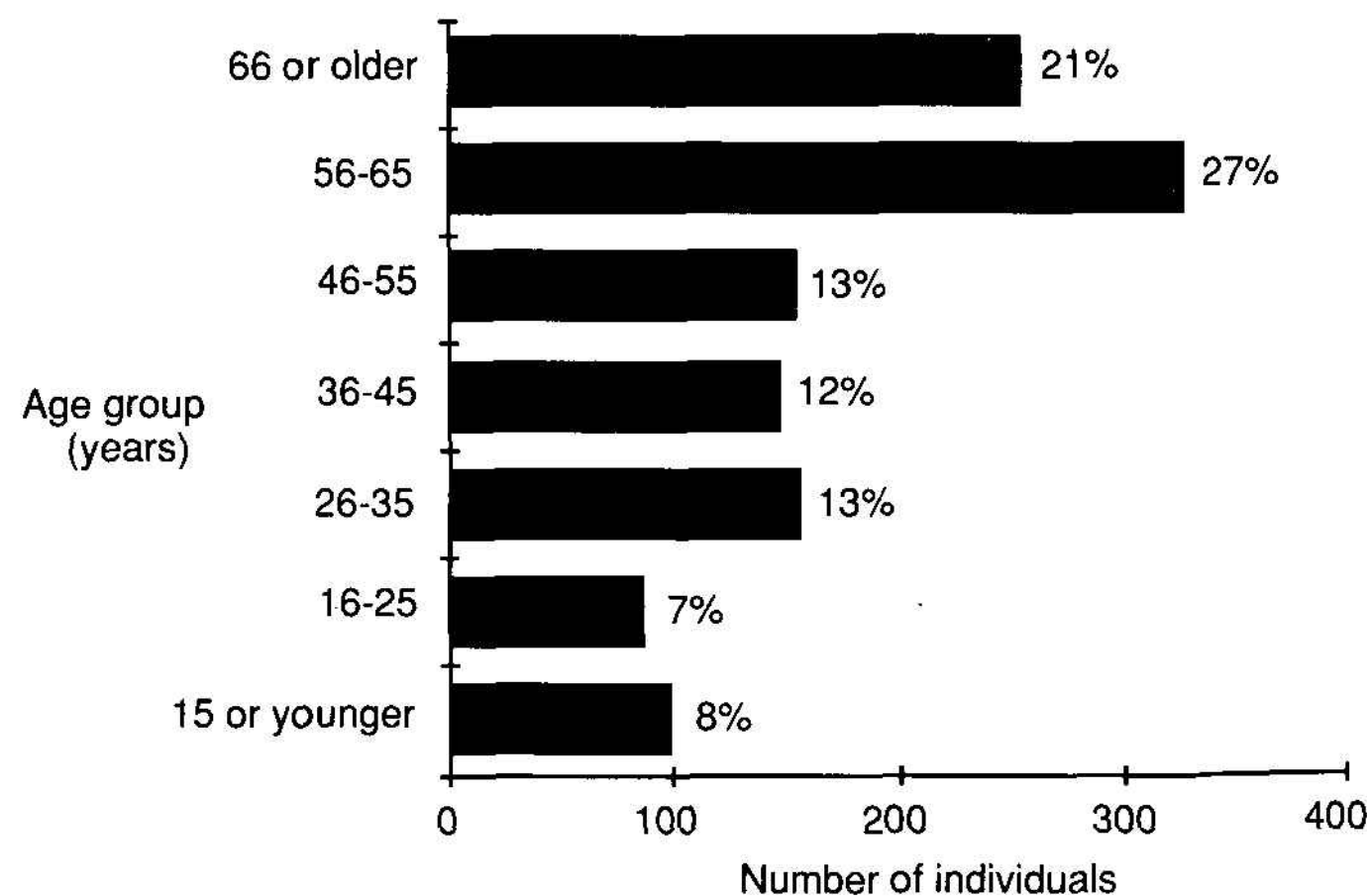


Figure 3: Visitor ages, Denali NP and Preserve, 1988

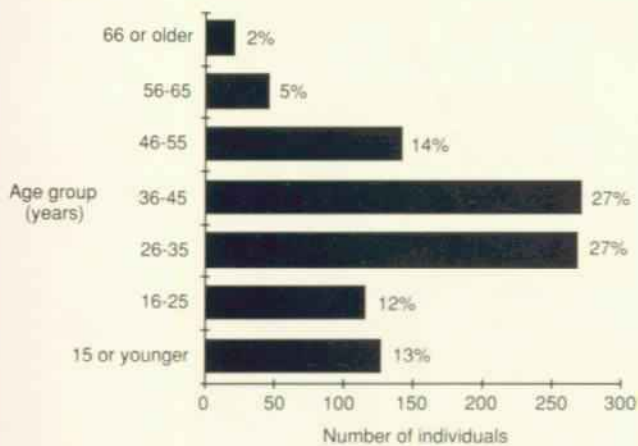


Figure 4: Visitor ages, lakeshore, Glen Canyon NRA, 1988

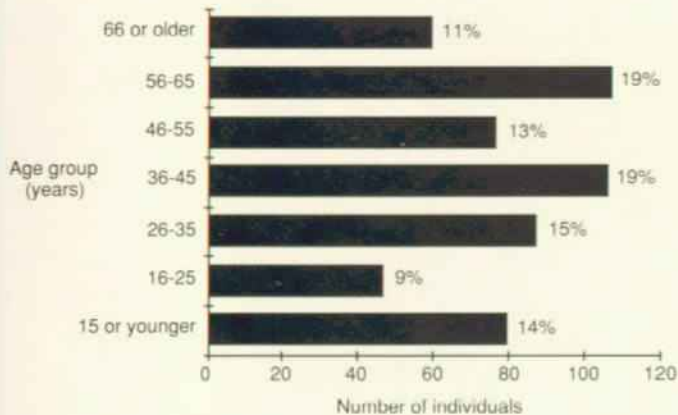
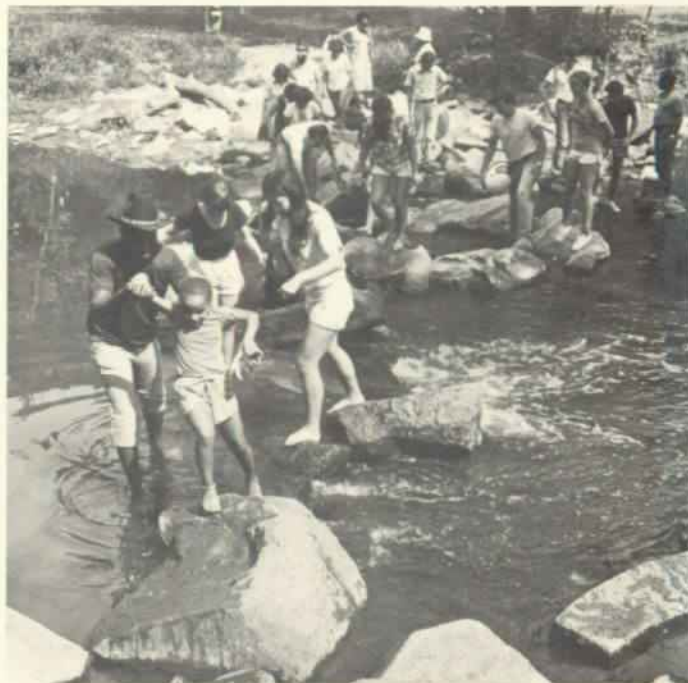


Figure 5: Visitor ages, highway corridor, North Cascades NP, 1985



Rock Creek Park

A visitor's comment at Colonial NHP:

This may sound crazy but middle age & older visitors tire easily & need to rest while sight seeing. I wish for more quiet & restful areas with comfortable chairs instead of benches. I found this true in Fredericksburg & Williamsburg, as well.

Where are international visitors from?

National park visitors represent the global community. The growing number of foreign visitors to national parks is causing park managers, concessioners, cooperating associations, and local businesses to take a new look at their operations and consider ways to provide services and products for people of other cultures. For example, park and lodging information and maps can be translated into appropriate languages, or employees with appropriate language skills can help in serving foreign visitors.

The VSP studies show that international tourism is a factor throughout the national park system:

▲ Most of the park areas studied had some foreign visitors (see Figures 6 and 7). Although foreign visitors comprised a small percentage of most parks' annual visitation, they may number several hundred thousand individuals. From two to twenty foreign countries were represented in the parks studied. More than three-fourths of the parks had some German visitors.

▲ Some national parks attracted a large proportion of foreign visitors. Bryce Canyon National Park received almost one-third of its visitors from foreign countries (see Figures 8 and 9). More than one-third of these were from Germany. The large proportion of German visitors may present an opportunity for a German tour guide business, as suggested by one German visitor.

As foreign tourism to the U.S. increases, a deeper understanding of international visitors will become necessary and valuable.



Figure 6: Foreign visitation by country, Independence NHP, 1986



Figure 7: Foreign visitation by country, Grand Teton NP, 1987



Figure 8: Foreign visitation by country, Bryce Canyon NP, 1988

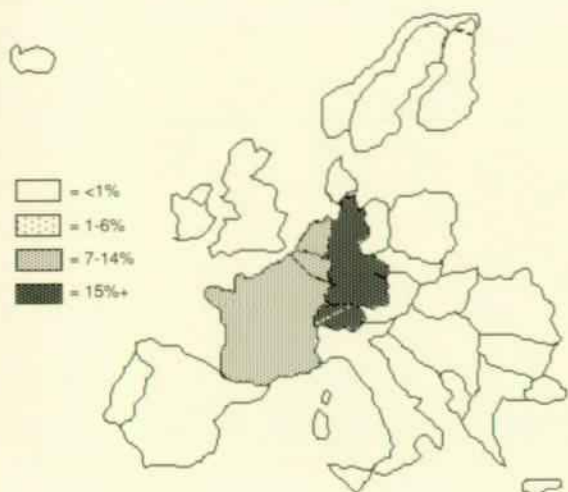


Figure 9: Foreign visitation from Europe, Bryce Canyon NP, 1988



Liberty Bell Pavilion, Independence NHP

A visitor's comment at Bryce Canyon NP:

*I learned the English language
in school eleven years long,
but it's very difficult when
you come from Germany to
follow and to understand a
guided walk! We would
like to use more walks, but
there's always the problem of
understanding!*

Where are United States visitors from?

United States park visitors travel from all over the country to visit national parks, and each park area has a geographically distinct mix of visitors. Some parks are visited mostly by people from the immediate region; others attract visitors from the entire nation.

The VSP studies illustrate the wide range of visitation patterns in parks:

▲ Some parks, such as Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, drew visitors from a limited region (see Figure 10). Others, such as Gettysburg National Military Park, were visited by people from a broader regional area (see Figure 11). Still others, like Grand Teton National Park, attracted visitors from all over the country (see Figure 12).

▲ Some of the VSP studies provided more detailed information on visitors' origins. They showed that, within a given state, visitors were also distributed in distinctive patterns. For example, the majority of Pennsylvania visitors to Independence National Historical Park came from counties near the park, and few, if any, visitors came from more distant counties (see Figure 13).

Knowing where visitors are from can make informational activities more efficient. For example, managers can use media such as newspapers and radio to help educate the public about potential safety hazards. Similarly, knowledge of regional visitation can help direct education and outreach campaigns at the local level. If, in the future, the National Park Service uses television to broadcast trip planning information, knowledge of visitors' home states could be very helpful.

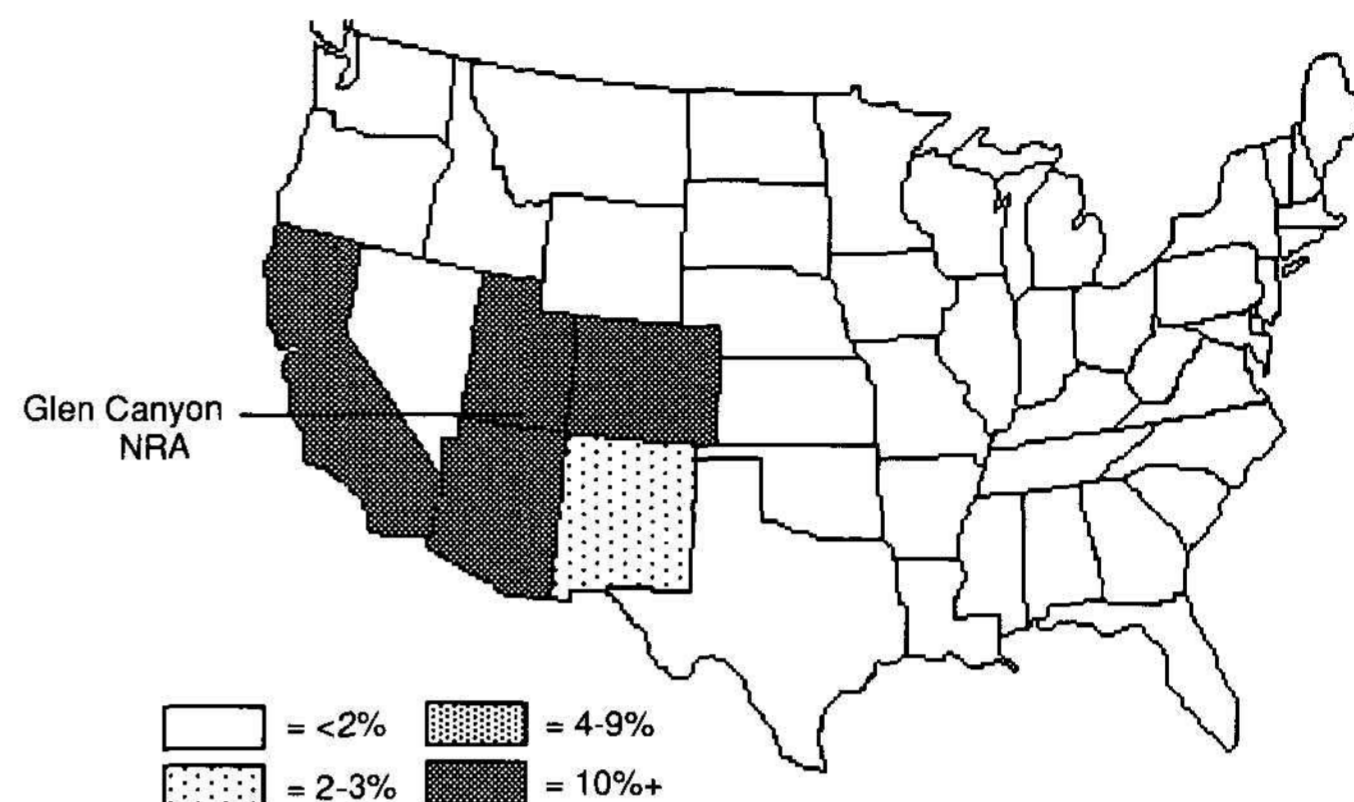


Figure 10: Lakeshore visitors by state, Glen Canyon NRA, 1988

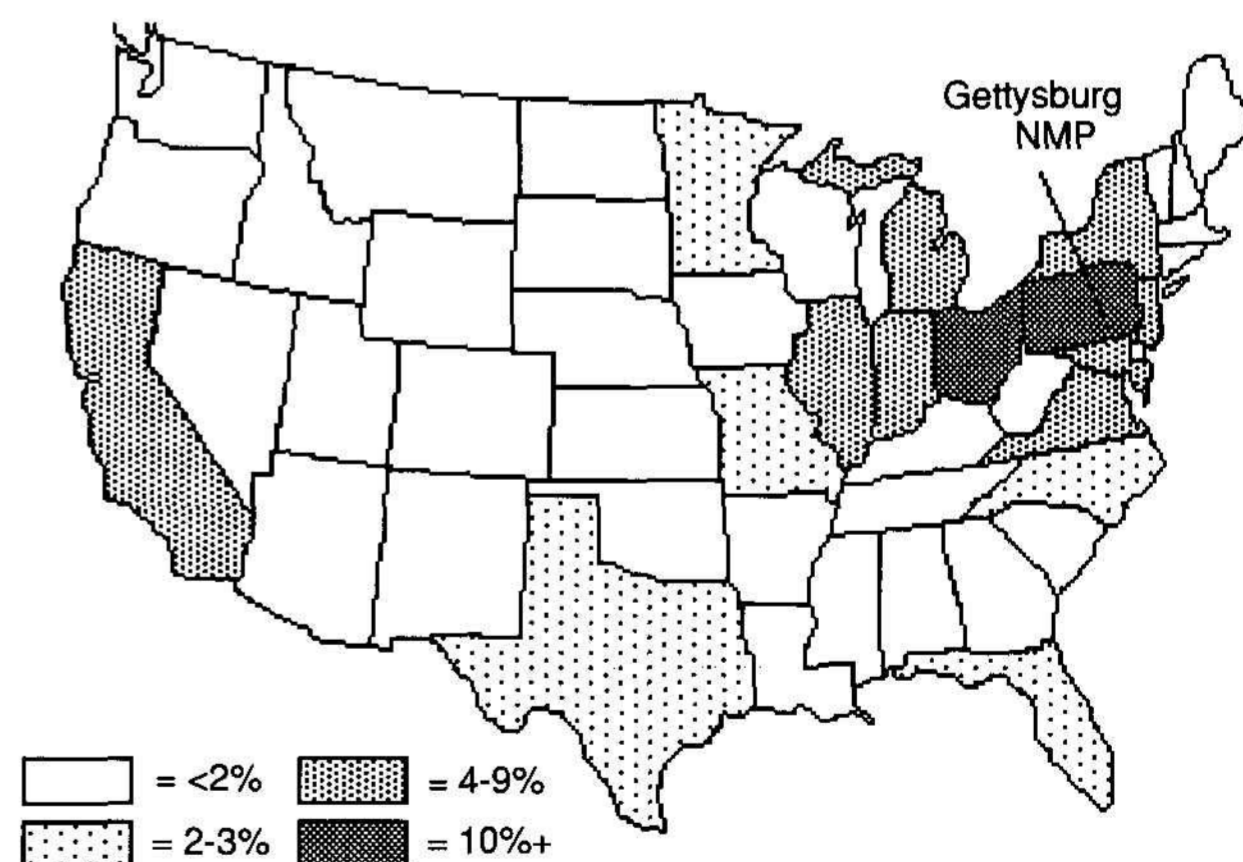


Figure 11: Visitation by state, Gettysburg NMP, 1986

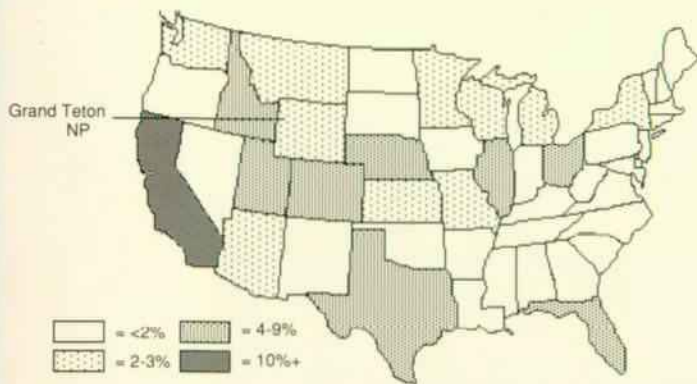


Figure 12: Visitation by state, Grand Teton NP, 1987

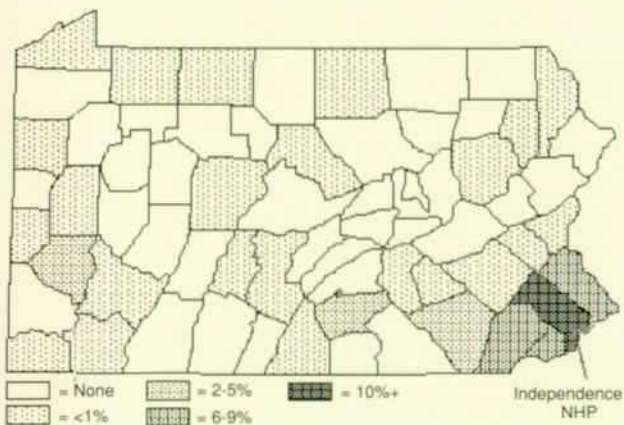


Figure 13: Pennsylvania visitation by county, Independence NHP, 1986-1987



Museum of Westward Expansion, Jefferson NEM

A visitor's comment at Grand Teton NP:

*I live near the Great Smokies
I was most surprised to find
overnight accommodations in
the Grand Tetons. That fact
needs to be advertised here
in the East.*

What kinds of groups visit the parks?

Knowing the makeup of visitor groups can better prepare park managers for providing information, activities, facilities, and other services. A small park staff that can easily handle family groups is not always prepared when two bus tours stop at the visitor center at the same time. If tour groups often picnic at a particular site, maintenance managers need to provide adequate litter collection. By learning about the kinds of visitor groups who use wilderness areas or specific park sites, resource managers and interpreters can help educate these groups in protecting natural and cultural resources. The VSP studies found:

▲ Families were the most common group that visited the parks studied (see Figures 14 and 15). However, “families” denotes diverse groups and may include married couples, two parents and children, one parent and children, and extended families with aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

▲ There are some exceptions. The most common group type visiting Glen Canyon National Recreation Area was a family traveling with friends (see Figure 16). At Denali National Park and Preserve, almost one-fourth of the visitors traveled in tour groups (see Figure 17). At most parks, some visitors traveled alone.

Park managers and others can use this information in planning services and activities. For example, park managers might want to develop short, easily accessible trails for tour groups, which often consist of older or foreign visitors with distinct needs and limited time to walk. Local businesses may be interested in providing group camping facilities.

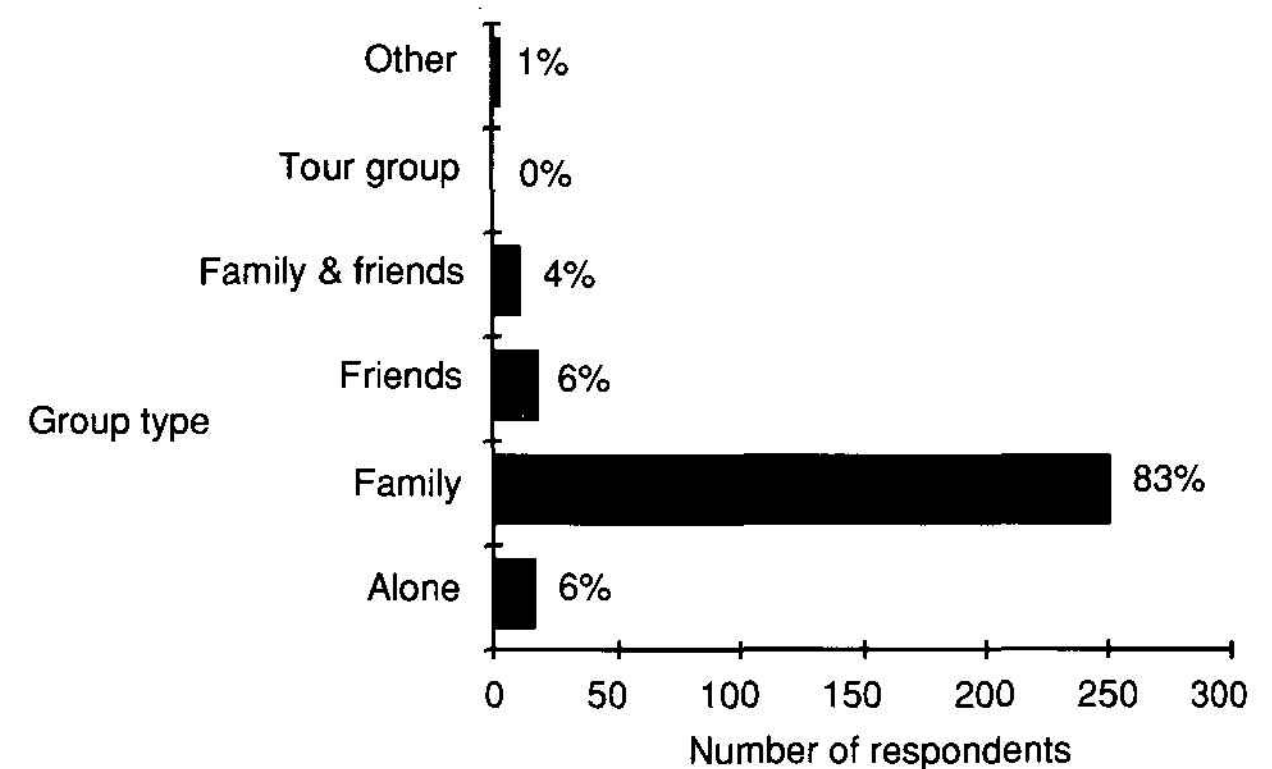


Figure 14: Visitor groups, Craters of the Moon NM, 1988

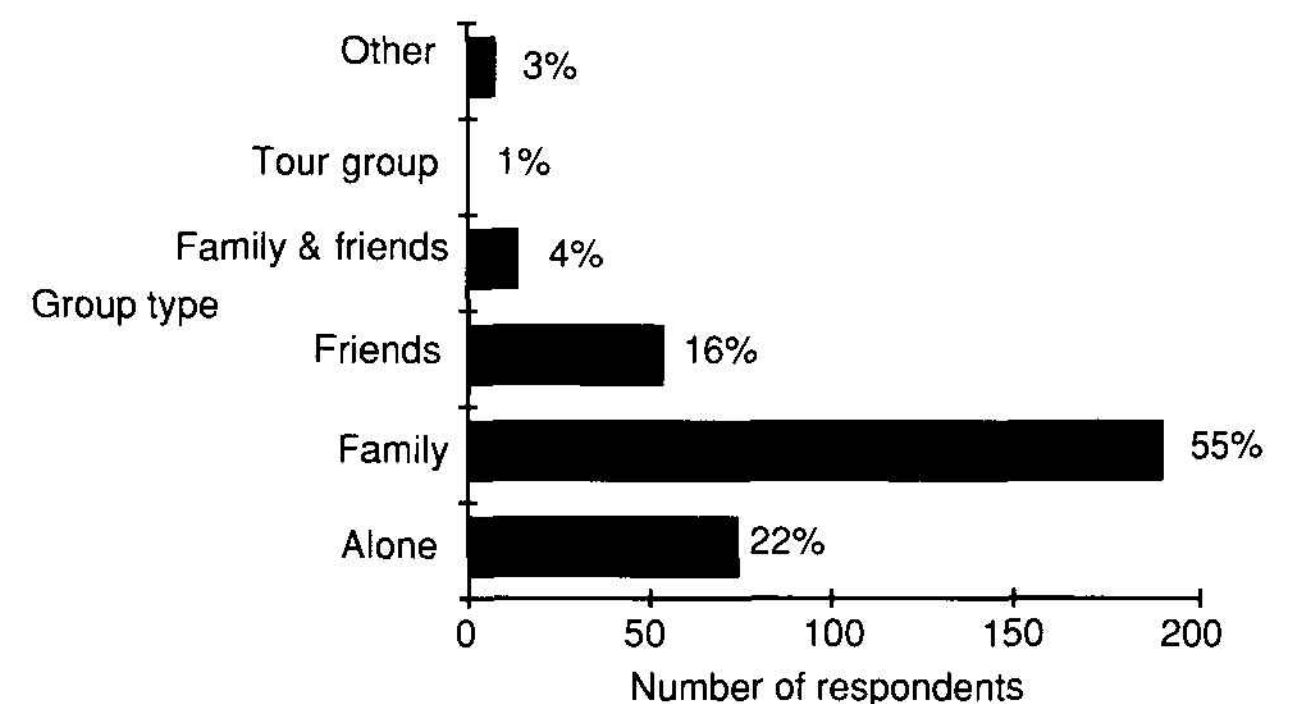


Figure 15: Visitor groups, Valley Forge NHP, 1986

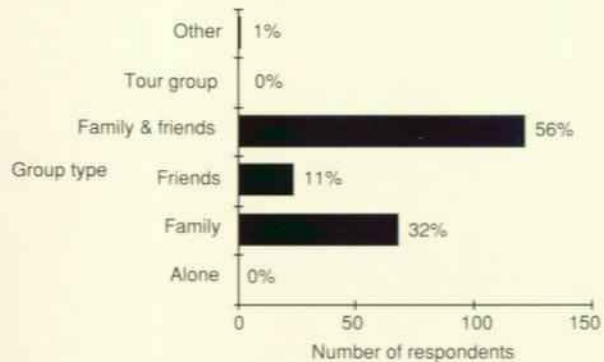


Figure 16: Lakeshore visitor groups, Glen Canyon NRA, 1988



Girl Scouts, Jefferson NEM

A visitor's comment at Craters of the Moon NM:

*It would be very helpfull
to families with small children
if there were mileage figures
on the trailheads to each of
the significant features with
on trails under a mile. We
have to pick and choose which
trails we take carefully because
of our kids and if we don't
know how far a trail goes it is
hard to make good decisions.*

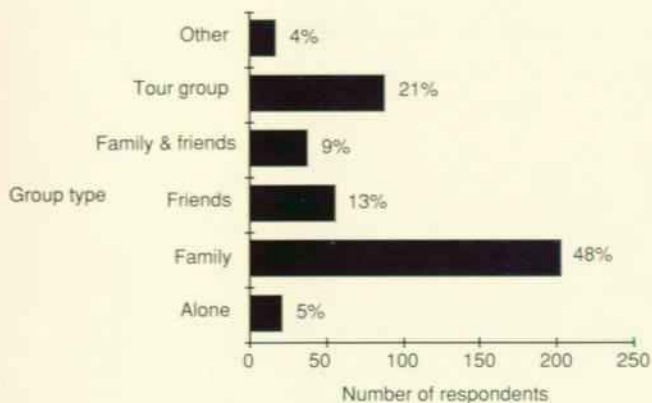


Figure 17: Visitor groups, Denali NP and Preserve, 1988

What do visitors do?

Visitors enjoy many activities in parks. Knowing the most popular activities can help park managers and others determine where staff can be used most effectively. By knowing what visitors do at specific park sites, managers can better protect park resources and visitors. The VSP studies indicate:

▲ Visitor activities are generally determined by the special features of a park. For example, nearly three-quarters of the visitors to Everglades National Park enjoyed birdwatching (see Figure 18), because birds are easily seen there. Almost half of Everglades' visitors went on long hikes and one-quarter attended interpretive programs.

▲ Shopping was also a popular activity in many of the park areas studied (see Figure 19). This included shopping at park bookstores, concession gift shops, and local businesses.

▲ Most visitors did not attend interpretive programs. At Grand Teton National Park, more visitors used other interpretive services such as visitor centers, museums, exhibits, and films (see Figure 20). Interpretive program attendance varied by park type; more visitors attended programs at the historical areas than at the natural areas studied (see Figure 21).

Managers can use this information in general planning and for specific programs such as safety. For example, boaters often do not use visitor centers, but still have important safety needs. If boating safety information is provided at marinas, launch ramps, and other sites, more visitors may receive it.

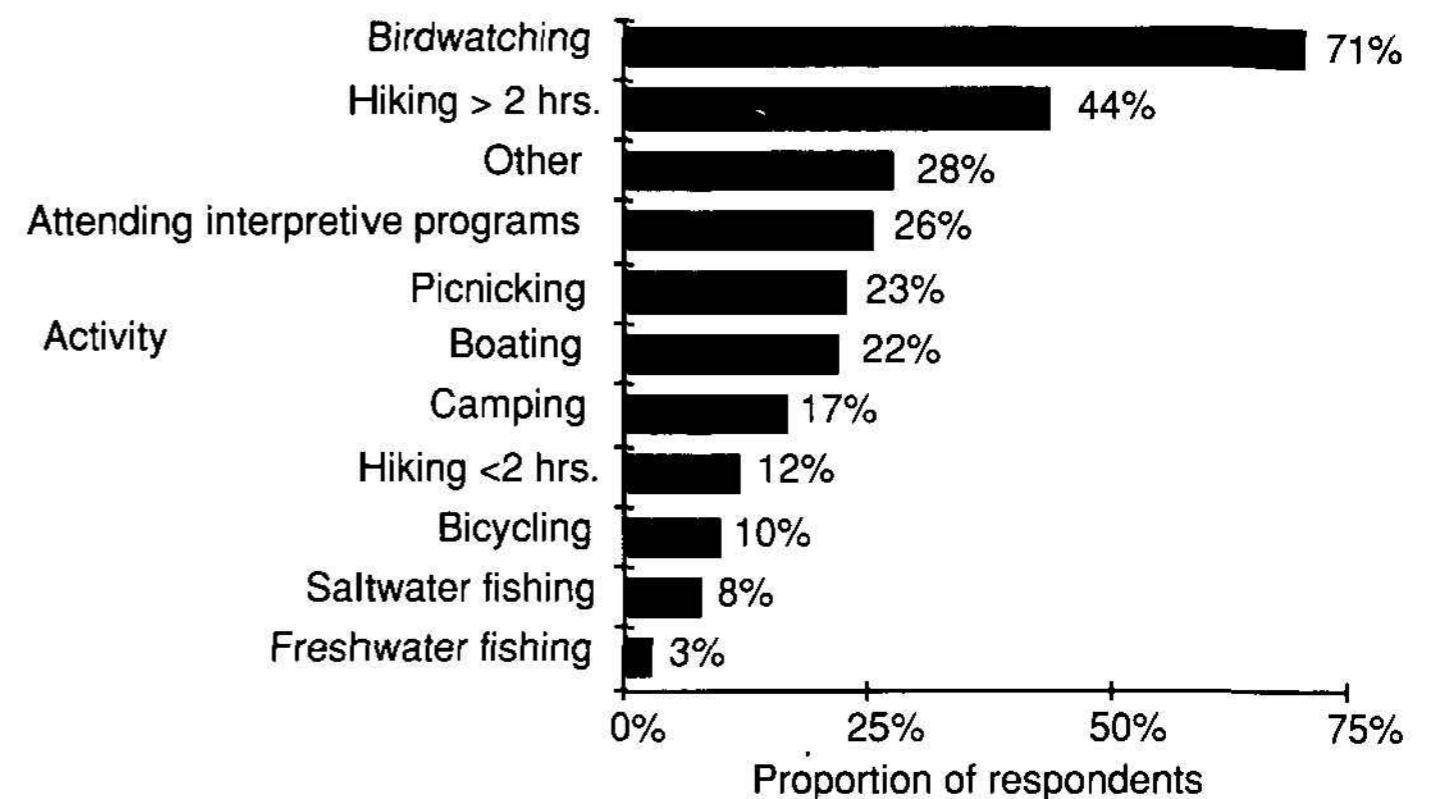


Figure 18: Visitor activities, Everglades NP, 1989

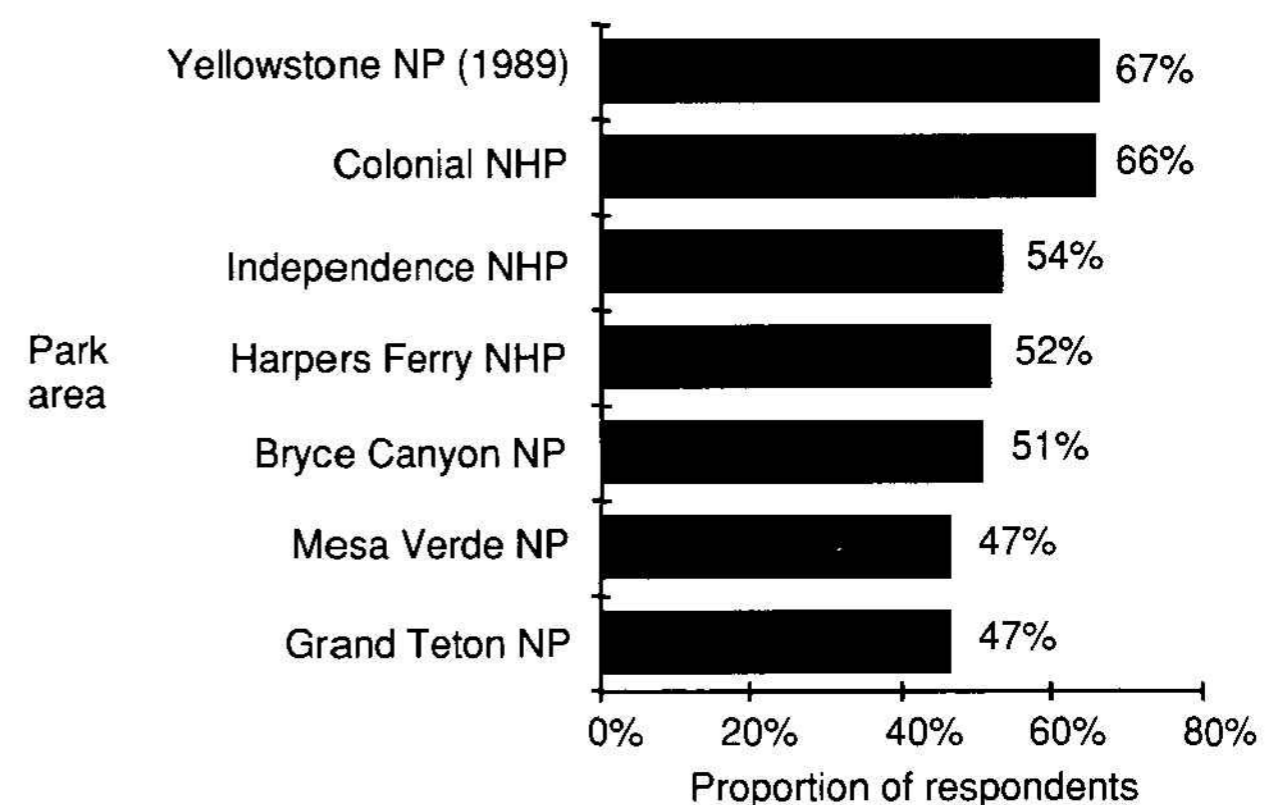


Figure 19: Shopping, selected parks

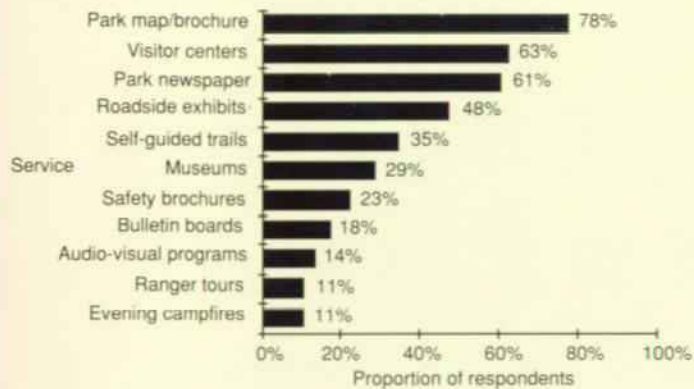


Figure 20: Use of interpretive services, Grand Teton NP, 1987

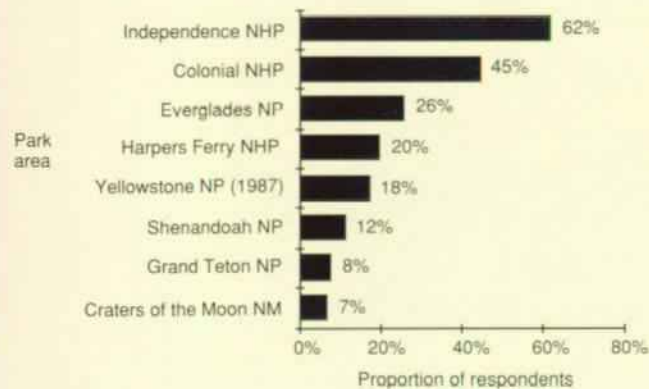
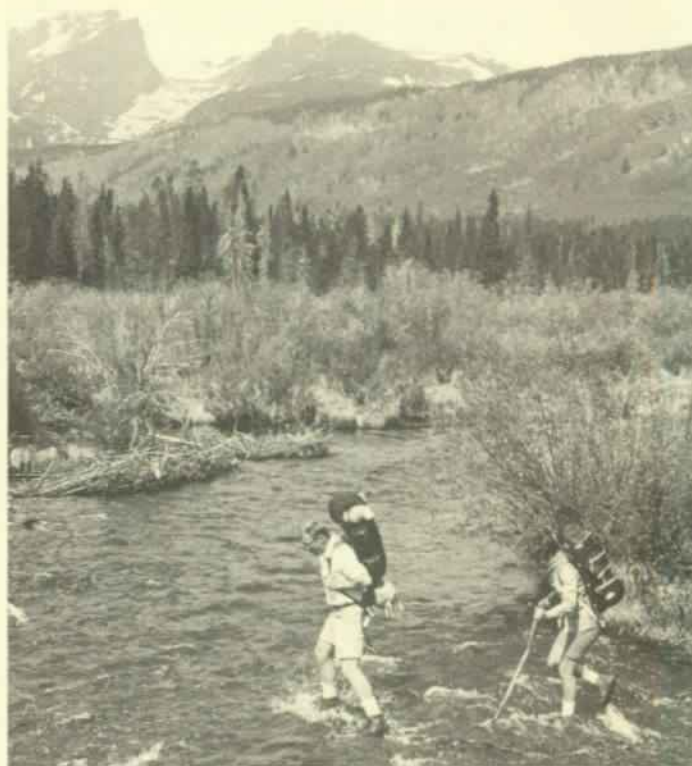


Figure 21: Interpretive program attendance, selected parks



Backpacking, Rocky Mountain NP

A visitor's comment at Shenandoah NP:

Except for "jet trails", the stars are so gorgeous on clear nights that I'd enjoy regular "astronomy" walks - rather than slide shows + folk singers. We enjoyed seeing the comet last year but hesitate to stargaze in the dark now that there are no comet-watchers to stand with for safety.

How do visitors spend their money?

Most visitors spend money during park visits. Park managers are often interested in finding out how much their parks contribute to the local economy. Managers of cooperating associations, concessions and local businesses are especially concerned with visitor spending, since their activities depend on visitor expenditures. The VSP studies show:

▲ What visitors spent money for varied by park. At most of the parks studied, visitors spent more for lodging than for food, travel or other items. For example, during visits to Lincoln Home National Historic Site, visitors spent over one-third of their money for lodging (see Figure 22).

▲ Most visitor groups, such as those at Mesa Verde National Park, spent less than \$50 in the park areas they visited (see Figure 23). However, at Denali National Park and Preserve, nearly one-third of the visitors spent more than \$200 (see Figure 24).

▲ The average per capita expenditure of visitors to five park areas varied from \$14 per person at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park to \$76 per person at Denali (see Figure 25). Visitors contributed substantial, although variable, amounts of money to the regional economies around the parks.

During the VSP studies, visitors commented not only on the costs of goods and services currently offered, but they also suggested additional services for which they would be willing to pay. For example, visitors to some parks expressed the need for faster, cheaper food, such as that offered by a snack bar/fast food restaurant. Others requested fresher and "healthier" food.

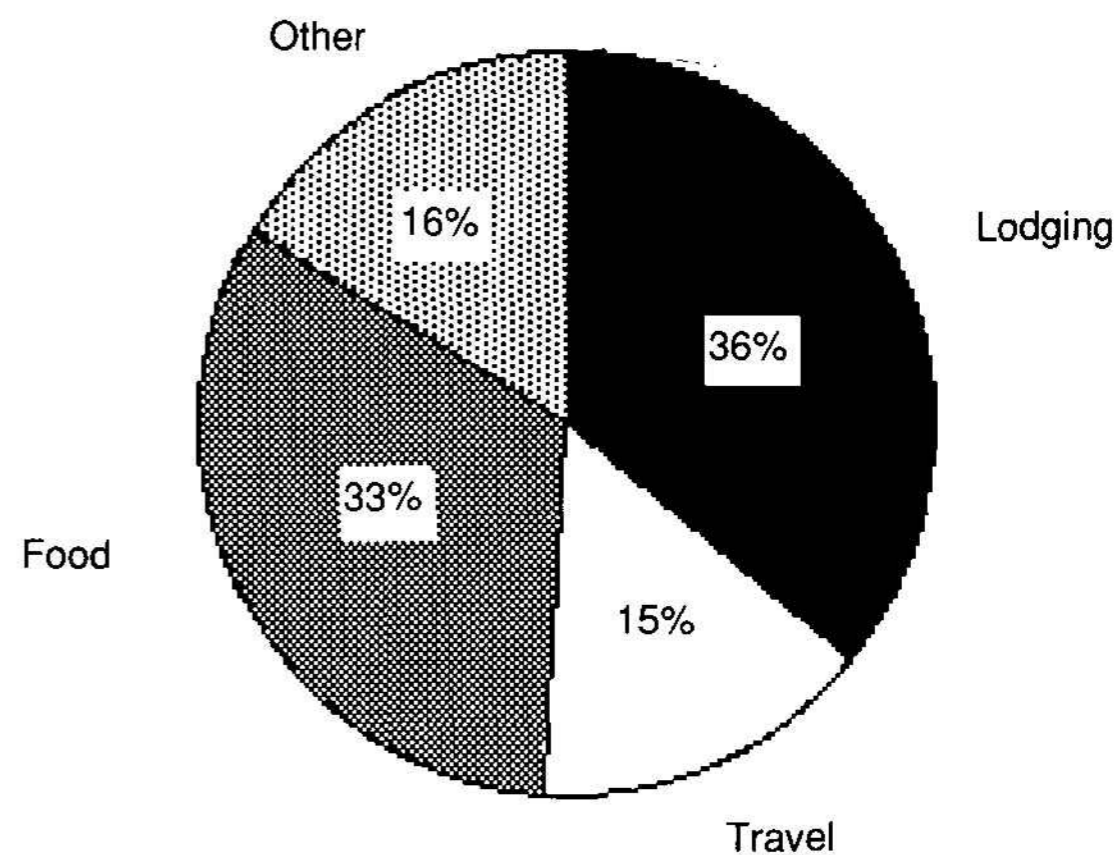


Figure 22: Visitor expenditures by category, Lincoln Home NHS, 1989

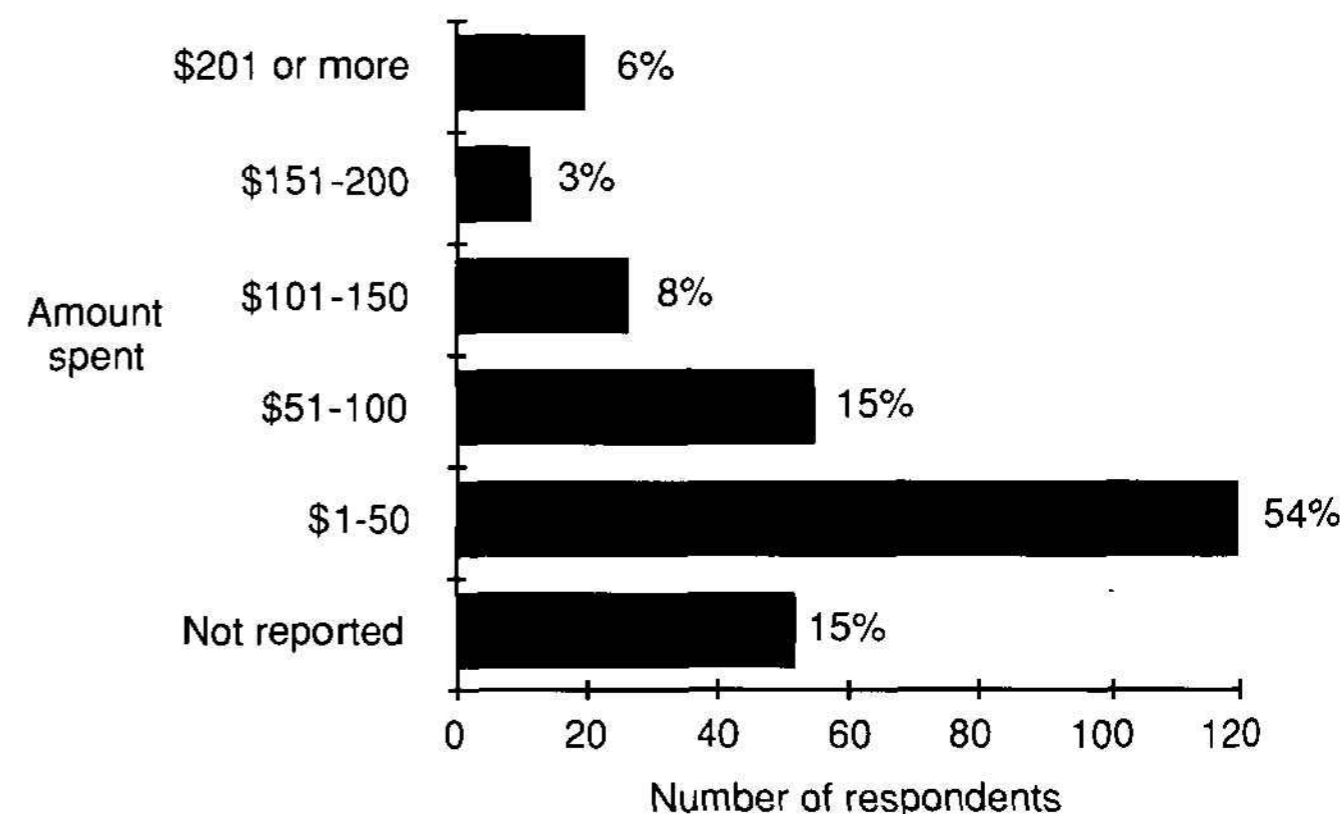


Figure 23: Total expenditures, Mesa Verde NP, 1987

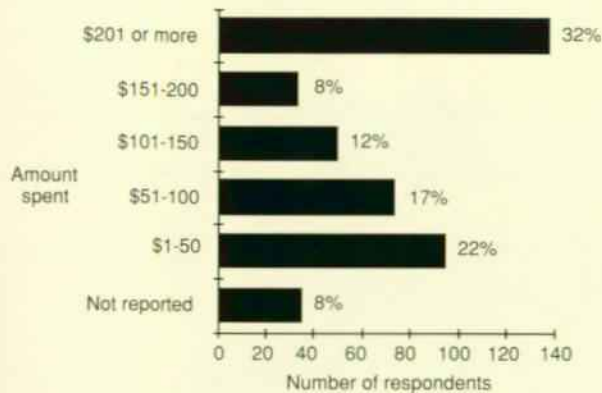


Figure 24: Total expenditures, Denali NP and Preserve, 1988

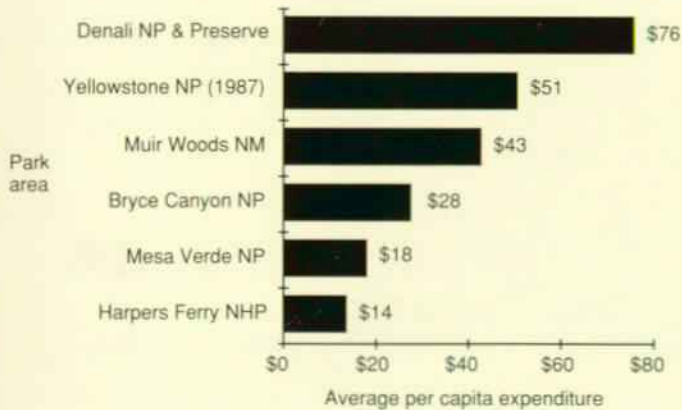


Figure 25: Average per capita expenditures, selected parks



Mule trip, Grand Canyon NP

A visitor's comment at Everglades NP:

*Restaurant not suited to budget,
diet of those who would like to
eat out, but to eat sensibly.
Likewise, not enough fresh fruits,
vegetables in Marina
store - sorry we had
to drive out of park to
buy healthy groceries.*

What services are important/useful to visitors?

Visitors use a variety of services in park areas, depending on their interests and needs. They may stop at the visitor center, take a guided tour through an historic site, read the outdoor exhibits, buy souvenirs at the gift shop, eat a picnic lunch, and visit the shops in town. Visitors' opinions about the importance of these services can be useful for park, concession, and local business planning and management. The visitors surveyed during the VSP studies had specific ideas about what services are important:

▲ For most parks, visitors rated the park maps and brochures as very important or useful (see Figure 26). Opinions about other services varied. For example, the self-guided auto tour was clearly useful to the Gettysburg National Military Park visitors who took it (see Figure 27).

▲ Within individual parks, interpretive services varied in importance to visitors. For example, at Shenandoah National Park more visitors used the outdoor exhibits than the park movie (see Figure 28). At Yellowstone National Park visitors rated a variety of services and facilities. Some services, such as information and directional signs, were considered very important to most visitors; others, such as boating facilities, were generally much less important (see Figure 29).

This type of information can be very useful for managers when they are prioritizing improvements for services and facilities.

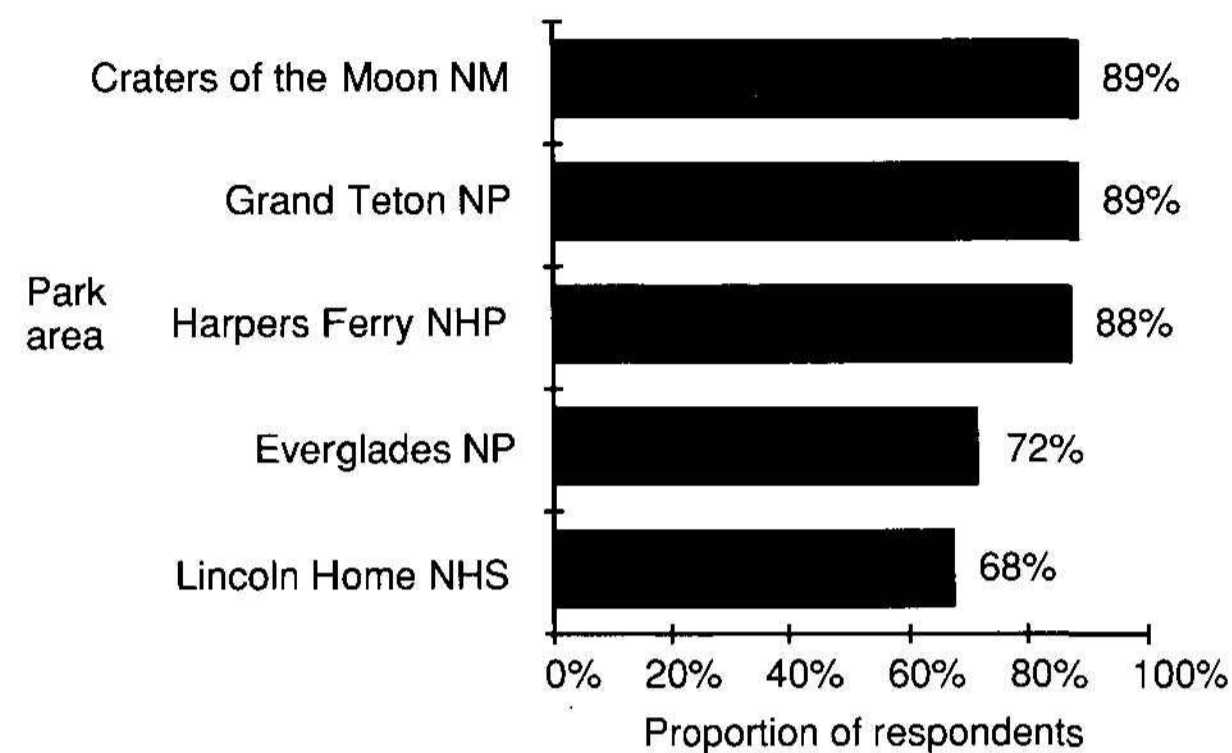


Figure 26: Maps/brochures rated as extremely or very important or useful, selected parks

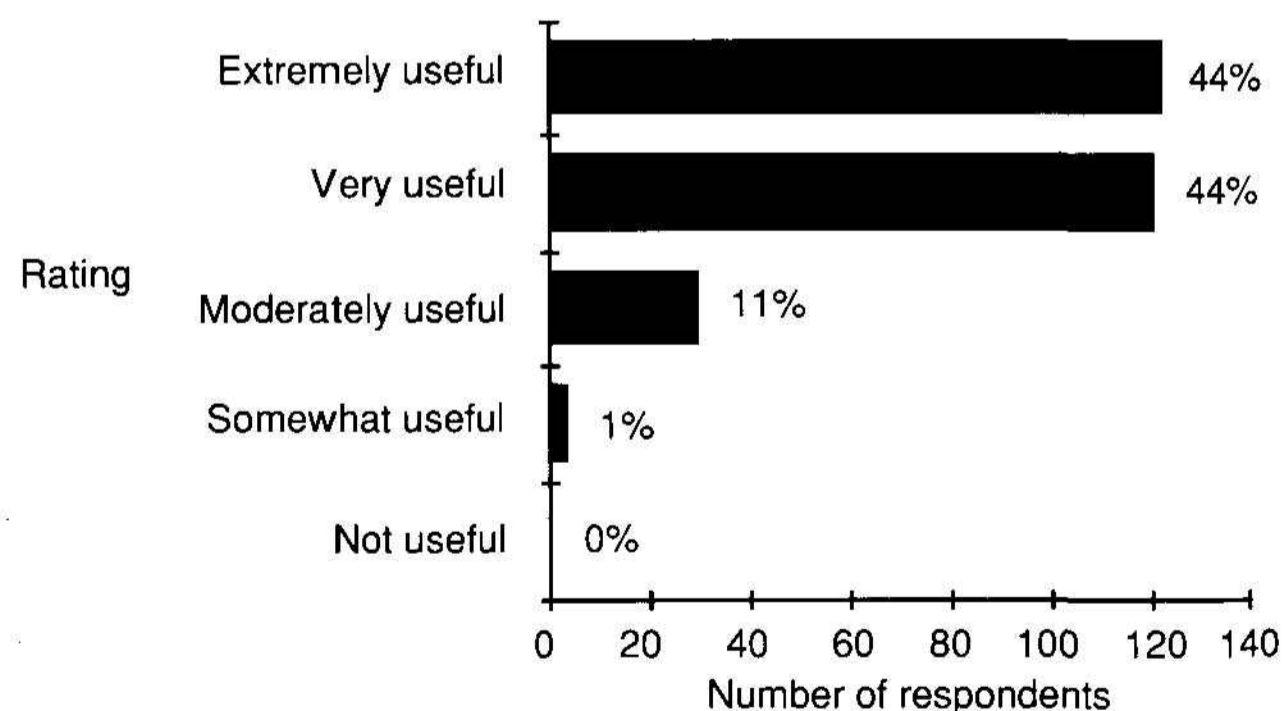


Figure 27: Usefulness of self-guided auto tour, Gettysburg NMP, 1986

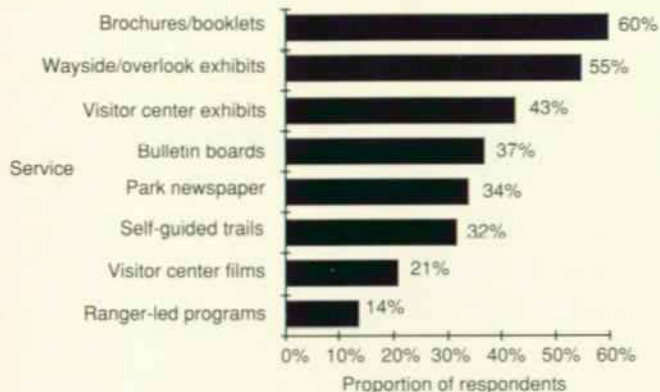


Figure 28: Use of information/interpretive services, Shenandoah NP, 1987

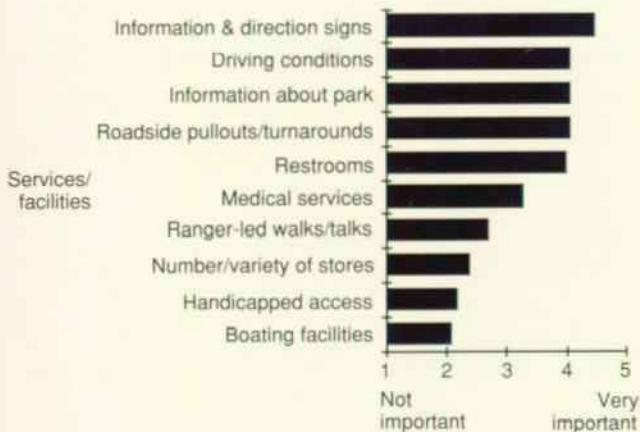


Figure 29: Importance of services/facilities, Yellowstone NP, 1987



Interpretive talk, Grand Canyon NP

A visitor's comment at Gettysburg NMP:

*The guided auto tour ex-
 conjunction with the electronic map
 presentation was an ideal way to share
 the event with our family!*

How good are the services provided?

Knowing what visitors think about the quality of services in the parks helps managers and staff do a better job. For example, if managers of a park lodge know that visitors are dissatisfied with the food services, they can make improvements. If the park map confuses and misleads visitors, park managers can revise it. Knowing when visitors are pleased with services can also be useful to managers. The VSP studies show overall approval of many park services:

▲ In the park areas studied, visitors who used the services generally rated them above average in quality. At Yellowstone National Park, driving conditions received the lowest quality ratings of all Yellowstone services, yet 78% of the visitors felt road conditions were average or above (see Figure 30). One of the highest ranked services at Everglades National Park was the boat tours (see Figure 31).

▲ Visitors generally rated the quality of interpretive programs and services as good. Two services at Bryce Canyon National Park—visitor center information and printed materials—were rated as high quality by the visitors who used them (see Figure 32). Most visitors who took ranger tours at Muir Woods National Monument rated them as good to very good quality (see Figure 33).

The diversity of visitors suggest there will always be a wide range of needed services; the generally positive visitor opinions suggest that the NPS and its partners are doing a good job.

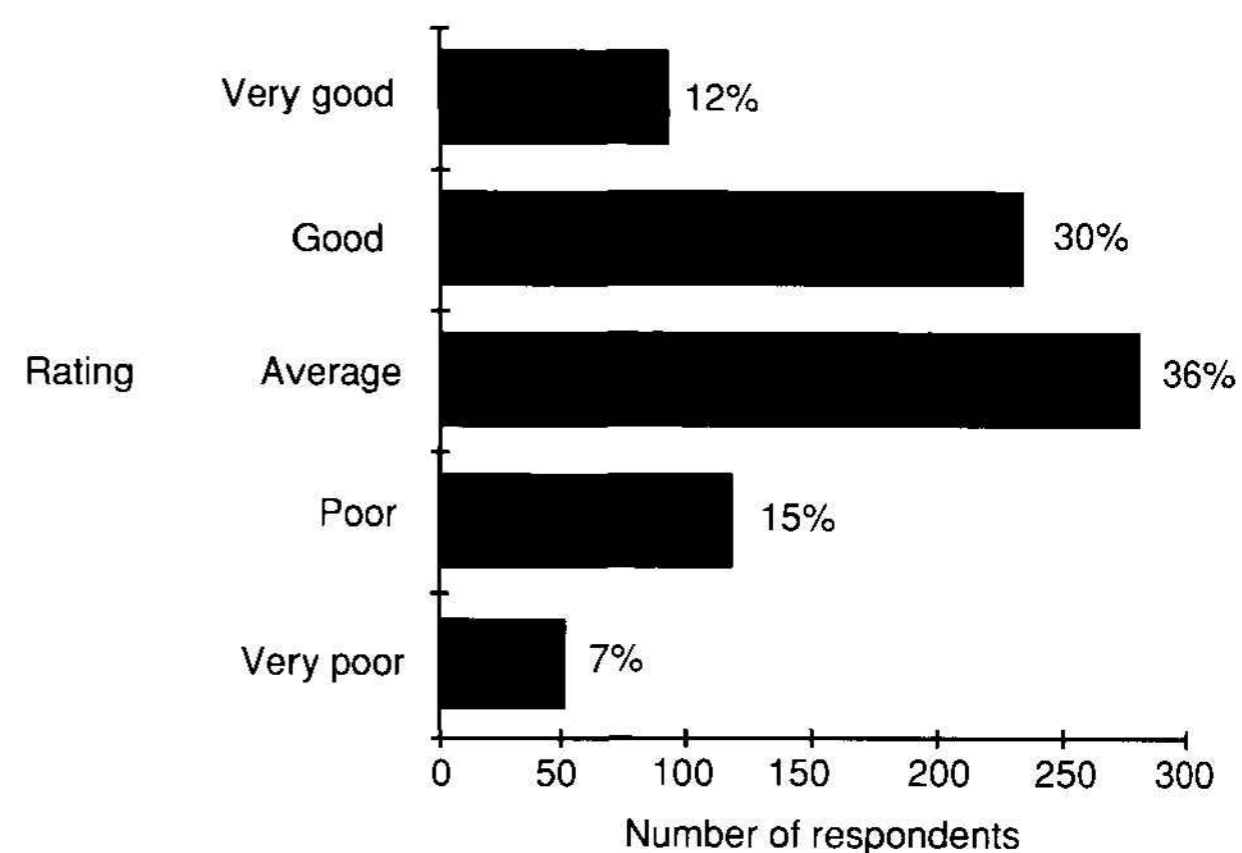


Figure 30: Quality of driving conditions, Yellowstone NP, 1987

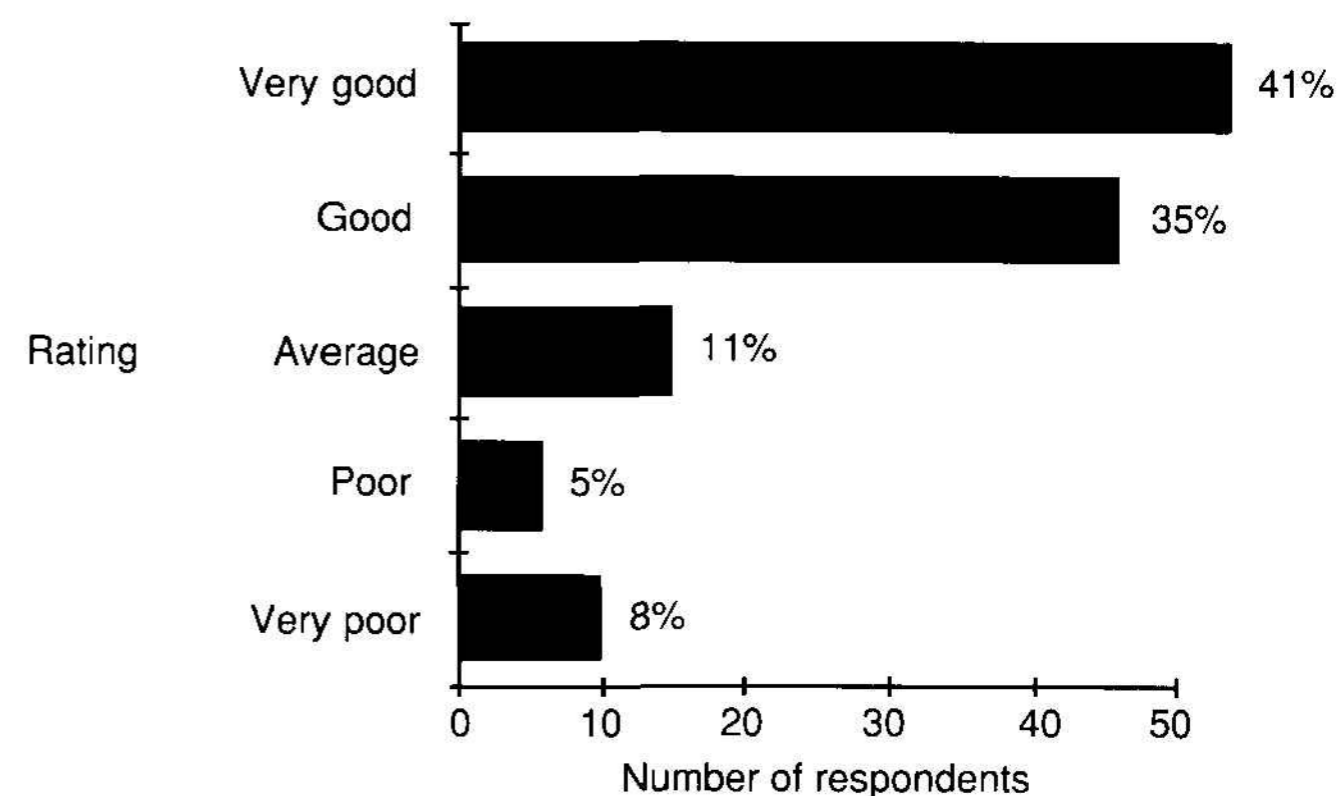


Figure 31: Quality of boat tours, Everglades NP, 1989

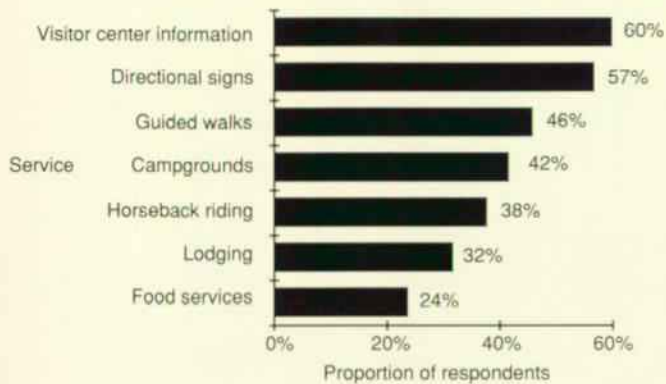


Figure 32: Selected services rated as very good quality, Bryce Canyon NP, 1988

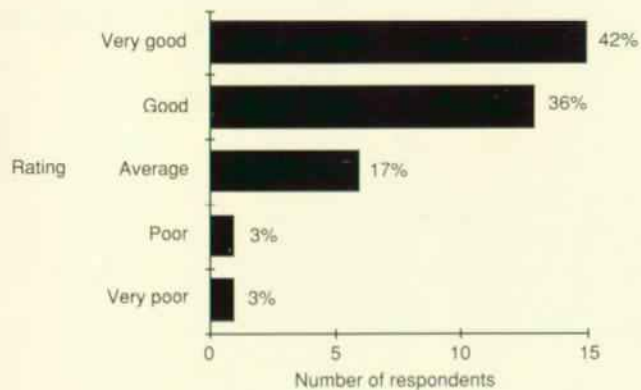


Figure 33: Quality ratings of interpretive programs, Muir Woods NM, 1989



1931 guided auto caravan, Grand Canyon NP

A visitor's comment at Independence NHP:

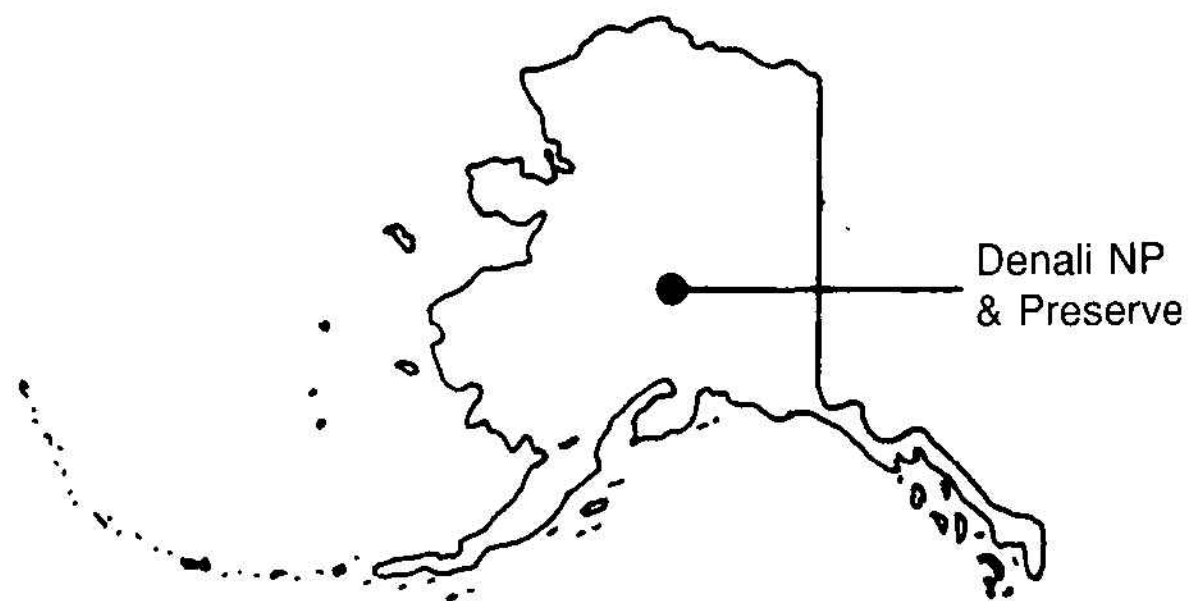
— guide who gave 10:00 A.M. tour of Independence Hall on Thurs. July 31st (and even played the harpsichord for us!) was outstanding! He deserves recognition and a raise for his excellent account of the "continuing" meaning of personal independence —

Highlights of the 1988-89 VSP Studies

The following pages highlight some of the VSP studies conducted in 1988 and 1989. The descriptions focus on some of the important issues identified by managers of these parks.

Denali National Park and Preserve

Denali National Park and Preserve, in central Alaska, protects a six-million-acre area with wildlife, tundra, taiga, and the highest mountain in North America—Mt. McKinley.



▲ Denali managers wanted to know what visitors thought about the shuttle bus reservation system. More than half of the visitors used the 24-hour advance reservation system to reserve rides on the shuttle buses. Managers were also interested in finding out what proportion of visitors saw some of the larger animals. Figure 34 shows that most visitors saw bears, Dall sheep, caribou, and moose, while fewer saw wolves.

▲ According to visitors, some services offered by park concessioners are more useful than others (see Figure 35). At Denali, more than half of the visitors used the gift shop, followed by the grocery store. The least used service was the cocktail bar.

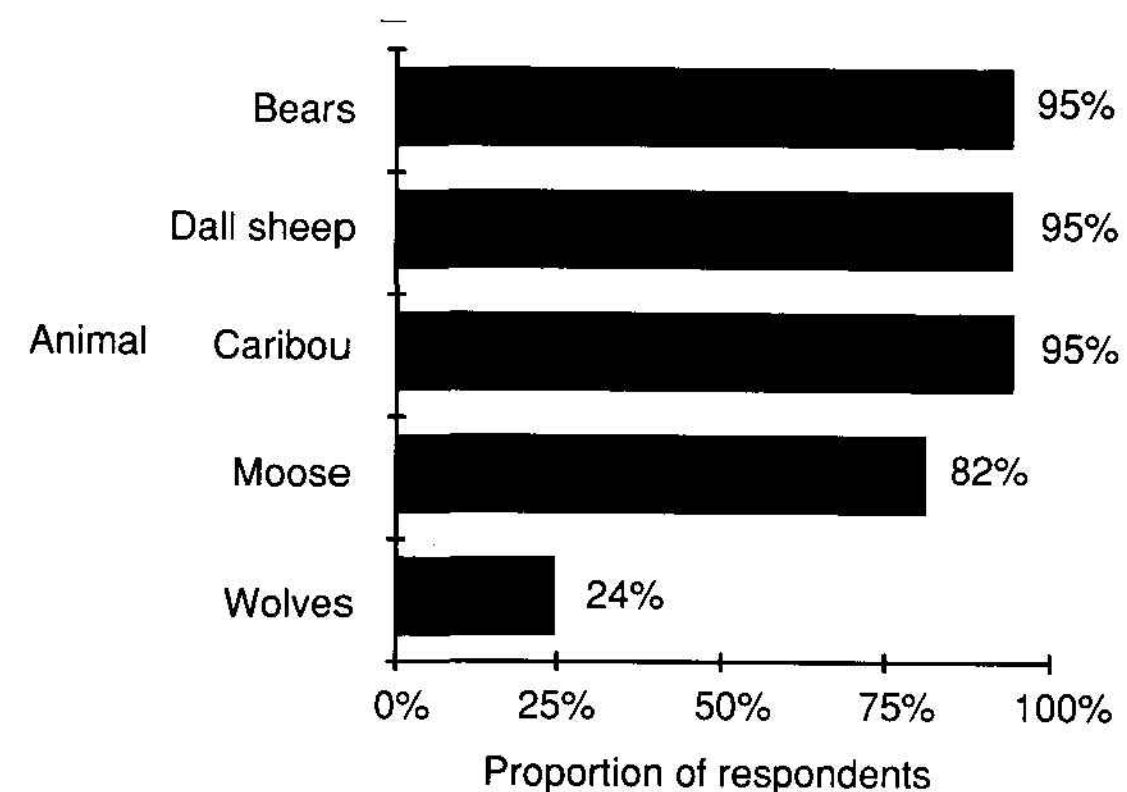


Figure 34: Reports of animal sightings, Denali NP and Preserve, 1988

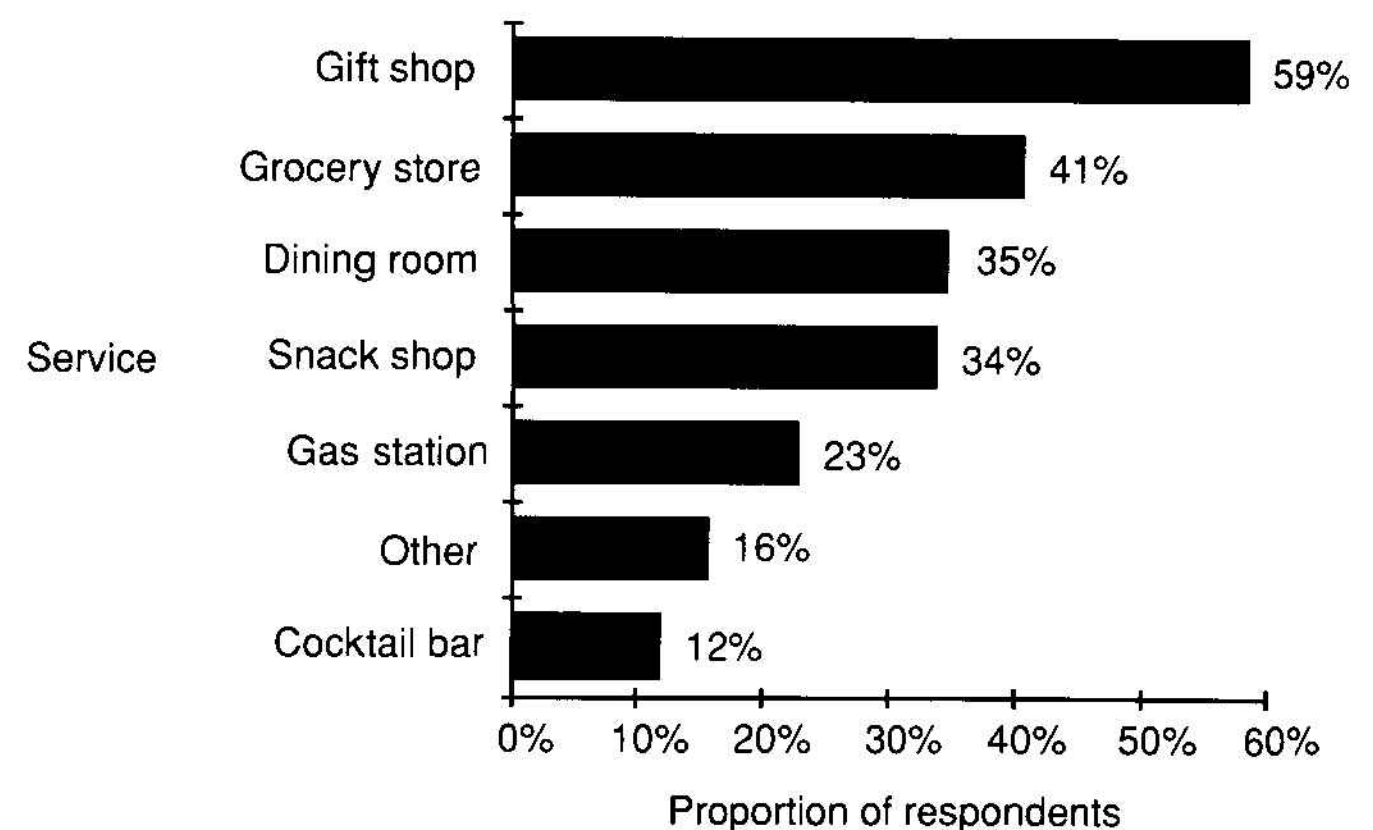


Figure 35: Use of concession services, Denali NP and Preserve, 1988

Everglades National Park



Figure 36: Visitation by state, Everglades NP, 1989

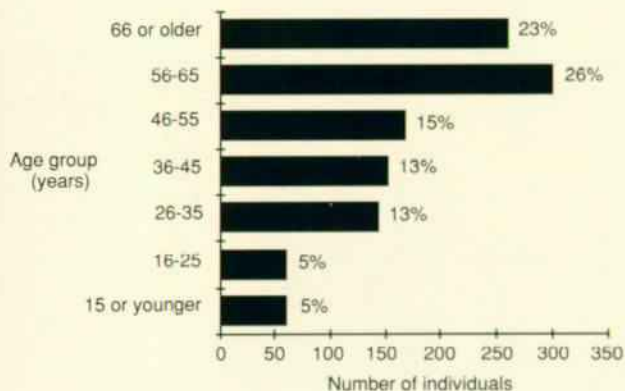


Figure 37: Visitor ages, Everglades NP, 1989

Everglades National Park, at the southernmost tip of Florida, preserves a remnant of the Everglades—the river of grass.



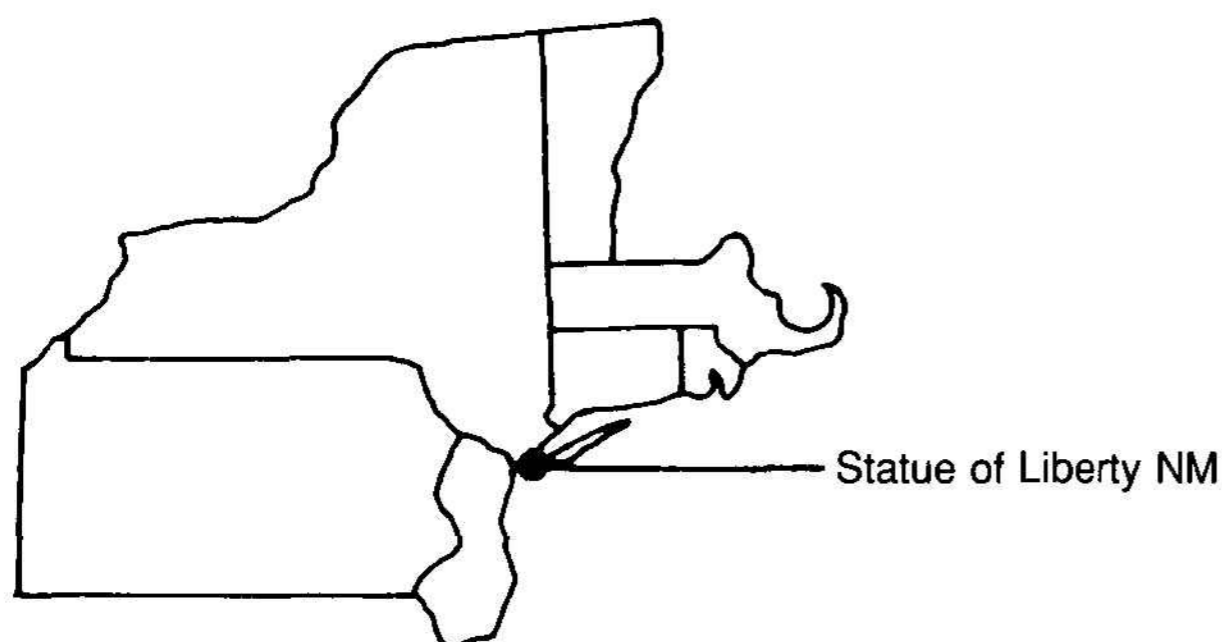
▲ Managers wanted to find out where visitors were from. At Everglades in the winter, U.S. visitors were mainly from Florida (24%) and the Northeast (see Figure 36).

▲ Managers also wanted to document the ages of their visitors. During the winter season in Florida, almost half of Everglades' visitors were over the age of 55 (see Figure 37).

▲ Finally, managers wanted to know if visitors were having difficulty locating the park, and if so, why. The VSP study results showed that the majority of visitors (95%) did not have trouble locating the park.

Statue of Liberty National Monument

The Statue of Liberty, a 152-foot copper statue holding the freedom torch, was dedicated in 1886. It was a gift from France to commemorate the French-American alliance during the American Revolution.



▲ Finding out the primary reason which brought visitors to Liberty Island was one of the interests of Statue of Liberty managers. Most visitors (64%) cited climbing the statue and visiting the crown as the main reason they came (see Figure 38).

▲ Managers also wanted to know the proportion of visitors using each site on Liberty Island. Fifty-eight percent visited the gift shop, 56% visited the Statue of Liberty exhibit, 52% visited the top of the pedestal, while 33% visited the crown (see Figure 39).

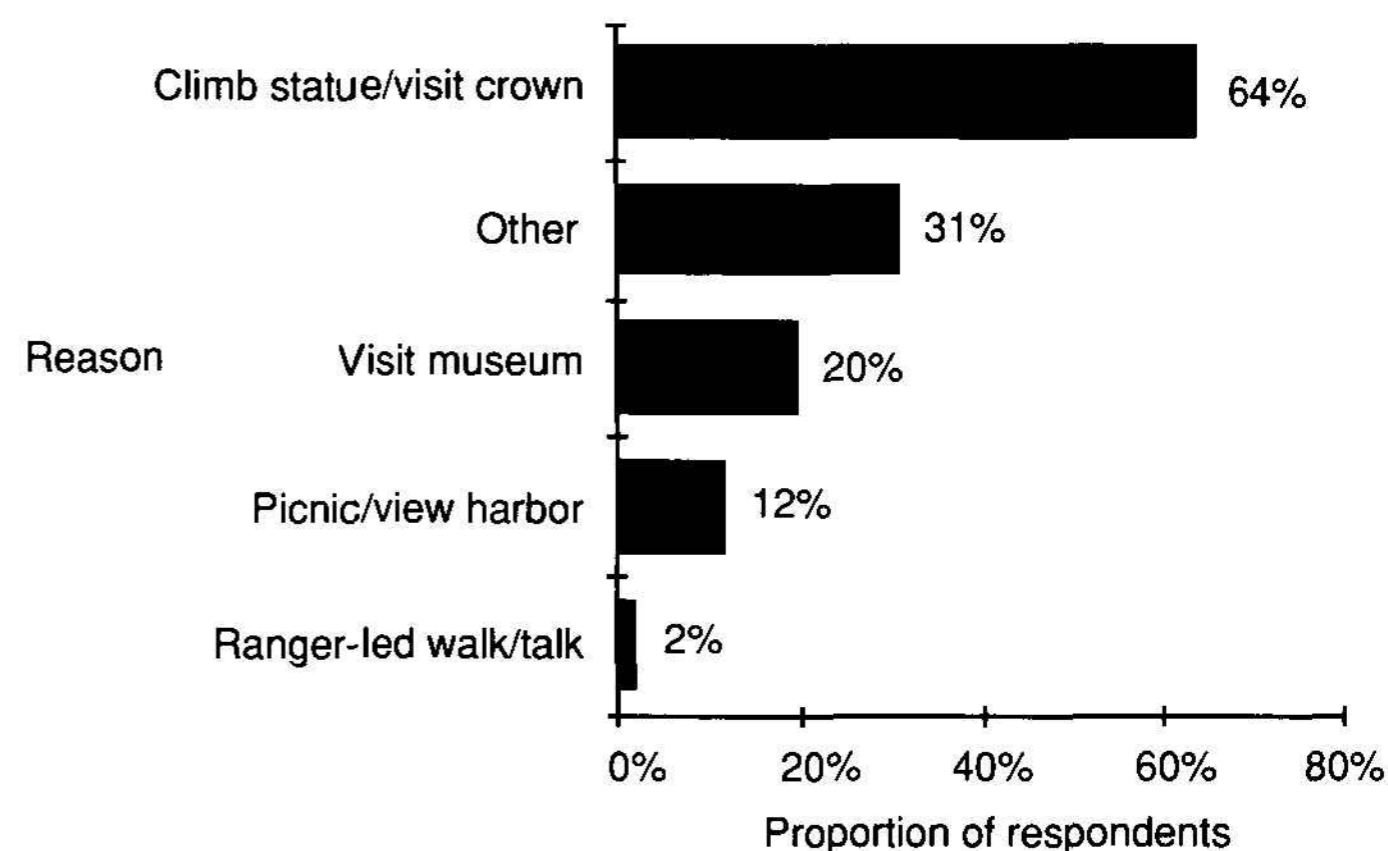


Figure 38: Primary reason for visiting Liberty Island, Statue of Liberty NM, 1989

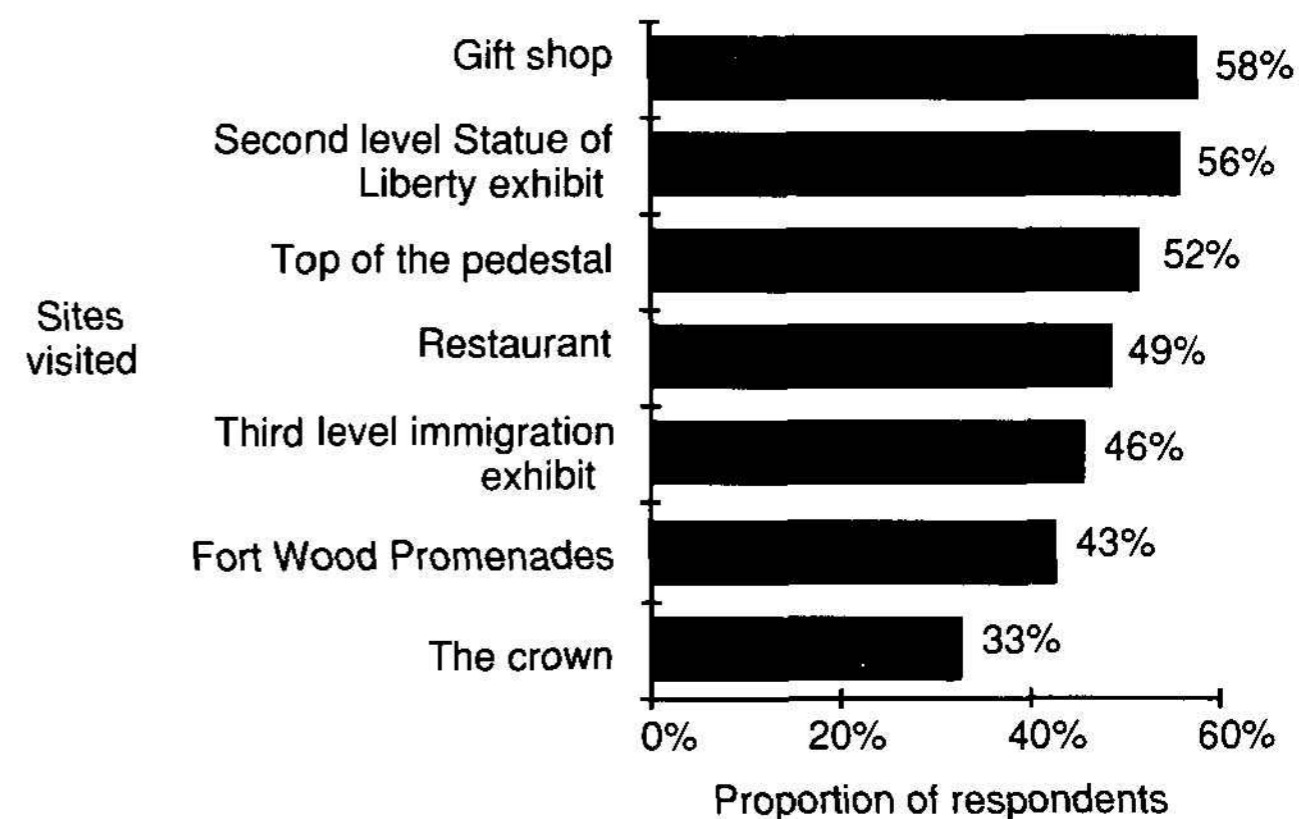


Figure 39: Proportion of groups visiting each site, Statue of Liberty NM, 1989

The White House Tours

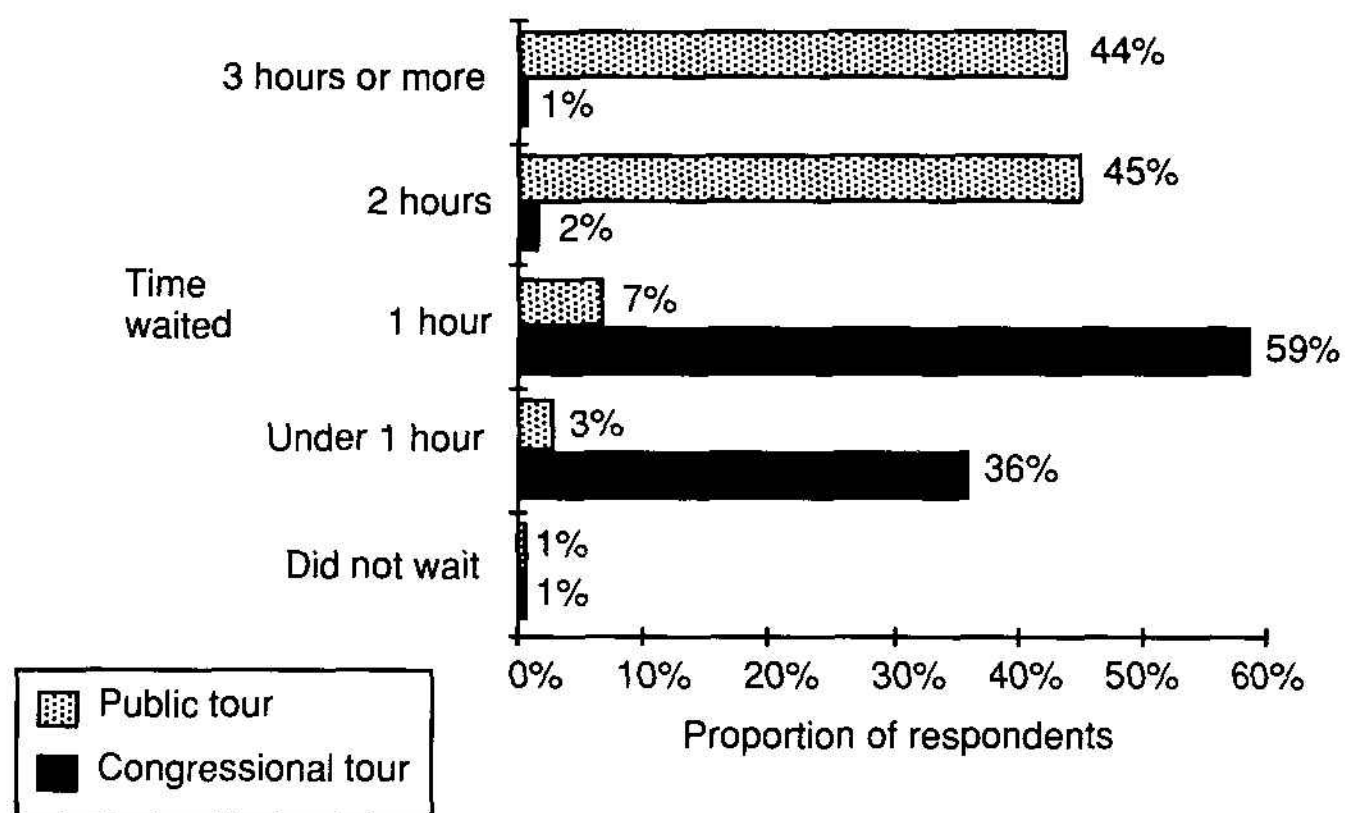
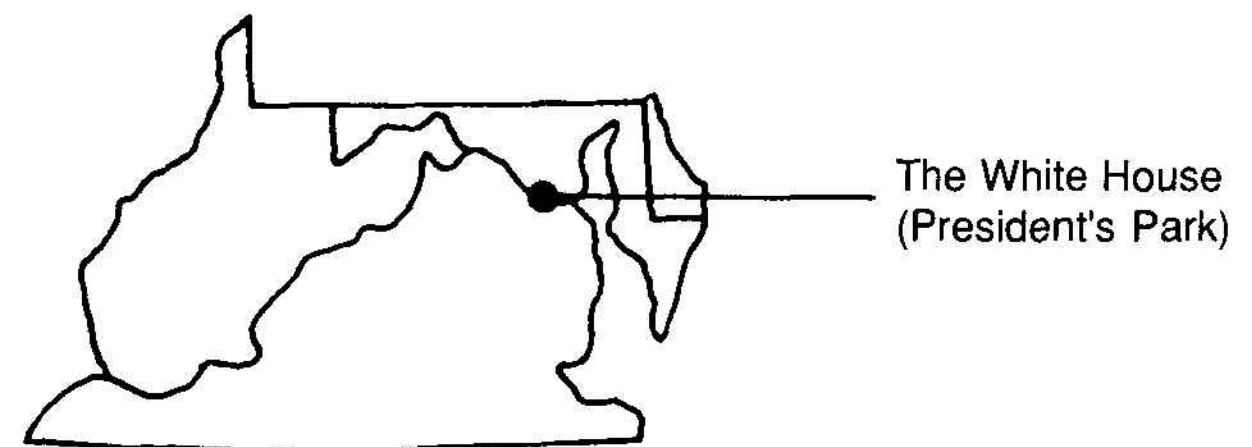


Figure 40: Length of wait for tour, White House tours, 1989

Subject	Number of times mentioned	
	Public tour	Congressional tour
History	68	84
Information on First Families	39	53
Official events	34	31
Architecture	33	31
Information on unseen White House rooms and grounds	22	24

Figure 41: Subjects of interest for future tours, White House tours, 1989

The National Park Service is responsible for arranging and coordinating the tours through the White House state rooms with the Secret Service, as well as the care and upkeep of the White House and its grounds.

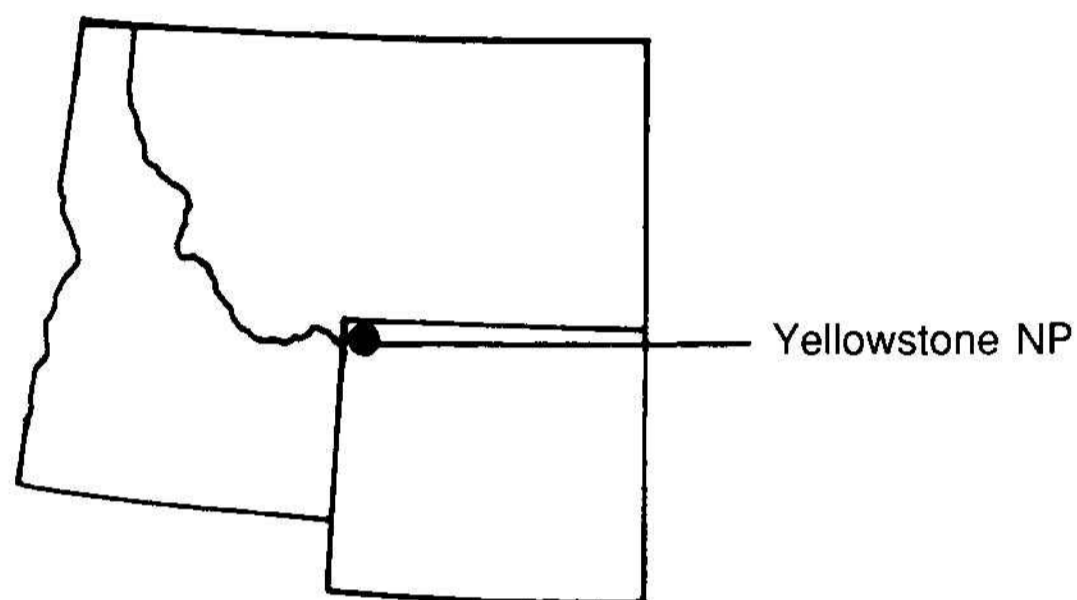


▲ Managers wanted to find out how long visitors had to wait for White House tours. Most visitors on Congressional tours waited one hour or less, while most visitors on public tours waited two hours or more (see Figure 40).

▲ Many visitors identified history as the top subject they wanted to learn more about on future White House tours (see Figure 41).

Yellowstone National Park

The first national park, established in 1872, Yellowstone National Park had its second VSP study during the summer of 1989. Managers were interested in getting visitors' opinions about the 1988 fires, as well as finding out if visitor demographics had changed since the previous VSP study in 1987.



▲ Managers wanted to find out if curiosity about the 1988 fires brought visitors to Yellowstone. Seven percent of the visitors cited the fires as the primary reason for their visit, and 29% said the fires were one of several reasons they visited (see Figure 42). Sixty-four percent of the visitors said the fires were not a reason for their visit to Yellowstone.

▲ Visitors were asked to identify whether they thought the fires had benefited Yellowstone's natural systems (plants, animals, soil, water, etc.). This information helped managers evaluate the effectiveness of the fire information provided for visitors. Almost half (48%) of the visitors thought the 1988 fires were beneficial (see Figure 43). More than one-fourth (28%) of the visitors did not see fires as beneficial, and 24% did not know.

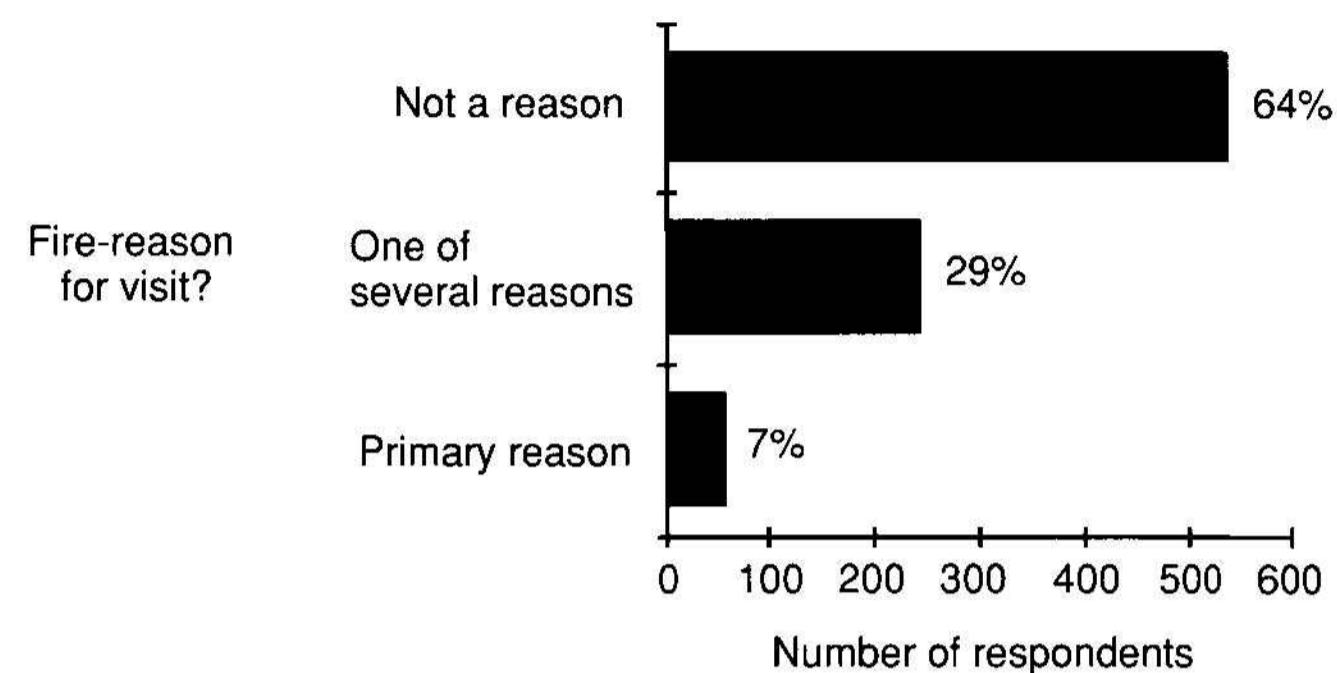


Figure 42: Visitors citing fire as reason for visit, Yellowstone NP, 1989

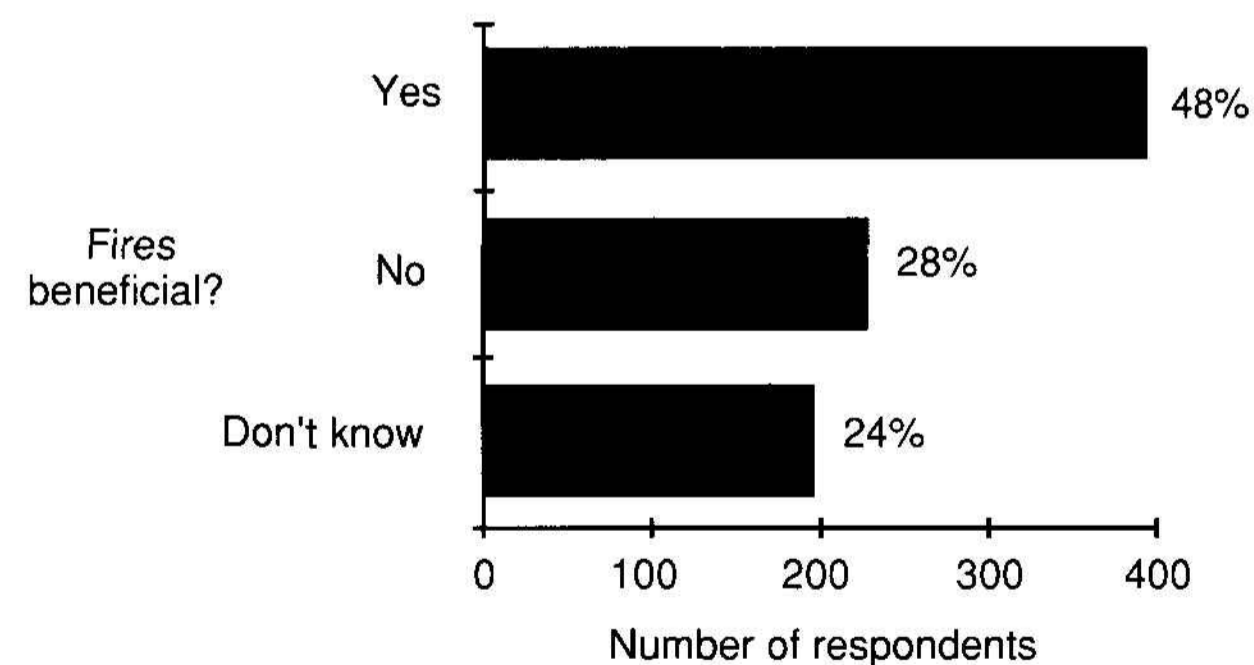


Figure 43: Visitor opinions of fires, Yellowstone NP, 1989

The VSP in the Future

As the preceding pages show, there is a great deal that managers can gain from systematically learning about their clientele. The VSP studies conducted to date demonstrate the rich diversity of visitors to the national park system.

Much additional work remains to be done:

- ▲ The VSP conducted 10 visitor studies in 1990 and is scheduled to conduct an additional 10 studies in 1991. These include a wide range of natural areas, urban parks, and historic sites.
- ▲ The information from all VSP studies is being combined into a national database. Using this database, the VSP plans to prepare more in-depth reports on specific topics, such as visitors' opinions about concession services.
- ▲ More detailed economic analyses are being prepared to provide estimates of how parks specifically contribute to regional economies.
- ▲ Improvements in the VSP techniques—to make them more efficient and more timely—are continuing.

The diversity of visitors reflects the importance of the national park system to Americans and the global community. The VSP is one way for managers to learn *from* visitors and *about* them. Understanding visitors is a key requirement for the wise management of parks.



Jefferson Memorial

Appendix: Survey Methods

The VSP visitor studies are based on systematic surveys of park visitors. The methods used have evolved since the project began. Like public opinion polls, a random sample of visitor groups is chosen to represent the general visitor population during the study period. The sample is usually "stratified" or distributed by entrance or zone, depending on park characteristics. Sample size is based on estimates of the previous year's visitation. The results are usually accurate 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, meaning that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar 95 out of 100 times.

Brief interviews are conducted as visitors enter the area, to collect data, obtain mailing addresses for follow-up reminders, and distribute the mail-back questionnaires. At least two reminders are sent. Data are coded and prepared for analysis by the Washington State University Social and Economic Sciences Research Center Public Opinion Lab. The data are analyzed using a statistical analysis program. A check on key variables is conducted to see if visitors who did not respond were significantly different from those who returned the questionnaires (nonresponse bias). The data are converted into graphic displays using a standard software program. Charts and figures with low sample sizes are identified with cautions for managers to consider. Open-ended questions (where visitors write in comments) are content-analyzed and organized into tables. The actual comments are included in a companion volume to the final report for each park.

The surveys have several limitations, described in each final report. Responses to mail-back questionnaires may not always reflect actual behavior. The results cannot be generalized beyond the study period. For several of the earlier reports, response bias was not tested. Visitor groups that do not include an English-speaking person may be underrepresented.

Dates, contacts, refusals, and response rates for each study are listed below. Response rates—the proportion of visitors who return their questionnaires—have increased from 30 to 40 percent in early studies to 70 to 85 percent in recent studies because of improvements in techniques. A detailed description of each study's methodology is available in its final report.

Bryce Canyon NP (VSP Report 19)

Study period: July 10-16, 1988

572 groups contacted

484 agreed to participate

406 groups responded (84% response rate)

Colonial NHP (VSP Report 10)

Study period: July 12-18, 1987

1236 groups contacted

1232 agreed to participate

439 groups responded (36% response rate)

Study period: October 11-17, 1987

980 groups contacted

977 agreed to participate

373 groups responded (38% response rate)

Crater Lake NP (VSP Report 6)

Study period: June 30 - July 6, 1985

480 groups contacted

475 agreed to participate

253 groups responded (53% response rate)

Study period: August 9-15, 1985

566 groups contacted

556 agreed to participate

269 groups responded (48% response rate)

Craters of the Moon NM (VSP Report 20)

Study period: June 25 - July 2, 1988

411 groups contacted

358 agreed to participate

303 groups responded (85% response rate)

Delaware Water Gap NRA (VSP Report 26)

Study period: July 22-30, 1989

684 groups contacted

648 agreed to participate

457 groups responded (71% response rate)

Denali NP and Preserve (VSP Report 18)

Study period: July 26 - August 1, 1988
507 groups contacted
483 agreed to participate
428 groups responded (89% response rate)

Everglades NP (VSP Report 21)

Study period: February 26 - March 4, 1989
602 groups contacted
584 agreed to participate
468 groups responded (80% response rate)

Gettysburg NMP (VSP Report 7)

Study period: July 22-28, 1986
1115 groups contacted
1093 agreed to participate
454 groups responded (42% response rate)

Glen Canyon NRA (VSP Report 17)

Study period: July 17-23, 1988
327 groups contacted
292 agreed to participate
255 groups responded (87% response rate)

Grand Teton NP (VSP Report 11)

Study period: July 12-18, 1987
1516 groups contacted
1500 agreed to participate
499 groups responded (33% response rate)

Harpers Ferry NHP (VSP Report 12)

Study period: July 26 - August 1, 1987
925 groups contacted
920 agreed to participate
331 groups responded (36% response rate)

Independence NHP (VSP Reports 8 and 16)

Study periods: July 31 - August 6, 1986
November 16-22, 1986
March 15-21, 1987
May 31 - June 6, 1987
4415 groups contacted
4246 agreed to participate
1365 groups responded (32% response rate)

Lincoln Home NHS (VSP Report 24)

Study period: July 2-8, 1989
487 groups contacted
445 agreed to participate
359 groups responded (81% response rate)

Muir Woods NM (VSP Report 27)

Study period: August 2-8, 1989
488 groups contacted
443 agreed to participate
341 groups responded (77% response rate)

Mesa Verde NP (VSP Report 13)

Study period: July 19-25, 1987
863 groups contacted
850 agreed to participate
358 groups responded (42% response rate)

North Cascades NP (VSP Report 5)

Study period: July 28 - August 3, 1985
530 groups contacted
510 agreed to participate
217 groups responded (43% response rate)

Shenandoah NP (VSP Report 14)

Study period: July 26 - August 1, 1987

1809 groups contacted

1805 agreed to participate

619 groups responded (34% response rate)

Study period: October 4-10, 1987

1165 groups contacted

1155 agreed to participate

389 groups responded (34% response rate)

Statue of Liberty NM (VSP Report 22)

Study period: June 18-24, 1989

629 groups contacted

599 agreed to participate

456 groups responded (76% response rate)

The White House Tours (VSP Report 23)

Study period: June 28 - July 1, 1989

595 groups contacted

558 agreed to participate

457 groups responded (82% response rate)

Valley Forge NHP (VSP Report 9)

Study period: August 9-15, 1987

789 groups contacted

782 agreed to participate

353 groups responded (45% response rate)

Yellowstone NP (VSP Report 15 and Report 25)

Study period: July 12-18, 1987

3029 groups contacted

2716 agreed to participate

845 groups responded (31% response rate)

Study period: July 12-18, 1989

1154 groups contacted

1070 agreed to participate

856 groups responded (80% response rate)

Available Publications

The Visitor Services Project has produced a number of publications. Reports 1-4 are available at cost from the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit upon request. The rest of the Visitor Services Project reports listed below are available from the superintendents of the individual parks:

1. Mapping interpretive services: A pilot study at Grand Teton National Park, 1983.
2. Mapping interpretive services: Identifying barriers to adoption and diffusion of the method, 1984.
3. Mapping interpretive services: A follow-up study at Yellowstone National Park and Mt. Rushmore National Memorial, 1984.
4. Mapping visitor populations: A pilot study at Yellowstone National Park, 1984.
5. North Cascades National Park Service Complex, 1985.
6. Crater Lake National Park, 1986.
7. Gettysburg National Military Park, 1987.
8. Independence National Historical Park, 1987.
9. Valley Forge National Historical Park, 1987.
10. Colonial National Historical Park, 1988.
11. Grand Teton National Park, 1988.
12. Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, 1988.
13. Mesa Verde National Park, 1988.
14. Shenandoah National Park, 1988.
15. Yellowstone National Park, 1988.
16. Independence National Historical Park: Four Seasons Study, 1988.
17. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, 1989.
18. Denali National Park and Preserve, 1989.
19. Bryce Canyon National Park, 1989.
20. Craters of the Moon National Monument, 1989.
21. Everglades National Park, 1989.
22. Statue of Liberty National Monument, 1990.
23. The White House Tours, President's Park, 1990.
24. Lincoln Home National Historic Site, 1990.
25. Yellowstone National Park, 1990.
26. Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, 1990.
27. Muir Woods National Monument, 1990.

Photo Credits:

Introduction

Lincoln Memorial: NPS Photo, National Capital Region

Crack-in-the-Rock Ruin, Wupatki NM: NPS Photo, Photographic Section and Picture Library

Horseback riding - Rocky Mountain NP: NPS Photo, Photographic Section and Picture Library

How old are visitors?

Rock Creek Park: NPS Photo, National Capital Region

Where are international visitors from?

Liberty Bell Pavilion, Independence NHP: NPS Photo, Independence National Historic Park

Where are United States visitors from?

Museum of Westward Expansion, Jefferson NEM: NPS Photo, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

What kinds of groups visit the parks?

Girl Scouts, Jefferson NEM: NPS Photo, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

What do visitors do?

Backpacking - Rocky Mountain NP: NPS Photo, Photographic Section and Picture Library

How do visitors spend their money?

Mule trip - Grand Canyon NP: NPS Photo, Grand Canyon National Park

What services are important/useful to visitors?

Interpretive talk - Grand Canyon NP: NPS Photo, Grand Canyon National Park

How good are the services provided?

1931 guided auto caravan - Grand Canyon NP: NPS Photo, Grand Canyon National Park

The VSP in the Future

Jefferson Memorial: NPS Photo, National Capital Region

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1916 - 1991

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