Serving the Visitor 2008

A Report on Visitors to the National Park System

National Park Service Visitor Services Project

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Foreword
from the Director

America's 392 national parks are a collective expression of who we are and what we value. The National Park Service has been entrusted with the care of these places, to preserve and share them and the stories they tell with the millions of people who visit every year and with future generations.

In 2008, we welcomed nearly 275 million people to national parks. The experiences they sought were as individual as each visitor. Some came to hike or climb, some to experience the authenticity of history, and some to find a place for quiet contemplation.

How well does the National Park Service meet the needs of our visitors? To find out, we ask them. In our latest report, *Serving the Visitor 2008*, I am proud to report that 97 percent of visitors rated their overall experiences in the parks as good or very good. But there are still areas where we can and will improve.

Whether people visit a national park every day or are on a once-in-a-lifetime trip, our job is to make them feel welcome and to help them get the most out of their time in the park. Every employee is an ambassador and every visit an opportunity to help those who come to the parks connect with them in a way beyond what they expected by explaining our stewardship and inviting theirs.

One of my top priorities is to invite new audiences to give parks a try. For these first-time visitors the experience we offer will determine whether we have delivered on the promise of the invitation.

As noted in this report, visitor use of park websites to help with trip planning is on the rise – but not as high as it could be. Making nps.gov the go-to source of information on parks and all aspects of the National Park Service is critical as is the effective use of social media. We will do both.

All park managers and staff should use the sound science in this report to enhance park operations and service to visitors. I applaud the Social Science Program for more than 20 years of giving National Park Service employees information they can use. I thank all of those employees, our volunteers and partners, for their dedication to our mission and the work they do every day.

Jonathan B. Jarvis
Director

Introduction

As the National Park System enters its second century, attention is being focused on re-invigorating public support for parks and discovering new ways to build a citizenry that is commited to conserving our shared heritage. To accomplish these goals, the National Park Service must evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of visitor services and understand how visitors learn about parks and how they would prefer to learn about them in the future.

The Park Studies Unit (PSU) in the Department of Conservation Social Sciences at the University of Idaho conducts two types of visitor studies. The Visitor Services Project (VSP) in-depth visitor studies and the Visitor Survey Card (VSC) both provide important, although different, data on how well the visitor is being served.

Since 1988, the VSP has conducted 198 in-depth visitor studies in 158 units of the National Park System. Through these customized studies, park managers obtain accurate information about visitors—who they are, what they do, their needs, opinions, and suggestions about improving park operations. Park managers have used these data to improve operations and better serve the public.

Blue Ridge Parkway, 2008

The VSC has used a visitor survey card for the past 11 years to survey visitors at over 320 units of the National Park System. These surveys are conducted annually at NPS units to measure performance related to visitor satisfaction, and visitor understanding of park significance. These data allow park managers to report performance in accordance with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA). In addition, the results can be applied to management needs, such as improving the design of park facilities, identifying general strengths and weaknesses in visitor services, and employee training. Results are reported in park-specific, regional, and systemwide combined reports.

The first section of this report shows how visitors evaluated the quality of 13 selected services, from recent in-depth visitor studies in parks. These ratings, provided by visitors who used the services, are indicators of visitor satisfaction. Each graph compares two years of current data (2007-2008), shown in color, with five-year baseline data (2002-2006), shown in black. Graphs showing results for less than five parks are labeled with "CAUTION!" since data gathered from such a small number of parks should be interpreted and used cautiously.

Very good — 63% / 64%

Good — 32% / 31%

proportion "satisfied" with service: 95%

Rating (for particular service)

Average — 5% / 5%

2008 data

baseline data

Poor — 1% / 1%

FY08

Very poor — 0% / 0%

Baseline (FY2005-2007)

Proportion of respondents
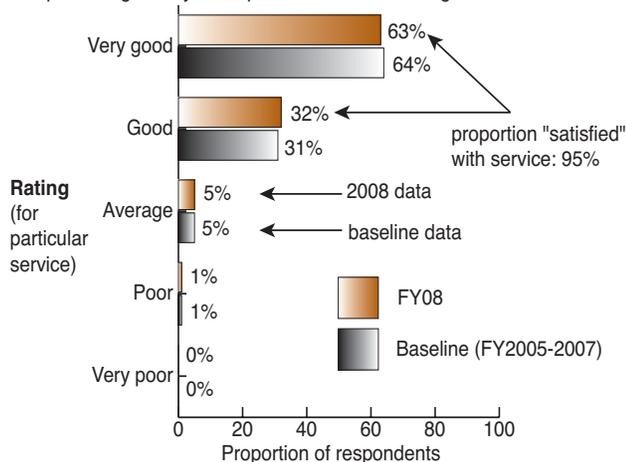
Sample graph for in-depth visitor studies
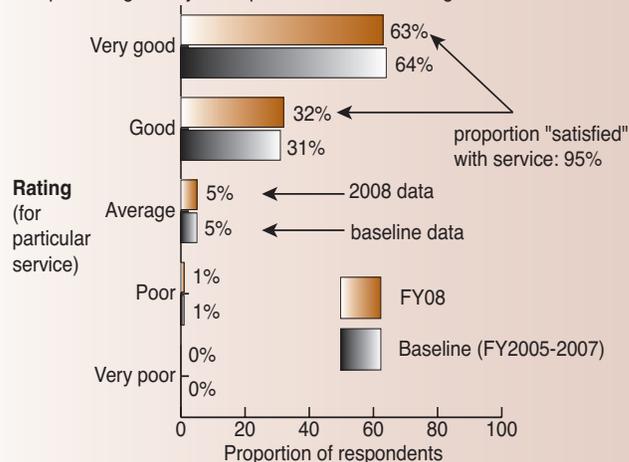
Sample graph for Visitor Survey Card studies

Highlighted this year is information from the in-depth surveys about visitor use of national park websites.

The second section includes visitor evaluations of services from the VSC studies conducted in all NPS units reporting visitation. Included are three 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 (2008), shown in color, with a three-year baseline of data (2005-2007), shown in black.

An appendix at the end of this report describes the research methods and limitations of both types of studies.

Visitor Comment

It was wonderful, beautiful NPS does an excellent job. We need more facilities like this.

Hooray for NPS!

VSP Visitor Studies

General Services

Visitor centers

Visitor centers offer information, bookstore sales items, and other services to help visitors enjoy their park visit. The general quality ratings of visitor centers in 15 parks (19 baseline parks) are shown in Figure 1.

➢ 89% of visitor groups rated the quality of visitor centers as "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 82%.
➢ 9% rated visitor center quality as "average," lower than the baseline rating of 12%.
➢ Fewer than 3% rated the quality of visitor centers as "very poor" or "poor," lower than the baseline rating of 6%.

2007-2008: 15 parks; 5,218 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
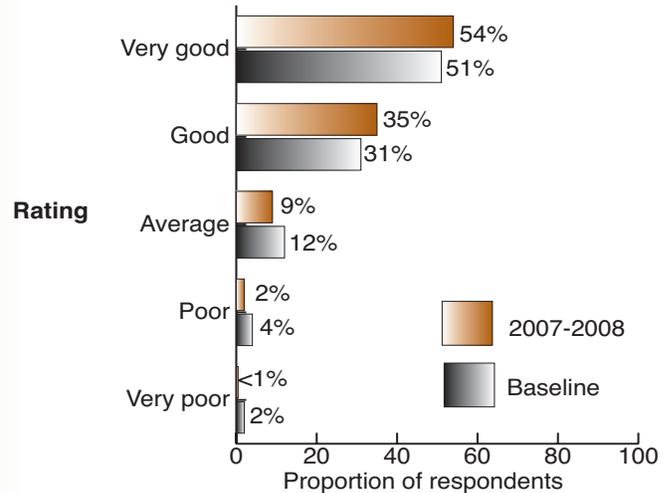
Figure 1: Quality of visitor centers

Park personnel

Park employees, such as rangers at entrance stations, maintenance employees, emergency response teams, and law enforcement officers, are important to visitors' park experience. Visitor groups at 27 parks (46 baseline parks) rated the quality of park personnel at those parks (see Figure 2).

➢ 91% of visitor groups rated the quality of park personnel as "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 90%.
➢ 7% rated the quality of personnel as "average," equal to the baseline rating.
➢ 3% rated the quality of park personnel as "very poor" or "poor," equal to the base-line rating.

2007-2008: 27 parks; 6,893 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
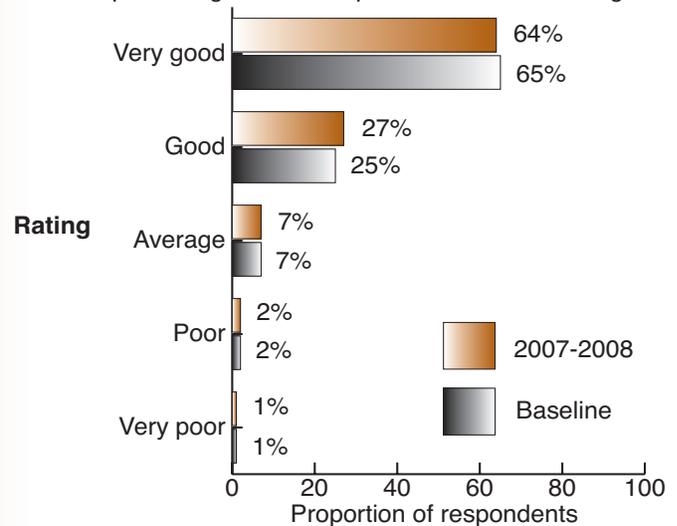
Figure 2: Quality of park personnel

Directional signs

Directional signs are important in helping visitors find their way around parks and locate services, facilities, and points of interest. Visitor groups at ten parks (29 baseline parks) evaluated the quality of directional signs in and around those parks (see Figure 3).

➢ 79% of visitor groups rated the quality of directional signs as "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 77%.

➢ 16% rated the quality of directional signs as "average," equal to the baseline rating.

➢ 5% rated the quality of directional signs as "very poor" or "poor," compared to the baseline rating of 6%.

2007-2008: 10 parks; 3,626 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
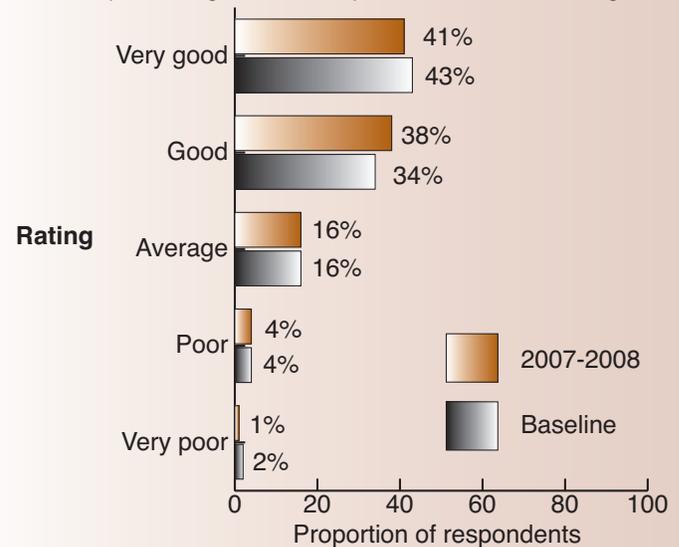

Figure 3: Quality of directional signs

Fire Island National Seashore, 2008

Visitor Comments

A PARK RANGER STOPPED & TALKED TO US WHILE WALKING TO ANOTHER LOCATION. THIS GAVE US A WARM, WELCOME FEELING

more road signs & historic signs for imformational purposes. Better trail signs

NPS Facilities

Restrooms

Restrooms are essential park facilities. Figure 4 shows visitor groups' ratings of the quality of restrooms in 26 parks (46 baseline parks).

➢ The quality of restrooms was rated as "very good" or "good" by 78% of visitor groups, higher than the baseline rating of 77%.

➢ Another 18% of visitor groups felt the restrooms were "average," higher than the baseline rating of 17%.

➢ 4% rated the restrooms as "very poor" or "poor," lower than the baseline rating of 7%.

2007-2008: 26 parks; 9,712 visitor groups.

Rating	2007-2008	Baseline
Very good	42%	45%
Good	36%	32%
Average	18%	17%
Poor	3%	5%
Very poor	1%	2%
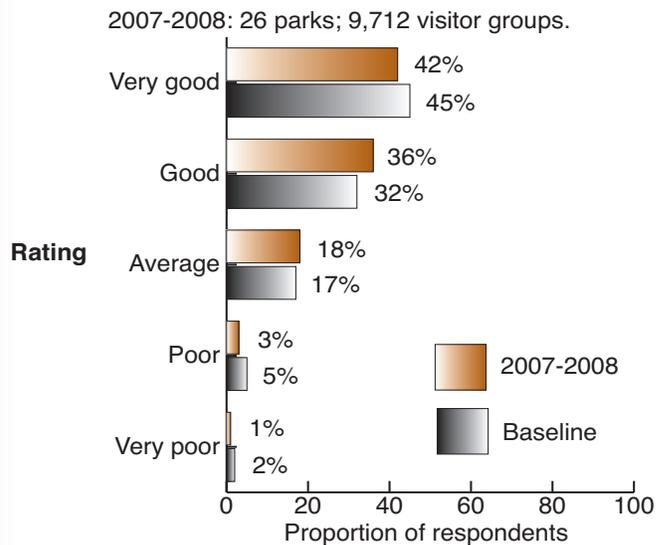
Figure 4: Quality of restrooms

Visitor Comments

Add more Rangers - Keep bathrooms cleaner - Keep some of the campgrounds open year round, or at least in good weather

The grounds were beautiful and well kept. It was great just enjoying the grounds

Capitol Reef National Park, 2008

Campgrounds

Camping is an integral part of some visitors' park experience. Visitor groups at 18 parks (19 baseline parks) were asked to rate the quality of NPS campgrounds in those parks.

➢ 79% of visitor groups rated the campgrounds as "very good" or "good," equal to the baseline rating (see Figure 5).

➢ Another 14% rated the campgrounds as "average," compared to the baseline rating of 16%.

➢ 6% rated the campgrounds as "very poor" or "poor," higher than the baseline rating of 5%.

2007-2008: 18 parks; 1,238 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
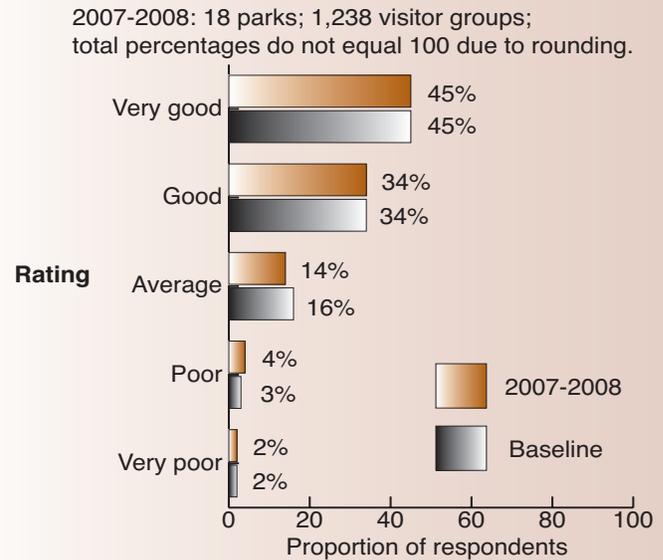
Figure 5: Quality of campgrounds

Picnic areas

Many visitors enjoy picnicking in national parks. Figure 6 shows how visitors at 23 parks (31 baseline parks) rated the quality of picnic areas in those parks.

➢ 81% of visitor groups rated the quality of picnic areas as "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 74%.

➢ 15% rated picnic areas as "average," compared to the baseline rating of 20%.

➢ 4% of visitor groups felt the quality of picnic areas was "very poor" or "poor," lower than the baseline rating of 5%.

2007-2008: 23 parks; 2,444 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
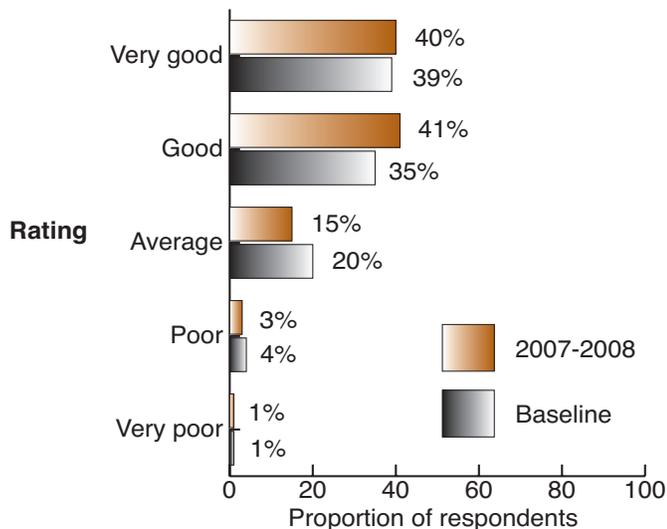
Figure 6: Quality of picnic areas

Interpretive Services

Ranger programs

Ranger programs include guided walks and tours, campfire programs, and living history demonstrations. In 28 parks (48 baseline parks), visitors were asked to rate the quality of ranger programs (see Figure 7).

➢ 90% of visitor groups felt the quality of ranger programs was "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 88%.

➢ 8% gave ranger programs an "average" rating, equal to the baseline rating.

➢ Another 2% rated ranger programs as "very poor" or "poor," lower than the baseline rating of 3%.

2007-2008: 28 parks; 3,441 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
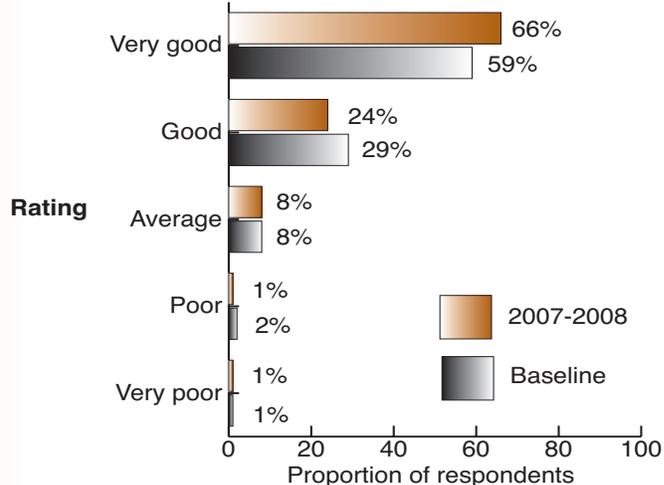
Figure 7: Quality of ranger programs

Exhibits

Exhibits in visitor centers, museums, and along roads and trails are a valuable interpretive service offered in parks. As shown in Figure 8, visitors at 29 parks (44 baseline parks) evaluated the quality of exhibits in those parks.

➢ 82% of visitor groups rated the quality of exhibits as "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 81%.

➢ Another 16% of visitor groups felt the quality of exhibits was "average," equal to the baseline rating.

➢ 3% of visitor groups rated the quality of exhibits as "very poor" or "poor," equal to the baseline rating.

2007-2008: 29 parks; 10,761 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
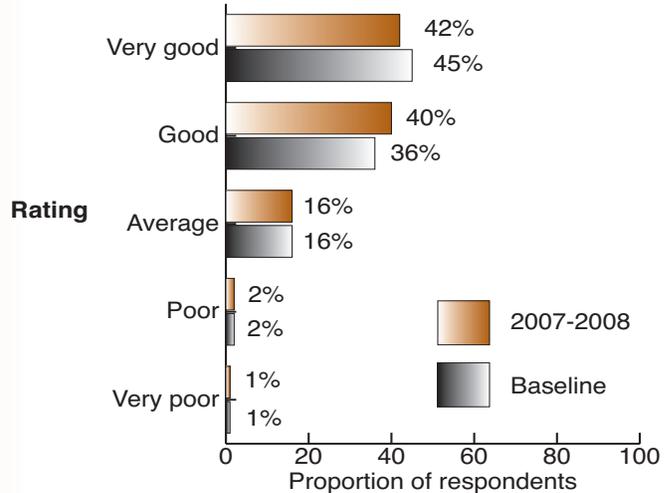
Figure 8: Quality of exhibits

Everglades National Park, 2008

Guided tour was excellent. We like learning about eco system + preservation efforts.

Leave the area as natural as possible except for better signs, maps, and access through gates.

Park brochures

Most parks have a brochure with a map and basic information to help visitors plan their visit. Visitors usually receive the brochure as they enter the park or arrive at a visitor center or ranger station. Figure 9 shows ratings from visitor groups at 26 parks (49 baseline parks).

➢ 89% of visitor groups rated park brochures as "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 87%.

➢ 9% felt the quality of brochures was "average," lower than the baseline rating of 11%.

➢ Fewer than 2% rated the overall quality of park brochures as "very poor" or "poor," lower than the baseline rating of 2%.

2007-2008: 26 parks; 8,229 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
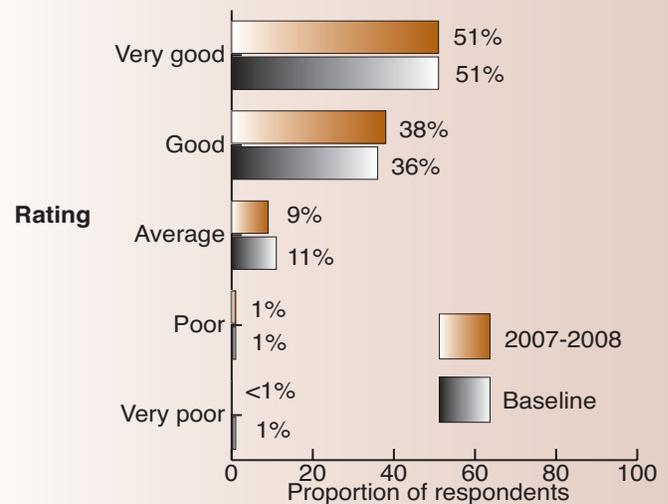

Figure 9: Quality of park brochures

Park bookstores

Park bookstores/museum shops are operated by non-profit organizations that use their profits to benefit park visitors. They sell publications and other educational materials, as well as provide programs to help visitors learn about the parks.

- ➤ 76% of visitor groups at 24 parks (29 baseline parks) rated the overall quality of park bookstores as "very good" or "good," equal to the baseline rating (see Figure 10).
- ➤ 20% felt the quality of bookstores was "average," equal to the baseline rating.
- ➤ 4% rated the quality of bookstores as "very poor" or "poor," equal to the baseline rating.

2007-2008: 24 parks; 4,012 visitor groups.

Rating	2007-2008	Baseline
Very good	36%	40%
Good	40%	36%
Average	20%	20%
Poor	3%	3%
Very poor	1%	1%

Proportion of respondents
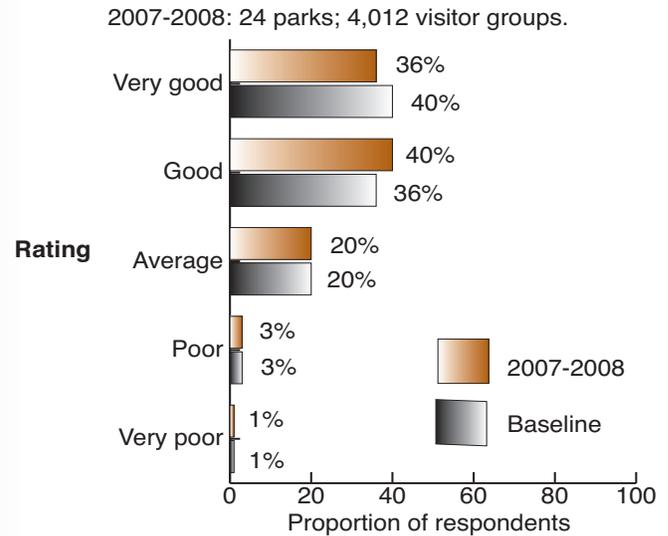
Figure 10: Quality of park bookstores

Blue Ridge Parkway, 2008

Visitor Comments

We all enjoyed. A great way for the children to learn and enjoy history.

My husband loves history and usually asks many questions. Our tour guide was very thorough when answering his inquiries. She led the group well and was very friendly.

Concession Services

Concession services include lodging, food services, and gift shops, since many parks have hotels, motels, restaurants, cafeterias, or snack bars within their boundaries.

Lodging

Five parks in the 2007-2008 studies had lodging within the park (nine baseline parks).

➢ 77% of visitor groups rated the quality of lodging as "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 70% (see Figure 11).

➢ 19% felt the quality of lodging was "average," compared to the baseline rating of 21%.

➢ Fewer than 4% rated the quality of lodging as "very poor" or "poor," lower than the baseline rating of 8%.

2007-2008: 5 parks; 508 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Rating	2007-2008	Baseline
Very good	44%	37%
Good	33%	33%
Average	19%	21%
Poor	3%	6%
Very poor	<1%	2%

Proportion of respondents
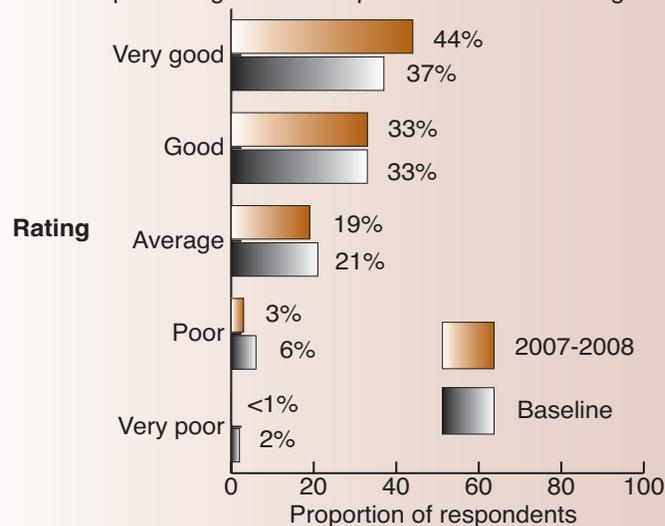
Figure 11: Quality of lodging

Food services

Figure 12 shows how visitor groups rated the quality of food services in seven parks in the 2007-2008 studies (11 baseline parks).

➢ 71% of visitor groups rated the quality of food services as "very good" or "good," higher than the baseline rating of 59%.

➢ 21% felt the quality of food services was "average," compared to the baseline rating of 26%.

➢ 7% rated the quality of food services as "very poor" or "poor," lower than the baseline rating of 14%.

2007-2008: 7 parks; 1,655 visitor groups.

Rating	2007-2008	Baseline
Very good	38%	29%
Good	33%	30%
Average	21%	26%
Poor	6%	10%
Very poor	1%	4%

Proportion of respondents
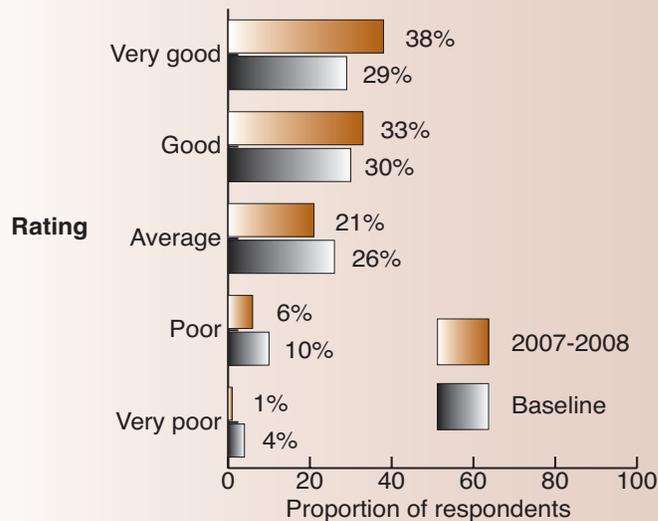
Figure 12: Quality of food services

Gift shops

Gift shops in parks provide visitors with an opportunity to take home souvenirs of their park visit. Fewer than five parks in the 2007-2008 studies had park gift shops; interpret with caution.

➤ 72% of visitor groups at four parks (eight baseline parks) rated the overall quality of gift shops as "very good" or "good," lower than the baseline rating of 73%, as shown in Figure 13.

➤ 24% felt the quality of gift shops was "average," compared to the baseline rating of 22%.

➤ 4% rated the quality of gift shops as "very poor" or "poor," compared to the baseline rating of 5%.

2007-2008: 4 parks; 1,752 visitor groups.

Rating

Very good	32% / 34%
Good	40% / 39%
Average	24% / 22%
Poor	3% / 3%
Very poor	1% / 2%

CAUTION!

■ 2007-2008
■ Baseline

Proportion of respondents
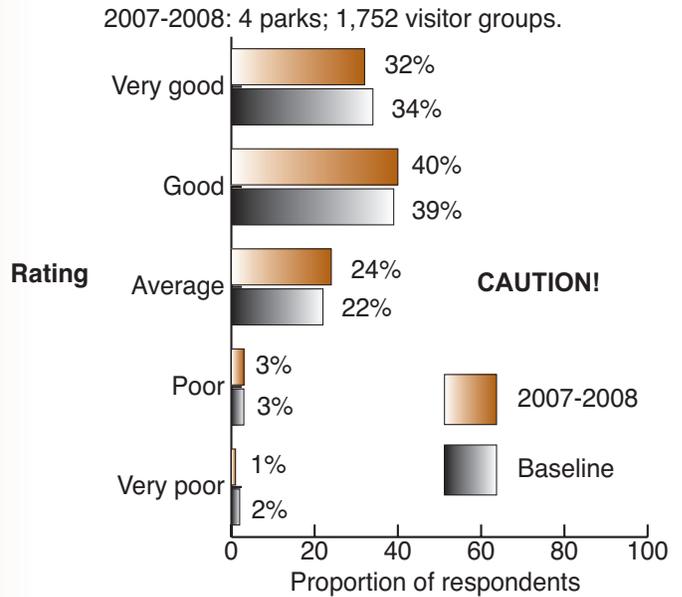
Figure 13: Quality of gift shops

Visitor Comments

Would have loved to stay onsite but lodging was either full or greater than 300 per night.

Availability of concessions for lunch / more advertised

Blue Ridge Parkway, 2008

Overall Quality of Services

The ratings of services from the in-depth visitor studies are indicators of how well the NPS is serving the public. Figure 14 shows the overall rating of 13 visitor services based on 59,557 visitor groups at 29 parks (49 baseline parks). These ratings are an index created by combining the ratings of the individual services.

➢ Most visitor groups (82%) rated the overall quality of services as "very good" or "good," equal to the baseline rating.

➢ 14% rated the overall quality as "average," equal to the baseline rating.

➢ 3% felt the overall quality of services was "very poor" or "poor," lower than the baseline rating of 4%.

2007-2008: 29 parks; 59,557 visitor groups; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Rating

Very good 47% / 49%
Good 35% / 33%
Average 14% / 14%
Poor 2% / 3%
Very poor 1% / 1%

2007-2008
Baseline

Proportion of respondents
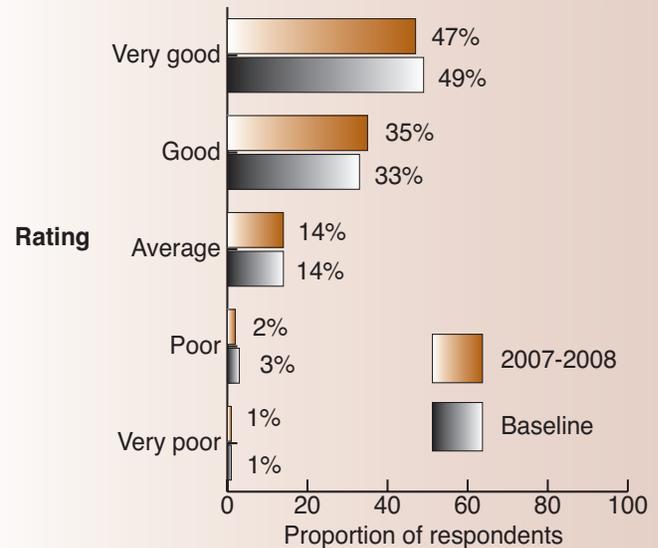
Figure 14: Overall quality of services

Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, 2008

Visitor Comments

Stopping at places in the passports that grandchildren all have makes a vacation very educational and interesting. Thanks for having the passports great idea.

We appreciated the level of professionalism provided by staff & knowledge of the park. We'll be back!

VSP Highlight

Visitor Use of Park Websites as a Source of Information

Before visiting a national park site, visitors may use many sources of information to learn about the site, such as words of mouth from friends or relatives, maps, brochures, or travel guides. The Internet has also become an increasingly popular tool to obtain travel information.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of U.S. households that have Internet access has increased from 18% in 1997 to 61% in 2009. The Internet can also be accessed outside the home at work, public libraries, schools, community centers, and other public Internet portals. In 2009, the percentage of households with Internet access either in or outside of their home is 72% (U.S. Census Bureau). Since the majority of the U.S. population has Internet access, National Park Service park websites offer a potentially powerful communication tool for sharing information with park visitors.

Prior to 1997, VSP questionnaires

with source of information questions did not include answer options for Internet/websites. As Internet use became more popular from 1997 to 1999, the question included Internet/websites, but did not specify whether they were National Park Service websites or other websites. Since 2000, all source of information questions have included park websites and other websites as separate answer options. Some parks have also asked visitors about their preferred source of information for future visits. This highlighted section examines visitors' use of park websites as a source of information on their visit, as well as their preference for the future.

Park websites provide information such as park history, maps, directions, weather conditions, activities, programs, traveler amenities and other information needed to plan a park visit. Figure 15 shows the percentage of visitor groups who used park websites as a source of information to plan a park visit. On average, 31.1%
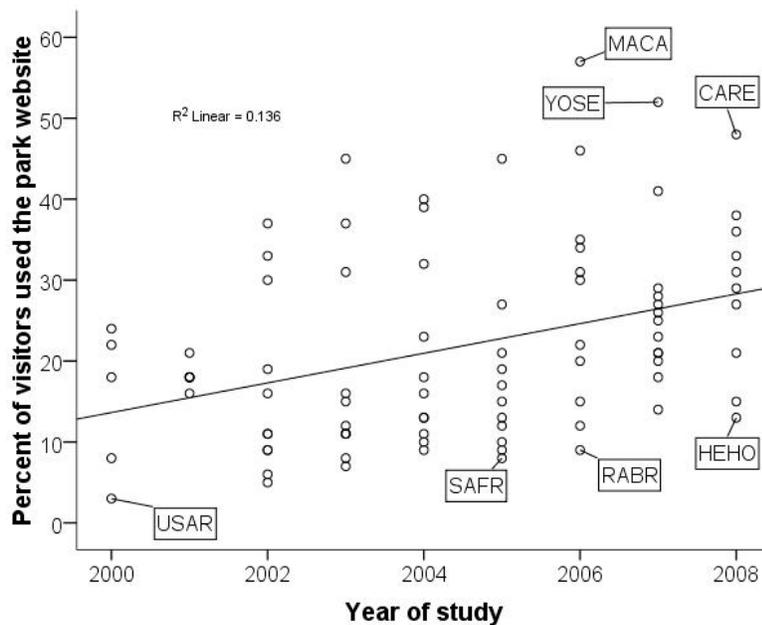
Figure 15: Percentage of visitor groups that used the park website as a source of information

of visitor groups used park websites in 2008--a significant increase from 15.6% in 2000, among 91 visitor studies (p-value<0.001). However, it has not changed as quickly (coefficient correlation = 0.378) as the rapid increase of Internet access in U.S. households.

Why don't more people use park websites? VSP visitor studies have not asked detailed website questions to learn the reasons for the moderate park website use. However, one of the reasons appears to be lack of awareness that a park website exists. Figure 16 shows some examples of park website use prior to the current visit compared to future visits. Grand Canyon National Park (North Rim), Mammoth Cave National Park, Yellowstone National Park, and Yosemite National Park are some high use examples. These parks names include the words "National Park," which may make them more recognizable as national park sites. The low-use examples such as USS Arizona National Memorial, Rainbow Bridge National Monument, San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, and Herbert Hoover National Historical Site may be less recognizable as national park sites. When asked, only 23% of San Francisco Maritime National

Historical Park and 43% of USS Arizona National Memorial visitors were aware that the site they visited was a unit of the National Park System. National Park Service websites may not be an obvious place for visitors to seek information about such parks.

Despite the current low use of park websites, visitors are willing to use park websites in planning a future visit. Figure 16 shows data from 41 visitor surveys that asked visitors to specify the sources of information that they used prior to their current visit as well as their future preferences. In every case, the future demand for park websites surpasses the current usage. Visitors seem to be more likely to use park websites once they are aware of their existence.

The Internet is a powerful and relatively inexpensive communication tool. Increased visitor awareness of parks may lead to an increase in park website usage . While efforts need to be made at the federal level, each park can also increase the awareness level by working with local businesses, chambers of commerce, state tourism offices, friend groups, and partners to link their websites to park websites.

Figure 16: Comparison of park websites used to plan current visit vs. preferences for future visits

Visitor Survey Card

In 1993, Congress enacted the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). 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 visitor satisfaction" for the American people. The NPS has followed the lead set forth by GPRA by setting agency goals to better manage its resources and services.

For the natural, cultural, and recreational resources in NPS care, and for the people served, GPRA requires the NPS to report how its goals are being met. One way to measure these goals is to survey visitors and ask them about the quality of their experiences while visiting NPS units, i.e. to measure visitor satisfaction.

Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site, 2008

The NPS measures visitor satisfaction to meet GPRA requirements. Since 1998, the NPS has used a standardized Visitor Survey Card annually at most NPS units to measure performance related to visitor satisfaction. In 2008, the Visitor Survey Card was completed by a sample of visitors at 313 National Park System units. At year's end, a total of 32,883 visitors had completed and returned their survey cards.

On the following pages, graphs show visitor evaluations of the quality of services within three 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 the purposes of this section, and for GPRA requirements, a visitor is "satisfied" when he or she rates a service as either "very good" or "good."

Visitor Comment

From visits to the facility and trails my health has really improved.
It's beautiful !!

Park Facilities

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

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

Most visitors (92%) were satisfied with these park facilities provided within the National Park System, equal to the baseline rating (see Figure 17).

2008: 313 parks; 31,281 respondents; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Rating

Very good — 65% / 63%
Good — 27% / 28%
Average — 7% / 7%
Poor — 1% / 1%
Very poor — 0% / 0%

proportion "satisfied" with service: 92%

FY08
Baseline (FY05-07)

Proportion of respondents
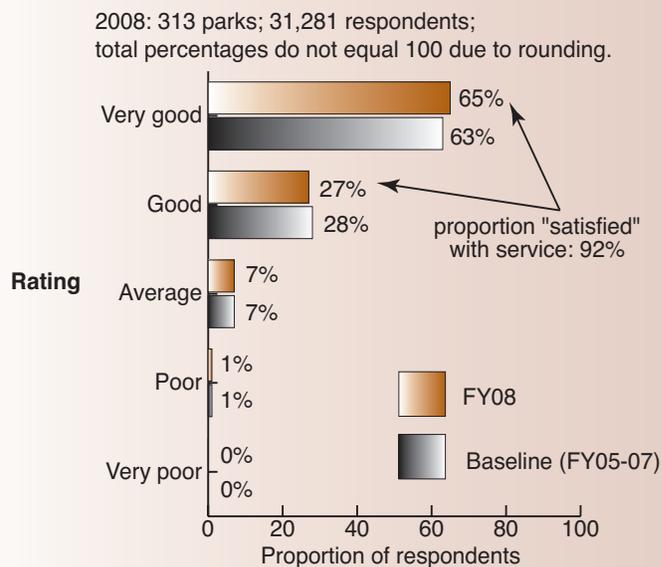
Figure 17: Combined index for satisfaction with park facilities

Yosemite National Park, 2008

Visitor Comments

Please leave it as it is. Too many facilities in the park could spoil it.

Access pass / wheelchair accessibility is so appreciated.

Visitor Services

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

- ➢ assistance from park employees
- ➢ park maps or brochures
- ➢ ranger programs
- ➢ commercial services in the park
- ➢ value for entrance fee paid

The majority of visitors (95%) were satisfied with these services provided within the National Park System, as shown in Figure 18. For the baseline rating, 93% of visitors were satisfied with the quality of visitor services.

2008: 313 parks; 31,798 respondents; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
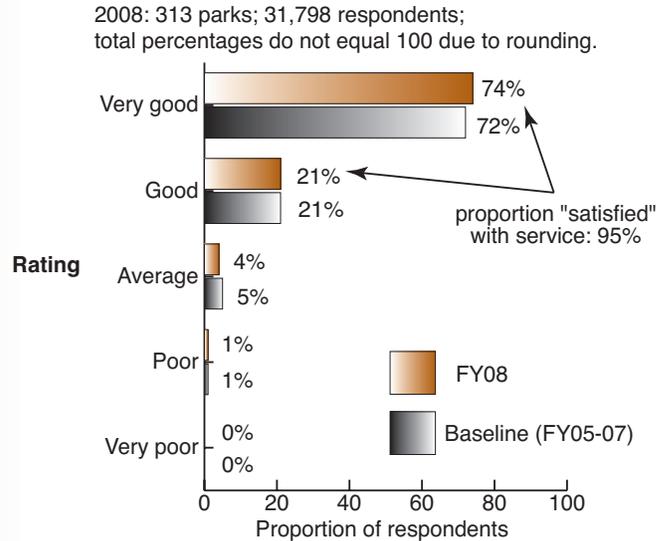
Figure 18: Combined index for satisfaction with visitor services

Recreational Opportunities

Visitor opinions of two key 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

As shown in Figure 19, most respondents (94%) were satisfied with these recreational opportunities provided within the National Park System, equal to the baseline rating.

2008: 313 parks; 29,080 respondents; total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
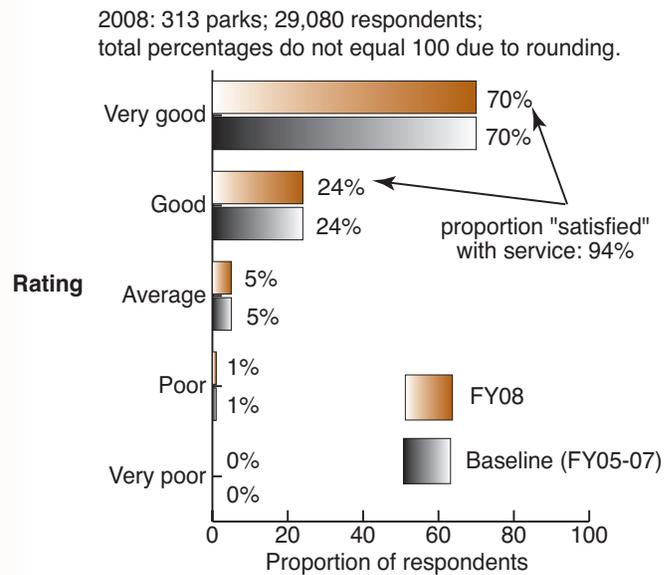
Figure 19: Combined index for satisfaction with recreational opportunities

Overall Quality of Facilities, Services, and 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) states that "95% of park visitors are satisfied with appropriate park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities."

For GPRA reporting purposes, the Visitor Survey Card includes an overall quality question used as the primary measure of visitor satisfaction. This question asks 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, visitors are considered "satisfied" if their response to this overall quality question is either "very good" or "good."

Figure 20 shows the overall quality rating based on 32,883 respondents in 313 units of the National Park System. In 2008, the satisfaction level was 97%, higher than the baseline rating of 96%.

The Visitor Survey Card results show strong evidence of excellent visitor service across the National Park System. The NPS has demanding GPRA goals for visitor satisfaction. Of the 313 parks that successfully completed a 2008 Visitor Survey Card study, 252 parks (81%) met or exceeded the annual servicewide goal of 95% visitor satisfaction. Most parks (296 or 95%) of the 313 parks had a visitor satisfaction rating of 90% or higher.

Visitor Comments

Beautiful facility, knowledgable staff — wish we had more time!

*The lodge and restaurant were excellent; exceeding our expectations*
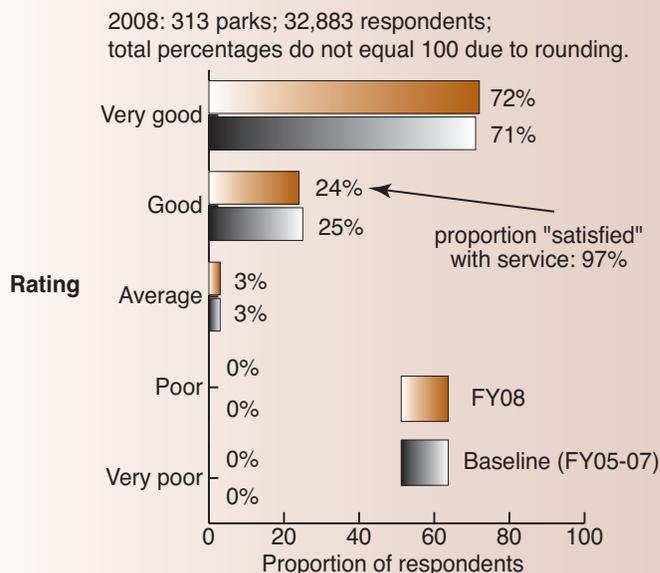
Figure 20: Overall quality of facilities, services, and recreational opportunities

The Visitor Survey Card results at individual parks were combined to produce a satisfaction rating for each individual NPS region. Figure 21 shows the seven regions and the proportion of park visitors satisfied overall with appropriate facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. Regional overall visitor satisfaction scores are very similar, ranging from 96% to 98%.

The Visitor Survey Card results 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, protect natural and cultural resources, and improve visitor services.

Alaska Region
98% (10 parks)

Alaska

Intermountain Region
97% (75 parks)

Midwest Region
97% (47 parks)

Northeast Region
96% (63 parks)

Pacific West Region
96% (47 parks)

National Capital Region
96% (14 parks)

American Samoa Guam Hawaii

Southeast Region
97% (57 parks)

Puerto Rico
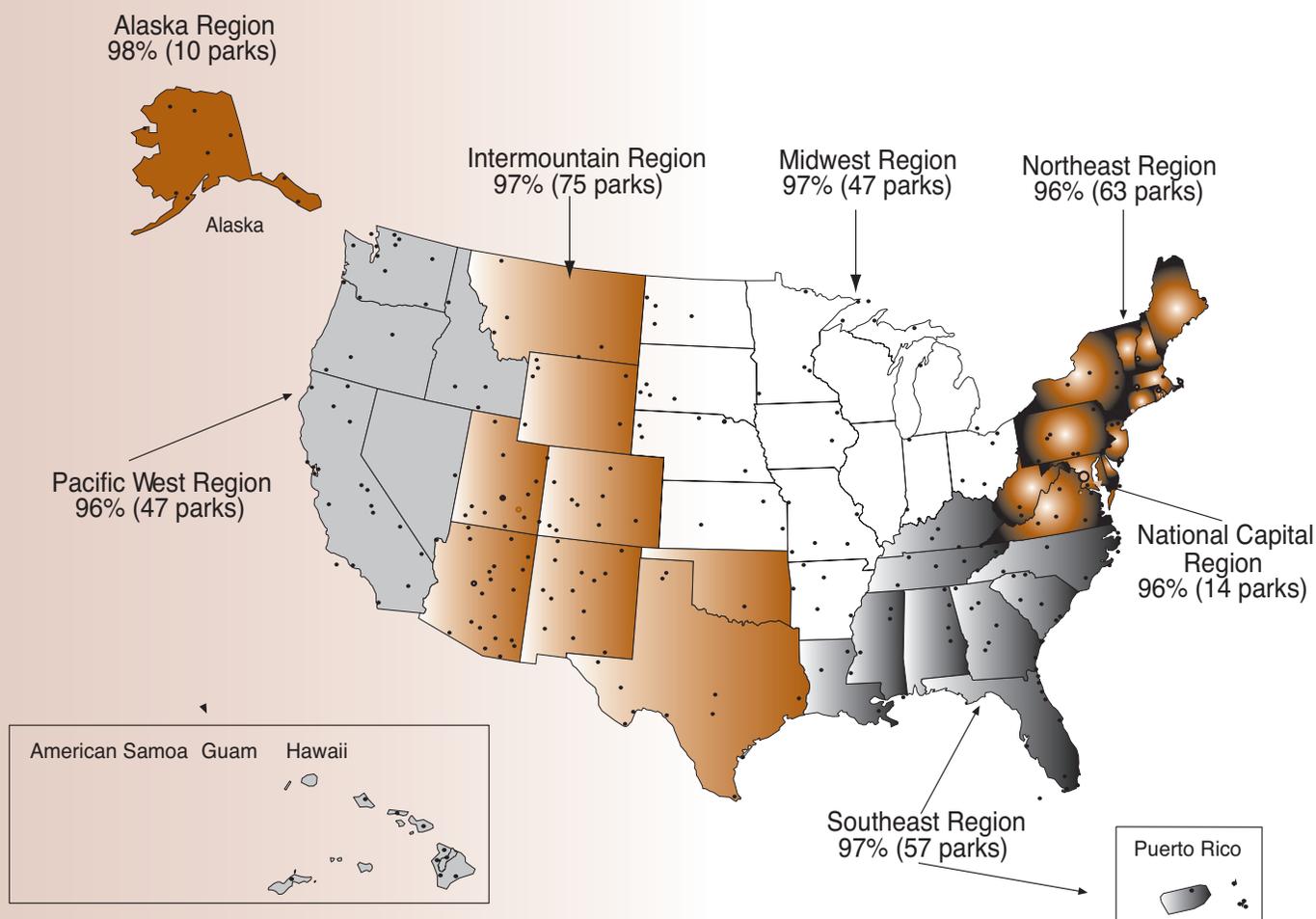
Figure 21: Percentage of visitors satisfied overall, by NPS region, 2008

Conclusion

Both the in-depth visitor studies and Visitor Survey Card asked visitors to rate the overall quality of the services provided during their park visit.

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.

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

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 2008

Visitor Comments

It is a great park. We had perfect weather. The ranger was very helpfull. *The movie was the best of any park/historical site that I have seen.

Would have liked more ranger programs on weekdays

The hiking trails + scenic views were spectacular. Encourage more hiking in lieu of sightseeing exclusively from vehicles!

I would like to see a few more MARKers on the road giving ADVANce notice of point of INTeresT

Research Methods

VSP Visitor Studies

The VSP in-depth visitor studies are based on systematic surveys of park visitors. A random sample of visitor groups is chosen to represent the general visitor population during a limited study period (usually 7 to 10 days). In 2005, the VSP started conducting surveys for very small parks that receive fewer than 340 visitor groups during a 7 to 10-day period. In these situations, the survey period is extended beyond 10 days until 340 questionnaires are distributed.

The sample is usually "stratified," or distributed by entrance or zone, depending upon park characteristics and visitor use patterns. Sample size and sampling intervals are based upon the previous year's visitation statistics. Results are usually accurate to within six 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 meet their information needs. In addition, questionnaires include open-ended questions so visitors can provide comments about their visit.

Short (two-minute) interviews are conducted as visitors arrive at a sampling site. The interviews are used to distribute the mail-back questionnaires, collect data for a non-response bias check, and obtain mailing addresses for follow-up reminders. The refusal rate (the proportion of visitors contacted that decline to participate) currently averages 9%. The response rate (the proportion of visitors that return their questionnaires) currently averages 74%. A respondent is a member of a visitor group (at least 16 years of age) who voluntarily participated in the survey by accepting the questionnaire for the group. However, the whole group is asked to provide their input and opinions when answering the questionnaire. Non-response bias is checked based on both individual and group characteristics using respondent age and group size to detect the differences between respondents and non-respondents (collected during the initial interview).

The data are coded, entered in computers, and analyzed using appropriate statistical software (i.e., SAS, SPSS). For this report, some data were entered by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University, and others were entered by VSP staff at the University of Idaho. Responses to open-ended questions (in which visitors write comments) are categorized and summarized by VSP staff. In 2007, the VSP offered an online questionnaire option at one park. Thus, some data were entered into the database by the respondents.

In-depth visitor studies have several limitations. Responses to mail-back questionnaires may not reflect actual behavior. The results cannot always be generalized beyond the study period. Visitor groups that do not include an English-speaking person may be under-represented, although parks may elect to use questionnaires in additional languages and interviewers who speak multiple languages. These methods help include diverse cultural groups. These limitations apply to all studies of this type.

Visitor Survey Card Studies

The Visitor Survey Card studies use a somewhat different methodology than the in-depth visitor studies. For each survey, park staff select an interval sampling plan based on the previous years' visitation. In each park, 400 visitor survey cards are distributed to a random sample of visitors during a 30-day study period. Results are usually accurate to within six percentage points. For individual park reports, results are statistically significant at the .06 level. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar 80 out of 100 times. For the whole National Park System, results are accurate to within 1 percentage point. These results are statistically significant with 99.99% confidence interval.

Park staff are trained to distribute survey cards according to a standard set of survey instructions and guidelines. A standardized Visitor Survey Card that includes the same set of service-related questions is used for each park. In addition, the card includes open-ended questions to evaluate visitor understanding of a park's significance and obtain overall feedback.

Returned cards are electronically scanned, and the data are 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 visitor survey card studies administered in 311 parks in 2008 averaged 29%. A test for non-response bias was conducted by comparing the results for the same question from both the Visitor Survey 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 was not significant.

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 region and systemwide levels. Data from parks with fewer than 30 returned cards, or from parks with discrepancies in data collection methods, are omitted from these reports and *Serving the Visitor*.

The Visitor Survey Card studies 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 under-represented. These limitations apply to all studies of this type. In addition, unlike the VSP studies, the VSC is a "comment card" type of survey in which no demographic data are collected, nor are multiple contacts made with potential respondents, resulting in a lower response rate compared to surveys using follow-up procedures.

Visitor Studies in this Report

The VSP in-depth visitor study data in this report came from the following NPS units. The questionnaires and reports are available online at: http://psu.uidaho.edu/vsp.reports.htm

Agate Fossil Beds National Monument, NE
Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, WI
Arches National Park, UT
Big Cypress National Preserve, FL
Blue Ridge Parkway, VA and NC
Catoctin Mountain Park, MD
C&O Canal National Historical Park, MD
Capitol Reef National Park, UT
Capulin Volcano National Monument, NM
Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site, NC
Chickasaw National Recreation Area, OK
City of Rocks National Reserve, ID
Congaree National Park, SC
Cowpens National Battlefield, SC
Craters of the Moon National Monument & Preserve, ID
Cuyahoga Valley National Park, OH
Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park, OH
Denali National Park and Preserve, AK
Devils Postpile National Monument, CA
Dry Tortugas National Park, FL
Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, WA
Effigy Mounds National Monument, IA
Everglades National Park, FL
Fire Island National Seashore, NY
Fort Donelson National Battlefield, TN
Fort Stanwix National Monument, NY
Fort Sumter National Monument, SC
Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, ND
George Washington Birthplace National Monument, VA
Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, AZ and UT
Golden Spike National Historic Site, UT
Grand Canyon National Park – North Rim, AZ
Grand Canyon National Park – South Rim, AZ
Grand Teton National Park, WY
Great Smoky Mountains National Park, TN
Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve, CO
Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, WV
Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, HI
Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, IA
Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site, PA
Horseshoe Bend National Military Park, AL

Independence National Historical Park, PA
John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, OR
John Fitzgerald Kennedy National Historic Site, MA
John Muir National Historic Site, CA
Johnstown Flood National Memorial, PA
Joshua Tree National Park, CA
Katmai National Park and Preserve, AK
Keweenaw National Historical Park, MI
Kings Mountain National Military Park, SC
Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, ND
Lava Beds National Monument, CA
Lincoln Home National Historic Site, IL
Mammoth Cave National Park, KY
Manzanar National Historic Site, CA
Minute Man National Historical Park, MA
Monocacy National Battlefield, MD
Mount Rushmore National Memorial, SD
New River Gorge National River, WV
Nicodemus National Historic Site, KS
Oregon Caves National Monument, OR
Outer Banks Group (Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Ft. Raleigh National Historic Site and Wright Brothers National Memorial), NC
Pinnacles National Monument, CA
Pipestone National Monument, MN
Rainbow Bridge National Monument, AZ
San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, CA
Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, NH
Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks and Sequoia National Forest, CA
Stones River National Battlefield, TN
Timpanogos Caves National Monument, UT
Yellowstone National Park, ID, MT, and WY
Yosemite National Park, CA
Zion National Park, UT

Visitor Survey Card Studies

The data for Visitor Survey Card surveys in this report came from 313 NPS units. Reports are available online at: http://psu.uidaho.edu/vsc.htm