

The Visitor Services Project



To Participate In A VSP Study

To become eligible for a VSP study, simply complete and return a Visitor Study Nomination Form to your Regional VSP Point-of-Contact (contact names are included on the nomination form).

VSP information and nomination forms are available on the web site:
<http://www.nps.gov/socialscience/waso/products.htm>

To learn more about the Visitor Services Project, contact:

- Margaret Littlejohn,
VSP Coordinator,
phone: 208-885-7863,
email: littlej@uidaho.edu
- Dr. Gary E. Machlis,
Visiting Chief Social Scientist, NPS,
phone: 208-885-7129 (in Idaho) or
202-208-5391 (in Washington, D.C.),
email: gmachlis@uidaho.edu

Cooperative Park Studies Unit
College of Natural Resources
University of Idaho
Moscow, Idaho 83844-1133
FAX: 208-885-4261

The Visitor Services Project



Introduction

Who are park visitors? Where are they from? What do they do? What do they think about, the facilities they use, and the interpretive programs they attend? What park features and qualities are most important to them? A Visitor Services Project (VSP) study provides answers to these questions—and more. The Visitor Services Project is an ongoing research project of the National Park Service (NPS) designed to provide superintendents with usable knowledge about visitors. The purpose of this brochure is to provide a brief description of the VSP, highlight project benefits, and explain how parks can participate in a VSP study.



The VSP began in 1982 when the NPS, recognizing the need to learn more about visitors and their opinions, asked the staff of the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit (UI CPSU) to develop a new approach to visitor studies. The UI CPSU developed a technique that provides an easy-to-understand, consistent, and efficient means of studying visitors. Since 1982, the VSP has conducted over 115 in-depth visitor studies in 93 units of the National Park System—including studies in all NPS Regions. Through these studies, park staffs can obtain accurate and customized information about visitors—who they are, what they do, their needs and opinions.

The results from the VSP studies are presented in *Serving the Visitor*, an annual “report card” for the National Park Service describing how well the visiting public is being served.

Each year, there are opportunities for a limited number of parks to participate in a VSP study. To be eligible, park staff complete and submit a VSP nomination form to their regional office (see instructions under the heading “*To Participate In A VSP Study*”). Each region submits a prioritized list of VSP candidates from the nominations received by the annual deadline. The VSP Advisory Committee (made up of NPS employees) meets annually to evaluate the nominations and recommend a final list of parks to participate in VSP study during the following fiscal year. The committee's recommendations are sent to the Associate Director of Natural Resource Stewardship and Science, for final approval.

The VSP Process

The VSP process is tailored to each NPS unit that is selected, 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.
- Once the questionnaire is approved by the superintendent, it is submitted by the VSP staff to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for review and approval.
- In the field, the UI CPSU utilizes a trained interview team consisting of VSP interviewers, volunteers, or park staff to distribute the stamped, addressed questionnaires to a random sample of visitors during a 7-10 day period. Sample sizes can vary from 300-1,200 visitors, depending upon visitor numbers and park needs. Visitors fill out the questionnaires and mail them to the UI CPSU.
- The data is coded and analyzed.
- VSP personnel prepare a draft report in an easy-to-understand graphic format (see Figure 2) for park staff review.
- After the draft is revised, a final report is prepared.

- A workshop is held at the park to explain the results to park staff and park partners (such as to local community leaders). Additional analyses are provided as needed.

"Visitor demographics are invaluable. Knowing our visitors helps us plan future program efforts."

Acting Superintendent

Grand Teton National Park

1) Questionnaire development workshop

2) Fieldwork (7-10 days)

3) Data analysis

4) Draft report

5) Park reviews

6) Final report

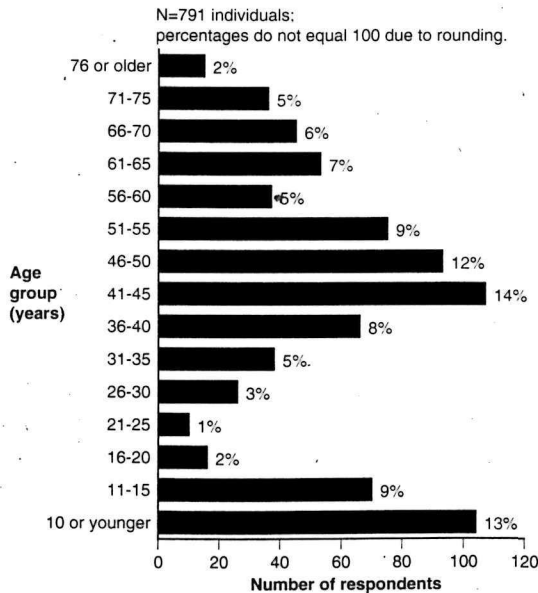
7) Results workshop

Why A VSP Study?

A VSP study will provide park managers with scientifically accurate knowledge about their visitors. Each study can provide information about visitors including but not limited to:

- demographics, such as age, zip code or country of residence, income, length of stay, number of visits to the park unit, languages spoken and ethnicity
- trip planning
- travel expenditures
- service and facility use
- service and facility importance and quality ratings
- preferences for future services and facilities
- opinions about resource management issues

Figure 1: Steps in a typical Visitor Services Project study



Each VSP questionnaire contains 3 types of questions:

- core—basic demographic and related questions that are asked in every VSP study
- common—questions that are frequently asked in VSP studies, such as sources of information, reasons for visiting, expenditures, crowding issues, use, importance and quality ratings of park services and facilities
- customized—questions designed specifically to meet one park's information needs, such as finding out the number of vehicles seen while in a specific area of backcountry, opinions on prescribed burn policy, and so forth

Figure 2: Sample VSP graph (Visitor Ages)

The VSP Advantage

VSP studies provide a snapshot of the overall visitor population in the park during the 7-10 day study period. The VSP system has been carefully designed to meet information needs at individual parks. The design incorporates a number of advantages for park superintendents including:

- proven methodology
- cost-effective (average study cost of approximately \$16,500)
- high response rate (since 1988, VSP studies have averaged a 79% return)
- detailed and customized visitor feedback
- timely results (less than 12 months from project start through field work to completion of final report and workshop)
- comparability with other VSP studies' results



"The survey methodology was carefully designed, tested, and revised, and its rate of response is so successful (75-85 percent) that it has been published in the social science literature and widely used, even in other countries."

Comment about the VSP by the National Research Council. (1992) Science and the National Parks. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

"The professionalism with which the survey was carried out and the close-out presentation have all combined to give the park some very usable data—some of which we have already put to work in federal court. We encourage all parks to embark upon this process."

Superintendent

Devils Tower National Monument

Ways VSP Results Are Used

- Park superintendents can use the information in preparing required planning documents (e.g. General Management Plans, interpretive plans, and hiring justifications).
- Planners and designers can use the data to improve the design of visitor facilities such as campgrounds or trails.
- Interpretive managers can tailor programs to 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 visitor needs.
- Local businesses can determine how visitors are contributing economically to the area, and discover new markets.

"Continue surveying visitors. It is important for us to know that our opinions are being considered in your plans for the future of the park".

- a visitor's comment