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# Visitor

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**A Report on Customers of the National Park Service**  
The NPS Visitor Services Project



# United States Department of the Interior



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

P.O. Box 37127

Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

IN REPLY REFER TO:

A6437(240)

8 SEP 1994

## Memorandum

To: All National Park Service Areas and Offices

From: Director *[Signature]*

Subject: Visitor Services Project

This is a period of great change for the National Park Service. We are challenged to accomplish our mission more efficiently than ever, while our organization evolves to reflect national priorities and needs. Vice President Gore, in his call to "reinvent government," has asked all agencies to begin by listening to the citizens they serve, and to use what is learned to improve and advance. The National Performance Review is an important initiative, and the NPS is committed to being a leader in its implementation.

Since 1985, the Visitor Services Project at the Cooperative Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho has conducted over 60 visitor studies in units of the National Park System. Many of you are familiar with these studies, and have used the results to improve the management of your area. With a grant from the National Park Foundation, Dr. Gary E. Machlis and his colleagues have collected data from these individual studies, and prepared the attached report, Serving the Visitor: A Report on Customers of the National Park Service. It was released during National Park Week.

Serving the Visitor is a "report card" on how well the NPS is serving the public that visits the National Park System. It is based on responses from over 18,000 visitors in 43 parks. Visitors evaluated a variety of services and facilities. Their evaluations are candid, thoughtful, and revealing. And while the results represent just a sample of NPS areas, and the services evaluated are only indicators of our overall effort, the voices of the visitors behind the charts and figures are compelling. As the report states, "Wise park managers will listen."

And what do the visitors tell us? Read on; there is much to be proud of, and ample room for improvement. We have asked the various Vail Agenda task forces to incorporate these findings into their action plans. This is an important report. We urge you to examine it with care, and to share it with your staff and partner organizations.

Attachment



# Serving the Visitor



A Report on Customers of the National Park Service

The NPS Visitor Services Project



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The National Park Service  
The University of Idaho  
The National Park Foundation  
The Visitor Services Project Advisory Committee

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Photos courtesy of the National Park Service, Harpers Ferry Center Historic Photograph Collection.

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.

# Introduction

The mission of the National Park Service (NPS) is to preserve the nation's natural and cultural heritage and to provide for its enjoyment by the public. These are both important and challenging tasks. From Aniakchak National Preserve in Alaska to Fort Jefferson National Monument in Florida, from Yellowstone National Park to Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, the national park system includes 367 treasures of the American people. They are visited by citizens from all 50 states and around the world. The diversity of places and people make management of the national park system a test of government's efficiency and effectiveness.

Vice President Al Gore's report of the National Performance Review<sup>1</sup> proposes a "new customer service contract," as part of its mission to reinvent government. As stated in that report, a key principle is "putting customers first," which begins with finding out what they want and need by asking them on a regular, systematic basis. Among the customers of the National Park Service, park visitors are perhaps the most important.

Since 1988, the Visitor Services Project has conducted visitor studies in over 40 units of the national park system. The primary purpose of these studies has been to provide park managers with accurate information about visitors—who they are, what they do, their needs and opinions. Park managers have used this information to improve visitor services and protect resources. These studies have now been combined into a comprehensive database, so that system-wide trends can be examined.

*Serving the Visitor* is a "report card" on how well the NPS is serving its primary customers. It is based on responses from over 18,000 visitors in 43 parks from

1988 to 1993. Visitors evaluated a variety of services and facilities, including visitor centers, contacts with park staff, campgrounds, ranger programs and others. A description of the research methods and a list of the sampled parks is at the end of this report.



*Visitors receive a questionnaire*

The Gore Report calls for "giving customers a voice." In the following pages, the visitors to our nation's national parks, historic sites and recreation areas evaluate the services and facilities of the national park system. Their evaluations are candid, thoughtful and important. If one of the missions of the National Park Service is serving the visitor, then the voices behind this report should be carefully heard. Wise park managers will listen.

1. The Gore Report on Reinventing Government, Vice President Al Gore, Random House, New York, 1993.

# General Services

## Park personnel

Park visitors are likely to encounter park employees during their visits, such as rangers at the entrance stations or visitor centers, maintenance employees, or law enforcement officers. Visitors in 19 parks were asked to rate the quality of park staff. Sixty-three percent of visitors rated park personnel as “very good,” and 21% rated park personnel as “good.” Seven percent of visitors felt the personnel were “average”; 9% rated them as “poor” to “very poor.”

## Visitor centers

Visitor centers are often the hub of park activities—offering information, emergency services, publications for sale, and other services. Visitors to six parks rated the quality of visitor centers. Nearly half (49%) felt the visitor centers were “very good.” Approximately one third (31%) rated the visitor centers as “good.” Fourteen percent of visitors felt the visitor centers were “average”; 6% rated them as “poor” to “very poor.”

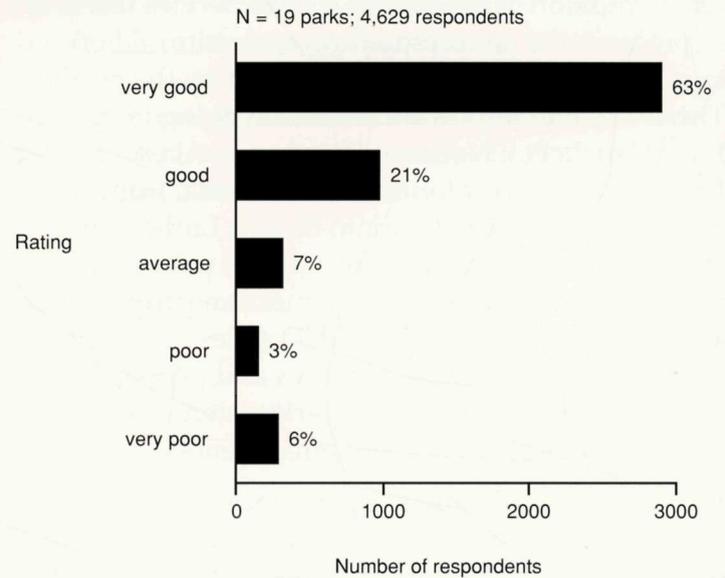


Figure 1: Quality of park personnel

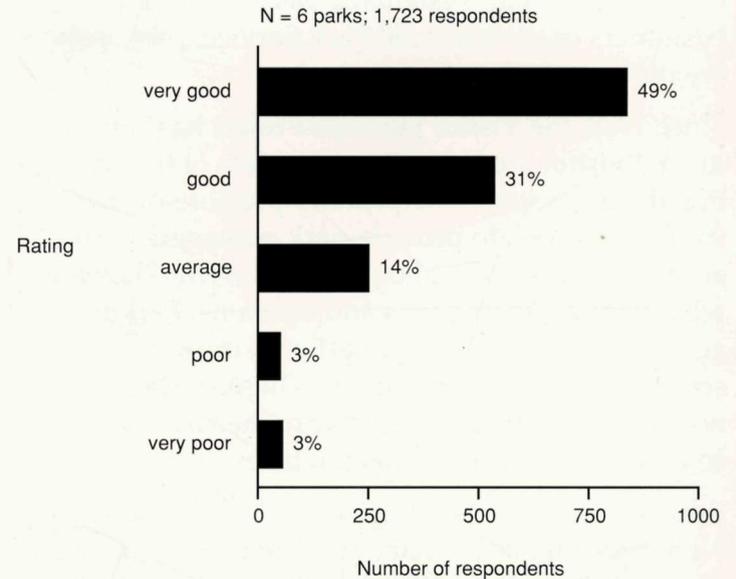


Figure 2: Quality of visitor centers

## Directional signs

Directional signs (such as road signs directing visitors to the park or signs for facilities) are important to visitors. These were rated in 14 parks. Forty-five percent of visitors felt the directional signs were "very good," and 28% rated them as "good." Fifteen percent of visitors rated the directional signs as "average," and 12% thought the signs were "poor" to "very poor."



Information from NPS ranger, President's Park

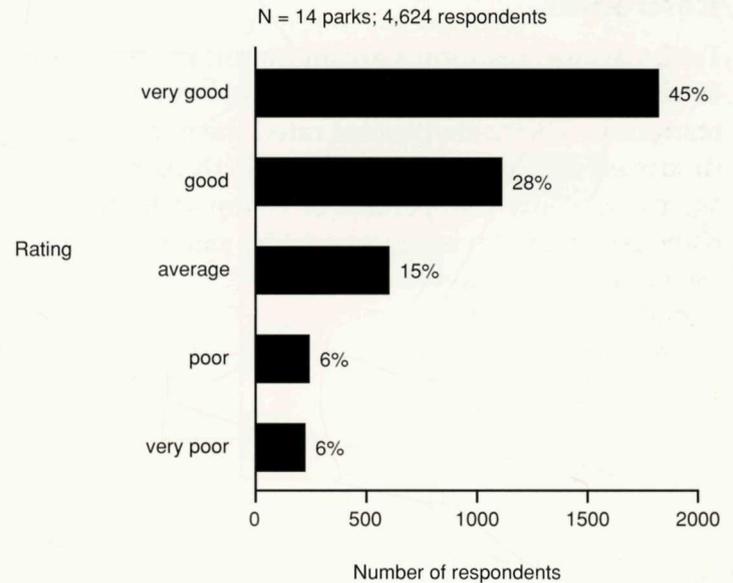


Figure 3: Directional signs

A visitor's comment:

*Because this park was so well organized we got a lot out of it and enjoyed it! The visitors center and programs there were outstanding as was the selection of books. We hope to come again and spend more time.*

# NPS Facilities

## Restrooms

To the visitor, restrooms are an important service. In 15 parks, visitors were asked about the quality of restrooms. Thirty-six percent rated the restrooms they used as "very good"; 28% rated them as "good." Twenty-two percent of visitors felt the restrooms were "average," and 13% rated them as "poor" to "very poor."

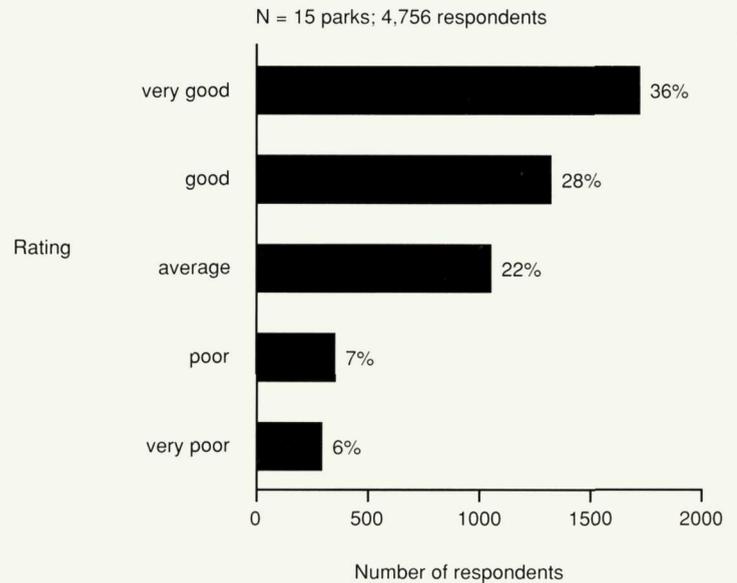


Figure 4: Quality of restrooms

## Campgrounds

For those visitors who camp, the quality of a park campground can have a significant effect on their park experience. Visitors to nine parks were asked to evaluate the NPS campgrounds. Thirty-eight percent rated the campgrounds as "very good"; the same percentage rated the campgrounds as "good." Campgrounds were rated as "average" by 16% of visitors, and 9% rated them as "poor" to "very poor."

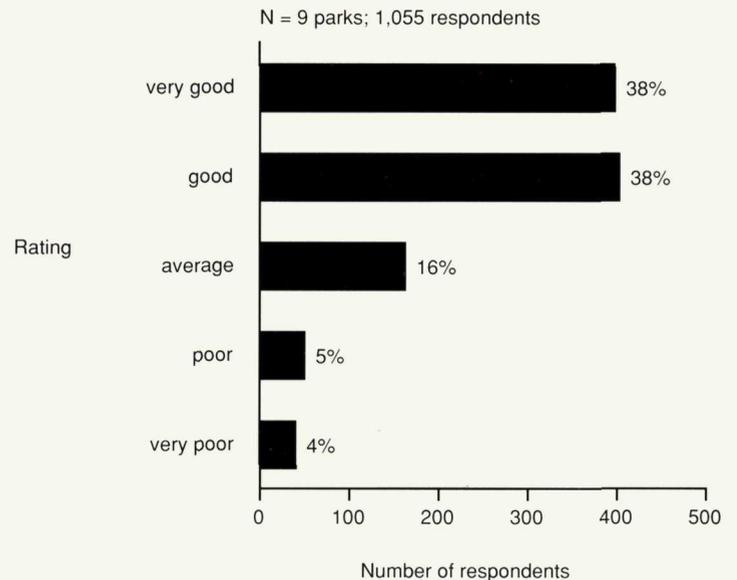


Figure 5: Quality of NPS campgrounds

## Picnic areas

Picnic areas offer visitors an opportunity to enjoy an outdoor setting while they eat; they are common facilities throughout the national park system.

Visitors to 11 parks were asked to rate the quality of picnic areas. Thirty-nine percent felt the picnic areas were "very good"; 33% rated them as "good."

Eighteen percent of visitors rated the picnic areas as "average"; 9% felt they were "poor" to "very poor."

A visitor's comment:

I love this park and come here frequently to walk. There is not enough area for shaded picnic tables that families can use.

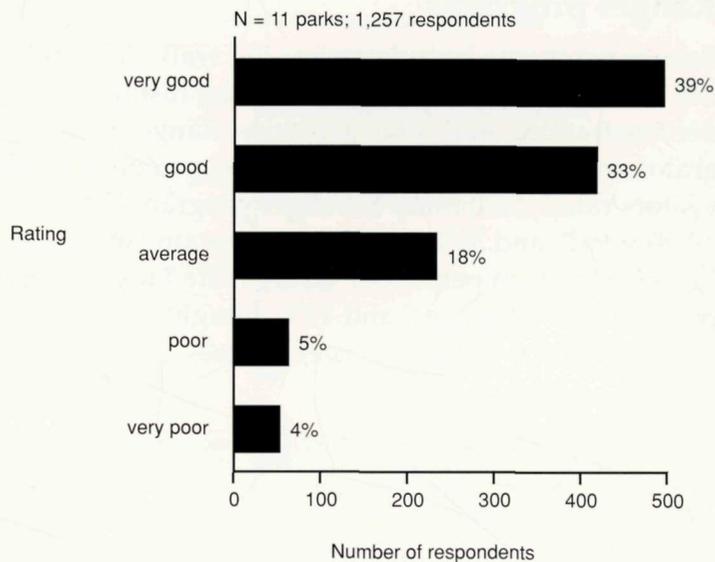


Figure 6: Quality of picnic areas



NPS campground, Mount Rainier National Park, 1941

# Interpretive Services

## Ranger programs

Ranger programs include ranger-led walks, campfire talks, audiovisual programs, living history demonstrations, and other activities. Ranger programs were rated in 21 parks. Forty-seven percent of visitors rated the quality of ranger programs as "very good" and 30% felt ranger programs were "good." Thirteen percent of visitors rated the ranger programs as "average," and 10% thought ranger programs were "poor" to "very poor."

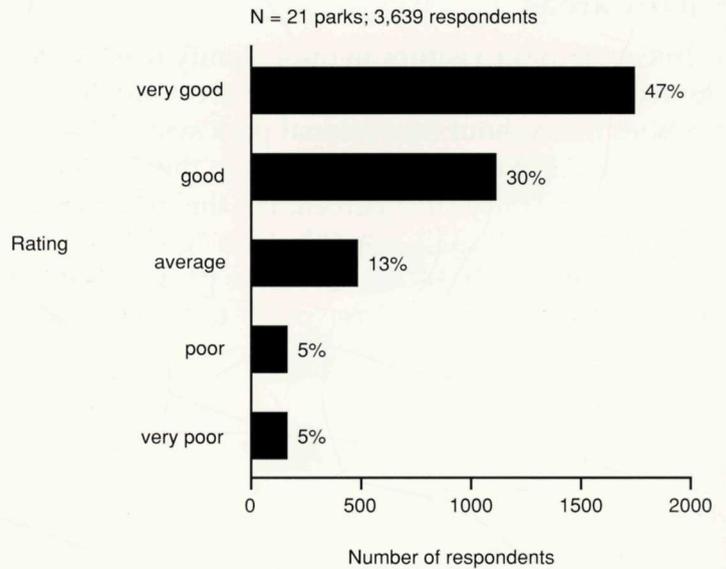


Figure 7: Quality of ranger programs

## Exhibits

An important interpretive service offered in parks are exhibits, both inside museums and visitor centers, and outdoors along roads and trails. Exhibits were rated by visitors to 23 parks. Forty-three percent of visitors rated the exhibits as "very good," 33% rated them as "good," and 14% felt the exhibits were "average." Exhibits were rated as "poor" to "very poor" by 10% of visitors.

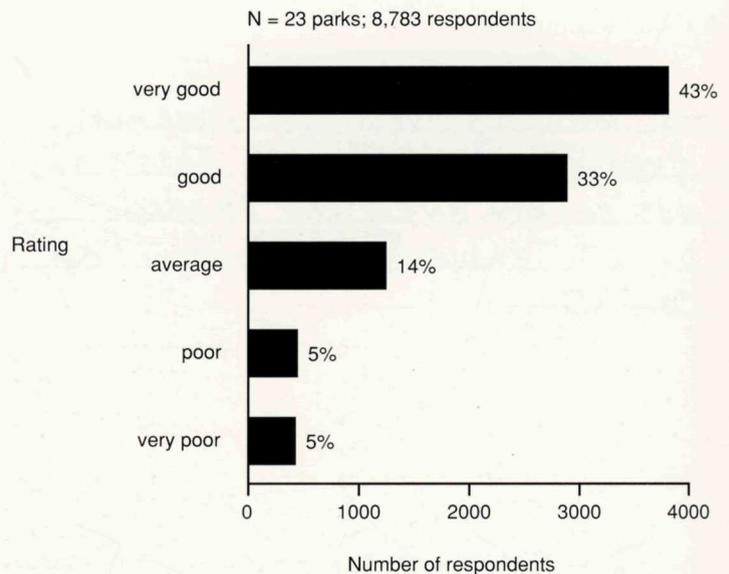


Figure 8: Quality of exhibits

## Park brochures

Most parks have a brochure containing a map and basic information about the site. Visitors usually receive this brochure upon entering the site. In 25 parks, visitors were asked to rate the quality of the park brochure. Fifty percent of visitors responded that the park brochure was "very good"; 30% rated the brochure as "good." Eleven percent of visitors felt the brochure was "average," and 9% rated it as "poor" to "very poor."



Ranger talk, Grand Teton National Park

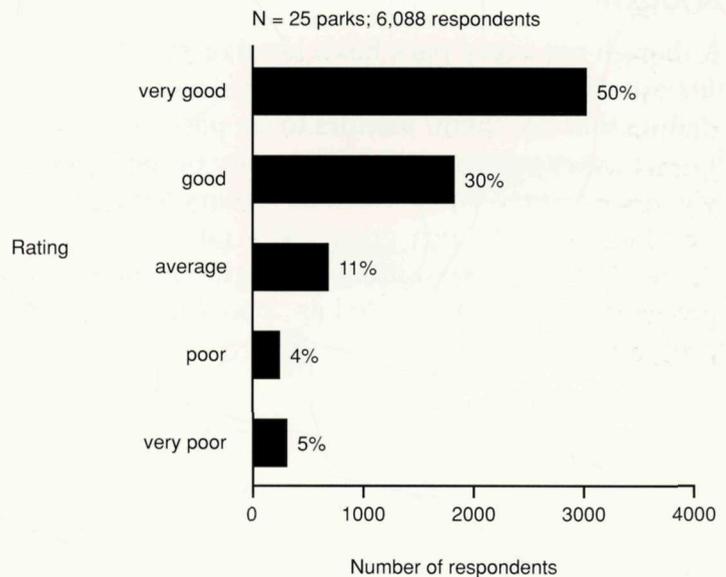


Figure 9: Quality of park brochures

A visitor's comment:

The geology of the park is so dramatic - I would suggest more roadside informative signs - on the building of the tunnel, the vertical cliffs, the layering/striations - how did these things happen?

# Concession Services

## Lodging

Although not every park has a hotel or motel within its boundaries, they are essential services to the visitors that use them. Visitors to six parks with lodging were asked to rate the quality of the lodges they used. Thirty-one percent of visitors felt that park lodging was "very good"; 41% rated the lodging as "good"; 18% thought the lodging was "average." Park lodging was rated as "poor" to "very poor" by 9% of visitors.

## Food services

Food services, including restaurants, cafeterias and snack bars, can be important to a visitor's park experience. Visitors to 11 parks rated the quality of food services inside the park. Seventeen percent of visitors rated the food services as "very good" and 33% rated the services as "good." Thirty-six percent of visitors felt that the food services were "average," and 14% rated them as "poor" to "very poor."

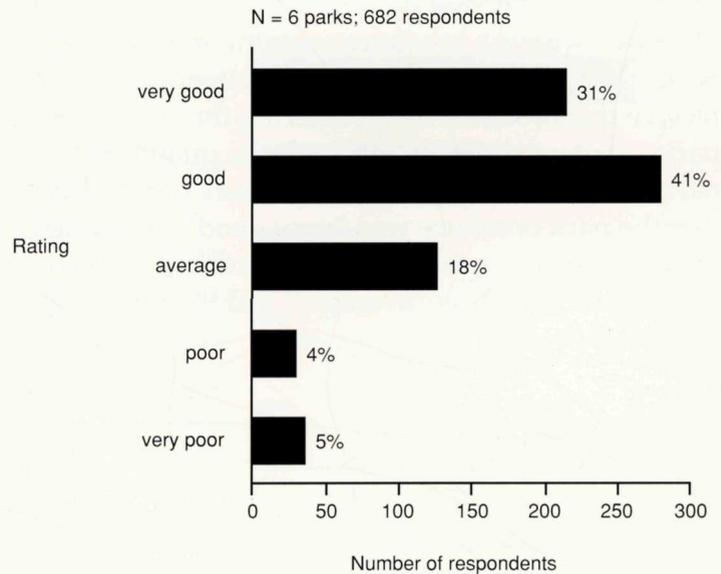


Figure 10: Quality of lodging in parks

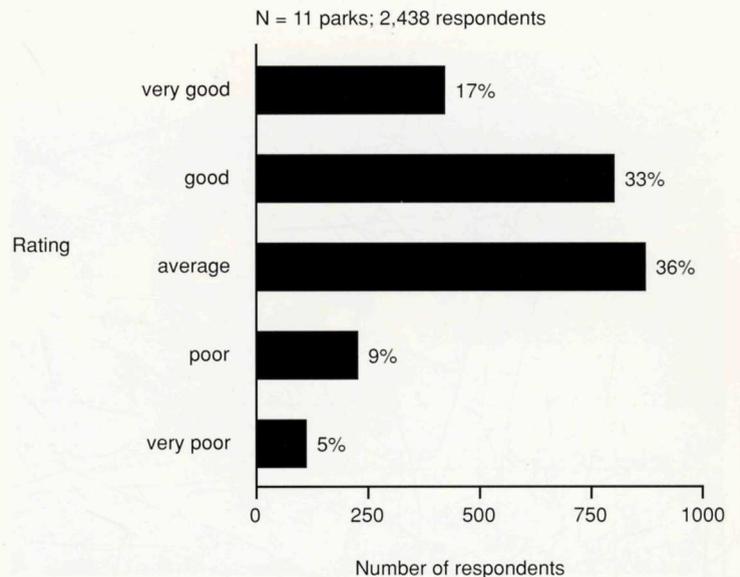


Figure 11: Quality of food services in parks

## Gift shops

For many visitors, gift shops offer tangible reminders of their park visits—a way to “bring home” their park experience. Visitors to eight parks were asked to rate the quality of gift shops inside the park. Gift shops were rated as “very good” by 27% of visitors, 38% felt they were “good,” and 26% felt the gift shops were “average.” Nine percent of visitors rated the gift shops as “poor” to “very poor.”

A visitor's comment:

THE SERVICE AT THE SNACK SHOP  
WAS NICE, BUT THE FOOD WAS  
NOT. I THINK THE GROCERY  
STORE NEEDS A FEW MORE  
THINGS TO ACCOMMODATE  
BACKPACKERS.

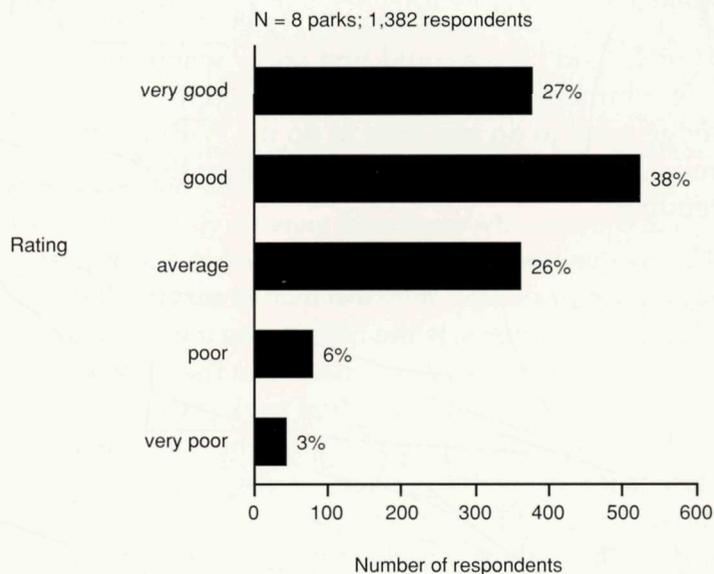


Figure 12: Quality of gift shops in parks



Concession stand, Muir Woods National Monument, 1933

# Conclusion

In a speech delivered June 16, 1858, Abraham Lincoln said “If we could first know where we are and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do and how to do it.” Within this report, visitors offer opinions of where the NPS “is tending.”

The twelve visitor services evaluated in this report are *indicators* of NPS performance in serving its primary customers. Is the NPS doing a good job in providing visitor services? Based on the survey results, the NPS and individual park staffs are performing well. Figure 13 shows the combined ratings for all twelve services. Forty-four percent of those surveyed rated visitor services as “very good,” the highest possible rating. An additional 30% of the respondents rated services as “good.”

Can the NPS improve its service to visitors? Certainly. Sixteen percent of the visitors rated services as “average.” And, 10% percent of the respondents felt visitor services were “poor” to “very poor.”

The information in this report has several possible uses:

- ▲ Visitor evaluations such as these could be used to help set performance standards for the quality of visitor services at specific parks or throughout the national park system.
- ▲ Since some services received lower ratings than others, the results could be used to focus efforts on those services most in need of improvement.
- ▲ *Serving the Visitor* could be used as a model for other federal agencies that are beginning customer evaluation programs.

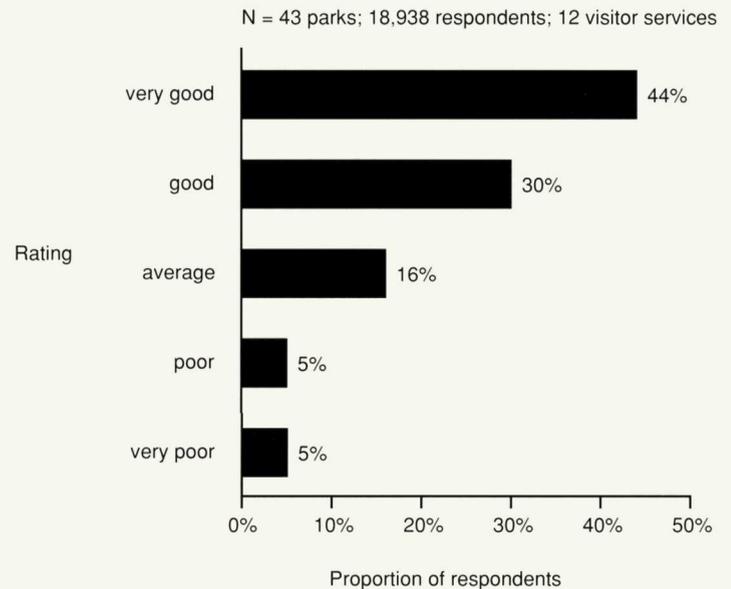
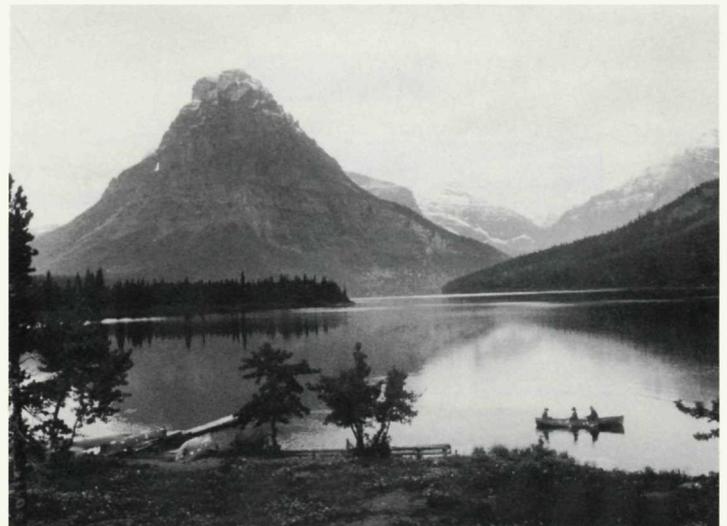


Figure 13: Overall quality of visitor services



Two Medicine Lake, Glacier National Park, pre-1930

# Research Methods

The Visitor Services Project (VSP) studies are based on systematic surveys of park visitors. A random sample of visitor groups are chosen to represent the general visitor population during a one-week study period. The sample is usually “stratified” or distributed by entrance or zone, depending upon park characteristics. Sample size is based upon 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.

VSP personnel hold an on-site workshop with park staff to develop the survey questionnaire and plan the study. A standard set of demographic questions is included in each survey, and park managers can include additional “customized” questions to reflect specific information needs. In addition, visitors are asked to write comments regarding their visit.

Brief interviews are conducted as visitors enter the area in order to collect data, obtain mailing addresses for follow-up reminders, and distribute the mail-back questionnaires. The acceptance rate (the proportion of visitors contacted that agree to participate) currently averages 94%. At least two reminders are sent. The response rate (the proportion of

visitors that return their questionnaire) currently averages 79%. Data are coded and prepared by the Washington State University Social and Economic Sciences Research Center Public Opinion Lab. The data are analyzed using a standard statistical analysis program. A check on key variables is conducted to see if those visitors who did not respond were significantly different from those who returned their questionnaires (non-response bias). Such bias has been insignificant. Open-ended questions (where visitors write in comments) are content analyzed and organized into tables.

The surveys have several limitations. Responses to mail-back questionnaires may not reflect actual behavior or opinion. The results cannot always be generalized beyond the study periods. Visitor groups that do not include an English-speaking person may be somewhat under-represented.

To create the comprehensive database, raw data from the individual survey data files were converted and entered into a relational database program. The information in *Serving the Visitor* is derived from that database. The data for Figure 13 were calculated by dividing the total number of ratings in each category (“very good” to “very poor”) by the total number of respondents.

# Selected Parks

The data in this report come from visitor studies conducted in the following NPS units:

Arlington House/Robert E. Lee Memorial, Virginia  
Belle Haven Park/Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve, Virginia  
Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, Colorado  
Big Bend National Park, Texas  
Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah  
Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona  
Canyonlands National Park, Utah  
Channel Islands National Park, California  
City of Rocks National Reserve, Idaho  
Death Valley National Monument, California  
Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, Pennsylvania  
Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska  
Everglades National Park, Florida  
Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, DC  
Gateway National Recreation Area, New York  
Glacier National Park, Montana  
Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Arizona  
Glen Echo Park, Virginia  
Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, Indiana  
Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, Louisiana  
Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, Missouri  
John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, Oregon  
Joshua Tree National Monument, California  
Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska  
Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Alaska  
Lincoln Home National Historic Site, Illinois

Muir Woods National Monument, California  
Natchez Trace Parkway, Mississippi  
National Mall (Jefferson Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument), Washington, DC  
New River Gorge National River, West Virginia  
North Cascades National Park, Washington  
Pecos National Historical Park, New Mexico  
Petersburg National Battlefield, Virginia  
Redwood National Park, California  
Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, California  
Scotts Bluff National Monument, Nebraska  
Sitka National Historical Park, Alaska  
Statue of Liberty National Monument, New York  
The White House/President's Park, Washington, DC  
White Sands National Monument, New Mexico  
Whitman Mission National Historic Site, Washington  
Yellowstone National Park, Montana  
Zion National Park, Utah



# Notes

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