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Satisfaction Monitoring for Quality Control in Campground Management

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Abstract

A 4-year study of camper satisfaction indicates that satisfaction monitoring is a useful tool for campground managers to assess their performance and achieve a high level of quality control in their service to the public. An indication of camper satisfaction with campground management is gained from a report card on which a small sample of visitors rates 14 elements of their camping experience. Changes from year to year in element scores correlated in many cases with actual changes in management practices. Differences in composite scores between parks and park systems were consistent from year to year. On the average, no differences were found between public and private campgrounds in the composite satisfaction ratings.

“The only way you can measure the value of a leisure activity is by the amount of pleasure it gives.”

Introduction

While use of forested recreation areas has increased dramatically over the past 20 years, it is generally conceded that neither management expertise nor budgets have kept pace. As a consequence, there is a growing concern among professionals that the quality of outdoor recreation experiences is slipping (Feuchter 1980). For years we have assumed that increasing use of our parks, forests, and wilderness areas indicates that the public is enjoying satisfactory experiences. And yet we know that because of the long waiting lines at ski lifts, large numbers of skiers have shifted their interests to cross-country skiing. And despite a steady growth of the camping market, there are many more former campers today than there are actively participating campers (LaPage and Cole 1979). To what extent such trends reflect declining satisfaction—and management failure—is of increasing concern.

Several studies have examined factors associated with visitor motivations and satisfactions at developed campgrounds (Bultena and Klessig 1969; Burch 1965; Foster and Jackson 1979; Hollender 1977; James and Cordell 1970; LaPage 1968; Munson and Schweitzer 1964; Stille 1970). Most researchers have concluded that camper satisfaction results from the interaction of camper expectations and the campground environment. While it is desirable to know more than we currently do about campers' social and psychological needs, it is more immediately useful to know how well campground management is performing in providing an environment conducive to satisfying those needs. The former is not a prerequisite to the latter: People dine out for many reasons, but the extent to which the restaurant provides good food, quality service, and a pleasant atmosphere can still be assessed. Not only does satisfaction offer the distinct prospect of a highly useful measure of management performance, its relationship to the basic business goals of longer visits, more repeat visitation, and more intentions to return has been documented by at least two studies (Foster and Jackson 1979; LaPage 1968).

Providing quality recreation experiences is the goal of all outdoor recreation agencies. It requires that management understands quality, visitor expectations, and the extent to which those expectations are satisfied. The goal of providing quality experiences also implies a commitment to manage for quality. Unfortunately, there are few guidelines to tell the recreation resource manager whether he is producing generally satisfying experiences for his visitors and whether the level of overall satisfaction is responsive to increased management efforts.

The Study

In an attempt to meet this need, a camping satisfaction monitoring system was established in 1977 as a cooperative effort of the New Hampshire Division of State Parks and the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station. Using a simple 2-to-3-minute report card, distributed to a small sample of visitors throughout the camping season, a composite measure of camper "satisfaction" is generated from 14 elements of a campground visit (Fig. 1). Each element is ranked from "A" (for excellent) to "E" (for poor). Converting letter "grades" to numeric scores produces a sensitive 0-to-8 point scale that monitors the slightest change in the average satisfaction of campers visiting a given campground or all campgrounds in the park system. With 8 points representing a completely satisfying experience (A=8, C=4, E=0), the composite ranking among more than 3,300 campers sampled at New Hampshire state park campgrounds over the past 4 years shows remarkable consistency:

Year	System-wide Satisfaction
1977	6.6
1978	6.7
1979	6.7
1980	6.7

Despite system-wide consistency, from year to year, considerable variation was found among individual satisfaction elements at specific campgrounds, thereby pinpointing areas needing management attention. For example, camper satisfaction declined at a number of campgrounds, between 1979 and 1980, with the "availability of firewood". A follow-up check with campground managers disclosed that indeed availability had declined as a result of changes in park policy or vendor practices.

Assessment of recreational satisfaction will usually involve more variables than the "quality of service—quality of food" evaluation cards used by many restaurants. The methodology for monitoring camper satisfaction was developed in an extensive study of camper and campground variability at 16 state parks in Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire in 1977. The following year, through the cooperation of the National Campground Owners Association, the report cards were used by more than 100 commercial campgrounds nationwide. Despite enormous differences in the kinds and quality of camping experiences being evaluated, the average camping satisfaction scores at public and private campgrounds were surprisingly similar (Table 1). Campgrounds in both sectors rated a 6.5 (B+) average satisfaction score, but public sector campgrounds seemed to have slightly more

Table 1.—Average satisfaction scores on 14 elements of a camping experience, reported in 1978 by visitors to public and private campgrounds.

Factor	Public	Private
Your first impression	6.9	6.5
Cleanliness of campsites	7.0	7.0
Cleanliness of restrooms	6.0	6.4
Privacy of campsites	6.4	5.8
Good size of campsites	7.1	6.3
Good choice of campsites	6.5	6.3
Availability of firewood	5.7	5.9
Availability of supplies	5.3	6.3
Recreation opportunities	5.9	6.3
Ease of check-in	6.8	7.0
Safety and security	6.8	6.7
Good rules & regulations	6.8	6.7
Helpfulness of employees	7.1	7.1
Your recommendation of us	7.1	6.8
Mean score	6.5	6.5
Number of campers	774	3045
Number of campgrounds	16	107

satisfying campsites (in size and privacy) while private camping enterprises provided better services (recreation opportunities and availability of supplies).

During the initial test of the system, an additional seven elements were included on the report card:

- Maintenance of campsites
- Maintenance of restrooms
- Availability of information
- Convenience of check-out time
- Attitude of employees
- General attractiveness
- Campground worth revisiting

While all of these elements were found to be adequately measured by other elements, they provided a useful test of the internal consistency of the report card. That is, essentially identical campground scores for each of the above were generated by:

- Cleanliness of campsites
- Cleanliness of restrooms
- Helpfulness of employees
- Ease of check-in and Good rules and regulations
- Your first impression
- Your recommendation of us

Figure 1.—Sample report card used to assess camper satisfaction at New Hampshire state parks, 1977–1980.

1980 CAMPGROUND REPORT CARD

Campground No. _____ Date _____

Please rate us on the following. Give us an A (for excellent), B (if better than average), C (average), D (below average) and E (poor).

	A	B	C	D	E
Your first impression _____					
Cleanliness of campsites _____					
Cleanliness of restrooms _____					
Privacy of campsites _____					
Good size of campsites _____					
Good choice of campsites _____					
Availability of firewood _____					
Availability of supplies _____					
Recreation opportunities _____					
Ease of check-in (speed) _____					
Safety and security _____					
Good rules/regulations _____					
Helpfulness of employees _____					
Your recommendation of us _____					
Control of pets _____					

May we have your zip code? _____

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SATISFACTION INDEX**

Additional first-year consistency tests were provided by asking campers what they liked least and most about the area and what services, programs, facilities, and improvements they would like to see added. The aggregate response to those questions was found to follow the same response patterns as the report cards alone. For example "solitude" was a more frequent response to "What did you like most" at those campgrounds receiving a high rating for "privacy of campsites" on the report cards. A 15th element, "control of pets" was added to the report card in 1980, but was not used in computing total satisfaction scores.

A wide range in average satisfaction scores was reported by visitors (Table 2) and the scores appear to be, at least in part, a function of the campground or its management. For example, significantly different average scores were reported by visitors to campgrounds in Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. And differences between parks in New Hampshire tended to be consistent over 4 years of study, with the same parks generally producing below-average or above-average satisfaction scores. Further evidence that the scores reflect actual changes in camping conditions was offered by several New Hampshire campground managers who confirmed changes in safety and security (improved through the addition of a night attendant on duty), in availability of firewood (declined as the result of a policy change), and in restroom cleanliness (improved through

more frequent spot checks) (Table 3). Also, those items that would only be expected to change from year to year with changes in clientele, such as first impressions, size of sites, and recommendations, did not change. On the other hand, campground managers occasionally did report a change in their operations which failed to show up in the ratings, such as a cutback in frequency of cleaning campsites to reduce fuel consumption.

No within-season differences in satisfaction scores were found at any of the 16 campgrounds studied during the first year of testing the system (1977). In each of the following years, a much smaller sample of campers was, therefore, used to assess satisfaction. Report cards were distributed to all incoming campers on 9 days during the summer camping season. The 9 days were selected to include a weekend period, a mid-week period, and a holiday period. Returned questionnaires averaged 32 percent of those distributed.

Discussion

In their study of *Social Indicators of Well-Being*, Andrews and Withey (1976) measured "satisfaction with life as a whole" on a 7-point scale in a national sample of 1,072 people. Minimal variation in scores was reported between the sexes, eight age classes, and seven socioeconomic status classes. The greatest variation (0.7 point) was found among eight family-life-cycle classes, and (0.6 point) between races. Using these differences as a guideline, we assumed that a difference of at least 1.0 point would be a reasonably reliable indicator of year-to-year change within individual satisfaction elements at state park campgrounds.

Table 2.—Range in satisfaction scores (mean $\pm$ 1 standard deviation) at 17 state park campgrounds in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Vermont, during the years 1977-1980.

Campground	Satisfaction range	Letter grade	Years
Greenfield (NH)	6.33 — 7.83	B to A	4
Moose Brook (NH)	6.17 — 7.90	B to A	4
Coleman (NH)	6.16 — 7.82	B to A	4
Milan (NH)	6.13 — 7.80	B to A	4
Pillsbury (NH)	5.92 — 7.86	B to A	4
Monadnock (NH)	5.89 — 7.67	B- to A-	4
Pawtuckaway (NH)	5.75 — 7.64	B- to A-	4
Brighton (VT)	5.50 — 7.48	B- to A-	1
Lafayette (NH)	5.48 — 7.51	B- to A-	4
Bear Brook (NH)	5.40 — 7.61	B- to A-	4
Tolland (MA)	5.32 — 7.38	B- to A-	2
Dry River (NH)	5.26 — 7.50	B- to A-	4
St. Catherine (VT)	5.26 — 7.42	B- to A-	1
White Lake (NH)	5.11 — 7.33	B- to A-	4
Nickerson (MA)	4.60 — 7.28	C+ to A-	1
Myles Standish (MA)	3.98 — 6.73	C to B+	2
Salisbury (MA)	3.05 — 5.99	C- to B	2

Table 3.—Summary of satisfaction changes noted at nine New Hampshire state park campgrounds 1977-1980, and frequency of manager's recollection of a change.

Change of at least 1.0 point	No. Parks		Manager agreement
	+	-	
Cleanliness of sites	1	0	1
Cleanliness of restrooms	3	1	3
Availability of supplies	5	3	1
Availability of firewood	4	4	3
Privacy of campsites	1	0	
Recreation opportunities	2	0	
Rules and regulations	0	1	
Safety and security	1	0	1
Ease of check-in	1	1	
Totals	18	10	9

Table 4.—Annual summary ratings of “satisfaction scores” by visitors to New Hampshire state park campgrounds, 1977-1980.^a

Factor	1977	1978	1979	1980
Your first impression	7.0	7.0	7.2	7.1
Cleanliness of campsites	7.2	7.3	7.3	7.3
Cleanliness of restrooms	6.5	6.6	6.5	6.6
Privacy of campsites	6.6	6.6	6.7	6.4
Good size of campsites	7.1	7.2	7.2	7.1
Good choice of campsites	6.5	6.8	6.9	6.6
Availability of firewood	5.4	5.8	5.4	5.3
Availability of supplies	5.0	5.5	5.4	5.3
Recreation opportunities	5.8	6.0	6.0	6.1
Ease of check-in (speed)	7.0	7.1	7.1	7.3
Safety and security	6.8	7.0	6.9	7.1
Good rules/regulations	—	7.0	7.0	7.1
Helpfulness of employees	7.4	7.3	7.3	7.5
Your recommendation of us	7.4	7.3	7.4	7.4
Mean Score	6.6	6.7	6.7	6.7
Number of respondents	1532	617	491	705
Number of campgrounds	11	11	11	11

^aBased on ratings of: A—Excellent—8 points; B—Better than average—6 points; C—Average—4 points; D—Below average—2 points; E—Poor—0 points.

The striking finding about average camper satisfaction scores, like “satisfaction with life” scores, is their apparent consistency. No clear annual trend was apparent at any of the campgrounds studied—suggesting that professional concerns about declining experience quality may be unfounded. In fact, seven of the nine parks in New Hampshire showed small increases in satisfaction (much less than 1.0 point) over the 4-year study period. At nine New Hampshire state parks¹, (during 4 years of study, and among 14 satisfaction elements, only 28 changes of at least 1.0 point were noted (out of a possible 367) (Table 3). In all 28 cases the change of 1.0 point or more in average satisfaction scores should be interpreted not as a *measure* of real change in services, but as an *indicator* of perceived change. The indicator may be a valid expression of physical change, changes in perception, changes in clientele and their expectations, or all three in combination. Therefore, changes in satisfaction scores can only be realistically used as clues that some element of campground management may need more (or less) management attention.

¹ Eleven state park campgrounds were studied, however, the sample size at two campgrounds was consistently too small to provide reliable comparisons. The coefficients of variation in total satisfaction indicated a minimum sample of 27 responses per campground would be essential for assessing average satisfaction at the 2-standard-error level.

While the 14 elements of a campground visit analyzed in this study may not reflect all, or even the most critical concerns of the average camper, they were selected from a number of surveys documenting camper needs for cleanliness, variety, service, privacy, and security (Alden 1967; Burch 1965; Cordell and James 1972; Hancock 1973; Hollender 1977; Kerr and Kerr 1972; LaPage 1968; Lucas 1970; Stille 1970). Additionally, the first and last elements of the report card are designed to provide a composite image of the campground at two different points in time during the visit (“your first impression” and “your recommendation of us”). A decline in the average rating for a campground between these two scores should immediately suggest that campers are dissatisfied, or at least that the campground fails to live up to its first impression. In only 5 of the 53 cases studied (all public parks and all years) was the average recommendation score lower than the average first impression score. At New Hampshire state parks, recommendation scores were consistently higher than first impressions (Table 4) suggesting that overall experience quality is satisfying to most campers and is not declining, at least at these campgrounds.

Measurement of visitor satisfaction, for research purposes, has usually considered only aggregate satisfaction and has generally involved the use of a Likert-type scaling system, e.g. “Highly Satisfied to Highly Dissatisfied.” For management purposes, this approach presents a number of diffi-

culties in both administration and interpretation. The use of letter grades in a report card format was readily understood, producing 100-percent useable data over the four years of this study without the confusion that sometimes accompanies numeric scales. More important, gross satisfaction measures cannot be disaggregated to pinpoint those areas of management that need further attention or those areas where employees should receive a commendation for their performance. Because of this lack of focus on management, gross satisfaction measures will invariably be contaminated by factors beyond the control of management such as the friendliness or unfriendliness of one's camping neighbors.

The evidence is strong that recreational satisfaction, among campers at least, is responsive to changes in management, and that improved management, in turn, produces quantifiable gains to management in the form of longer and more frequent visits. Given these relationships, it would seem that the monitoring of camper satisfaction might well become a basic management tool. Satisfaction monitoring offers a means of quality assurance for the visitor, an approach to performance measurement for administration, and a rational basis for decisions about use limits and the delivery of recreation services.

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