

PERMITTING PETS IN FLORIDA STATE PARK CAMPGROUNDS: SELECTED PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPERS

Andy Holdnak

Assistant Professor
Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, University of Florida,
P.O. Box 118208, Gainesville, FL 16827.

Steve Holland

Associate Professor
Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, University of Florida,
P.O. Box 118208, Gainesville, FL 16827.

Tony Fedler

Assistant Professor
Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, University of Florida,
P.O. Box 118208, Gainesville, FL 16827.

Abstract: Since the 1950s pets have been excluded from Florida State Park Campgrounds. In response to public comment and pressure, the Florida State Park System recently began to reconsider this policy. The initial step in this process was to survey campers to examine camper characteristics and perception's about a variety of campground issues, particularly attitudes towards allowing pets in Florida State Park campgrounds. This paper discusses the findings. People with previous camping experience at campgrounds that permitted pets reported only slight negative impacts. Most campers expected that permitting pets in campgrounds would have negative impacts on campground noise and the observance of wildlife. If behavior is consistent with stated intention, permitting pets in the state park campgrounds would result in a slight increase in overall camping frequency.

Introduction

Florida State Parks Campgrounds are currently one of the few state parks campground systems to restrict pets from their campgrounds. The reasons for this restriction cited by the state parks managers include safety hazards, increased noise, negative impacts on the observance of wildlife and a general negative impact on the overall experience of campers. Recently, this policy has been challenged by numerous pet owners. They cite personal companionship and personal safety as positive impacts resulting from permitting pets in campgrounds. In 1996, at the request of the state legislature, the state parks system undertook a research project to survey campground visitors. The purpose of the study was to examine camper characteristics and perception's about a variety of campground issues,

particularly attitudes towards allowing pets in Florida State Park campgrounds.

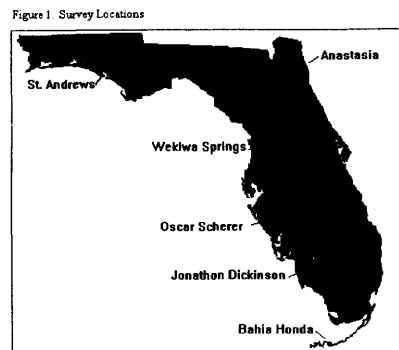
This paper will discuss some of the findings from this research project - particularly what the perceived impacts might be if pets were permitted in Florida state parks campgrounds and how changing the pet policy in campgrounds might impact the frequency of camping in Florida State Parks by state residents and non-residents.

Methodology

An on-site intercept interview was conducted during January through March, 1996 at 16 campgrounds in Florida.

One state park campground was selected in each of the six administrative regions of the Florida State Parks system. Private campgrounds in the vicinity of each state park campground were also invited to participate in the study. Ten private campgrounds agreed to permit their campers to be surveyed. An interview with 47 questions was administered to campers in both the state park and private campgrounds. Questions included basic demographic and camping history questions plus additional sections to discover the respondent's familiarity with pets in campgrounds; their perceptions of the impact pets might have and their likely changes in state park camping patterns if pets were to be permitted in state park campgrounds. The survey was conducted by project personnel from the University of Florida. A total of 619 surveys was completed.

Figure 1. Survey Locations



Findings

The profile of respondents is summarized in Table 1. About 53% of the respondents were interviewed in state park campgrounds while 47% were interviewed in private campgrounds. 34% were Florida residents, 58% were non Florida, US residents and 8% were international visitors. About 43% were pet owners while 57% did not own pets. Regarding participant experiences with camping in campgrounds with pets, about 82% reported camping at some previous time in a campground that allowed pets while 18% had no experience camping in campgrounds that permitted pets.

Among all campers, 36% reported that pets enhanced their camping experience, 41% reported no effect and 23% reported a negative effect on their camping experience. When further analyzed, about 30% of non pet owners

reported a negative effect on their camping experience. About 38% of the campers who were interviewed in Florida State Park Campgrounds reported a negative effects on their camping experience.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

<i>Interview Location</i>	
53%	Interviewed in state parks
47%	Interviewed in private campgrounds
<i>Residence</i>	
34%	Florida residents
58%	Non resident - US
8%	Non resident - International
<i>Pet Ownership</i>	
43%	Pet owner
57%	Non pet owners
<i>Campers previous experience with pets</i>	
82%	Stayed in campgrounds that permitted pets
18%	Never stayed in campgrounds that permitted pets

The reported effects of pets on pets on previous camping experiences are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Effects of pets on previous camping experience

All Campers
36% - Positive effect
41% - No effect
23% - Negative effect

Non pet owners - only 30% felt a negative effect
State park campers - 38% felt a negative effect

Campers were asked to explain what they believed would occur if pets were permitted in state park campgrounds. These beliefs are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Beliefs about impacts if pets were permitted
(Overall sample)

<i>Safety</i>	
18%	Positive effect
54%	No effect
28%	Negative effect
<i>Observation of wildlife</i>	
3%	Positive effect
42%	No effect
55%	Negative effect
<i>Noise in campground</i>	
2%	Positive effect
42%	No effect
56%	Negative effect
<i>Overall Experience</i>	
28%	Positive effect
37%	No effect
35%	Negative effect

A slight majority of of state park campers indicated that allowing dogs in state park campgrounds would have a negative effect on their overall camping experience. About

41% of state park campers indicated that the presence of pets would have a negative effect on safety, 72% expect a negative effect on the ability to observe wildlife and 70% anticipate a negative effect on noise levels in state park campgrounds. Only about 15% of private campground campers expect a negative effect on safety while about 40% predicted a negative effect on wildlife observation and noise.

Campers were asked to report how changes in the current pet policy might affect their future camping patterns in Florida State Park campgrounds. Anticipated changes in camping frequency due to a change in the pet policy are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Changes in camping frequency if pets were permitted.

Willingness to camp in Florida State Parks
(overall sample)

No change - 70%
Increase - 18%
Decrease - 12%

Willingness to camp in Florida State Parks
(Private campgrounds)

No change - 74%
Increase - 23%
Decrease - 3%

Willingness to camp in Florida State Parks
(State Park Campgrounds)

No change - 68%
Increase - 12%
Decrease - 20%

When asked how their camping frequency in state parks would change if pets were permitted in campgrounds, 70% of the overall sample replied it would make no difference, while 18% indicated they would increase their camping in state parks and 12% would decrease their camping in state parks. 23% of the campers interviewed in private campgrounds indicated potential increases in visits to state park campground while 20 of the campers interviewed in state park campgrounds indicated that their future visits would potentially decrease.

Conclusion

Results of this study were somewhat mixed. Less than one forth of the campers who had camped in campgrounds which permitted pets felt that their overall experience had been negatively impacted yet most campers anticipated some negative impact on the observance of wildlife and campground noise. Overall, if behavior was consistent with stated intentions, changing the policy would have a small positive impact on camping frequency in Florida State Parks. More than two-thirds said that the policy would not affect their camping frequency. Of the nearly one-third who indicated that a change in policy would affect their camping frequency, slightly more than half the group indicated that they would camp more often in state park campgrounds and slightly less than half said that they

would camp less frequently. If pets were permitted in campgrounds, there would be some small positive impact on camping frequency but also some negative impacts on wildlife and noise. Clearly the decision to change campground policies should consider other issues than campground attendance as little overall change in camper attendance is indicated by this study.

Discussion:

Increased attendance may/may not cover additional operating costs. Additionally, there are some questions as

to whether policies like this should even be subject to popular opinion. Since this study was conducted during the winter tourist season, it had a high proportion of non resident campers, perhaps seasonality may have been a research issue. Other policy issues such as length of stay and reservations methods plus the availability of full service hook-ups for motor homes may reduce the move from private campground to state park campgrounds.