

## A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF FLORIDA STATE PARK SATISFACTION SURVEY DATA

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**Abstract:** This study is part of a five-year quality review process for Florida State Parks. It attempts to document the feelings visitors have about the parks they visit. The preliminary findings are very similar to results found in a similar study conducted in 1995 in which high levels of overall satisfaction were found. Despite high levels of overall satisfaction there were some significant differences found between some user groups.

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### Introduction

In 1994/95, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Recreation and Parks undertook the first comprehensive study of visitors to Florida State Parks, State Recreation Areas and Special Feature Areas. The purpose of the project was to determine visitor satisfaction with Florida State Parks and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the Florida State Park System. Research staff from the Leisure Services and Studies Program at Florida State University conducted the study.

In 2000, researchers from the University of Florida, Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, Center for Tourism Research and Development implemented a research project to continue the evaluation of visitor satisfaction at Florida State Park operations. This five-year review is part of an ongoing process to understand how users feel about the Florida State Parks. Modeled generally on the 1994/95 project, this study attempted to add a greater understanding of issues important to Florida State Park visitors and the Florida Park Service by adding questions to learn more about the visitation, dining and information gathering patterns of visitors to Florida State Parks. Questions were also asked to determine what roles visitors felt that parks should play as public resources.

In revisiting visitor satisfaction issues after five years, it is important to note a number of conditions that have changed:

1. The number of visitors and the number of facilities operated by the Division increased substantially.
2. Technology such as the World Wide Web emerged as a major method of communicating information.

3. The Division embarked on a major Eco-tourism initiative, as environmental tourism and heritage tourism became two of the fastest growing types of tourism worldwide.
4. The Division developed new administrative rules to permit pets in some Florida State Park campgrounds.
5. Research models for visitor satisfaction are more sophisticated as issues of service quality, price/value and customer loyalty were further developed

### Purpose

This study, modeled generally on the 1995 study, attempts to add a greater understanding of issues important to Florida State Park visitors and the Florida Park Service. Of particular interest are comparisons between the 1995 and 2000 study and comparisons of satisfaction scores between different user groups visiting the parks.

### Methodology

In order to insure comparability with the previous study, the basic methods and survey instrument were the same. Twenty-five locations throughout the state were selected to take part in the study. A stratified random sample, stratified by type of operation (state park, state recreation area, and state special use area) and management regions was developed.

Selected parks were sampled 4 times during the year 2000 (January, April, July and October). The week prior to the beginning of each survey month, managers were shipped boxes containing 400 survey instruments (consisting of the questionnaire and a return envelope). Each park distributed a total of 1,600 questionnaires throughout the year with a total of 40,000 questionnaires distributed throughout the system during the yearlong period.

Park personnel were asked to distribute survey packets to visitors as they entered the park during each survey period. Staff members were asked to distribute a maximum of 40 studies per day from the initiation of the survey period until all survey forms were been distributed regardless of the number of days required.

### Questionnaire

Similar to the previous study, the questionnaire was completed by the respondent and returned to the researchers using postage paid return envelopes. The questionnaire was developed with input from the Division of Recreation and Parks and was comparable to the previous study. Questions were also developed to learn more about the visitation, dining and information gathering patterns of visitors to Florida State Parks.

The questionnaires were printed on a computer scan able form. Questions were generally forced choice questions with respondents indicating their answers by darkening in ovals next to selected items. There were no open-ended questions on the survey though respondents were encouraged to add any additional comments on separate paper.

## Results

Overall, 5,162 visitors to the Florida State Parks took time to return completed and usable surveys. This represents an estimated return rate of 12.9% if all questionnaires were actually disbursed. Under this methodology, no attempt was made to determine how many surveys each park actually passed out each quarter.

### Respondents

As seen in Table 1, about 65% of the respondents were Florida residents though the largest group was from outside the county of the park. The most common age group reported was 45- 64 years of age with about reporting incomes between \$30,000 and \$60,000. Visitors were primarily Caucasian with only 6.1% of the respondents being minorities.

### General Satisfaction Scores

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with 12 general statements about their most recent visit to a Florida State Park. Response categories were: 1 = "Strongly Agree", 2 = "Agree", 3 = "Neutral", 4 = "Disagree", 5 = "Strongly Disagree". Thus, in this section, the lower the number, the more strongly respondents agree with the statement.

As seen in Table 2, the General satisfaction Scores indicate a high level of agreement with the statements made about the parks. In this table, responses have been sorted in ascending order so that the items most strongly supported are listed on the top of the table and the items least strongly supported are listed toward the bottom of the table. It should be noted that all items averaged 1.85 or less which indicates that, on average, all items were ranked between "Strongly Agree" and "Agree". When comparing the 1995 scores to the 2000 scores, slight improvements were noticed in all areas except one: "The park is adequately staffed." In this case, scores dropped from 1.67 to 1.85.

Respondents feel most strongly that the natural and cultural features of the park are worth protecting (1.15), and that they would like to visit the park again (1.40) and they are satisfied with their visit (1.43). They feel least strongly that "The park is adequately staffed" (1.85), "The cultural and historical features are managed appropriately" (1.76) and "Overall, the park fees are fair" (1.70).

**Table 1. Description of Respondents**

| <u>Residence</u>          | <u>Count</u> | <u>%</u>    |
|---------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Fl County w/ Park         | 1164         | 23.4        |
| Fl County w/o Park        | 2089         | 42.0        |
| Other US State            | 1497         | 30.1        |
| Canada                    | 115          | 2.3         |
| <u>Intl Not Canada</u>    | <u>108</u>   | <u>2.2</u>  |
| Total                     | 4973         | 100.0       |
| <u>Age</u>                | <u>Count</u> | <u>%</u>    |
| 18 - 24                   | 167          | 3.4         |
| 25 - 44                   | 1595         | 32.2        |
| 45 - 64                   | 2148         | 43.4        |
| <u>65 Plus</u>            | <u>1043</u>  | <u>21.1</u> |
| Total                     | 4953         | 100.0       |
| <u>Ethnicity/Race</u>     | <u>Count</u> | <u>%</u>    |
| Caucasian                 | 4306         | 93.9        |
| Hispanic                  | 106          | 2.3         |
| African American          | 20           | .4          |
| Asian                     | 27           | .6          |
| <u>Other</u>              | <u>129</u>   | <u>2.8</u>  |
| Total                     | 4588         | 100.0       |
| <u>Income</u>             | <u>Count</u> | <u>%</u>    |
| Less than \$15,000        | 168          | 3.8         |
| \$15,001 to \$30,000      | 664          | 15.1        |
| \$30,001 to \$45,000      | 973          | 22.2        |
| \$45,001 to \$60,000      | 996          | 22.7        |
| \$60,001 to \$75,000      | 570          | 13.0        |
| <u>More than \$75,000</u> | <u>1015</u>  | <u>23.1</u> |
| Total                     | 4386         | 100.0       |

**Table 2. General Satisfaction Scores**

| <u>Comment</u>                                                 | <u>1995<br/>Report</u> | <u>2000<br/>Report</u> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Natural and cultural features of the park are worth protecting | 1.16                   | 1.15                   |
| I would like to visit this park again                          | 1.45                   | 1.40                   |
| Overall, I am satisfied with my visit                          | 1.51                   | 1.43                   |
| Staff was courteous & friendly                                 | 1.48                   | 1.46                   |
| I feel safe in this park                                       | 1.67                   | 1.49                   |
| Visit was well worth the money I spent                         | N/A                    | 1.50                   |
| Staff members were prompt and helpful                          | 1.55                   | 1.51                   |
| Natural features of the park are appropriately managed         | 1.67                   | 1.59                   |
| The weather was good during my visit                           | 1.83                   | 1.59                   |
| Overall, the park fees are fair                                | N/A                    | 1.70                   |
| Cultural and historical features are managed appropriately     | N/A                    | 1.76                   |
| Park is adequately staffed                                     | 1.67                   | 1.85                   |

### Comparisons between Groups

When comparisons were made between different user groups, several interesting findings were discovered. When comparing residents and non-residents, there were significant differences between groups on every variable. In each case, residents were more satisfied than non-residents.

When comparisons were made between satisfaction scores by race/ethnicity several differences were found (Table 3). "African Americans" and "Others" were least likely to feel that the natural and cultural features of the park were worth protecting. "African Americans" and "Others" were least likely to feel that the natural features were being appropriately managed while Asians were least likely to feel that the cultural/historic features were being appropriately managed.

"African Americans" and "Others" were also least likely to feel that the park fees were fair, the park was adequately staffed, and the visitor was worth the money. African Americans and Hispanics were least likely to feel that the staff was courteous and friendly.

### **Discussion**

Overall, the General Satisfaction Scores for the Florida State Parks are very good. There were high levels of agreement with all the positive statements made about the parks. People felt most strongly that the natural and cultural

features of the parks were worth preserving and that they would like to visit the park again. When comparing the scores from this study to those from 1995, the general evaluation scores improved in every case except one.

The findings that respondents are less satisfied with staffing levels in 2000 is important to Florida State Park administrators. During the Summer of 1999, under the direction of Governor Jeb Bush, state administrators were requested to develop plans to reduce the size of all state agencies by 25% over a 5 year period. This plan is to include all state parks. Administrators are faced with a dilemma – on one hand, public satisfaction with staffing levels was already dropping before the mandate – on the other hand, there is strong pressure from the governor to make additional cuts.

Though state park visitors seemed quite pleased with the parks, there were some variations depending upon user group. This points out that the Florida State Parks are attractive to several constituencies and management plans should consider all groups. However, there are some potential challenges for park management in meeting the needs of minorities, particularly African Americans.

### **Reference**

Beeler, C., Fletcher, D., & Fletcher, H. (1995). Florida State Parks Visitor Study: Final Report (Unpublished Tech. Rep.). Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Recreation and Parks.

**Table 3. Differences in Satisfaction Scores by Race/Ethnicity**

| <u>Comment</u>                                                 | <u>Caucasian</u> | <u>Hispanic</u> | <u>Afr.<br/>Amer</u> | <u>Asian</u> | <u>Other</u> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Natural and cultural features of the park are worth protecting | 1.13             | 1.20            | 1.35                 | 1.04         | 1.37         |
| Natural features of the park are appropriately managed         | 1.58             | 1.48            | 1.75                 | 1.37         | 1.78         |
| Cultural/historical features are managed appropriately         | 1.75             | 1.80            | 1.75                 | 1.46         | 2.07         |
| Overall, the park fees are fair                                | 1.69             | 1.65            | 1.85                 | 1.26         | 1.98         |
| The park is adequately staffed                                 | 1.84             | 1.87            | 2.16                 | 1.62         | 2.01         |
| Visit was well worth the money I spent                         | 1.49             | 1.48            | 1.80                 | 1.15         | 1.67         |
| Staff was courteous & friendly                                 | 1.45             | 1.56            | 1.75                 | 1.19         | 1.49         |

**Note:** All variables mentioned are significant at the .05 level or greater