

PRIVATE BUSINESS PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSPORTATION ISSUES AND THE ISLAND EXPLORER BUS SYSTEM AT ACADIA NATIONAL PARK, MAINE

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Abstract: National Parks and communities that surround them often must work together to create the best possible experience for the visitors to the area. In the case of Acadia National Park in Maine, the surrounding communities and the park have worked together to face the issue of congestion in the area caused by too many automobiles. The Island Explorer Bus alternative transportation system was integrated in 1999 to begin dealing with this problem. This exploratory study was designed to assess the perceptions of private businesses on transportation issues in and around Acadia National Park and the Island Explorer Bus alternative transportation system. In-person interviews were conducted with managers or owners. The businesses included hotels, motels, campgrounds, bed and breakfasts, and in town stores. The results from the interviews will be used to assist in the planning of Intelligent Transportation System information to be integrated with the Island Explorer Bus alternative transportation system in late Summer, 2001. Also, the results will help with the design process of an in-depth mail survey of businesses on Mount Desert Island, to evaluate transportation and the Intelligent Transportation Systems technologies associated with the Island Explorer Bus system in late Summer, 2002.

Introduction

In 1999, over 280 million people visited the United States National Parks from all over the world to experience their historic and natural beauty, and the numbers are ever increasing (National Park Service, 2001). Yet, there is more to the experience than simply visiting these parks. While traveling to and from these gems of America, visitors encounter the numerous communities that surround the National Parks. As Lucas (1992) discusses, the National Park Service (NPS) must work cooperatively with these surrounding communities to create a positive overall experience for their many visitors. To ensure success of many park programs, the NPS must work closely with the

surrounding communities during the planning stages. The communities and their available amenities hold the power to attract visitors and promote the parks, as they have a great deal of contact with the visitors to the National Parks.

Part of the experience of visiting Acadia National Park, Maine, is the experience of visiting the numerous small coastal villages that are next to the park. Acadia National Park shares its main 32,000 acres with these multiple small villages on Mount Desert Island (National Park Service, 1992). The layout of Acadia is such that some of these surrounding small coastal villages share property lines and roads with the park. Because of this closeness, the National Park Service and their associated management actions must be mindful of these communities. Members of the surrounding communities and Acadia National Park Service representatives work together to satisfy the needs of each other and their many visitors. To further illustrate this, in 1998, the National Park Service conducted a general survey of Acadia National Park visitors (Littlejohn, 1999). One of the top reasons visitors reported for visiting Acadia was to also visit the surrounding villages, mainly for shopping and dining purposes (Littlejohn, 1999).

Each year almost 3 million visitors arrive at Acadia National Park (Daigle & Lee, 2000), and almost 4 million people visit the small surrounding community of Bar Harbor, Maine (McMahon & Propst, 1998). The small area of the park and the many visitors it receives each year makes Acadia among the most densely populated National Parks. In the Acadia National Park General Management Plan (1992), congestion of people and automobiles are discussed as areas that need to be addressed if the experience of the area is to be maintained. The management plan also notes that with the numerous cars parked on the sides of the roads, a safety issue is also of concern (National Park Service, 1992). Alternative methods of entering the park and working with the surrounding communities to begin solving the congestion problem were also stressed (National Park Service, 1992). Further supporting idea of congestion within Acadia National Park, in 1998 a general survey of Acadia visitors reported responses to open-ended questions regarding what visitors liked most and liked least about their trip to the park. The top four things that the visitors liked most about their trip to Acadia National Park were Beauty and Scenery, Scenic Views, Hiking Trails, and the Carriage Roads. The top four things that visitors liked least were Crowds, Traffic, Nothing, and congested parking. (Littlejohn, 1999). Again, the traffic, congestion, and crowding issues are still of concern to the park planners as they try to maintain the positive overall experience for their visitors.

In 1999, Acadia National Park, with the help of several other state and federal government agencies, the Friends of Acadia, and the surrounding communities on Mount Desert Island, introduced the Island Explorer Bus alternative transportation system into the park and onto the island as a means to address the congestion caused by too many automobiles on the roads (Daigle & Lee, 2000). The bus system began service with 9 buses along 6 routes, and

attracted 142,260 passengers (Daigle & Lee, 2000). In Summer 2000, the Island Explorer Bus ran 17 buses along 7 routes, and carried 193,057 passengers throughout Acadia National Park and the island (Crikelair, 2000). The bus runs each day during the summer months, from the last week in June until Labor Day in September. The idea behind Island Explorer Bus system is to change the travel behavior of visitors to Mount Desert Island, from a private vehicle based behavior to an alternative transportation behavior, such as using private or public buses, which are both available options on the island. The Island Explorer is primarily designed to allow visitors to leave their personal vehicles at their lodging facility, yet still have the ability to move freely about the island. While working alongside the many private transportation providers, the Island Explorer Bus system can keep Acadia National Park and Mount Desert Island accessible.

The Island Explorer is a voluntary use, free shuttle supported by donations from the local communities and organizations, local private businesses, and the federal government and Acadia National Park. Once again, the relationship between the National Park and the surrounding community must be strong to support this program. According to the responses on the 1998 general visitor survey, 74% of the respondents that spent their nights on Mount Desert Island stayed in the local villages, at hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts and campgrounds (Littlejohn, 1999). These visitors may not have contact with a park employee each day of their stay, but they will have contact with these lodging facilities. The continued success of the Island Explorer Bus system relies on the satisfaction of these local businesses, lodging facilities and villages, as they have the power to promote using the bus system and make donations to keep it cost free to its users.

The Island Explorer Bus system found increasing success over its first two years of service; yet, the planners recognized a need to make the system more attractive and effortless for the visitors. The integration of Intelligent Transportation Systems was determined to be the best way to do both. Intelligent Transportation Systems are technological innovations that will allow the distribution of Island Explorer information to the visitors, such as bus location and driver communication, to be more efficient (Batelle, 2000). The most important of these new technologies, for the visitors, are the Traveler Information Services. Traveler Information Services will allow area visitors and Island Explorer users to access information regarding the bus schedule, arrival times of each individual bus, and parking availability status in certain areas within the National Park. The components of the Traveler Information Services include electronic display boards for the bus arrival times and the parking availability information, interactive video display screens that will monitor certain Acadia National Park parking lots and track the Island Explorer buses, a web link from the Acadia National Park homepage, and a telephone accessible menu of all of these information options (Batelle, 2000).

To ensure the Island Explorer Bus alternative transportation system is continuing to meet the needs of Acadia National

Park, the surrounding communities, and the visitors, several studies are being conducted regarding the Island Explorer service. This exploratory study was designed to assess the perceptions of private businesses, which surround Acadia National Park, regarding transportation issues and the Island Explorer Bus system. In-person interviews were conducted in Fall, 2000, and the results will assist the planning for the new Traveler Information Services, to be incorporated late Summer, 2001, and to develop a more extensive survey of the businesses on Mount Desert Island in late Summer, 2002, and future assessments of the Island Explorer Bus service.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to determine the overall perceptions of the local businesses regarding the benefits of alternative transportation to the business environment, the benefits to their customers, and the traveler information needs of their customers on Mount Desert Island. In order to identify the issues and concerns of these businesses, in-person interviews were chosen as the method of data collection.

The interview schedule was developed at the University of Maine, Parks Recreation, and Tourism program, and was then reviewed and revised by Batelle, an independent research firm, and an advisory planning committee, which included local town planners, park staff, and a local consultant. There were four topic areas included in the interview schedule. The first topic area included the background information of the businesses, such as how long the person had been in the business and whether the business operated on seasonally vs. year-round, the size and location of the establishment, and characteristics of the customers, such as the types of customer groups. The next topics addressed were the awareness and use of the Island Explorer, such as how the customers or business found out about the Island Explorer or if they actually used the bus. The third topic area included benefits to the businesses and their associated customers. The final topic area included what traveler information the participants thought would be important to the businesses or their customers. The questions for these topic areas were asked in an open-ended format. This allowed the respondents to discuss their feelings and perceptions of the problems and issues addressed in the interview. "Yes" or "No" answers could not always be avoided in response to the questions, and probing questions were used to help guide the conversations. The goal here was to collect information that would eventually be used to inform the visitors of the area and change the transportation behavior of customers to fewer automobile drivers and more bus riders.

Purposeful sampling was used to select the businesses using the AltaVista™ Internet search engine "yellow pages" directory. Businesses were first selected based on type of establishment, campground, hotel, motel, bed and breakfasts, or in-town shop. The second criterion for selecting a business was its location on Mount Desert Island, attempting to get a range across the island. Twenty-five businesses were initially selected and contacted by

phone. Of those, thirteen answered and were invited to participate in the study. Of the thirteen businesses contacted, one declined due to a busy schedule. The interviewees included the owner or manager of the establishments, which, in some cases was the same person.

Most businesses, especially lodging establishments, are at their full capacity until after Labor Day. Therefore the in-person interviews took place in late September and early October, after the busy summer season but before most businesses close for the winter months. The times of the interviews were scheduled around the businesses to make the interviews as convenient as possible; they lasted between 25 and 30 minutes.

Permission to record was granted by the interviewees at the beginning of each interview, than a tape recorder was used to record the interview. Tape recording the interviews along with brief note taking was used, rather than only note taking, to allow all of the interviews to be captured at a steady pace. Each business was given a code to protect their identities and ensure their confidentiality. The interviews were then transcribed using a transcribing machine, by the interviewer. The transcription process provided the opportunity to do an initial analysis of the interviews before they were analyzed for specific themes, which found additional themes than initially sought by the interviewer. The interviews were then examined for the specific recurring themes in the responses to the sets of questions, such as the idea that there is a transportation problem on Mount Desert Island and in Acadia National Park, and if there is a difference in the types of customer depending on the month of the tourist season.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of the Business and Their Customers

The general characteristics of the businesses varied between type of establishment, size of establishment, and location. Type and sizes of businesses were one, 200+ room hotel; three, 50+ room motels; three, 6-8 room bed and breakfasts; three, 100+ site campgrounds; a small locally owned gift shop and a larger chain store. The majority of the businesses were located on the eastern side of Mount Desert Island, and several were located on the northern and southern parts of the island as well. Two of the businesses operated year-round and the seasonal businesses lasted from around mid-May until the mid to end of October. Almost all of the businesses reported full capacity in July and August and about 75% capacity in June, September, and October.

The participants reported a difference in the customer base depending on the time of the season. They determined in May and June, their customers were primarily local residents or in the area to attend a conference or wedding. During the busiest part of the season, from mid-June until Labor Day in September, their customers were mostly families. And, after Labor Day, the customer base consisted of local residents along with touring customers that were primarily older and possibly retired. When asked

what they thought about the different types of customers, one participant responded:

Yeah, it's usually July and August, but June is turning [busy], with weddings and seminars, and this year September is looking real good as well, I think that when repeat people come to the island, 'cause they know July and August is such a zoo here, [they] start coming in September. So, we're finding that from Labor Day to Columbus Day, and fall foliage, we're pretty much set at capacity.

Another responded:

Sure, they [September and October Customers] are touring customers, you know, retired, sightseeing, as opposed to July and August, which are family, June is definitely conference.

One implication of this changing customer base is that there may need to be different types of alternative transportation available for the diverse customers. Currently, the Island Explorer Bus system is the only public transportation system, and as one participant noted, "...you have to take your own car. Or, if not, you have to use your legs, or feet, or use a bike; there really isn't much as far as public transportation." The Island Explorer Bus also only runs during the busy season of families, in July and August. The other customers of June, September, and October, must find alternative transportation from private providers, such as commercial tours of the park, or they have to use their personal automobile, which is what the Island Explorer Bus system is trying to discourage. A possible extension of the season with different types of service was mentioned by several businesses and may be needed to promote use among all of the visitors to the Acadia National Park area.

Customer Awareness and Use of the Island Explorer Bus System

This topic area began with a brief discussion of the Island Explorer Bus system, which all of the businesses knew of and some had actually used the bus. During this discussion, the participants were asked if they thought there were any transportation issues, such as problems caused by too many automobiles, on Mount Desert Island. Only one motel participant did not think there was a transportation problem on Mount Desert Island, however, the participant indicated it was his first summer on the island. One bed and breakfast was aware of a traffic congestion and parking availability problem in the adjacent village, but did not think there was a transportation problem within Acadia National Park, as she had never heard of one. However, the rest of the businesses felt that there was a definite problem of too many automobiles on Mount Desert Island, including within Acadia National Park. The majority of responses were as follows:

I think the traffic is going to be here no matter what.

Oh, I think it's a big problem. I think that the roads weren't made for this traffic, I mean, certainly, there are no lights, you don't see one for crossing! I mean, someone must get run over...

...if someone was to stay here, and left their car, there is still another car to take its place. It's like water, always going into a space.

There was an agreement by all of the businesses that if the customers hadn't used the Island Explorer Bus the previous year or were new visitors, they were probably unaware of the bus prior to contacting the establishment. All of the participants reported their businesses advocated using the Island Explorer Bus by handing out schedules or helping their customers plan visits to Acadia National Park using the bus. There was some concern however, that the businesses were doing most of the advertising for the bus system and the Island Explorer planning committee needs to do, "A little more publicizing."

...for the first people just coming in, we always gave them the information when they were registering. Most of them, nine out of ten didn't know anything about the service, it was new.

I doubt they know before they get here.

They come in and ask us where they should go to hike. We tell them about great one-way hikes to do using the bus. It's good for bikes too.

Every business reported that not many of their customers used the Island Explorer Bus. A couple stated that it was hard to convince their customers to use it because they had already planned on using their private vehicles.

...maybe a couple, as far as I know. Not too many of them left their cars here.

I'd say 1 or 2% use the Island Explorer, a lot of them have rented cars...and their out for a few days, so they've already had their vehicle, and the traffic is the traffic that they thought.

Certainly I notice a difference in the number of cars left in the yard...in the fall, the yard is empty during the day. In the summer, when the bus is running, maybe a third, a half, or more are here. They leave the cars and ride the bus.

Although not many visitors seemed to be aware of the Island Explorer Bus system prior to their arrival on Mount Desert Island or at the business, the small percentage of people using the buses can make a difference. As the years progress, and more businesses speak to their customers about the Island Explorer Bus and more repeat customers return to use the bus, the numbers of Island Explorer Bus users will inevitably increase. The few businesses that were unaware of transportation congestion problems on certain parts of Mount Desert Island and in Acadia National

Park may be indicative of many more. Outreach efforts by Acadia National Park representatives may help to inform the local businesses of these transportation issues, which can then be passed along to the customers and promote using the Island Explorer Bus to avoid these transportation congestion problems. Along with additional outreach to the local businesses, the Island Explorer planning committee may indulge in increased marketing to the visitors to the area to increase the public awareness of the Island Explorer Bus system and the need to use it.

Benefits to Businesses, Customers, and the Environment

Multiple benefits of the Island Explorer Bus system were identified by the businesses. Several of these benefits were synonymous with benefits identified in the Daigle and Lee (1999) survey of Island Explorer Bus users. Participants in the interviews identified a benefit to the customers, such as not having to drive their own vehicles and find parking. The 1999 Island Explorer user survey respondents identified "Less worry about driving and parking" as the number one desired and attained benefit of the Island Explorer Bus and "Rest from driving own vehicle" as the fourth (Daigle & Lee, 2000).

But even people who have cars like to ride the shuttle. Its just so, its an easy way to see the area.

...that they don't have to move their motor home. It's very convenient, very simple, they can use it to put their bicycles on, go around the park...

As far as transportation for our customers, downtown is always a problem with parking.

Other benefits identified in these in-person interviews were benefits to the customers of not drinking and driving if they have a cocktail or wine while in town or at dinner, as one motel phrased it,

We feel that, people if they want to go downtown to have a couple of beers or a glass of wine or something, they don't have to drive.

Benefits to the environment, such as taking some cars off the road and the cleaner fuel burned in the buses were also identified by the businesses as a very important benefit. Some of the participants had very strong feelings about the numbers of cars on Mount Desert Island and in Acadia National Park. Some of the resounding responses were:

You know, less traffic, less pollution, I just think that they shouldn't let so many cars into the park.

Just what it does for the environment, by reducing the amount of cars and traffic. Also just making the island more accessible.

Over the years, I've seen the pollution increase. I've seen the cloud gray over the island. It just gets worse and worse every year. And if this is

someway, anyway to control it, I would like to see the integrity of the air here better.

Few if any benefits that directly impacted the businesses could be identified. The businesses that had an Island Explorer Bus stop on their premises felt that the bus was an additional attraction to their customers, such as this campground owner,

I can tell the public in my web page, or on my flyer, we are a shuttle stop, we are a bus stop. It really helps... It hasn't effected how much business I get, because I am still, we are still full, even though business was up this year, I was still quite full. It just made it easier for people here to get around the island.

Finally, a benefit identified for all three, the customers, environment, and the businesses, was the possibility of attracting more carless visitors to Mount Desert Island.

Yeah, people that come over on the ferry. Motorcycle people, but mostly people that would be hikers, people that come across on the ferry, that are here for a few days, and looking for transportation.

A lot of people that arrive just in their motor homes, those are usually the ones that really appreciate the shuttle service.

The Island Explorer Bus system provides many overall positive benefits to the business customers. Although the bus system may not increase the numbers of customers that the businesses attract, it has the potential to diversify the customer base, such as attracting more carless visitors. The idea that there would be fewer cars on the road due to the increased use of the Island Explorer Bus is a benefit to Mount Desert Island residents and Acadia National Park users, such as less traffic congestion and increased parking availability if a personal vehicle is required. The benefit to the environment, like less air pollution, benefits the business environment and the customers by allowing for a better quality of life; if the quality of life is ruined by air pollution, businesses may choose to locate elsewhere.

Ideas about Traveler Information Services

The topic area dealing with important traveler information was especially important because it will help to plan for the new Traveler Information Services that will be initiated in late Summer, 2001. Most of the businesses had never really given much thought to the possibility of using technologies, such as video or electronic display signs, or a telephone information system, to relate information to the visitors during their stay. The businesses agreed that important information to include in the Traveler Information Services would be parking availability at certain busy areas in Acadia National Park and Island Explorer Bus arrival times.

You know, I never thought about that. It's kind of a good idea really.

Any bit of information we can get them is better.

Some of the businesses were skeptical that the Traveler Information Services would be used by their customers, and would probably not help to change the transportation behaviors of their customers. Many of the businesses felt that their customers were going to go where they wanted to go, on Mount Desert Island and in Acadia National Park, regardless of traffic congestion and parking availability.

They got there anyway.

They may, but as I say, my clients have a plan.

Providing this information to the patrons of these establishments did not seem to be a high priority for the respondents, they did not think that it would have much of an impact on their businesses. However, some businesses agreed there was a possibility that additional information on alternative travel routes using the bus could convince the visitors to leave their personal vehicles at their lodging facility. A few of the businesses felt that providing information on the arrival times of the buses could make the service more efficient and attract their customers to use the Island Explorer Bus system. Still, the businesses seemed to think that information on Acadia National Park was the most important.

Conclusion

As the interviews progressed, there seemed to be differences in the perceptions of the interviewees based on the type and size of business, how long the interviewee had been involved with the business, and the location of the business. The smaller businesses, the longer established businesses, and the businesses located on the northern and southern parts of Mount Desert Island seemed to think there was a bigger overall congestion problem, of people and automobiles. They tended to send their visitors to the less populated and congested areas in Acadia National Park. The larger businesses and the ones on the eastern side of Mount Desert Island, seemed to have more customers using the Island Explorer Bus and sent their customers to more populated areas in Acadia. Overall, the businesses thought that the Island Explorer was a positive addition to Mount Desert Island and Acadia National Park. They felt that there were definite benefits to their customers and the environment, and even a few to their businesses. Each participant had their own idea about what the new Traveler Information Services would be like. Traveler Information Services could complement the parking availability information with alternative travel plans into Acadia National Park using the Island Explorer Bus. They all felt that it would be an interesting addition to the Island Explorer Bus alternative transportation system, and were eager to see it in action the coming summer season.

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