

RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING IN A FAMILY CAMPGROUND: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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The purpose of this study was to determine if recreational programming within family campgrounds was a valid approach to deal with management problems found in public outdoor recreation areas. A survey of 399 respondents at Lieber State Recreation Area (Indiana) showed that programs offered tended to add to overall levels of camper satisfaction. Seventy-two percent of the campers have camped there before an average of 9.6 times in the past five years and 96% of the respondents intend to return.

Introduction

According to Jones (1988, p. 1), "camping has long been a favorite activity of outdoor recreationists." Technological advancement has resulted in a gradual change in the camping industry, as well as in the campers themselves. The concept of "roughing it" is rarely seen in modern camping facilities today (Jones, 1988).

Camping use in both public and private camping areas began to decrease in the mid-1980s. According to Cottrell (1990), "this trend continues today." The reasons are quite complex: decreased funding; lack of emphasis, in some cases a disdain for family campers on the part of management; greater expectations on the part of the user; attempts at privatization at the federal level; greatly increased user fees; and the lack of fun programming, which may contribute to youth boredom in public campgrounds (Cottrell, 1990).

Since visitation to both public and private campgrounds has declined, an assessment of public recreation need in a technologically advanced society is critical for both public and private sector campground managers. Declining use, an increase in camper discrimination when selecting a place to camp, and the increasingly more competitive campground marketplace, mean pleasing the customer is a necessity (Jones, 1988). Obviously, managers should consider a change in the traditional approaches to customer service.

Most camping clientele come from an urban setting, where general knowledge of ecology and nature is rather limited. As noted by Cottrell (1980, p. 38), "research data and recent history tells us that public park camping use is not rural in origin." In fact, most campers are from urban areas and are accustomed to an assortment of recreational activities. Those activities, at the municipal level, typically involve such program categories as arts, crafts, dance, drama, music, sports, games, social events, and some environmental activities.

Community recreation programs serve to enrich family unity by providing activities that encourage entire family participation. Traditional interpretive programs on boating safety and smokey the bear do not provide a comfortable tie to municipal programs (Cottrell, 1990). Therefore, public agencies, for the sake of continuity, might also tailor programs in family campgrounds to encourage entire families to camp together (Hultsman et al., 1987). According to Cottrell (Hultsman et al., 1987, p. 250), "the lack of outdoor recreation programming is the most serious shortcoming of the profession today." Recreational programming can provide familiar activities in an unknown setting, a bridge or stepping stone over the fear of the foreign and of the unknown for those citybred campers who feel out of place in a wooded environment (Cottrell, 1980).

In a recent study involving the factors that influence outdoor recreation participation as outlined by McClaskie, Napier and Christensen (1986), familiarity with an activity or activities in which prior participation produced positive rewards was more likely to breed future repeat participation. Simply stated, people will normally repeat known safe positive experiences. These findings suggest that participation in outdoor activities as a youth may carry over into adult leisure time activities. Therefore, the provision of recreational programs intertwined with interpretive programs might be an avenue for managers to do a better job serving campground visitors as well as enhancing visitor knowledge about the outdoors.

Another study focusing on the relationship between adolescent and adult leisure patterns indicates that a certain percentage of youthful leisure time experiences will carry over into adulthood (Scott and Willits, 1989). Using a longitudinal model, Scott and Willits compared data from 1298 subjects who were studied during their high school days and again when the same subjects were in their fifties. "For the sample members, the greater the involvement in a specific type of activity during adolescence, the more frequent the participation in the same type of activity at midlife" (Scott and Willits, 1989, p. 323). In support of this idea, Kelly (1974, 1978) found that leisure patterns of adults are augmented from childhood leisure time activities and experiences.

Prior recreation program research in family campgrounds is quite limited. One of the first studies in this area was conducted by Winn (1975), who examined the characteristics, camping background, and program preferences of campers at Hillman Ferry campground, Land Between the Lakes in western Kentucky. In 1975, campground occupancy rates at Land Between the Lakes increased eight percent over the 1974 use figures. Interestingly, 90 percent of the teenagers campers had were camping with them. Research being rather limited in this respect, one can only speculate based on authoritative opinion that such high numbers of teenagers camping with their families in Land Between the Lakes may be attributable to the aspect of lots to do. A typical summer week in Land Between the Lakes campgrounds in the mid to late 1970s featured 75 to 100 scheduled activities ranging from sports and games, skills activities, arts and crafts, interpretation, aquatic activities, dancing, and evening campfire programs (Cottrell, 1990). Winn implies that recreational 'fun' programs may increase campground occupancy rates, camper satisfaction, and teenage camping participation.

As a follow up to the Winn project, Hultsman (1977) conducted an applied study looking at teenage program preferences. Of the 96 respondents, 86% had participated in campground programs. Results imply that teenagers, typically a group that park

managers do not program for (Cottrell, 1990), will participate in programs of interest to them.

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to: 1) determine if programming within a family campground was important to campers, and how this importance rating relates to overall camper satisfaction, 2) determine if there was a relationship between performance of campground programs and overall satisfaction, and 3) determine if there was a relationship between participation in campground programs and camper feelings towards overall camper satisfaction. The overall intent of this exploratory research was to determine if recreational programming within family campgrounds was a valid approach to deal with management problems found in public outdoor recreation areas.

Methods

Study Setting

Lieber State Recreation Area (LSRA), operated by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, is located 50 miles due west of Indianapolis, Indiana. Adjacent to Cagles Mill Reservoir, program facilities include a marina, boat docks, boat ramp, swim beach, basketball courts, amphitheater, activity center, hiking trails, and a sports/activity field. Don Albietz (1990), Property Manager, LSRA, says that "recreational programs in the campground have been a solution to several of his management problems in the park." Those problems, typically associated with insufficient generation of revenues, were identified as excessive vandalism and poor visitation rates during the week and on non-holiday weekends. Prior to the 1986 season, campground programming had mostly been interpretation with low camper participation. In 1986, Albietz minimized interpretation and began to incorporate recreational programming into the overall management scheme of LSRA.

Albietz (1990) states that "the implementation of recreational programs in the campground has increased both camping and overall property revenues." Camping revenue declined from 1984 to 1985. Following the advent of the treatment (recreational programming), camping revenue has increased 39% from 1985 to 1989; likewise, overall property revenue has increased 66% from 1985 to 1989. There has only been a marginal increase in user fees from 1987 to 1990. For instance, in 1987, camping fees were \$8.00 per site with electrical hookups and \$5.00 per site without electricity, which increased to \$9.00 per site with electrical hookups and \$5.50 per site without electricity in 1989. Likewise, no fees were charged for campground programs. In addition, the incidence of vandalism has decreased (\$5,000 in 1985 allocated for repair of damaged property versus \$2,000 in 1989).

Data Collection

A twelve-page self-administered questionnaire was used to solicit responses about camper participation characteristics, program attendance patterns, levels of experience satisfaction, and demographics. A stratified systematic sample with a random start represents those campers in camp the last night of their trip. State park rangers and activities staff distributed and collected the surveys on site. Approximately 6% of those campers asked to participate in the study refused to do so. The total of 399 subjects represents the entire camping season from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day 1990.

Description of Sample

Indiana state residents represent 92% of the user population. Forty-three percent of those campers were from Indianapolis,

Indiana. The average distance traveled per camper from Indiana was approximately 53 miles one-way.

The average size group of LSRA campers included five people. Fifty-eight percent of the users were family campers with children while 25% were couples. Forty-four percent of the campers were camping with another group of family members or with friends. The average number of vehicles per group on this trip was 1.76. In addition, there was an average of one boat per group. Tents (62%) were the most frequently used type of camping equipment, followed by fold down campers (17.9%).

When the respondents were asked "do you have children living with you," 66% said 'yes.' The average number of children living with the subjects was 2.2. Over two-thirds (67.9%) of these campers reported having children with them on this camping trip. Approximately three-quarters of the children with families on this camping trip were between one and twelve years old. Of those campers with teenagers living with them, 69% of the teenagers were with them on this camping trip.

LSRA visitors were quite avid campers. Seventy-six percent of the respondents camped in public campgrounds last year while averaging 24 days camping per year in the last five years.

Satisfaction

LSRA campers appear to be quite satisfied with their overall camping experience (Table 1). On a scale of one to ten (with ten being the perfect experience), 88.9% rated their experience a seven or higher. Nearly one-third of the campers rated their experience an eight, and the average satisfaction level was 8.0.

Other variables indicative of campers' overall high levels of satisfaction with the camping experience at LSRA included the high number of return visitors and campers' intent to return. Approximately three-quarters of the respondents have camped at the site before, with the number of visits per camper over the last five years averaging 9.6. When asked if they plan to return to LSRA, 96.1% said 'yes.' Of the 3.9% of the respondents who do not intend to return, 53.3% were just passing through the area enroute to some other destination. Some of the most frequent reasons why campers plan to return were: close to home (24.3%), clean park (16.4%), nice place to camp (15.3%), and we like the park (15.3%). Additionally, 44.8% of the respondents intend to return this year. These findings suggest that campers are very pleased with their camping experience at LSRA. One assumption may be that campers feel welcome, comfortable, and safe. Although not directly measurable, campground programs may be a major contributing factor towards increased feelings of being welcome and increased perceptions of safety.

Table 1. Overall satisfaction of LSRA campers as measured by 10-point satisfaction scale.

Satisfaction Level	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
2	1	.3	.3
3	2	.5	.8
4	1	.3	1.1
5	20	5.3	6.4
6	19	5.1	11.4
7	74	19.7	31.1
8	118	31.4	62.5
9	84	22.3	84.8
10	57	15.2	100.0
Total	376	100.0	100.0
Mean = 8.0		Median = 8.0	Std Dev = 1.4

Program Participation

Twenty program categories were identified as those structured opportunities scheduled on a weekly basis throughout the summer 1990 camping season. Campers were asked to indicate what program(s) members of their group participated in.

Approximately 67% (N=253) of the respondents indicated that some member of their family had participated in one or more of the programs. Some of the most frequent reasons why campers did not participate in campground programs were because these activities were not why we came here (45.5%) and they did not know of the programs (35.3%).

When asked "Are you familiar with the program activities at LSRA," 60% of the respondents said 'yes.' The relationship between program attendance and camper familiarity with programs was statistically significant at the .001 level ($X^2=33.157$, df 1). Of those campers familiar with the programs at LSRA, 78% attended campground programs. Likewise, of the 40% not familiar with programs, 49% attended programs as well. The most effective methods of informing campers about the programs were by program brochures given at the main gate (53.3%), the activity center bulletin board (51.5%), and rest room bulletin boards (40.2%).

Approximately 32% of the respondents answered 'yes' to the question "Does the opportunity to participate in various programs influence your family's decision to camp here rather than in other public or private campgrounds?" There was a strong relationship between program attendance and the influence of programs on campers decision to camp at LSRA, which was statistically significant at the .001 level ($X^2=25.120$, df 1). Among those campers for which program opportunities at LSRA influenced their decision to camp there, 85% attended campground programs. Moreover, of those campers not influenced by program opportunities, 57.5% attended campground programs.

Another finding concerning the independent variable, familiarity with programs, was its relationship to previous camping experiences. This relationship was statistically significant at the .001 level ($X^2=18.562$, df 1). Two-thirds (67%) of those who had previously camped at LSRA were familiar with its programs, compared to only 43% who had not camped there before.

The relationship between past camping at LSRA and program attendance was statistically significant at the .05 level ($X^2=5.286$, df 1). Of those campers who had camped there before, 70.6% attended campground programs, while 57.5% of those campers who had not camped there before attended campground programs.

Importance-Performance Analysis

Upon examination of the importance and performance placed on the various activities, there was considerable variance among the different activity means. Table 2 shows the twenty program categories included in the camper survey. Those activities rated 5.0 or above in importance (listed from high to low) were recreation equipment issue (5.8), activity center (5.6), nature hikes (5.6), beach activities (5.5), boat rides (5.4), dances (5.1), and children's movies (5.0). It was surprising to find that campfire programs were not as important to campers as other activities. Interestingly, the only educational/nature oriented activity scoring above the 5.0 rating was the nature hike category. Slides/speakers, rated 3.2, was the lowest of all the

program activities, probably because of its lecture oriented connotation.

Table 2. Program activities mean importance-performance ratings.

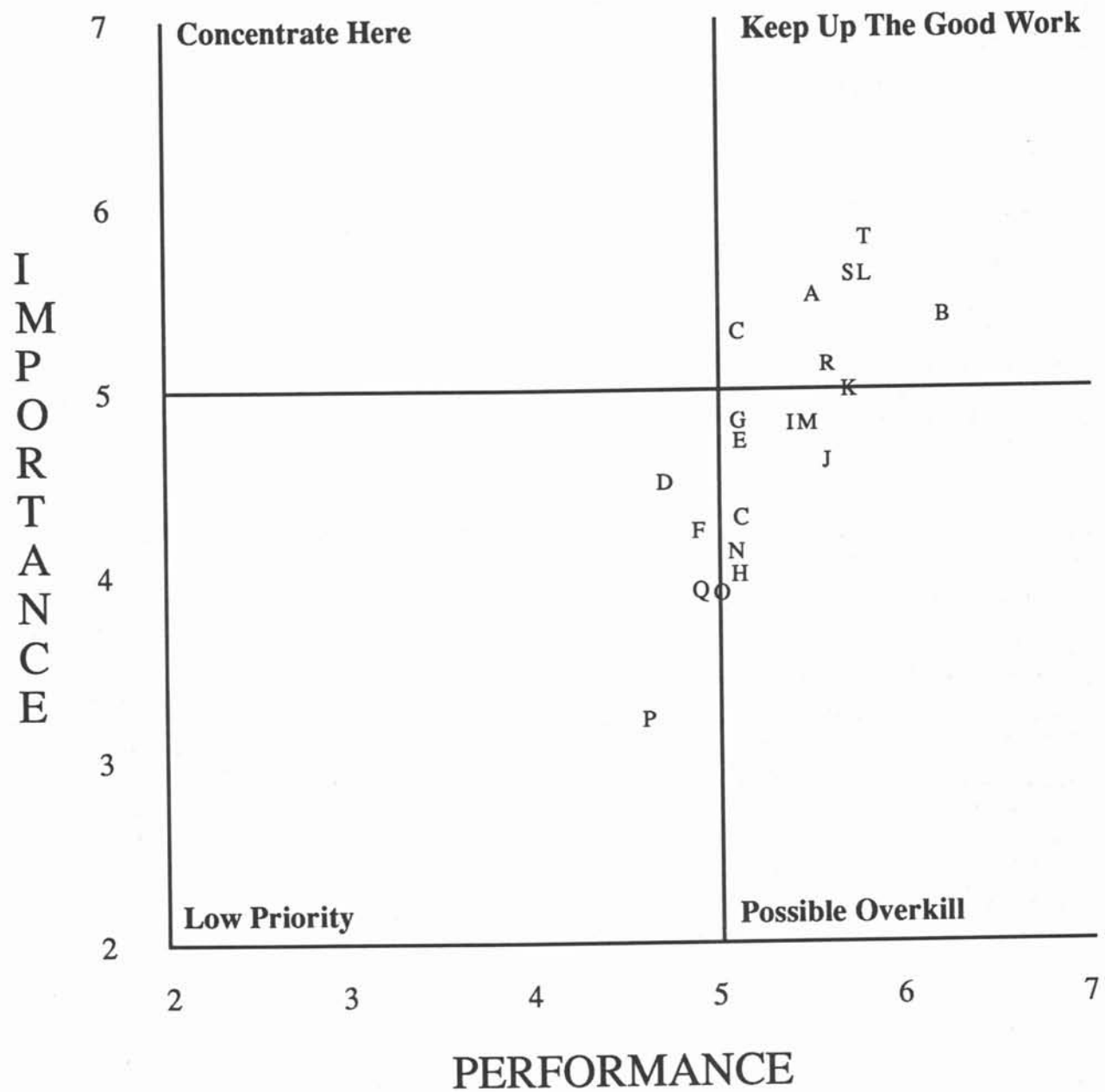
Sym- bol	Program Activity	Importance Ratings		Performance Ratings	
		Average	N	Average	N
A.	Beach Activities	5.5	180	5.5	187
B.	Boat rides	5.4	158	6.2	163
C.	Worship Service	4.3	71	5.1	74
D.	Bicycle programs	4.5	61	4.7	65
E.	Campfire programs	4.7	66	5.1	71
F.	Court games	4.2	70	4.9	75
G.	Educational programs	4.8	59	5.1	66
H.	Field sports/games	4.0	62	5.1	65
I.	Musical programs	4.8	72	5.4	77
J.	Late night movies	4.6	77	5.6	82
K.	Children's movies	5.0	72	5.7	74
L.	Nature hikes	5.6	106	5.8	110
M.	Night hikes	4.8	71	5.4	73
N.	Contests	4.1	59	5.1	60
O.	Square dances	3.9	53	5.0	57
P.	Slides/speakers	3.2	47	4.6	52
Q.	Teen scene	3.9	51	4.9	53
R.	Dances	5.1	89	5.6	92
S.	Activity Center	5.6	95	5.7	101
T.	Recreation Equipment Checkout	5.8	99	5.8	105

Note: The sample size for both ratings represents only those campers that participated in each of the programs.

Generally, mean performance ratings were higher than importance ratings (Table 2). For instance, boat rides had the highest rating at 6.2 in performance in comparison to 5.4 for importance. Both recreation equipment checkout and nature hikes (5.8) were the second highest rated activities followed by activity center and children's movies (5.7), dances (5.6), late night movies (5.6), beach activities (5.5), etc. Only four of the activity categories averaged below a five point rating: teen scene, court games, bicycle programs, and slides and speakers.

Figure 1 (see next page) presents the Importance-Performance Action grid for program activities at LSRA. Recreation equipment checkout was evaluated as the most important and well performed item. Bicycle programs, court games, teen scene, slides and speakers were the only four activity items to fall within the "Low Priority" quadrant.

Of the importance variables, the relationships between court games ($F=2.20$), contests ($F=2.28$), slides/speakers ($F=2.56$), and activity center ($r=2.44$) and the dependent variable, overall camper satisfaction were statistically significant at the .05 level (Table 3). Those respondents reporting higher importance for those programs tended to also report higher overall satisfaction.



- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A. Beach Activities | K. Children's Movies |
| B. Boat Rides | L. Nature Hikes |
| C. Worship Service | M. Night Hikes |
| D. Bicycle Programs | N. Contests |
| E. Campfire Programs | O. Square Dance |
| F. Court Games | P. Slide and Speakers |
| G. Educational Programs | Q. Teen Scene |
| H. Field Sports and Games | R. Dances |
| I. Musical Programs | S. Activity Center |
| J. Late Night Movies | T. Recreation Equip. Checkout |

Figure 1. Importance performance action grid for program activities at Lieber State Recreation Area.

Table 3. Mean values of overall camping satisfaction by importance of the campground programs.

	Not Important 1	2	3	Somewhat Important 4	5	6	Quite Important 7	$\bar{x}$	F-Value
	(111)	(32)	(46)	(63)	(21)	(21)	(21)	(315)	
Court Games	7.8	7.8	7.6	8.2	8.2	8.6	7.8	7.9	2.20*
	(116)	(34)	(41)	(53)	(27)	(20)	(31)	(322)	
Contests	7.8	7.6	7.8	7.9	8.1	8.6	8.5	7.9	2.28*
	(54)	(22)	(29)	(57)	(38)	(39)	(92)	(331)	
Activity Center	7.6	7.9	7.8	8.4	7.7	7.6	8.2	7.9	2.44*
	(138)	(37)	(36)	(55)	(17)	(18)	(15)	(316)	
Slides/speakers	7.9	7.4	8.0	8.0	7.3	8.5	8.6	7.9	2.56*

* Significant at the .05 level

() Values in parenthesis denote sample size

Of the performance variables (Table 4), the relationship between contests ($F=3.64$) and overall camper satisfaction was statistically significant at the .05 level. Campfire programs ($F=3.88$) and beach activities ($F=4.42$) were significant at the .01 level and nature hikes ($F=6.92$) was significant at the .001 level. Those respondents reporting higher performance for these programs tended to have higher overall satisfaction.

To determine if campers were satisfied with the programs at LSRA, campers were asked to rate their level of satisfaction for campground programs. Campers appear to be quite satisfied with the programs overall. On a scale of one to seven (with seven being the highest), 83% rated their experience a five or above. One-third of the campers rated the quality of the programs a seven, and the mean program satisfaction level was

5.7. As expected, the relationship between program satisfaction and overall camper satisfaction was statistically significant at the .001 level ($r=.298$).

Although program participation (nominal scale) was not significantly related to overall camper satisfaction, those campers who participated in programs rated overall satisfaction (mean=8.09) slightly higher than those campers who did not participate (mean=7.98) in the campground programs. The relationship between the independent variables of previous experience at LSRA ($F=6.43$, $p=.05$), programs influence on decision to camp here ($F=7.63$, $p=.05$) and camper intent to return ($F=13.39$, $p=.001$) to overall camping satisfaction were all statistically significant (Table 5).

Table 4. Mean values of overall camping satisfaction by performance of the campground programs.

	Mostly Dis- Satisfied 3	Mixed 4	Mostly Satisfied 5	Pleased 6	De- lighted 7	$\bar{x}$	F-Value
	(6)	(14)	(15)	(11)	(13)	(59)	
Contests	7.5	7.6	7.5	8.9	8.7	8.1	3.64*
	(12)	(14)	(10)	(16)	(17)	(69)	
Campfire Programs	7.8	7.4b	8.4	8.3	8.8a	8.2	3.88**
	(20)	(16)	(36)	(66)	(45)	(183)	
Beach Activities	8.1	7.6b	7.9c	7.9d	8.8a	8.1	4.42**
	(3)	(11)	(24)	(38)	(32)	(108)	
Nature Hikes	7.7	7.6b	7.6c	7.9d	8.9a	8.1	6.92***

*Significant at the .05 level

**Significant at the .01 level

***Significant at the .001 level

Scheffe Test: Letter superscripts indicate differences between groups significant at the .05 level.

() Values in parenthesis denote sample size

Table 5. One-way analysis of variance: Mean values of levels of overall camping satisfaction by attendance in programs, previous camping at LSRA, influence of programs on camping decision and intent to return.

		N	$\bar{x}$	F-Value
<u>Level of Overall Camping Satisfaction</u>				
Attendance	Yes	244	8.09	ns
	No	115	7.98	
Previous Camping	Yes	278	8.12	6.43*
at LSRA	No	97	7.70	
Influence of Programs on	Yes	113	8.30	7.63**
Camping Decision	No	239	7.86	
Intent to Return	Yes	357	8.11	13.39***
	No	8	6.38	

*Significant at the .05 level

**Significant at the .01 level

***Significant at the .001 level

Conclusions

Upon review of camping participation at Lieber State Recreation Area, apparently most of the subjects like to camp there. Data show the park to be clean, safe, as well as desirable for family campers. These attributes were demonstrated by: 72% of the campers have camped there before on the average of 9.6 times in the past five years; 96% of the campers intend to return of which 45% intend to return during the same calendar year; over two-thirds of the respondents with children living with them had those children on this trip, and 69% of those people with teenagers living with them had those teenagers on this trip.

In summary, programs offered at LSRA tend to increase overall levels of camper satisfaction. As program satisfaction increases, so does the overall satisfaction of campers with the camping experience. These findings present implications for the use of program satisfaction as a management tool for indirectly manipulating overall camper satisfaction. By focusing management action on the types of programs offered and on types of activities the user prefers, overall camper satisfaction should increase. Continual effort is necessary, however, to monitor and assess user participant patterns, program interests, trends, and camper satisfaction. For simplification, individuals seek alternatives of interest to them. The availability of freedom of choice results in happy, healthy individuals, "the happy camper." The notion of the happy camper could mean return visitation, increased revenue, ... and ultimately, a happy management team.

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