

MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES CAMP INITIATIVES PROGRAM

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The Camp Initiatives Program was developed to increase revenue and visitation through a series of policy changes. During the summer of 1990, the program was evaluated at six Maryland State Parks and found to increase revenue and visitation by 3% and 16%, respectively. More intensive marketing efforts, implementation of a computerized reservation system, increased community relations, and status of interpretive programs were specifically addressed as management recommendations. With minor policy revisions, the Camp Initiatives Program will continue to enhance the visitor experience and meet management objectives.

Introduction

Natural Resource managers are continually challenged with providing quality recreational services and more so in light of recent budget cuts at the federal, state, and local level. A review of current policy is warranted to determine the optimal balance between services and available resources. This review may result in innovative approaches to accomplishing the overall goals of an agency.

As a result of substantial reductions in the operating budget, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources-Forest and Park Service (DNR) began to focus on past, present, and future visitation with the prospect of increasing revenue through increased visitation. Specifically, a decrease in camping visitation in 1988, 1989, and a projected decrease for 1990 was found. Efforts were focused on the camping sector to increase overall revenue and expose more people to Maryland State parks. New policies were designed to encourage the use of Maryland State park campgrounds. Incorporating these new policies, the Maryland Camp Initiatives Program was established in April 1990 to encourage use of Maryland State parks and enhance the recreational experience.

Prior to the 1990 Camp Initiatives Program, DNR camping policies included: 1) camping on a first come, first serve basis; 2) a pet policy which allowed animals in designated areas in 5 parks; 3) a two week limit on length of stay; and 4) employment of seasonal naturalists to provide nature and recreational programs. The Camp Initiatives Program incorporated the following five policy changes:

- 1) An expanded reservation system allows campers to reserve up to one year in advance with the option to reserve sites for other groups.
- 2) Pets were permitted at 4 of the 6 pilot areas.
- 3) No limit was placed on the length of stay (except Rocky Gap State Park).
- 4) A Campground Programmer was hired to specifically provide tourist information, recreation, and nature programs for campers.

- 5) "Camping packages" were developed in cooperation with local merchants/businesses to encourage a partnership and symbiotic relationship with the community.

Methodology

Six pilot parks were chosen to evaluate the success of the Camp Initiatives Program. The six parks (i.e., Swallow Falls, Rocky Gap, Greenbrier, Point Lookout, Elk Neck, and Pocomoke River State Parks) were selected to represent the various geographical areas in Maryland and for the ease of program implementation.

An on-site survey was conducted to evaluate the impact of policy changes, as well as to gain information about Maryland State park campers. The survey addressed camper's past experience in Maryland State parks or forests, frequency of visitation, importance of, and satisfaction with, various site and service attributes, and attendance at interpretive programs. Two hundred and thirty five on-site interviews were conducted from Friday through Sunday during the months of June and July, 1990. A list of occupied sites was provided by the park manager and one adult per occupied site was selected. Additionally, campers with pets were contacted to assure representation of this user group. In addition to conducting the formal survey, interviewers remained in the campgrounds throughout the survey weekends to informally observe campers.

Findings

Twelve states and the District of Columbia were represented by the 235 campers interviewed. Fifty-six percent of the campers were male and 44% were females. The median age was between 34-49 years, with 40% aged 21-34 years and 41% aged 35-49 years. Young adults comprised only 1% of the campers and seniors (i.e., campers 65 years or over) comprised only 4%. Children were well represented at the parks with 29% aged 5-9 years, 28% aged 0-4 years, 21% aged 10-13, and 12% aged 14-18 years. The most frequently reported camping groups were couples (32%) and groups of four persons (23%). Over half of the respondents (65%) were weekend campers spending 2-4 days. Only 7% camped seven or more days during a particular visit. Over half of the respondents (64%) were tent campers, 18% used motorhomes and trailers, and 14% utilized pop-up trailers. Repeat visitors comprised 64% of those campers surveyed.

The success of any new program can in part be determined by participant awareness. Of significant interest to DNR officials was camper's knowledge of the Camp Initiatives Program prior to contact with the interviewer. Of those interviewed, only 36% were aware of the policy changes. Campers at Rocky Gap State Park were most aware of the Camp Initiatives Program. However, overall, a low level of awareness was reported by campers and can be attributed in part to delayed publicity. Information sources were analyzed to highlight potential marketing avenues. The top sources by which campers became aware of the Camp Initiatives Program included brochures (18%), friends/family (19%), newspapers (23%), and "other sources" (24%). "Other sources" included information from other persons in the local area, those at other parks, or DNR headquarters information hotline.

The new reservation system was generally well received. Sixty-four percent rated the ability to make reservations as moderately to very important and 74% rated the campsite reservation system as excellent. Most complaints about the system involved campers who were unaware of the reservation system and arrived to find all the sites "reserved." Some repeat campers were unhappy that "preferred" sites could be reserved by a select few for the entire summer or specific holidays; no

longer first come, first serve. The \$2.00 reservation fee increase did not seem to displace the majority of campers. Campers at Rocky Gap State Park however, were adamantly opposed to additional fee increases.

The policy of allowing pets in four of the six pilot parks was received with mixed results. Forty percent of the campers indicated that having pets in the campground was of little to no importance; similarly, 32% felt it was moderately to very important. The majority of those adamantly opposed to pets in the campground cited noise, disturbance of wildlife, and pet waste as reasons for not allowing pets in the campground. Few problems with pets were recorded by park managers and rangers; most were site specific. Park personnel who reported conflicts noted the lack of undeveloped areas for pets, noise, failure to clean wastes from the site upon departure, and non-compliance with rules as to where pets can go within the park.

Interpretive programming in Maryland State parks has historically been the first budget area to feel the repercussions of fiscal restraint. Programs, personnel and materials/supplies are often drastically reduced or eliminated. The DNR was eager to identify the number of campers attending interpretive programs and the importance of these programs to the overall visitor experience. Only 33% of the campers interviewed attended interpretive programs. However, of the 67% that did not attend, 57% rated interpretive programs moderately to very important. This suggests a discrepancy between what campers feel is important to their experience and their actual behavior. Only 9% indicated that interpretive programs were of no importance to their camping experience. The campground programmers noted that many campers had personal itineraries often involving travel and activity outside the park. Although campers seemed enthusiastic and interested in the park programs, they chose not to attend. The most frequently attended programs in the six pilot parks were the traditional campfires (n=35), Junior Ranger programs (n=7), and those programs involving live animals (n=7).

To better understand recreational behavior in the campgrounds, campers were asked to select activities in which they participated during their camping visit. The top five activities within the park included: reading/relaxing (72%), walking/hiking (70%), swimming (64%), fishing (55%), and picnicking (33%).

The Camp Initiatives Program was created to address declining revenue and visitation. In 1990, the total visitation for the 23 Maryland State camping parks declined 3% to just below 100,000 total sites occupied. In examining the six Camp Initiatives parks, an increase of 3.2% in total sites occupied during June-August 1990 was found. This translates to a 16% increase in revenue for the initiatives parks up from \$433,699 in 1989 to \$503,029 in 1990. The non-initiatives parks experienced a 2% reduction in revenue during the same time period.

A primary objective of the campground programmer was to solicit support from the surrounding community with the expectation of building a symbiotic relationship with the parks. This partnership was intended to promote not only the park, but local tourism and merchant retailers in the area. A great deal of effort was made to solicit support from businesses, restaurants, and tourist attractions in the area to provide informational brochures, coupons, or other special discounts for campers. This effort was particularly attractive at those campgrounds where campers were inclined to participate in activities in the local area. The campground programmers also

promoted special in-house camping deals such as a "mid-week special," where campers would get a free night of camping if they checked in on a Tuesday or Wednesday. Other promotions included free boat rental, free pizza delivery to the campground, holiday packages (i.e., Father's Day, 4th of July celebrations), and caravan tours. While this particular aspect of the policy changes was not specifically measured by the survey, park managers, rangers and programmers provided valuable information.

Conclusions

The following recommendations are based on an analysis of interviews with campers, park rangers, and park managers. First and foremost, investment in a computerized system to oversee the reservation system appears warranted. A computerized system would drastically reduce errors presently occurring as a result of keeping the campsite reservation information in hand written ledgers. These ledgers are often handled by many personnel. The computer system could be further utilized for word processing and budget preparation. To reduce user conflict over the next few years, a percentage of sites should remain available on a first come, first serve basis for campers unaware of the new reservation system.

Campers with pets should be assigned to one specific area (i.e., a camp loop for pets), to eliminate user conflicts. Undeveloped areas in the parks should be utilized and managed for pet and owner recreation (i.e., mowed paths as opposed to developed trails), and alternative areas in the surrounding community (i.e., circuit trails, community parks/ponds that permit pets) should be offered as options for recreation.

Interpretive program resources should be allocated to traditional programs with special emphasis on children's activities. Parents enjoy one-half to one hour, active, educational programs for children. The Campground programmer position was eliminated for 1991-92 due to additional funding cuts. However, the responsibilities of this position should be absorbed by the remaining park staff. The relationship that the park builds with the community is vital to promoting the parks and increasing visitation.

In 1991, the Camp Initiatives program will include one additional park, eliminate the campground programmers position, and explore options for utilizing a centralized, privately operated reservation service. With the increase in visitation (2-10% in the Initiative parks) and revenue, as well as provision of services and facilities most important to campers, the Camp Initiatives program has been a success and will continue. This evaluation demonstrated that positive and innovative programs can help ease budgetary constraints while continuing to provide quality services for those campers wishing to utilize Maryland State park resources.