

RESIDENT PERCEPTIONS OF VERMONT

STATE PARKS

Herbert E. Echelberger

USDA Forest Service, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station,
Burlington, VT 05401

Thomas A. More

USDA Forest Service, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station,
Burlington, VT 05401

This report describes results of a survey to determine Vermont residents' opinions about their state park system. Over 400 responses were obtained from current park users and nearly 300 came from non-users. Results suggest that both day and overnight state park users are quite satisfied with the quality of services and facilities at the Vermont park they had most recently visited. Non-users also had positive feelings about the system as a whole. User fees were not felt to be a problem for users, or deterrents for non-use of the parks. One very useful aspect of the study was that over 200 respondents volunteered extemporaneous comments about the park system and the survey.

Introduction

Even though open space is in short supply and has become valuable, especially in the densely populated Northeast, there are places where people can go in search of relief from urban pressures. Vermont is such a place. It is a state known for its scenic beauty, rural character, cultural heritage, and outdoor recreation opportunities. Skiing probably gets the biggest play in the press, but summer activities like camping, hiking, swimming, and boating also are popular. Spring draws fishermen to lakes and streams, and in the fall, hunters and foliage viewers bring out the "No Vacancy" signs throughout the state.

Vermont is rural in character. With 535,000 people living in the state in 1985, its density was only about 58 people per square mile. This compares with more than 100 per square mile in New Hampshire, more than 350 in New York, and more than 700 people per square mile in Massachusetts. Vermonters are proud of the state's rural character, its scenic characteristics, and opportunities available for cultural and leisure pursuits. In fact, most Vermonters believe they participate in more outdoor activities than the average U.S. citizen. They have voted with their pens and their pocketbooks to preserve the qualities that make the state an attractive place in which to live and visit.

One of Vermont's major attractions is its state park system. It offers recreation opportunities that range from the developed to the primitive. This report describes Vermont residents' opinions of the Vermont state park system.

Several studies have shown that recreationists are usually satisfied with the overall management of public recreation areas they visit (Lucas 1970; Echelberger and Moeller 1977; McDonald et al. 1987), but few studies have described the attitudes of residents of a single state (users and nonusers) toward the management of its entire park system. State park

administrators need to know how all residents feel about the quantity and quality of opportunities the parks offer, the distribution of recreation opportunities within the system, and pricing policies. Administrators also need to know why some people have stopped using the system and others have never started.

Methods

Resident opinions were obtained from a mail survey that followed procedures described by Dillman (1978). A representative sample of Vermont's residents was drawn from telephone directories that cover the entire state without overlaps. Examination of several directories indicated that approximately 270 nonbusiness telephone numbers were on each page. By randomly drawing three names from each page of each directory, we were able to obtain a representative sample of Vermont residents. Telephone calls were made to 1,318 residents during November of 1986. They were asked if they had visited a state park in Vermont within the past 24 months and if they would be willing to participate in a mail survey of their opinions of the park system. The calls resulted in 1,143 residents who agreed to participate in the survey. Of these, 587 had visited a Vermont state park recently and 556 had not. Two types of surveys were mailed: one for recent park users and another for those who had not recently or had never used a Vermont state park.

Results

We received 424 usable responses from recent park visitors, a 72-percent response rate, and 278 from nonusers, a 50-percent response rate. Information obtained during the initial telephone interviews suggests that nonrespondents to the surveys were older than respondents, less likely to be state park users, and probably less active in outdoor recreation as a whole. Respondents cited August most often when describing their most recent visit to a Vermont state park. This was followed by July, September, and June. Many of those who had visited in later months also may have visited in June. The parks mentioned most often were Sandbar (a 15-minute drive from Burlington, the largest city in Vermont), New Discovery at Groton (about a 30-minute drive from either St. Johnsbury or the Barre/Montpelier areas), and Branbury State Park, just south of Middlebury.

Since 41 percent of the respondents said they had stayed less than a half day, and another 43 percent said they had stayed more than a half day but less than one day, we estimated that the average length of stay for day visits was 4 to 6 hours. Only 15 percent of the respondents said that their most recent visit included an overnight stay. The average length of stay for these 58 Vermont residents was about two nights. As the following tabulation shows, the responses indicated that more than 90 percent of these Vermonters stayed less than four nights during their most recent overnight visit to a state park:

Number of nights	Percent responding
1	28
2	38
3	26
4	5
5	2
6	2

Respondents visited the parks in many group sizes. The average group size was nearly 12 people, but this figure is somewhat inflated because of several large groups. The median as well as most prevalent group size was four people. There also

was considerable variation in the type of group. Five percent said they came alone; 49 percent were in family groups; 16 percent consisted of groups of friends; 18 percent said they were part of a group of family and friends; and 13 percent were part of an organized group, such as a church group, office, or plant party.

Most resident visitors to Vermont's state parks have been satisfied with their visits. In fact, 76 percent specifically stated this to be the case with respect to their most recent visit. Another 20 percent stated they were somewhat satisfied and only 2 percent were somewhat dissatisfied. The remaining 2 percent said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. This concept of satisfaction was examined more thoroughly by asking residents about their intentions of returning to the park. More than three-quarters said it was either extremely likely or likely that they would return within a year. Another 19 percent said they probably would return; only 4 percent probably would not return. We did not explore reasons for plans not to return but believe that in some cases, reasons other than dissatisfaction with the park played a role in the responses--moving out of state, substitute opportunities, loss of transportation, lack of interest, etc.

To further quantify visitors' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their most recent park visit, we asked respondents to grade the park they visited most recently on 11 criteria and then assign an overall grade for recommending the park (LaPage and Bevins 1981). We asked respondents to use the standards of A for excellent, B for better than average, C for average, D for below average, and E for poor. By assigning numeric values of 1 for A to 5 for E, we were able to quantify in a rough manner the perceptions of these users of the Vermont state park system (Table 1).

Table 1. Average grades given to Vermont's state parks by resident visitors based on a scale of 1 (excellent) to 5 (poor), n=224.

Criterion	Quantified Grade
Helpfulness of employees	1.9
Availability of sites	2.0
Privacy of sites	2.2
Rules and their enforcement	2.1
Control of noise	2.1
Recreation opportunities	2.2
Safety and security	2.0
Control of pets	2.1
Availability of firewood	2.3
Cleanliness of grounds	1.6
Cleanliness of restrooms	1.9
Your recommendation of the park	1.8

The grades for these criteria suggest that current users are satisfied with the quality of the Vermont state park system. This assessment agrees with one given by overnight visitors to state campgrounds in 1982.¹ However, it does not address the issue of satisfaction or lack of it from the perspective of former users who may have stopped visiting Vermont state parks for

any number of reasons, or from the perspective of "potential users," those who have not yet used the parks but who may do so in the future. This is discussed elsewhere in this paper.

We also examined residents' perceptions about Vermont state parks in general using a semantic differential (Osgood et al. 1957). They were asked to describe a visit to a state park using 12 bipolar pairs of adjectives, i.e., interesting/boring, dirty/clean, work/fun, etc. Respondents were asked to express the strength of their feelings for each adjective-pair by making a checkmark on a scale between them.

For example, if a person believed that visiting a state park in Vermont was more easy than complicated, he/she would put the checkmark more toward the easy end of the scale than the complicated end. Visiting a park is perceived by recent users as interesting, refreshing, easy, clean, somewhat convenient, fun, and very safe (Fig. 1). Together, the adjective-pairs for these seven adjectives form an evaluative factor in the respondents' perception of a visit to a Vermont state park.

INTERESTING	<u> X </u> : : : :	BORING
INEXPENSIVE	<u> X </u> : : : :	EXPENSIVE
TIRING	<u> X </u> : : : :	REFRESHING
EDUCATIONAL	<u> X </u> : : : :	NOT EDUCATIONAL
EASY	<u> X </u> : : : :	COMPLICATED
DIRTY	: : : : <u> X </u>	CLEAN
CONVENIENT	<u> X </u> : : : :	INCONVENIENT
WORK	: : : : <u> X </u>	FUN
SAFE	<u> X </u> : : : :	DANGEROUS
UNCROWDED	<u> X </u> : : : :	CROWDED
PLEASANT	<u> X </u> : : : :	UNPLEASANT
COMFORTABLE	<u> X </u> : : : :	UNCOMFORTABLE

Figure 1. Semantic differential describing Vermonters' perception of visiting a Vermont state park (includes responses by users and nonusers, n=617).

Osgood et al. (1957) stated that the evaluative factor of the semantic differential is an index of attitude. Thus, Vermonters who have recently been to a park seem to have a positive attitude about their state park system. Visiting a park also was perceived as being just slightly uncrowded, very pleasant, and comfortable. Finally, Vermonters perceive visiting a state park as relatively inexpensive and only slightly educational. In fact, nonusers and past users expressed even more positive feelings about the parks than current users, though the differences were not significant.

To ascertain why nonusers stopped using the parks or why some people have never used them, we asked recipients of the nonuser survey to rate the importance of 17 reasons for nonuse on a scale of 1 (very important) to 4 (unimportant). The reason given most often by nonusers, and with the greatest amount of conviction, was that they had other things to do, such as household chores, work, etc. (Table 2). This may correlate closely with Reason 14, "Park facilities don't appeal to me anymore." A second and significant reason why people do not use the state parks is that they have closer, more convenient substitutes (which may be closely correlated with reason 6, "I prefer private (commercial) facilities." The third most frequently cited reason was "My children have grown up." This corroborates characteristics of nonrespondents to the survey--older, less likely to use the parks, and probably not as physically active as those classified as current users.

¹/ Bevins, Malcolm I. 1983. Personal communication on file at Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, Burlington, Vermont.

It is interesting that most people did not believe the parks cost too much, reason 12 in Table 2. Former users and people who have never used the parks (and never intend to) believed price is even less important a reason for not using the parks than potential users. This suggests that pricing of Vermont state parks is not a major issue among Vermonters. The insignificance of prices is further confirmed by the relatively high importance that nonusers assigned to a preference for private facilities, substitutes for state park opportunities, and doing other things than visiting a state park. These reasons appear to be more important than entry or user fees.

Comparisons between park users versus nonusers revealed that users were, on average, 10 years younger and had lived in Vermont 9 years less than those who had not recently used the parks. Nonusers tend to have somewhat less education than users, but their incomes and where they were raised (urban, suburban, or rural environments) did not appear to be related to use or nonuse of the park system.

Table 2. Importance of reasons for not using Vermont's state parks based on scale of 1 (very important) to 4 (unimportant).

Reason	Potential		
	Former User	User	Non-user
1. I'm not interested in using them	3.19	3.31	3.14
2. I have no means of getting to them	3.74	3.81	3.76
3. My children have grown up	2.28	3.23	3.55
4. I have health problems	3.52	3.72	3.57
5. I don't have time	2.75	2.55	3.76
6. I prefer private (commercial) facilities	3.25	3.16	2.57
7. I don't know where any state parks are	3.72	2.97	3.71
8. The parks are too far away	3.54	3.18	3.76
9. I don't like the people who use state parks	3.73	3.55	3.71
10. I have closer more convenient substitutes	2.56	3.02	2.48
11. I don't have the skills necessary for participating in park activities	3.59	3.48	3.57
12. The parks cost too much	3.67	3.31	3.81
13. I don't have anyone to go with	3.54	3.47	3.62
14. Park facilities don't appeal to me anymore	3.24	3.35	2.81
15. I wouldn't know what to do at a state park	3.71	3.48	3.76
16. I have other more important things to do (household chores, work, etc.)	2.34	1.94	2.29
17. I haven't lived in Vermont long enough to take advantage of state park facilities	3.72	3.43	3.90
Sample size	173	72	33

Summary and Discussion

Several reports state that as our Nation continues to urbanize, there will be increased demand for outdoor recreation trips closer to home and of shorter duration (Market Opinion Research 1986; Mill 1987; Task Force on Outdoor Resources and Opportunities 1988). State parks are uniquely situated to fulfill this demand, but park administrators should move cautiously in responding to increased urban needs. We submit that the

appropriate niche for state parks generally is in the middle range of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) (Clark and Stankey 1979). Federal areas can and should offer experiences at the primitive end of the ROS while municipal facilities provide developed programs and opportunities. State park systems should offer recreation opportunities that touch both ends of the ROS but should tend to emphasize opportunities in the middle of it. Some state parks might provide some primitive and/or developed opportunities depending on the environmental setting of the area, history of experiences that have been offered in the past, and expectations of users.

This study showed that only 15 percent of park user respondents stayed overnight on their most recent visit to a Vermont state park, and that those visitors seldom stayed more than three nights. We cannot say whether Vermonters tend to leave the state for extended vacations or if this finding was a result of the "most recent visit" wording of the question. However, departmental records indicate that between 1986 and 1990, two-thirds of camping use at Vermont state parks was by nonresidents. Further, More et al. (1990) stated that Vermont residents do not favor subsidizing overnight users of state parks but expressed considerable support for subsidies at day-use park facilities. Perhaps the reason Vermonters do not wish to subsidize camping at Vermont state parks is that they know that most of the campers using the park system are nonresidents and/or they seldom use the system themselves for extended vacations. Further research on the issue of where Vermonters spend extended camping vacations may be useful to tourist agencies and associations.

Both day and overnight users of Vermont state parks indicate that they had very satisfactory experiences. This positive attitude toward the parks was verified by most of the current users, intentions to return in subsequent years. Nonusers had even more positive feelings than users based on the results of the evaluative factor of the semantic differential. We believe that the positive feelings of the latter may be due in part to the "aura" associated with Vermont and partly to promotional efforts by tourist agencies and associations.

We were surprised to find that of the 1,318 calls made to establish the study, 1,143 agreed to participate. Vermonters are genuinely concerned about the welfare of their park system. Nearly three-quarters of the state-park users who received questionnaires responded. There also was a 50-percent response from people who did not use the parks, and more than 200 people volunteered extemporaneous comments about the system and the survey. The following are examples of these comments.

"People want state parks. They do not want to pay for them, in either taxes or fees. While this is human nature, it is not realistic."

"You (state park administrators) are doing as fine a job as any state and better than most. Let's not lose our park system--they can never be replaced."

"More restrooms and with easier access for older and handicapped persons are needed at Ellis (State Park). There should be more recreational activities for all age groups."

"It (the survey) also brought a good discussion to the household. Vermonters do like to have a say in things that go on around them."

"Let's not bureaucratize (sic) the parks by finding ways to 'improve' them. The pressure to develop and exploit these parks

will increase with every passing year. The time will come when certain parks will have to turn away people, otherwise they will not be parks but Disneylands. Keep the parks simple and undefiled."

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