

NPPC PARK VISITOR RESEARCH SUMMIT

The National Parks Promotion Council (NPPC) held a first-ever Park Visitor Research Summit in Yosemite National Park on January 7 and 8, 2011. Some 70 participants came from the National Park Service (NPS), a dozen universities and colleges, concessions companies, park-related businesses, state tourism agencies and non-profit organizations working with national parks to serve visitors. Substantial support for the meeting was provided by Delaware North Companies, the principal concessioner in Yosemite National Park. The meeting was coordinated by the co-chairs of the NPPC Research Committee, Drs. Nina Roberts and Emilyn Sheffield. The meeting sought to assemble and assimilate available park visitor information, as well as information about non-visitors, and to identify priority visitor research needs.

Participants received briefings on currently available park visitor research, including hundreds of unit visitor studies performed under the NPS Visitor Studies Program managed by the University of Idaho, as well as a briefing by Dr. Jim Gramann, until recently the Chief Social Scientist of the NPS, on the National Park Service's 2nd Comprehensive Survey of the American Public, a telephone survey of more than 4,000 Americans conducted in 2008 and 2009 to achieve a valid national sampling. Additional data was provided by Greg Dunn, using the "Portrait of the American Traveler" survey, conducted annually, and an interesting review utilizing Google's free Trend tool of on-line searches for park information for 2004-2010, and especially searches coinciding with the airing of the 6-part PBS special on national parks done by Ken Burns. State research efforts, both under the auspices of State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans and state tourism programs, was also presented.

Research confirms that park visitation has failed to rise proportionately with population growth and has further remained dominated by Caucasian, educated and affluent Americans. There is significant agreement on key barriers to park visitation, with time and interest being key factors. Other significant factors deterring visitation, according to researchers, is lack of information – about where to go and what to do that would be enjoyable once arriving – and competition for leisure time from in-home and near-home opportunities. Cost is a factor, although park visitation costs are generally lower than many other leisure choices.

The participants spent significant time in focused, small-group discussions, charged with identifying research priorities for specific population subgroups (ethnic minorities, youth, traditional visitors) and around specific topics (use of technology, health and economic contributions/jobs). A report will be prepared, summarizing key research and recommended research efforts. Special interest was expressed by the group in better use of current research to change NPS programs and communications efforts, and to focus future research on information that would be timely, future-focused and useful to both NPS and its partners that assist in attracting and serving visitors. The Research Committee will share its findings and recommendations with the NPPC Outreach Committee, which sponsored the National Park Adventures youth video project (see www.youtube.com/npadventure) and is preparing recommendations to the NPS on future outreach and marketing strategies, including refinement of the fee-waiver program initiated by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in 2009.

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