

APPLIED RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES IN DEVELOPED CAMPGROUNDS

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Abstract: Developed area camping is an important recreational activity in terms of both participation and as a source of revenue for public agencies. A major challenge for administrators in the public sector is how to increase revenues on limited budgets without sacrificing customer satisfaction. Applied research could make a valuable contribution to decision making, but not much current research has been published. Over fifty potential research subjects were recently identified and ranked in order to encourage further study.

Introduction

Camping is a popular recreational activity. According to a recent national assessment of demand (Cordell, 1999), 21% of the population camped at a developed facility within the previous year. According to this survey, camping is more popular than backpacking (7% participation) and is nearly as popular as hiking (24% participation). Campgrounds also make a significant contribution to revenues in the public sector. In fact, campgrounds are the largest single source of revenue for state parks (McLean, 1997). This is especially important at a time when both state and federal outdoor recreation management agencies are trying to offset operating costs with revenues (Leal & Fretwell, 1997).

Applied Research is Scarce

Since developed area camping is such an important aspect of outdoor recreation, considerable research on the subject might be expected. Surprisingly, this does not appear to be the case. According to a recent textbook (Hultsman, Cottrell & Hultsman, 1998), most university research related to campground issues has little or no relevance to practitioners. Larger federal agencies with research staffs have also missed the mark according to the authors. This situation is blamed on poor communication between researchers, managers and administrators.

A review of the past proceedings from the Northeast Recreation Research Symposium (NERRS) supports the contention that applied campground research is limited. The Symposium provides an annual forum for both researchers and public and private recreation managers and administrators. There are thousands of public and private campgrounds in the northeast. Yet between 1987 and 2000, only 37 (5.5%) out of 658 topics at NERRS had a direct application to campground management issues. In the past five years, this has dropped to 2.5%! The lack of applied research may be reflected by the limited participation by campground managers and administrators in NERRS. In a recent survey of a dozen state park

managers and administrators in the northeast, most were aware of NERRS. However, only a third had ever attended the symposium, and only half indicated they found the proceedings useful.

Million Dollar Decisions in the Public Sector

Public campground managers face a number of challenges - not the least of which is how to increase revenues on limited budgets (Alexander, 1996). To meet this challenge, the choices often come down to increasing income and attendance while reducing costs. Accomplishing this successfully means making sound decisions on aspects as varied as pet policies, reservation policies, use fees, opening and closing dates, alcohol use, recreational activities, volunteer programs, advertising and marketing efforts, etc. etc. Since current research is usually not available, most decisions are made without benefit of a research component. The following three examples from New York State are offered to show how applied research could contribute to our understanding and improve management decisions.

Campsite Reservations

Technology is changing the camping business. Thirty years ago camping reservation services were not widely used. If reservations were taken, they were often done at the park. Today, most state and federal campsites can be reserved through a centralized reservation service of some type. There are several private vendors in this business under contract with public agencies. Campers at New York State campgrounds currently spend about \$2,000,000 annually on reservation service fees. This represents a significant percentage of the total cost of camping. Sound decisions with respect to the reservation service system are critical in order to provide campers the best value. Poor decisions mean higher costs and/or poorer service.

Five years ago, New York State was in the market for a new campsite reservation service vendor. These are some of the questions that needed answers:

- How do reservations, versus camping on a walk-up basis, effect camping attendance and revenue?
- How do the costs of reservations through a private service vendor compare with doing the work with public employees?
- How do Internet reservations compare to call center reservations with respect to cost, reliability, customer satisfaction, and access?
- What types of reservation systems are currently used by other state and federal agencies?
- What information is there to rate and/or compare private reservation service vendors and related software?
- What are the optimum hours, days, and seasons of call center operation which provide the best service at a reasonable cost?
- How far in advance should reservations be taken in order to optimize camper satisfaction and operating costs?

- How do one, two, three or more night minimum reservation length policies affect attendance, revenue and customer satisfaction?
- How do site specific campsite reservations effect revenue, attendance & satisfaction?
- What is the effect of billing reservation fees separately from camping fees on customer satisfaction and use of the service?

When New York State was making decisions on a new reservation service, there was no published research information to help answer these questions.

The Access Pass

State park user fees have been a subject for some debate. The current trend is to make parks financially self sufficient, supported by those who use them (Leal & Fretwell, 1997) and fees are an obvious source of revenue. However, others are concerned that fees may exclude low-income people which raises questions about the purpose of public recreation facilities (More & Stevens, 2000). These philosophical differences are often reflected in fee policies. For example, New York State offers free use of any state park for those who have a disability and who have an Access Pass. Approximately \$2.4 million dollars in free services are currently provided to Access Pass holders. However, New York, like many other states, relies on fees to support park maintenance and operations. Although most state park and campground facilities meet ADA standards, large capital investments are necessary to maintain infrastructure and to improve access. Part of the capital budget in the Office of Parks and Recreation is supported by user fees. In spite of the revenue generated from fees, capital funds are extremely limited in comparison to the infrastructure needs.

In an effort to try and supplement the state parks infrastructure budget, a proposal has been discussed which would require Access Pass holders to pay 50% of the fees that are now free. This change would require legislation, but could generate an additional million dollars annually dedicated to access improvement projects. When the proposal became public, advocacy groups protested. They contended that people with disabilities are often also economically disadvantaged and therefore cannot afford to pay fees, no matter how low. But some administrators believe that accessible facilities would be a better way to serve people than free use. The fundamental question is this; which will benefit people with disabilities more, lower fees or more accessible facilities? More information provided by independent research might help to resolve the issue. Answers to the following questions would be especially useful at this time:

- To what extent are user fees exclusionary to Access Pass holders?
- To what extent are park facilities currently inaccessible?
- How do Access Pass holders answer the question?
- How would partial fees effect use by Access Pass holders?
- How do other states and federal agencies handle this issue?

Utility Hook-ups in Forever Wild Campgrounds

There are 44 campgrounds in the Adirondacks with 5,344 campsites. The operating budget for these campgrounds is based on the revenues that they generate. In 2000 campground revenues were approximately \$4,000,000. Campground developments in the Adirondack Park is guided by the State Land Master Plan. The Plan specifically prohibits utility hook-ups in campgrounds in order to maintain a rustic character. However, this restriction may not have accomplished the intended goal.

The lack of utility hookups is a disincentive to campers, particularly those with recreational vehicles, who want the convenience of utilities at their campsite. Since RV owners make up an estimated one third of the camping public (Cordell, 1999), it seems likely that Adirondack campgrounds are losing potential campers and revenue. Any loss of revenue is significant because the operating budget is based on revenue. If utility hookups increased attendance by 10%, revenues would increase by at least \$400,000 annually. This additional money could be used to offset inflation or provide better services.

Since power is not provided, campers who want electricity often run a generator. This creates noise and exhaust fumes which can be disruptive to others. As a consequence, the hours of generator operation are limited. This in turn generates complaints from campers who require some type of mechanical device for a disability such as sleep apnea or refrigerated medications.

Research could help develop better information about the compatibility of campgrounds and utilities in the Adirondack Park. Some potential topics include the following:

- To what extent are tent campers and RV campers compatible?
- What campground characteristics either enhance or detract from the wild forest experience?
- Do generators detract from the camping experience?
- Do electric utility hookups either enhance or detract from the camping experience?
- How does the lack of utility hookups affect attendance and revenue?
- How would a total prohibition against use of generators effect attendance and satisfaction?

Opportunities for Applied Research

Two dozen campground managers and administrators from the northeast were mailed a survey in 2001 to determine their interest in applied research subjects. Each manager was asked to review a list of 49 potential research topics and to indicate a level of interest - high medium or low. The responses were scored on the following scale: 3 - high interest, 2 - medium, and 1 - low. The objective was to identify potential applied research subjects and to identify the level of interest. The following is the result of that survey:

High Interest Topics (>2.5)

- Demographics of campers in the northeast.
- Camping preferences of the various types or categories of campers.
- Camping attendance trends in the northeast by camper type.
- The most important factors which determine length of stay.
- How well do public campgrounds promote better understanding of conservation and the environment?
- Identification & ranking of the most important campground characteristics related to visitor satisfaction.
- The effectiveness of volunteer campground hosts on visitor satisfaction.
- A survey of public & private camping fees in the northeast by campsite type.
- How does the availability of a reservation service effect attendance?
- Comparison of site specific versus site standard reservations on attendance?
- How do unprotected beaches effect attendance, safety and satisfaction?
- The effect of alcohol prohibition on visitor satisfaction and attendance.
- Comparison of pets allowed and pet free campgrounds on visitor satisfaction and attendance.
- The effect of recreation programs on attendance & visitor satisfaction.
- The economic impact of a public campground on local economies.
- Identification and ranking of the most effective campground advertising venues.
- Factors which determine where campers decide to camp.

Medium Interest Topics (1.5 - 2.4)

- A classification system that identifies different types or categories of campers.
- Is there regional variability in the expectations of campers?
- Factors influencing satisfaction of people with disabilities who camp.
- Analysis of compatibility between RV campers and tent campers.
- Differences of environmental attitudes between RV and tent campers.
- A classification system that identifies different types or categories of campgrounds.
- What is the optimum campsite shade density?
- What is the optimum campsite density in campgrounds?
- Evaluation of fireplace design by cost, life expectancy and user satisfaction.
- Evaluation of picnic table designs by cost, life expectancy and user satisfaction.
- National or regional survey of the ways volunteers are being used in campgrounds.
- Comparison of attitudes between paid staff and volunteer hosts.
- Fee strategy comparison - should camping fees and reservation fees be separate or combined?

- Characteristics of public campground reservation services currently used in the US.
- A "consumer reports" type rating of reservation service vendors in the US.
- What are optimum quiet hours?
- Evaluation of generator use policies in campgrounds.
- How recreational use of personal water craft effects camper satisfaction and attendance.
- Evaluation of campground environmental education programs.
- The economic contribution made by campers to the region or state.
- The economic impact of a public campground on local private campgrounds.
- A survey of sources of injuries in campgrounds.
- A survey of hazard tree risk experience and management policies.
- A survey of playground risk experience and management policies.
- Relationship between camper density & soils on campsite erosion & vegetation health.
- Relationship between soil types and vehicle use on erosion & campsite vegetation health.
- Analysis of mitigation measures to control erosion and protect vegetation.
- Effectiveness of camping shows as a marketing opportunity.

Low Interest Topics (<1.5)

- A formula for establishing camping fees.
- Cost effectiveness of coin operated showers

Other Topics Suggested in Survey Response

- Costs of running campground recreational activity.
- Why people do not camp, what would get them interested in a camping experience.
- Distribution of ethnic type among the various types of campgrounds.
- The top 10 reasons people camp.
- How many do it for what reason.
- What physical characteristics are viewed as desirable or necessary for visitor satisfaction by ethnic group.
- Camping support elements (grocery, laundry, entertainment) as they pertain to the quality of a camping experience.
- Are education and training needs of staff being met?

Conclusion & Recommendations

Applied research for campground managers could improve decision making and the viability of campgrounds. In the private sector, and increasingly in the public sector, revenue is an important consideration. Applied research has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the decision making process. Four criteria have been identified to improve the value of research to managers and administrators (Hultsman, Cottrell & Hultsman, 1998). These are: research should be related to real applied professional needs. The emphasis should be placed on helping managers. Results should be written in language managers can understand. Finally, research papers should include tangible and applicable recommendations based on the findings.

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