

FINAL REPORT

DICKEY RIDGE SURVEY
SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

Prepared for:

National Park Service
Harpers Ferry Center
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Prepared by:

Harris Shettel
Evaluation Consultant
Rockville, MD

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INTRODUCTION

This survey falls under the general heading of a "Front-End" study, that is, a study designed to learn about the interests of visitors in the subject matter of a proposed exhibition before final decisions are made about its scope and content. It has been demonstrated over the years that such knowledge obtained from members of the target audience can increase both the level of interest visitors show and the amount of information they get from the final installation..

The present survey was designed to obtain inputs from visitors to the Dickey Ridge Visitor Center in two areas, one having to do with the nature of the visit itself and the other having to do with the kinds of subject matter/information they would be interested in seeing displayed at the Center. The latter is intended to help inform the planning process that is ongoing with respect to the installation of several new exhibitions within the Center.

The survey questions were designed primarily by members of the exhibit development team. It was administered to randomly selected visitors exiting from the main door of the Visitor Center who appeared to be 18 years old or above. They were told the purpose of the survey and that it would take not more than 10 minutes to complete. Those who showed any hesitation to participate were thanked and excused. Their gender and approximate age was recorded on a specially prepared Decline Form.

Those who agreed to participate were taken to a seat where the interview could be comfortably conducted. If more than one person was present during the interview, an effort was made to address only one person. Some group interaction was inevitable, but this is not considered to be a major factor in interpreting the results.

The survey was carried out over a morning and afternoon on a Saturday. The weather was beautiful which meant that (1) there was no shortage of visitors, and (2) visitors were anxious to do what they came to the Visitor Center to do and "get on" with the rest of their trip. Forty two persons/groups were approached to achieve the target of 30 completed interviews, for a refusal rate of 30%.

The relatively small size of the sample should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. It would not be appropriate to generalize to the larger "park" population on the basis of this survey alone. Small samples of this kind are primarily designed to provide clues and insights that can help inform decisions related to visitor preferences and behaviors. They are sometimes referred to as "clinical" or "naturalistic" rather than statistically based studies.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The 30 persons in the sample divide into the following categories:

Male = 19
Female = 11

Size of Group:

1 = 2
2 = 14
3 = 4
4 = 4
4+ = 6

Age:

18-25 = 4
26-45 = 15
46-65 = 9
66+ = 2

The vast majority of groups of 2 were male and female. The vast majority of groups of more than two were family groups with children. The interviews were conducted in a manner consistent with the setting, that is to say, friendly and informal. The response of those being interviewed was cheerful and cooperative.

RESULTS

The questions below are reproduced exactly as they were stated verbally to the participants. The answers given have been paraphrased and categorized to aid in interpretation.

1. Why did you stop here at the Dickey Ridge Visitor Center on this trip?

Help plan our trip/get information/maps	12
Saw the sign on the road	5
Use the bathroom	5
Last stop on the Drive	3
First stop on the Drive	3
Heard about it/revisit	2

2. Why did you choose to come here to Shenandoah National Park on this trip?

See the mountains/scenic views/general exploration	16
Use trails/hiking	4
Family outing	2
Bring visitors	2
Bike riding	1
Visit battlefield sites	1
Camping	1
Recommended by friends	1
Picnic	1
Passing through	1

3. Where did you enter the Park on this trip?

Front Royal	27
Other	3

4. What are you going to do in the Park during this visit? (Note: This question was designed to get visitors to think more specifically about their plans during their visit. Question #2 was intended to be more general.)

Hike	12
Just drive	8
Look around	3
Picnic	2
Camp	2
Bike	1
Visit battlefield sites	1
Drive through	1

5. Did you ask questions/talk to any of the Park Staff in the Visitor Center just now?

Yes	14
No	16

(If "Yes") About what?

Get map/pamphlet/brochures	5
Where hiking trails are	4
Where falls are located	2
Where to go	2
Where to see bears	1

6. About how much time did you spend inside the Visitor Center?

Few minutes	3
5 minutes	8
10 minutes	9
15 minutes	4
30 minutes	4
1 hour	2

7. Do you feel that you now have the information you need to explore the Park?

Yes	28
No	2

(If "No") What else would you like to know about?

Where trails are/trail guide	1
Eating places	1

Additional, unsolicited remarks made about their visit included the following:

It's expensive to visit the Park
 It's very busy in the Visitor Center
 All Visitor Centers look alike.
 I feel a lot more confident about my visit now.

8. The staff of this Visitor Center is planning to install some new exhibits. Please look at these descriptions of possible exhibits and tell me whether you would find them to be (1) Very Interesting, (2) Somewhat Interesting, (3) Not Very Interesting, or (4) You Have No Opinion. (A card containing the following descriptions was handed to the visitor.)

	Very	Somewhat	Not Very
An exhibit featuring a large 3-D scale model of the entire park, showing the Skyline Drive, the overlook areas, the mountains, camp sites, and other Park features. You could highlight those things you wanted to know more about.	27	2	1
An exhibit about Skyline Drive, showing some of its changing, dramatic views and describing the work in planning, constructing, and landscaping the scenic opportunities.	15	8	7
A 3-dimensional exhibit featuring the animals and the habitats in Shenandoah's forests	23	6	1
A film showing the dynamic natural environment of Shenandoah National Park and the positive and negative impacts that humans have on it.	17	4	9

9. Is there anything else that you would like to see in the exhibits?

No	18
Yes	12

(If "Yes", what?)

The human story; original settlers	3
Historical things found	1
Pollution, human impact	1
Changing seasons	1
Weather information	1

Geology of the Park	1
Difficulty level of the trails	1
Insects and exotic species	1
Map of short trails	1
Hands-on exhibits for kids	1

Additional comments made at the end of the survey:

The geologic age figures given in the exhibits inside are not correct.

The Bible should be the basis of the exhibits (elderly gentleman).

Live animals would be good.

A film is not appropriate for this setting..Want to see the "real thing." (2)

The film should be short.

Will people watch a film?

(All the film comments were made by family groups.)

Of the 12 visitors who declined to participate, 7 were males, 5 females, and all were in the 26-45 age group. All but one was in a 2-person group.

DISCUSSION

Those who are familiar with the operation of the Dickey Ridge Visitor Center and who interact with visitors to the Center on a daily basis are in the best position to interpret and make use of the findings of the survey as presented above. However, there are several observations that can be made from the perspective of previous visitor studies that might be helpful

The Dickey Ridge Center is not, strictly speaking, a destination but a stop-over on the way "somewhere else". The reason most people stop is to "get information" and when they get it, they are on their way. The time data reflect this as do the answers to many of the other questions in the survey. Also, the reasons most often given by those who declined to participate in the survey had to do with their need to "move on" or "get someplace." (This is not true of all Centers. Some of them represent "end points" for many visitors who do not wish to, or are not prepared to, go beyond the Center site itself.)

While this point is obvious to anyone who has spent time at the Dickey Ridge Center, the implications this has for the proposed exhibition program may not be obvious. Almost all exhibitions that have been studied over the past 40 years suffer from trying to present too much information along with too many objects, with the result that the majority of visitors attend to only a small percentage of what is available to them and, in the process, fail to understand the intended information or messages. This is true even when exhibitions are in a destination-type setting, such as a major museum, science center, or historic site. It is obviously more true of a site at which visitors do not intend to spend very much time in the first place!

Several recommendations for the proposed exhibits derive from this analysis:

Each exhibit element proposed for Dickey Ridge should have a very clear message focus. That means that the visitor who spends only a few moments at the exhibit will be able to "get" the essence of the intended message. This can only be achieved if those who are preparing the

exhibit have articulated for themselves and in writing what it is that they wish the visitor to know, think, or believe, as a result of paying attention to that exhibit. This statement should guide the entire exhibit development cycle and the decisions that are made about content, including text/labels, graphics, objects, etc.

The way "messages" are presented to the visitor must be perceptually and cognitively clear and obvious. That means that the accompanying text material must be easy to see and easy to comprehend. The main message should be obvious by virtue of its prominence (type size, color, contrast, location) and it should be easy to comprehend (short, uncomplicated sentences and words that a 7th grade student could understand). Even a glance at the exhibit should be enough to convey the main message. That is often the "hook" that leads the visitor to "want to know more." (The use of questions has been found to be a good stimulator of visitor interest, especially when they have a humorous flavor. Also, counter-intuitive statements of the "Did you know?" variety can create interest.).

Objects should be selected only because they help to tell the story (get the message across). The text that relates to objects should make the relationship clear and unambiguous. Unnecessary facts and details (like scientific names) should not be included.

The use of interactive devices and hands-on displays are usually a major attraction to visitors. Opportunities for their use should be explored as long as they relate to the message of the exhibit.

The space available for the exhibits themselves is relatively small and it would be easy to "clutter it up." The display area should be open and clean looking, with space to move around without interfering with other visitors. When the visitor is trying to decide whether or not to enter the exhibit area, the trade off between "It looks like too much to do, lets move on" and "Gee, it looks kind of interesting, lets take a closer look" is critical.

The use of films is problematic. They seem to run counter to the notion that the visitor is inclined not to dwell very long in the Center. This is shown clearly in the "ratings" given to the four proposed exhibit ideas (Item #8) as well as the unsolicited comments made by several visitors at the end of the survey (Page 6). The film idea received the largest number of Not Very Interesting votes (30%).

The exhibit idea that got the most positive votes (90% Very Interesting) is the 3-D scale model of the park area. This may well be because it is congruent with the reason most visitors come into the Center - to get information. The fact that the visitor can select what it is he or she wants to know more about, is another positive feature. "Time to use" is in the hands of the visitor. An issue that detracts from the maximum effectiveness of this type of display is the fact that only one person at a time can use the interactive device.

The second most "popular" display that visitors were asked to rate was the 3-D exhibit of animals who live in the Park. Based on many other studies, this is not surprising, and such an exhibit would be almost sure to attract the younger members of the audience. (Of course, "live" would be even better!) This is also consistent with the number of comments made by many visitors during the interview that had to do with their interest in seeing "wild life" during their visit to the Park.

As a final note, it should be emphasized that all exhibit development efforts can benefit from getting inputs from visitors even as the various elements of the exhibit are being prepared. Thus, a label and text panel can be shown to several visitors to see if it "makes sense" to them. Often even a few such trials can reveal difficulties in the use of words or concepts that can be easily corrected and even re-tested. After the various elements of the exhibit are installed there is another opportunity to check on the ability of those elements to convey their intended messages by asking visitors what they think the exhibit is about. Where there is an interactive display, like the 3-D scale model, the question is "Do visitors know how to use it properly." Very often the label copy that explains how to operate the display is not clear or it is hard to see/locate. Making corrections to such problems can make a dramatic difference in the proper utilization of such displays.

There is little doubt that the Dickey Ridge Visitor Center is fulfilling its primary function as a source of information for visitors planning to make use of one of the most beautiful and accessible natural park areas in the United States. Without exception, the visitors who participated in this small scale survey were pleased with their visit and valued the information they received. A properly conceived and executed exhibit program can only enhance the quality of this experience.