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THE 1987 WISCONSIN CAMPER SURVEY: RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

by Linda J. Penaloza

In the fall of 1987, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources conducted a study of campers who, during the previous summer, had used state and private campgrounds in Wisconsin. The study had four purposes: 1) to develop a demographic profile of Wisconsin campers in 1987; 2) to determine the reasons why people camped that year; 3) to examine camper preferences for various camping options; and 4) to gauge camper reactions to proposed policy changes in state parks regarding the amount of security, the use of alcohol and drugs, the level of noise, and the presence of pets.

We selected a sample size of 2,304 state and 2,089 private campground campers. Each respondent was contacted 3 times, using the Dillmann (1978) technique. The survey form contained questions about camping behavior, motivations, and preferences, as well as queries about specific campgrounds visited, state camping policies, and personal background of the respondents. Using this method, we achieved response rates of 84% and 68%, respectively, for state and private campground campers.

The 1987 study was designed to replicate a similar, but less extensive, study conducted in 1980 by the University of Wisconsin-Extension Recreation Resources Center (Cooper et al. 1981). The earlier study examined some of the same questions that we looked at. We have used the 1980 results, where appropriate, for comparisons.

The Wisconsin Camper: Results of the 1987 Survey

The survey results defined some of the demographic characteristics, activities, and desires of the 1987 sample population. We used these results to develop recommendations that state park planners and private campground owners can use to plan, market, and manage Wisconsin parks.

Who They Were . . .

1) Family groups constituted a smaller percentage of the total number of camping parties in 1987 than in 1980. However, families accounted for about two-thirds of the camper groups in the 1987 survey, with the remaining one-third consisting of non-family members.

2) Almost half of all campers who responded to the 1987 survey were from rural areas or small towns.

3) People of all ages camped in

1987, but the camping activities and facilities that they preferred differed with their ages.

4) A surprising number of campers (13%) were "snowbirds," meaning that they spent an average of 2 months in southern climates during the winter.

5) The size of the camping parties in the 1987 survey was smaller than in the 1980 survey. With fewer people at each campsite, services such as campstores and canoe rentals received less profit. Consequently, more campsites were needed at each facility to make campgrounds profitable.

6) A substantial number of campers who responded to the 1987 survey indicated that, as children, they did not learn basic camping skills. Twenty-nine percent of the state campground campers and 36% of the private campground campers surveyed noted that they first camped after the age of 20. Of all the campers surveyed, 40% stated that parks should offer training programs for learning camping and other outdoor skills.

What They Did . . .

1) Campers who responded to the 1987 survey stayed at the campgrounds for an average of 2.5 nights, a decrease from the average of 3.5 nights indicated by campers in the 1980 survey.

2) Campers who responded to the 1987 survey stated that they camped often and visited the same campgrounds repeatedly. Over one-third of the campers in state campgrounds and about half of the campers in private campgrounds indicated that they returned to the same campgrounds year after year. Thus successful campgrounds are enjoying a high degree of repeat business.

3) Campers in the 1987 survey travelled an average distance of 20 miles one-way to a campground. This distance is an effective marketing area for a state or private campground.

4) In 1987 the activities that campers most frequently participated in included swimming, sightseeing, hiking, walking, picnicking, and fishing. But without more specific information, we cannot determine if campers preferred these activities over other activities, or chose campgrounds that specifically offered these activities instead of others.

5) Campers spent money in campgrounds and the areas around campgrounds on food, gasoline, auto service, and entertainment. Local communities benefitted from these expenditures and should cooperate with campground planners and owners to promote attendance.

6) A minority of campers (31% of the state campground campers and 37% of the private campground campers) who camped in 1987 planned their trips a month or more in advance. The others made more spontaneous vacation plans.

7) In both the 1987 and 1980 studies, the same number of campers used tents. However, campers in the 1987 study used fewer pop-up tent trailers and small recreational vehicles, and more large recreational vehicles, than campers in the 1980 study.

What They Wanted . . .

1) Campers emphasized the need for adequate security at campgrounds. Their specific concerns were for protection of personal property and for control of noise. Campers were also concerned that regulations regarding the use of alcohol and drugs be enforced. On the whole,

campers felt secure while camping, and rated security as a high priority in choosing a camping spot. This opinion was especially true for single-parent families or other non-traditional family groups.

2) Campers in 1987 wanted high quality camping experiences. According to the results of the survey, most campers (68% of the state campground campers and 58% of the private campground campers) were satisfied with the quality of their camping experiences in Wisconsin parks. For those who were not, we need to study the ways that camping experiences and facilities can be improved to meet their needs.

3) Campers did not want to feel crowded, whether they used state or private campgrounds. However, definitions of crowding differed among individuals. Most respondents in the 1987 survey indicated that they did not feel crowded in the parks, although there were some campers in each type of campground who did feel crowded.

4) Campers gave diverse reasons for camping. Some camped to be with family and friends, while others camped to get away from people. Some camped for excitement and stimulation, while others camped for quiet and relaxation.

5) Campers mentioned three items that they would like to see at most campgrounds: (a) cleaner facilities; (b) more and different recreation activities; and (c) more wildlife.

6) Most campers agreed that pets should not be allowed on park beaches or trails. However, a large percentage agreed that parks should offer separate facilities for pet owners. A few campers stated that pets should not be allowed at all in any state parks, and still fewer campers felt that pets should be allowed to run free at the parks.

Recommendations

1) Broaden the appeal of campgrounds for other types of camping parties than family groups. Because the number of traditional families is in the minority today, there will be more room for expansion among non-family than family groups.

2) Increase the percentage of sites with the capacity for handling larger recreational vehicles, decrease the percentage of sites for small and moderately sized vehicles, and retain the current percentage of sites for tents.

3) Improve noise control and enforce restrictions on alcohol and drug use. If campgrounds are kept quiet and controlled, campers feel more secure, and therefore enjoy the camping experience more.

4) Alleviate overcrowding through redesign and expansion of campgrounds and by providing more spacious campsites.

5) Provide more and different recreational activities for campers. People of all ages and backgrounds camp, and they bring with them diverse interests and expectations. Campground managers and owners need to consider how to make camping experiences as diverse and enjoyable as possible. Recreational activities can be promoted and used to advertise campgrounds. These activities become reasons for campers to return to campgrounds.

6) Offer training programs on basic outdoor and camping skills. Many campers, especially those who did not camp as children, expressed interest in learning the skills necessary to enjoy camping.

7) Keep toilet and washroom facilities clean and tidy. Most campers expect clean facilities, even in unimproved campgrounds.

8) Provide wildlife habitat in campgrounds. The presence of wildlife can be used as part of a promotional effort.

9) Advertise primarily in small or medium-sized towns within 200 miles of a campground. Flyers distributed in small towns can effectively reach large numbers of potential campers,and can be far less expensive than advertising in large cities.

10) Advertise not only during the spring and early summer, but also throughout the summer to take advantage of the many campers who decide within a week of their vacation where they will be going.

11) Advertise during the winter months at southern camper events and attractions to get the attention of those individuals who move north in the summer.

12) Offer at private campgrounds the same types of camping experiences offered at state parks, especially if the two facilities are located near each other. This effort will help to meet camper expectations.

References

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