

The benefits of live interpretive programs to Great Smoky Mountains National Park



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LIVE INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS AT NATIONAL PARKS

serve multiple functions (fig. 1). They help to reveal to park visitors the deeper meanings associated with parks' cultural and natural resources (Ham 1992; Tilden 1977). They can enhance visitors' enjoyment by providing entertaining experiences or better orientation to the available sights, resources, and activities (Moscardo 1999). They can effect emotional connections to landscapes, to animal or plant life, and to the history being interpreted (Tilden 1977). They can influence visitors' attitudes to the park they are visiting, toward the National Park Service, or toward an ecosystem, a historical event, a social movement, or the environment or nature in general (e.g., Powell et al. 2009). Research and theory also suggest that interpretation can influence visitors' behaviors both during their visits and after they have left the park (Ham 2009).

In conjunction with a study designed to learn why visitors attend (or do not attend) ranger-led interpretive programs at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, we set out to address three additional research questions that provide the focus of this report:

- How many visitors attend a ranger-led interpretive program? While general visitor surveys conducted by the Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho typically ask visitors whether they have attended a ranger-led interpretive program on the particular visit during which they were contacted by the survey team, we sought to find out how many visitors

had attended a program in the park when multiple visits are considered.

- How do visitors feel about ranger-led interpretive programs, regardless of their attendance? We sought to understand how visitors value the existence of ranger-led interpretive programs as well as their opinions of programs they had attended.
- What impacts do ranger-led interpretive programs appear to have on attendees? We gauged program impacts on a number of attitudes and intentions relevant to park management.

Methods overview

This study was an initiative of Virginia Tech and Clemson University, and it was funded by the Friends of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.¹ We conducted a survey with a representative sample of visitors to the areas of Great Smoky Mountains National Park where most interpretive programs are offered. The survey explored attendance patterns and asked multiple questions about visitors' reasons for attending or not attending ranger-led interpretive programs² in the park. It also asked about

¹While the study was permitted by Great Smoky Mountains National Park and discussed with its staff, park staff did not participate in the research directly.

²We described ranger-led programs in the following manner: "Great Smoky Mountains National Park offers a number of ranger-led programs for park visitors. These include campfire programs, guided walks and hikes, cultural demonstrations, junior ranger programs, and numerous other activities."

Abstract

We conducted a visitor survey at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee and North Carolina, to investigate attendance at live (ranger-led) interpretive programs, visitors' attitudes toward those programs, and the impacts of the programs on visitors' appreciation and awareness of park resources. We found that more than a quarter of the park visitors we contacted during the nine-day study had attended a ranger-led program at the park, either on this or a prior visit. This is substantially more than the most recent general visitor survey at the park in the prior year, which considered only the current visit. Results suggest that visitors to Great Smoky Mountains National Park highly value ranger-led interpretive experiences regardless of their direct participation in them. Most program attendees also suggested that the programs had increased their appreciation of this national park and the National Park Service (NPS), increased the likelihood that they would donate to the park if asked, and made them more aware of this country's cultural heritage and environmental issues and concerns. The study affirms the importance of live interpretive programs for enhancing the visitor experience and promoting positive attitudes toward Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the National Park Service.

Key words: interpretation, visitation, evaluation, survey research

group characteristics, prior experiences, motivations for visiting the park in general, quality assessments of programs for those who had attended, information sources for finding out about programs, and general opinions about ranger-led programs, the national park, and the National Park Service. This report focuses on patterns in program attendance, opinions about ranger-led programs, and the programs' impacts on participants. Additional results are reported elsewhere (Stern et al. 2010).

Contacts with visitors were made from 25 July 2009 to 2 August 2009. Respondents were briefly told about the purpose of the survey and were invited to participate. If they agreed to participate, they were handed a postcard with instructions for accessing a survey online, along with a personal identification number (PIN). The PINs were used primarily to associate responses with data collected on-site and to maintain respondents' confidentiality. One e-mail reminder was sent 10 days after the on-site recruitment period to those who provided an e-mail address and had not yet completed the survey. We also printed 200 mail-back surveys with return envelopes and postage for those without Internet access or who stated a preference for the paper survey.

More than 80% of respondents viewed ranger-led programs as important to the mission of the National Park Service.

Results

Of the 2,064 visitors approached, a total of 1,830 visitors accepted either the postcard or one of the 200 mail-back paper surveys. We received 617 completed surveys, indicating a 34% response rate. The demographics and trip characteristics of our survey respondents matched those of the most recent general visitor survey (Papadogiannaki and Hollenhorst 2008), suggesting that we achieved a representative sample of visitors to the park.

Program attendance

Sixty-three percent of respondents were aware that the park offered ranger-led interpretive programs. Of the 617 respondents, 82 (13.3%) reported attending a ranger-led program on this particular visit. Of those who expressed an awareness of program existence, 21.1% attended a program on this visit. Ranger talks were the most commonly attended programs (table 1, next page).

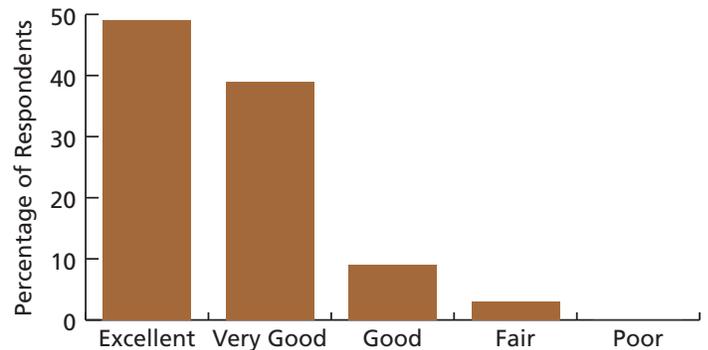
We also asked respondents whether they had ever attended a ranger-led program at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, either on this visit or a prior one. More than a quarter (26.4%) of respondents reported having attended a ranger-led program at the park at least once when multiple visits are considered. Nearly half (42%) of those who expressed awareness of these programs reported attending at least one interpretive program on this or a previous visit.

Visitor opinions

All respondents were asked their opinions of park management and whether ranger-led interpretive programs are important to the mission of the National Park Service. Respondents who were not aware that the park offered these programs were asked whether these programs should be offered (table 2, next page). Those who were aware of programs were asked additional questions about their value (table 3, next page). Respondents were asked to rate their answers to the questions on a five-point scale, reflecting their level of agreement with each statement (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Opinions of the park and of the importance of ranger-led programs were high for each group. More than 80% of respondents viewed ranger-led programs as important to the mission of the National Park Service.

Table 1. Survey respondents' attendance at interpretive programs

Program	Total Sample (n = 617)	Those Aware of Any Ranger Program (n = 388)
Talk by a ranger	8.4%	13.4%
Cultural or craft demonstration	6.0%	9.5%
Junior ranger program	2.6%	4.1%
Guided daytime walk or hike	2.4%	3.9%
Amphitheatre program	1.9%	3.1%
Night hike	1.0%	1.5%
Campfire program	0.0%	0.1%

**Figure 2.** Opinions of ranger-led program quality for those who attended a program on this park visit.**Table 2. Opinions about the park and interpretive programs of those unaware of the existence of ranger-led programs**

Statement	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Neutral	Agree or Strongly Agree
Great Smoky Mountains National Park is well managed.	4.6%	9.3%	86.1%
The park should offer ranger-led programs.	1.2%	13.6%	85.2%
Ranger-led programs are important to the mission of the National Park Service.	2.8%	15.0%	82.3%

Table 3. Opinions about the park and interpretive programs of those aware of the existence of ranger-led programs

Statement	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Neutral	Agree or Strongly Agree
Great Smoky Mountains National Park is well managed.	2.0%	7.8%	91.2%
Ranger-led programs are important to me.	6.7%	45.2%	48.1%
Ranger-led programs are important to the mission of the National Park Service.	2.3%	13.6%	84.7%
If ranger-led programs did not exist, I would be disappointed.	8.7%	38.2%	53.2%
If ranger-led programs did not exist, it would lower my opinion of the National Park Service.	22.6%	27.2%	50.1%
If ranger-led programs did not exist, it would lower my opinion of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.	27.5%	27.8%	44.6%

Table 4. Comparisons of opinions about the park and ranger-led programs for those who had ever attended a live program vs. those who had not

Statement	Ever Attended?	Mean	Mean Difference
Great Smoky Mountains National Park is well managed.	Yes	4.26	0.05
	No	4.21	
Ranger-led programs are important to me.	Yes	3.88	0.59*
	No	3.29	
Ranger-led programs are important to the mission of the National Park Service.	Yes	4.31	0.29*
	No	4.02	
If ranger-led programs did not exist, I would be disappointed.	Yes	3.82	0.43*
	No	3.39	
If ranger-led programs did not exist, it would lower my opinion of the National Park Service.	Yes	3.68	0.55*
	No	3.13	
If ranger-led programs did not exist, it would lower my opinion of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.	Yes	3.45	0.45*
	No	3.00	

*Statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Impacts of ranger-led programs on attendees' attitudes

Participating in a ranger-led program(s) has . . .	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Neutral	Agree or Strongly Agree
Increased my appreciation of Great Smoky Mountains National Park (n = 77).	2.6%	9.1%	88.3%
Increased my appreciation of the National Park Service (n = 76).	2.6%	9.2%	88.2%
Increased the likelihood that I would donate to the park if asked (n = 75).	6.7%	34.7%	58.7%
Made me more aware of environmental issues and concerns (n = 75).	9.1%	29.9%	61.0%
Made me more aware of this country's cultural heritage (n = 77).	9.1%	16.9%	74.0%

Respondents who attended a program (either on this or a prior visit; n = 163) were also asked about the quality of the ranger-led programs they had attended. Respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of their ranger-led programs on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = good; 4 = very good; 5 = excellent). Respondents were also provided an option to report the quality of programs as “mixed (some good, some not).” No respondents selected this category. None rated the program(s) they had attended as poor, and 88.6% rated the program(s) as excellent or very good (fig. 2). The overall average score was 4.35.

Impacts of programs

To gauge the impact of attending an interpretive program, we divided the sample into those who attended a program (either on this or a prior visit; n = 163) and those who had not (n = 464). We then compared the two groups' mean scores for each attitudinal statement (table 4). While opinions about the management of the park were not significantly different between the two groups, opinions about the importance of ranger-led programs were more positive for those who had attended one.

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which the program(s) they had attended on this visit impacted their appreciation of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the National Park Service, their awareness of environmental issues and this country's cultural heritage, and their likelihood of donating to the park if asked (table 5). The results suggest that the programs had a strong positive impact on most respondents. Nearly 90% of respondents reported that attending a ranger-led program increased their appreciation of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the National Park Service. More than 60% of respondents indicated that their awareness of environmental issues and this country's cultural heritage increased. More than half reported that their attendance increased the likelihood that they would donate to the park if asked.

[No respondents] rated the program(s) they had attended as poor, and 88.6% rated the program(s) as excellent or very good.

Summary

Results from this survey show that more visitors have attended interpretive programs in the park (26.4%) than accounted for in the most recent general visitor survey, which found that approximately 9% of visitors attended an interpretive program on the specific visit during which their participation in the survey was solicited (Papadogiannaki and Hollenhorst 2008). By accounting for multiple visits, our research suggests that interpretive programs may be attended by a larger portion of visitors than previously assumed, particularly at parks where repeat visitation is common, such as Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Visitors highly value ranger-led interpretive experiences regardless of their direct participation in them. More than 80% agreed that ranger-led programs are important to the mission of the National Park Service. Just over half of those who were aware of the existence of ranger-led programs suggested that their absence would lower their opinion of the National Park Service.

Program attendees rated highly those programs they had attended, and most suggested that these programs had increased their appreciation of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the National Park Service, increased the likelihood that they would donate to the park if asked, and made them more aware of this country's cultural heritage and environmental issues and concerns.

Nearly 90% of respondents reported that attending a ranger-led program increased their appreciation of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the National Park Service. More than 60% of respondents indicated that their awareness of environmental issues and this country's cultural heritage increased.

In conclusion, the study affirms the importance of interpretive programs for enhancing the visitor experience at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, promoting positive attitudes toward this park and the National Park Service, increasing awareness, and building constituencies for achieving the NPS mission.

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