

Penn's Parks for All Surveys

Overall Executive Summary

Pennsylvania State Parks provide opportunities for enjoying healthful outdoor recreation and serve as outdoor classrooms for environmental education. To ensure that Pennsylvania state parks continue to provide for this mission into the future, it is important to have careful input and planning from a variety of stakeholders. It's been more than 25 years since the release of *State Parks 2000*, the previous strategic plan for Pennsylvania state parks. Given rapid demographic, environmental, and economic changes, it is necessary to revisit planning for state parks for the next 25 years. One part of the *Penn's Parks for All* strategic planning process was to conduct citizen and stakeholder surveys to understand how Pennsylvanians use and perceive state parks.

The purpose of these surveys was to assess the attitudes and opinions of state park visitors, the general public, and ethnic minorities in Pennsylvania regarding key issues for the future of the Pennsylvania state parks to inform the *Penn's Parks for All* strategic plan. The studies included an in-park and online survey of state park visitors, a telephone survey of the public, and an online survey of ethnic minorities. The studies were based upon the prior state park strategic plan, *State Parks 2000*, prior state park research from Pennsylvania State University's Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management (Penn State RPTM), as well as current issues of concern to the Bureau of State Parks.

The survey questionnaires, as a whole, focused on the following themes, though not every survey included questions covering all of these themes:

- Who visits State Parks?
- Should we change the current outdoor recreation opportunities or experiences in the State Parks?
- Should we enhance existing overnight accommodations in our State Parks?
- How should we pay for our State Parks?
- How can we protect our State Parks?
- Should we provide more modern conveniences in the State Parks?
- How satisfied are visitors with services and facilities at State Parks?
- How appropriate are various activities for State Parks?
- How can the experience at State Parks be improved?
- What are the constraints that Pennsylvanians face to State Park visitation?
- How do different ethnicities perceive the importance and performance of outreach to ethnically diverse communities?
- To what extent do ethnic minorities feel a sense of welcome and belonging in State Parks?
- Do Pennsylvanians know about free entrance to State Parks?
- How can Pennsylvania State Parks better accommodate the needs and interests of various ethnicities?

Methods

Penn State RPTM researchers worked in cooperation with Bureau of State Parks staff to plan and design these survey efforts. Beginning in spring 2017, meetings were held with managers and staff in all state park regions, including the central office in Harrisburg, PA. The purpose of these strategic planning meetings was to solicit state park employee input on the

Penn's Parks for All plan as well as which questions should be asked in the public input surveys. Following these meetings, Penn State RPTM worked with the Bureau of State Parks to design the questionnaires administered in these surveys.

The in-park and online visitor survey was designed to elicit input from users of state parks. In contrast, the telephone survey was a random sample of cell phone and land line numbers designed to reach a representative demographic of the Pennsylvania population; therefore, producing survey findings that represent the opinions of the general public. Finally, an online survey was designed to gauge the opinions and preferences of the most prominent ethnicities in Pennsylvania: White, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Mixed Race/Other.

Key Findings

Park Visitation

- Visitation patterns were generally consistent across age, gender, income, and rural/urban residence. However, a few differences did emerge across surveys. For example, White respondents reported more frequent visitation compared to Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander respondents.

State Park Experience

- An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that State Parks should continue to emphasize healthful outdoor recreation activities and that visitors to State Parks should expect a quiet, natural, and/or wild experience. In the telephone and online ethnicity panel surveys, there was also majority support across race/ethnicity for offering more active adventure recreation activities. Agreement with the mission of the Bureau of State Parks has remained consistent over time between *State Parks 2000* and *Penn's Parks for All*.
- While majority support was generally present across race/ethnicity in the telephone and online ethnicity panel surveys, Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino respondents were noticeably more supportive of travel and camping vacation packages and splash playgrounds.

Overnight Accommodations

- State park visitor respondents, on average, disagreed that state parks' modern family cabin or camping areas should include a central all-purpose social hall; however, Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino respondents were far more likely to agree with this item. Responses in the telephone and online ethnicity panel surveys were slightly more positive towards the development of a few more inns, construction of larger cabins that can accommodate multiple families, and central all-purpose social halls; and Black/African and Hispanic/Latino respondents were generally supportive of these ideas.
- Within the ethnic minority panel, there was generally majority support for adding more on-site water, sewer, and electrical hookups for campsites.

Paying for State Parks

- Maintenance is a significant issue throughout the Pennsylvania state park system. The maintenance backlog for state parks is estimated at over \$500 million. As noted in the Pennsylvania Parks and Forest Foundation's (2018) *The Legacy of Pennsylvania's State*

Parks and Forests: The Future is in Our Hands, built and natural infrastructure needs in Pennsylvania state parks far outweigh the current budget from the commonwealth.

- Across all demographic groups, support was high for the allocation of additional funding from the commonwealth to reduce the backlog of state park rehabilitation projects. This support has remained steady, and in some cases, increased since *State Parks 2000*.
- Respondents generally disagreed with the institution of new annual/entrance fees, the closing of facilities that are too expensive to operate or maintain, or the leasing of state park facilities to private businesses or non-profit organizations. *Penn's Park for All* respondents were far less supportive than *State Parks 2000* respondents in their support of a new annual or daily entrance fee or parking permit system.

Protecting State Parks

- Respondents, on average, agreed that when impacts of over use are evident at a state park, participation should be limited.
- Support for increasing the protection of the state parks by enlarging boundaries, devoting more staff and funding to conserving native habitat, continuing its strategic land acquisition program, and improving the water quality of streams and lakes was high and appeared consistent across all demographic groups.
- Support has remained consistent since *State Parks 2000* for continuing to acquire land that conserves high value resources and helps to manage the parks.

Modern Conveniences

- While many respondents in the park visitor survey disagreed with increasing kitchen amenities, air conditioning, and internet access, there was still not majority agreement that nothing needs to be modernized and that parks now provide adequate conveniences.
- In contrast, in the telephone and online ethnic minority panel, majority support was consistent across race/ethnicities for having air conditioning in some modern cabins.
- In terms of increasing kitchen amenities and offering internet access, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander respondents in both the telephone and online ethnic minority panel surveys were more supportive than other race/ethnicity groups, with majorities agreeing or strongly agreeing that state parks should offer these amenities.

Satisfaction

- Overall, respondents were satisfied with the services and facilities at state parks, with no mean response dropping below 'average', and the majority of responses for every item being either 'good' or 'excellent'.

Appropriateness of Activities

- Overall, special events with greater than 1,000 attendees, trails for motorized use, and resort-style development were viewed as inappropriate, with the majority of respondents marking all of these items as either inappropriate or somewhat inappropriate. Although it should be noted that minority respondents in both the telephone and online ethnic minority panel surveys were more likely to agree or strongly agree with these items than White respondents.
- Respondents of all races/ethnicities generally found traditional ball sports, swimming pools, small special events, single use trail systems, shared use trail systems, increasing

the number of large picnic areas, and the maintenance of large grassy fields for sports to be appropriate. [Note that this question was only asked in the ethnicity survey.]

Improving the Visitor Experience

- Among telephone survey respondents, common themes for improving the visitor experience included improving sanitation/waste management, increasing funding for state parks and keeping them free of cost to the visitor, increasing staff and law enforcement presence, and providing additional education, interpretation, and activities at state parks.

Constraints

Overall, constraints to state park visitation were low among the telephone and online ethnic minority panel samples. However, younger respondents, low-income respondents, and ethnic minorities reported higher constraints, most notably regarding a lack of transportation, lack of public transportation, and the state parks being too far away.

Outreach to Ethnically Diverse Communities

- Majorities of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino respondents' rated increasing engagement and outreach with ethnically diverse communities to be very important. While the other ethnicities were slightly more moderate in their response to this question, all ethnicities gave a higher rating to the *importance* of engagement and outreach efforts than to the *effectiveness* of the Bureau's current efforts.

Sense of Welcome and Belonging

- Sense of welcome and belonging was highest among White and Asian/Pacific Islander respondents, followed by Hispanic/Latino respondents. Sense of welcome and belonging was notably lower among Mixed Race/Other and Black/African American respondents.

Free Entrance to State Parks

- Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino respondents were less likely to know that Pennsylvania state parks are free than respondents from other races/ethnicities.
- Across race/ethnicity, users were more likely than non-users to know about free entry to state parks.

Needs and Interests of Various Ethnicity Groups

- Some of the most common themes from ethnic minority respondents included equality, providing a welcoming atmosphere, hosting cultural events and incorporating cultural foods, promoting state park in their communities and in multiple languages, and hiring more diverse staff.

Conclusion

This report presents the results of the in-park and online park visitor survey, representative telephone survey, and online ethnic minority survey. Findings from this report will be discussed at future citizen engagement meetings with specific groups to see what is most relevant and what additional issues need to be discussed. This document will inform the *Penn's Parks for All* planning process, which will guide the Pennsylvania state park system for the next 25 years.