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CAMPER CHARACTERISTICS DIFFER AT PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL CAMPGROUNDS IN NEW ENGLAND

Abstract. Early findings from a 5-year panel survey of New England campers' changing leisure habits are reported. A significant number of campers interviewed at four commercial campgrounds differed in their camping behavior from campers at four state park and national forest campgrounds. The most apparent differences are the higher degree of mobility and the larger dollar investment in camping equipment of the commercial campground visitors.

Most managers of forest recreation areas recognize several different categories of visitors. Understanding the characteristics and expectations of these groupings is prerequisite to responsive recreation enterprise management. Camping, for example, takes many forms, and satisfying the camper is easier with the realization that a satisfactory camping experience has many meanings depending upon each visitor's equipment, interests, and past camping experiences.

Some early findings from a 5-year panel survey of campers' changing leisure habits by the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station reveal the existence of several potentially important differences between campers visiting commercial and public campgrounds.

In a sample selected to include a variety of camping experiences throughout New England (fig. 1) a significant number of campers interviewed at four large commercial campgrounds differed in their camping behavior from campers interviewed at four large state park and national forest campgrounds. The campers at the commercial campgrounds also had a greater investment in camping equipment than campers at public campgrounds (table 1).

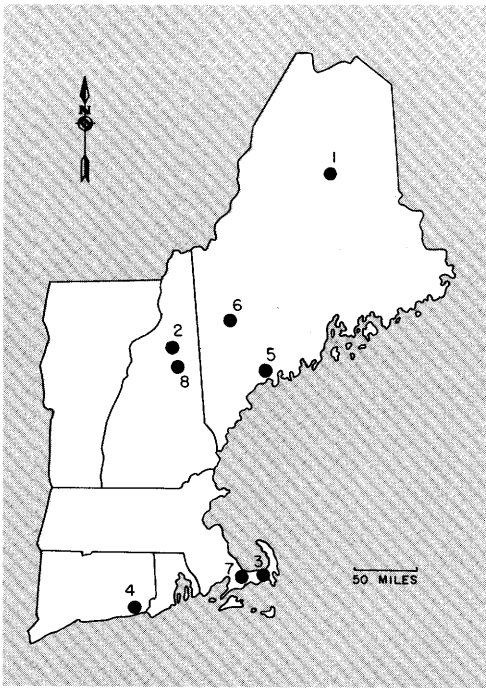


Figure 1.—The public campgrounds sampled in 1964 were: 1. Baxter State Park, Me.; 2. Dolly Copp Campground, White Mountain National Forest, N. H.; 3. Nickerson State Park, Mass.; and 4. Rocky Neck State Park, Conn. The commercial campgrounds sampled in 1965 were: 5. Hermit Island Campground, Bath, Me.; 6. Lakeside Pines Campground, North Bridgton, Me.; 7. Sweetwater Forest, Brewster, Mass.; and 8. Eastern Slope Campground, North Conway, N. H.

Although many of the differences are highly significant, they fall short of suggesting that visitors to these two types of campgrounds are opposites. In fact, many campers freely alternate between the two kinds. However, sufficiently dissimilar populations of campers were present at these public and commercial campgrounds to provide a warning that the concept of an average camper is not a useful management tool for either public or private camping enterprises.

Differences in Camping Behavior

Without trying to depict an average visitor to either public or private campgrounds, several useful observations can be made from the findings presented in table 1. Most obvious among these are the interest in mobility and travel and the apparent greater sociability of a large segment of commercial campground visitors.

The high incidence of both sophisticated camping equipment and a preference for travel-type camping trips among the commercial campground respondents has valuable implications for managers of these enterprises. Since the camper's outlook on camping, as well as his equipment are often oriented toward high mobility, private campground managers may find that incentives such as fee reductions are of little value in influencing campers to stay more than a few days in one place. How-

ever, a similar incentive geared to influencing campers to return for future visits might be highly successful since the proportion of repeat visitation at private areas without the use of such incentives, was about 57 percent higher than at public areas.

High mobility among campers can influence management and design guidelines through the campers' obvious need for facilities that are designed for ease of access and use. And the highly mobile camper will probably require more personalized services and conveniences at the campground, whereas the extended visit vacation camper might well be satisfied to have these services available at the nearest town or to provide them himself.

Further, this greater interest in travel and mobility might logically be interpreted as a desire for increased social contact. And the implication

Table 1. — Differences between visitors to eight large public and commercial campgrounds in New England¹

Campers who —	445	421	Difference
	commercial campground visitors	public campground visitors	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1. Tend to revisit campgrounds rather than try new ones **	274	174	57
2. Are recent initiates to camping (last 9 years) **	350	287	22
3. Do not intend to return for a future visit *	20	36	80
4. Considered an alternative destination for this trip **	121	170	40
5. Selected this campground on the recommendation of others **	86	44	95
6. Own, rent, or have the use of a camping trailer **	217	105	107
7. Consider cross-country travel the most desirable type of vacation **	259	187	38
8. Are members of a camping or outdoor organization **	208	102	104
9. Are on a vacation trip of at least 2-weeks duration*	231	190	22
10. Select campsites by their location rather than condition *	276	227	22
11. Camped for 20 days or more during the current year **	222	160	39

¹ Chi-square analyses of the response proportions at public and private campgrounds revealed these differences were significant at: * the 0.05 level; ** at the 0.01 level.

for management of increased camper contact is the obvious value of word-of-mouth advertising.

The majority of campers are probably not in the woods to follow Thoreau's ideal of living simply and alone. Most campers appear to be gregarious, socially-conscious people, and to say that commercial campground visitors may be more gregarious than those who visit public areas sounds decidedly speculative. However, the fact remains that the proportion of respondents selecting their campsites on the advice of others, and the proportion belonging to a camping organization, were both about 100 percent higher at the commercial campgrounds. And during the year in which they were interviewed, 50 percent of the commercial area respondents camped for 20 days or more, as compared with 38 percent of the public area campers. In short, a significant proportion of the commercial campground patrons were more likely to pick their camping destinations because of their interaction with many other campers even though their individual visits averaged fewer days per campground and their years of camping experience were fewer than those of public campground visitors.

The influence of camping equipment in this relationship is obvious since the more mobile trailer-camper can see more campgrounds and make contact with more campers of similar interests than would be possible for the less mobile tent-camper. Further, the more sophisticated camping equipment attracts the attention of other campers and facilitates the process of socializing in any type of weather.

Additional evidence that a large proportion of these private campground visitors are, in fact, basically more socially oriented in their camping is found in a comparison of camper response to the question of their primary reasons for camping. Approximately 11 percent of the private area respondents camped *primarily* because they enjoyed meeting other campers, although only half as many public area visitors claimed this as their primary motivation. Undoubtedly the desire to meet and visit other campers is a strong secondary motivation for many who go camping primarily for reasons of economy and recreation.

As an interesting comparison, this study's findings about camper motivation are similar to those of an earlier survey of private campground visitors in New Hampshire (table 2).

Since camping at developed campgrounds is not a retreat from socialization, and in fact appears to represent an intentional increase in social contact for many, the design and management of some types of campgrounds should be geared to meeting the social needs of their patrons. For

Table 2. — A comparison of reasons given for camping by private campground visitors in two independent surveys

Reasons for camping ¹	New Hampshire ²	New England
	1964	1965
	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1. Social interest	11	11
2. Travel interest	19	35
3. Economical vacation	30	32
4. Recreational interest	32	—
5. Physical exercise	—	6
6. Closeness to nature	—	11
Size of sample	978	445

¹ The terms social, travel, etc., are simply descriptive shorthand for the actual categories presented in each survey.

² Drawn from THE PRIVATELY-OWNED CAMPGROUNDS OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, Study Report No. 7 of the New Hampshire State Planning Project.

example, the entire social atmosphere of a campground can be modified by something as simple as excessive campsite spacing, unnecessary restrictions on the use of facilities, or the lack of organized group recreational programs.

Differences in Camping Investment

Nearly all of the campers interviewed had large family incomes; 44 percent and 37 percent, respectively, of private and public visitors reported a weekly gross income of \$200 or more, and 80 percent of all persons interviewed earned at least \$150 per week. And they evidently spent a substantial portion of their income on camping trips and equipment. Those having equipment investments of over \$1,000 were more common at the private campgrounds. Public campground patrons were slightly less likely to have the major part of their total recreational investment tied up in camping equipment. However, camping equipment alone accounted for more than three-quarters of the total recreational investment for most of the campers interviewed at both public and private areas.

A comparison of camping investment categories reveals that a sizeable expenditure for camping equipment is not uncommon. However, the larger investments are considerably more common among commercial campground visitors, among camping association members, and among those who have been residentially stable for the past 10 years (table 3).

Some indication of the extent to which the heavily-invested camper is involved with camping is revealed by his high rate of membership in camping organizations and his frequently lower level of residential (and

Table 3. — Percentages of campers in four equipment-investment classes visiting commercial campgrounds, belonging to one or more camping or outdoor organizations, and residing at the same address for the past 10 years.

Equipment investment class	Size of class (campers)	Percent of investment who are —		
		At private campgrounds	Members of organizations	Residentially stable
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Under \$250	326	39	8	38
\$251 to \$500	221	48	15	43
\$501 to \$1,000	152	55	22	37
Over \$1,000	166	76	41	54

occupational?) mobility. But, his involvement is also evident from his attitudes toward camping and his level of investment in other outdoor pursuits. The proportion of respondents who agree that camping is "basically a wilderness experience" was significantly higher among campers with a minimum investment of \$1,000 in camping equipment, and therefore tended to be higher among private campground visitors even though all of the private campgrounds sampled were highly developed with modern conveniences (fig. 2).

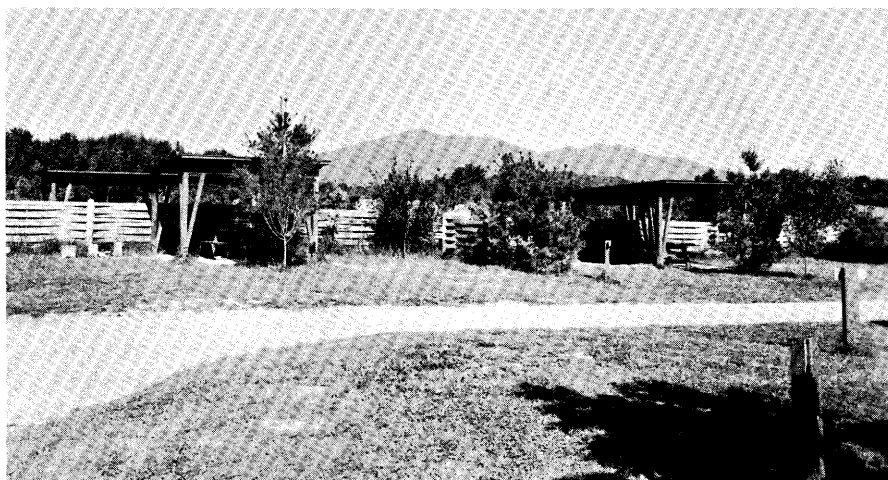


Figure 2. — Ninety-one percent of the campers interviewed at this very modern, carefully landscaped campground felt that camping was basically a "wilderness" experience. Eastern Slope Campground, North Conway, N. H.

Rather than investing in other kinds of leisure activities, the heavily invested camper seems to be totally preoccupied with camping. Eighty-four percent of the campers with an investment greater than \$1,000 in camping equipment had few, if any, other outdoor recreational interests. But camping was the dominant interest for only about 46 percent of those having less than a \$250 equipment investment (table 4).

Because of their more expensive equipment, it is not at all surprising to find that private campground visitors also averaged a much higher dollar investment in camping. The implication that this higher investment may reflect a more-or-less permanent commitment to camping is a valuable one for private enterprise. For, unless this intensity of camper interest is matched by an equally serious investment of time and money on the part of the campground owner, he may never develop the high rate of repeat visitation that seems to be essential to success in the campground business.

Summary and Conclusions

Like most camper surveys, this one has limitations in the application of its findings to other campgrounds and other regions. Perhaps the major limitation is that all of the campgrounds in this study are relatively large, averaging 200 family units at the commercial areas and 250 units at the public areas, and many of these visitor characteristics may differ considerably at the more common smaller campgrounds. For example, length of camping visits tends to increase directly with campground size, apparently because of a large number of attractions at big campgrounds.

Despite the limitations of the survey, two general and related observations about the visitors to the public and private campgrounds sampled in this study should interest most managers and prospective managers of camping enterprises. Most apparent is the high degree of mobility among a large segment of private campground visitors and its related effects of greater social contact, improved knowledgeability about alterna-

Table 4. — The value of camping equipment as a percent of total recreational investment for each of four camping equipment categories

Percent of total recreational investment	Persons having camping equipment valued at —				Total
	Under \$251	\$251-\$500	\$501-\$1,000	Over \$1,000	
0 to 29	88	26	6	1	121
30 to 69	79	65	42	25	211
70 to 100	141	129	104	139	513
Total	308	220	152	165	845

tive campgrounds, and an increased need for more intensive campground service. And related to that mobility is the large dollar investment of many private campground visitors with its implications of a semi-permanent camping interest, and a willingness to pay a reasonable price for facilities that are attractive and convenient.

To determine how permanent these interests are, how equipment ownership changes over time, and how participation in camping is affected by changing leisure interests and changing financial status, this panel of New England campers is being re-surveyed annually over a 5-year period. Future findings in these trends will be reported as they become evident to provide forest recreation land managers with some better insights concerning their visitor's changing interests and expectations.

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