

ADDENDUM

Hikers Summary

Focus Groups with
Recent Users and Lapsed/Non-Users
of Texas State Parks
Contract #177796

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Attracting Texas Residents to Texas State Parks

Conducted for:

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Austin, Texas

Conducted by:



Hikers (Recent User) Target

Respondent Profile

A focus group of hikers was conducted in Austin on July 26, 2007.

- Ages 25-60
- Hiked or walked a hiking/nature trail at least 3 times in the past year
- Hiked or walked a hiking/nature trail at a state park at least once in the past year
- Half moderate and half high interest in nature-related outdoor activities at parks
- 4 Hispanic, 1 African-American, 5 Caucasian
- Half men, half women
- Half had children at home

These “hikers” walk frequently and do not seem to be seeking a challenging hiking experience on long hiking trails.

Hiking Trails: General Perceptions, Usage/Habits and Decision Factors

Perceptions

- Top of mind images when thinking of hiking or walking hiking/nature trails focused on relaxation, stress-relief and the beauty of the areas and the quiet and stillness.

Many enjoy taking their children and grandchildren when hiking/walking trails, particularly in the city parks and greenbelts.

- Hikers seem to enjoy the outdoors, and hiking/walking appears secondary to being at a park or outdoor area for varied activities – hiking alone does not appear to be the primary motivator among this group.

Usage and Habits

- Most frequent hiking/walking tends to be in city parks and greenbelts. Less frequently (one to four times a year) they will go to a state or national park. Almost half of the group had been to more than one state park in the past year.
- Hiking and walking is described as easily accessible in town, and something many frequently enjoy in city parks (Town Lake Hike and Bike Trails, Zilker Park, City Park) and numerous greenbelt areas in town.
- Favorite parks for hiking outside of Austin include Inks Lake for easy overnights/camping by the lake and variety of terrain (including hiking to Devils Hole), Enchanted Rock for a day trip and hiking, and Longhorn Caverns. West Texas/Davis Mountains was also mentioned as a favorite because of the uniqueness of the terrain.

The unique setting tends to be cited as the primary reason for the appeal – they offer something that can't be experienced around Austin.

- When hiking or walking hiking/nature trails, Hikers:
 - Frequently hike/walk in city parks and greenbelts
 - If going to an out-of-town park, tend to go on weekends due to their work
 - Prefer Spring and Fall due to cooler weather, and occasionally winter (less crowded)
 - Tend to go with family or friends if going outside of the city
 - Enjoy taking their children or grandchildren on nature or hiking trails
 - Participate in other activities (camping, golfing, water sports) as well as hiking

Decision Process

- Key factors in the decision process as to where to go for hiking/walking trails outside of Austin include (in order of importance):
 - Distance/proximity (impacts time and cost)
 - Weather/temperature (impacts water features, comfort, vegetation, insects)
 - Activities / other things to do (“a reason to go”, “if it’s just trails it’s not enough”)
 - Trails well-marked, length of trails, good trail map or information
 - Restroom facilities (clean, available, especially for children, women)
 - Scenery / water
 - Cost (including price of gas)
- Typically these factors do not change in importance for day trips or overnight trips.
- Information Hikers would like to have provided to make their decision include:
 - Costs
 - Distance
 - Activities
 - Accommodations available
 - Map of trails
 - Facilities available (restrooms, barbeque pits)
 - Restaurants
- At least half use the Texas state parks website for information (either generally or googling a specific park they are aware of). Word of mouth is also an important source of information. Others occasionally see articles about state parks in magazines (*Texas Highways* or *Texas Parks and Wildlife*). Previous experience with a park is also important, including childhood experiences.

When using the internet, participants described “googling” specific state parks or Texas state parks in general. Information they are interested in include cost, distance, weather, and activities.

Texas State Parks

Awareness and Usage

- Many Hikers had been going to state parks for many years, and indicated that they thought they first found out about these state parks primarily through word of mouth (family and friends) and “just knowing” because they had grown up in the area and had been going to state parks since they were children (including field trips).
- This group of Hikers tends to be aware of many Texas state parks. Most reported that they had been to 3-5 state parks, but several seemed uncertain if these were state parks.
- Inks Lake, McKinney Falls and Enchanted Rock were most frequently mentioned as state parks where they hike. Others were Bastrop, Pedernales Falls, Longhorn Caverns, and Davis Mountains.
- Interestingly, Hikers tend to over-estimate the number of state parks within 60 miles of Austin (typically estimating 20-30). This may be due to lack of differentiation in state parks versus county parks or city parks, or simply the feeling that the Austin area is park-friendly/full of parks.
- Some confusion exists about state parks, county parks, city parks and LCRA parks and how they are differentiated. Determining if a park is a state park is difficult for some Hiker participants until they are on site:
 - receive a sticker for their window
 - park rangers there/on site
 - a sign when leaving

However, distinguishing between them was not important (“*people don’t care*”) unless they knew state parks offered a benefit, such as better facilities or increased security.

“There are so many parks and greenbelts where you can go walking and hiking that state parks is just one thing in the mix and I wouldn’t think that the fact that it’s a state park makes it any more or less attractive.”

“(Texas state parks vs. other parks) “It would make a difference if there was a reason for it to make a difference, like better facilities or more bucked up security or something.”

- Although familiar with many Texas state parks, state parks do not typically come to mind when thinking about going hiking. Their competitive set for hiking/walking trails only tangentially includes state parks.

"I actually said one because I don't say let's go find a state park. I just say let's go somewhere."

When these participants think of hiking, they tend to think of hiking/walking in parks or greenbelts in the city. Because Austin has so many areas and parks for hiking, they do not think of driving a distance to hike/walk the trails. (*"If I'm just going hiking or walking, I'll go locally."*)

"Since the state parks are generally more far off, are further away from us, that's the reason I put three in terms of my likelihood of how often would I think of it; just because they are so far away or because they're not right across the street I wouldn't think of them first for just to go hiking."

The distance to state parks is a key deterrent to frequent hiking/walking, even to closer parks such as Bastrop which is within 30 miles of Austin, due to the traffic and construction. (*"It's even a drag to drive to Bastrop now, you've got to think about it."*)

- State parks are more likely to be considered for overnight or weekend trips that will include hiking. However, hiking does not seem to be the primary purpose of these trips (supported by the lower importance of trails and higher importance of activities/things to do in the decision process).

"For me you just go to the state park and find out there's hiking so you hike – you don't go to a state park just to hike."

- Many visit state parks for activities other than hiking, such as: historical/educational experiences (Battleship Texas, Washington on the Brazos), biking, water sports, picnicking. Hiking is a secondary activity.

Image of Texas State Parks

- Texas state parks first brings to mind thoughts of diversity that the parks offer and lack of funding resulting in poor maintenance, "run down quite a bit," overgrown trails, and no volunteer trail program (although one could describe the web site where that could be accessed.)
- Satisfaction with state parks was relatively high with half rating their experience an 8 on a 1-10 scale. The higher ratings were not attributed to hiking trails, but to the availability of cabins and information (internet, magazines, and maps). However, "satisfied" hikers also didn't rate it any higher because of the lack of park rangers and interpretive centers which diminishes the experience of state parks (that many recall from childhood or other parks visited).

"The nice thing about Inks Lake is the campsites are right there and the land is all flat. It's right near the water and you can drive up to your campsite and..."

"We do Inks on the weekend, just one day because it's close. It's about an hour from our house, so we like to go and barbecue or invite friends and that kind of thing, so we do it for a daytrip."

Lower ratings were also attributed to the decline in quality of the state parks – citing disrepair and lack of upkeep. *"They are slowly going into disrepair because of a lack of funding or care."*

- Some of the positives of state parks include:
 - Outdoors, getting away from home
 - Serenity, quiet, "turn off everything"
 - Wildlife, deer, nature
 - Community / safety - with others "like me" so never feel threatened or unsafe
- Negative experiences and perceptions of hiking at state parks include:
 - Crowds (strong agreement)
 - Too far away
 - Poorly defined trails (dense, not well marked, fear getting lost)
 - Lack of upkeep/maintenance
 - Poor handling of reservations
 - May have to make reservations, even for the day (corrected by others)
 - No rangers/guides at parks (*"I hate it when I get there and you can't really find anybody there"*)

Increasing Usage of State Parks

- Suggestions to increase hiking at state parks tended to focus on enhanced communication and included:
 - Information/education about park, flora and wildlife, whether through guided tours, organized hikes or improved signage
 - Create/promote an identity for each park – what makes it special (*"A lot of parks are just faceless – they don't have an identity"*)
 - Create a sense of ownership/membership, using emails or mailings to promote events and activities (reasons to go) and possibly discounts.
 - Improve maintenance/upkeep
 - Offer/promote activities other than hiking, activities for family, concerts
 - Parks closer to home/too far away for the day.

- To increase usage of state parks (for any/all visits), most focused on activities (or awareness/promotion of those activities). Suggestions included:
 - Guided hikes
 - Nature walks
 - Educational tours/speakers
 - Interpretive activities
 - Variety of activities (for each family member, children, etc.)
 - Canoeing, kayaking
 - Horseback riding
 - Playground facilities for younger children

In addition, better maintenance (park in general, cleaner restrooms) and increased staffing were suggested to enhance the parks and increase their usage.

Other suggestions included coupon books, public transportation, calendar of events/activities, more/updated information on the website, and easier reservation process.

Of the alternative concepts tested, the yurts generated the greatest enthusiasm and strongest interest, and could increase usage.

I'm going to say guided tours (inaudible-unclear) changed, having someone there to kind of explain different things that you see throughout the park."

"I like the idea of organized hikes. When you have somebody there that can point stuff out to you that you might not notice or know anything about if you were by yourself."

What they need, anything you go to the park or somewhere then you get there and like say parks for the week and you can't find anything and you can't really find anybody there. There's nobody around usually not till the weekend."

"I think that's my biggest issue about not going to a lot of parks. A lot of parks are just faceless. They don't have a lot of identity. Enchanted Rock's got it's own identity, it's just very...It just grabs you right away, but there's a lot of parks that are probably very nice that I really I click on the name or see it and it just doesn't resonate with me. It needs something to identify or something. Like something unique about it."

"I mean if there's an activity coming up or something like that they give e-mail, yeah by e-mail, but if there's nothing going on then there's no reason for me to go out there."

"More activities. I mean if they were to get more activities, canoeing, paddle boating, taking some guided tours...Yeah, organized activities."

"Give some sort of nature walks, for low key events, guarantee plentiful staff and good facilities."

"Pretty much the same thing, and organized to be... and then I put here tour-guided hikes. I really like that, more in-person education, that same thing; one or the other."

"When I'm out here just like a coupon book of some sort where you get incentives to try a park, basically if you go down here you get a free admission this one weekend or something like that; you get to try something for free or something...would be nice." (Stephen)³⁴

"For me, you just go to the state park and find out there's hiking so you hike, 'cause you don't go to a state park for the first time just for the hiking; at least I don't. I go to the state park to see what it's like and if there's hiking you can hike. If you like it you go back to it."

- To increase daytrips to state parks, the following were suggested:
 - Promote parks within one hour of home
 - Free entrance esp. if hiking only
 - Clean restrooms (not porta-potties) with "everything's working"
 - Picnicking and barbeque areas
 - Safety/security (more park rangers/staff)
- Suggested communication tools to keep Hikers informed about state parks tended to revolve around the internet presence:
 - Email updates and alerts (with attachments and links to website, updates)
 - Sign up for email alerts, flyers and mailers
 - Website with calendars and activities for each park or website for each park
 - More visual website, less reliant on text
 - Desire a sense of membership in the state parks

"I mean I know that it kind of maybe gets expensive to do lots of elaborate, high-priced full-color printing or what have you, but maybe if the web presence of the park system was kind of reworked so that it was more visual instead of more just straight text information."

"One thing that I would probably respond well to is something that really showed off the natural beauty kind of like the Texas Highway Magazine has always done There's lots of ways I'm sure that they could take advantage of photography and try and promote all of these places to visit because that's something that people would be right in on."

"I mean if there's an activity coming up or something like that they give e-mail, yeah by e-mail, but if there's nothing going on then there's no reason for me to go out there."

"Yeah. Some people may have actually been to a page on the Texas Parks and Wildlife site and maybe they just don't remember because it was maybe kind of bland or just informational strictly, but if you can kind of make it a little more visual."

"I think you would also need to have something that tells you like if there's barbecue pits available already there or cabins, something that tells you what's available there, how far the restrooms are, something like that."

So I would get all the big picture things so I just kind of look at what's available so whether it's the web page is telling me more information or just things that maybe I don't know about that park where they could be more informative that would get me there and say, hey we could go do this. Because I wouldn't even know this was available, maybe just

better information or updated information. Because some of the information isn't really up to date."

A few Hikers tend to think that it's easy to find out about state parks (saying this is why the parks are so crowded).

Reactions to Concepts

Note: Respondents were made aware that there are a number of state parks within 60 miles, which may have contributed to higher interest.

Yurts

- Interest in Yurts was high among Hikers, with most indicating interest. Some thought the name/description sounded "cool" and a few men thought that would be a way to get their wives to go camping (due to electricity and water).

Those who indicated strong interest in yurts cited the ease of having everything there and having little to pack. They would expect to pay \$30 to \$50 per night.

- The option of air conditioning had little impact on interest, but it increased the value by \$10-\$15. A few did not want air conditioning, indicating it would detract from the outdoor experience.

Group Facilities

- Interest in renting a group facility was moderate, with 2 indicating definite interest for company team building, retreats and reunions. Expected rental fees typically ranged from \$150 to \$200 per day, and as high as \$500. Those who were not interested in the group facility expressed concern that it would impact the seclusion and nature experience of a state park, fearing catering trucks, loud speakers, increased traffic.

Knowing that there were so many state parks close to Austin may have contributed to the higher interest.

Outdoors Workshops

- Participating in outdoors workshops received a positive response with half expressing interest. Fees were expected to be \$10 per person.

This was described as a fun activity that could be done together by a family, grandchildren, or group of friends.

Summer Camps

- About half of Hikers were interested in a summer camp, whether day camp only (with or without transportation) or overnight camp. Expected fees were around \$100 without transportation, \$150 with transportation, and \$200-\$275 for overnight camp.
- Appeal of the summer camp concept included: having kids outside, exposed to activities they don't normally get to do, gets them away from television and video, and parents are always looking for activities for children during the summer.