

ADDENDUM

Cabin/Lodge Target 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:



Cabin/Lodge Overnighter (Recent User) Target

Respondent Profile

A focus group of cabin/lodge respondents was conducted in Dallas on July 25, 2007.

- Ages 25-59
- Stayed in a cabin at a park/campground/recreational area in the past year
- Stayed at least one night in Texas state park cabin or lodge in the past year
- Most had a high level of interest in nature related outdoor activities
- 1 Hispanic, 1 African American, 8 Caucasian
- 7 women, 3 men
- Half had children at home.

Cabin/Lodge Camping: Perceptions, Usage/Habits and Decision Factors

Perceptions

- When thinking of overnight stays in cabins, top of mind images focused on specifics of the cabins rather than the nature experience. Thoughts included: air conditioning, screens, comfort, rustic, space between cabins, and no bugs.
- Images/photos representing a cabin experience portrayed experiences which were described as relaxing, beautiful/breathtaking scenery, diversified and even exotic, family-oriented, fun and homey.

Usage and Habits

- When staying in cabins, respondents tend to prefer:
 - Weekends rather than weekdays due to work schedule
 - Spring and Fall are their favorite times of year due to the weather
 - Most tend to go with family or friends.
- Places that come to mind or that they would consider for cabin stays include areas with scenery, lakes, big trees, mountains, canyons and hiking trails.
- Favorite places where they have stayed in cabins are typically outside of Texas, especially Oklahoma (Broken Bow, Petit Jean, Turner Falls) within several hours of the Dallas area. Texas favorites were Caddo Lake and Palo Duro Canyon.
- Reasons for selecting these as favorites did not focus on the cabin itself, but on the scenery (unique, beautiful mountains, lakes, waterfalls, stars); the peace and relaxation enjoyed with family/friends (away from computers/TV); and selected activities such as boating, hiking, biking, and fishing.

- Other places mentioned (that were not state parks) included: Lake Whitney, YMCA Camps, Victory Camp, Yellowstone, Glacier, Grand Canyon, and Hot Springs.
- Of Texas state parks they had stayed in, Palo Duro Canyon and Caddo Lake were mentioned more often, followed by Garner, Daingerfield, and Bob Sandlin. Several had only stayed in a cabin at only one state park.

Decision Process

- Key factors in the decision process as to where to go for a weekend stay in a cabin included (in order of importance):
 - Distance (under 2-4 hours preferred for weekend)
 - Availability
 - Cabin amenities (clean, kitchen, bathroom, size of cabin, air conditioning)
 - Price
 - Lake (for views and activities)
 - Activities (hike, boat/boat ramps horses)

Other considerations mentioned, but not most important include: stores/bait store, fishing piers, parking near cabin, windows in cabins, fire pits, or fireplace.

"I always look for other activities, specifically for me it's horseback riding, and they do that in Palo Duro"

"That it's clean." (agree)

"Obviously well cared for, and doesn't smell bad."

"Up in Sandlin, even the mattresses are covered with plastic, and you put your sheets over it. That's real important to me."

"Not all cabins have bathrooms, and I think that's high priority."

"I agree earlier, I think there needs to be a lake there for view and for activities."

"I would say it's the same thing. Normally it depends, because if you go through a lot of small towns, 200 miles can be a time consuming process, but I'm going to agree with two hours."

"I can tell you I went to Bastrop Park for Spring Break last March, don't go there...There wasn't a crowd. It was nothing. The lake was the size of this table, it was muddy, and they were having some sort of endangered species toad thing, so we weren't allowed to fish or even get near the lake. I was like, nobody told us this. So here we are with our cabin, and we can't get to the lake. The cabin was okay, they were in rows and close together, which I didn't like. There was no place to put our chairs all out and sit around the fire. I won't go back."

- For a week trip, distance becomes much less important, while price and cabin amenities such as bathrooms become increasingly important.

“Taking a real family vacation if you’re going through the week distance totally changes.”

“I think a bath would be more important.”

- Preferred information sources when planning cabin trips include:
 - Websites and the internet - because of the visuals (want to see what the area and cabins look like) and the detailed information that is available. When using the website, searches are made by location, lake names, and occasionally specific state parks.
 - Word of mouth/recommendations by friends
 - Magazines such as *Texas Highways*, *Texas Monthly*, *Texas Travel Guide* and *Trip Advisor*.

“It’s the thing that they put out, the Texas travel guide. It has every city, and it has a listing of all the lakes and it has the list in the back that you were talking about, what you could get off the internet about the parks, and what the facilities are.”

“Internet, because it tells you everything. With word of mouth, they may not think about what you want, and internet may find you something.”

“Internet, and also when you do a search, you can find people that post pictures on these other groups, like hiking groups and things. You can find all the word of mouth, people that have been there, and their pictures. That’s really a neat thing.”

“I either do that or look up specific lakes, because I’m usually looking to go to certain lake areas. So, I look up that lake and look up cabins that they have near that lake. They usually have the area narrowed down, so I look for the cabin. You go key in that lake, and...I’ve gone to the parks website too, but more often than not, I’ve made a decision on a lake and tried to find a cabin on one of a couple of lakes.”

Texas State Parks

Because usage of out-of-state parks is high in the Dallas area, the moderator had to repeatedly specify “Texas” state parks or many respondents would think of Oklahoma or Arkansas state parks.

Awareness and Usage

- Participants were not strongly predisposed to consider Texas state parks when searching for cabins.

Reasons included preferences for Oklahoma or Arkansas cabins/lodges which were considered nicer. Others were focused more on a specific location (e.g., a lake) and did not care if the cabins were at state park or other public/private area.

“Well, there’s some lovely lodges in Arkansas that we enjoy going to. Also in Oklahoma. We’re not always moved by a cabin. We love to hike, at the state parks here, like Caprock. In fact, we don’t spend a lot of time in the cabins, but when I think of it, my husband says, let’s go stay at a lodge for next weekend. We want to go; we’ll probably make the drive to Oklahoma, because they’re nice cabins.”

I’ve compared it to other cabins I’ve stayed in like Arkansas...The cabins just weren’t as comfortable. They didn’t feel as cozy or as nice. The other areas were more cabin like. They were cozy feeling. The fireplace was next to the bed. I don’t know, they had a cozy feeling.”

“Lake Murray (Oklahoma state park) they have lots of different types and sizes, so if you go with 12 people you get a cabin....They have about three different size cabins. Outside of Texas I’ve found that, but in Texas we haven’t.” (Cabin)

“I either do that or look up specific lakes, because I’m usually looking to go to certain lake areas. So, I look up that lake and look up cabins that they have near that lake. (Cabin)

- Those who had a favorite Texas state park (not necessarily with cabins) mentioned: Cooper, Goliad, Tyler, Tawokoni, and Purtis Creek.
- Favorite Texas state parks when thinking of cabins include: Palo Duro Canyon and Caddo Lake, followed by Garner, Daingerfield, and Bob Sandlin.

“Palo Duro, I gave it a nine. It was wonderful. It was clean. It was everything that I wanted. The only sad part was, there was only three available. But the cabin itself was great.”

- Most were uncertain of the number of state parks within 60 miles of Dallas, and were surprised that 5 were in the Dallas area. Some were unfamiliar with several of the state parks named, or were unaware that the parks named were state parks.

Image of Texas State Parks

- Participants do not offer an abundance of images when thinking of Texas state parks (top of mind). After a period of silence, mentions of rustic, needing repair, historical parks, and family memories came to mind.

“They seem to all have plumbing issues.”

“Septic tank problems. I’ve stayed at... with my kid’s class, and there was always plumbing issues, toilets backing up. I don’t know there always seems to be something. It’s part of being run down.”

“I would say the smell. They use some kind of disinfectant that lingers strongly.”

“At Bob Sandlin, as small and rinky dink as that, it was \$38.00 a night. We had been going for years, and it keeps going up, but the facility doesn’t change. I thought that was a lot for a night.”

“Improvements and modernization is what you expect to see after a while. But they seem to be staying the same after a while.”

- Several were satisfied with Texas state parks (particularly Palo Duro Canyon), but generally their expectations were lower – describing cabins as more utilitarian, bare bones, and run down.

- The primary appeal of staying at cabins in Texas state parks included:
 - Setting (scenery, surroundings, being outside in nature),
 - Activities and things to do, and
 - Relatively low price

“That’s what I would say too, the scenery that’s surrounding it is the big thing.”

“Getting outside of the cabin. I’m not that concerned with lodging.”

The cabins themselves typically were not mentioned as appealing (exception of Palo Duro).

- Changes they would like to see at state parks involving cabins focused on improved maintenance and cabin improvements:
 - Maintain the parks, cabins and facilities (e.g., not “ick” bathrooms)
 - Repair plumbing, backed-up toilets
 - New shower doors
 - Reduce smell of strong disinfectant
 - Bigger beds
 - As prices go up, improve the cabins and facilities

One woman described her frustration in trying to find Cleburne State Park because the sign was on the ground with foliage growing over it.

- Complaints were noted about the poor reservations system offered by the state parks, particularly the 800 number. Dissatisfaction with this included: unfamiliarity with the parks and what was offered (e.g., that the lake was closed), long holds on the phone, repeated calls necessary, difficult/impossible to book for large groups (family reunions).

“I can’t waste my time like that.”

"I tried the 800 number that Parks and Recs has, but...or the number that the state parks has, but it's out of Boston, so they really don't know everything about all the lakes or the parks, because they're just Boston. So, we ask them and they really don't know."

"For family reunions it's very hard, because you can reserve for up to 14 days, 10 months ahead for the state parks; however, on their computer systems, they can't see what that 14th day is, so if you're trying to reserve for a reunion, it's basically impossible. You can call every single day, and they'll say it's booked for that day, and it could be for after two weeks after that day that you're allowed to book for. But they don't know. They can't see on their computer past the day you're allowed to book for. So, somebody could make a reservation for Wednesday for 14 days, and this is what people do. They do it for 14 days, and then they call back and cancel part of it so they can get their weekend in there two weeks ahead of time. But they may call on a Wednesday and do that, so it's impossible, so you have to sit there on hold for 30 minutes trying to get this, because you have to call at 9:00 AM or whenever they open. It's an impossible system for a large group like that, for a family reunion we've pretty much said forget state parks. We have to go to other areas, because of their reservation system. I don't mind to book for two weeks, I just want you to tell me when that two weeks ends so I don't have to call you everyday."

Two had used the state parks email registration and were satisfied with that process although some complained it took too long for a response to their request.

Increasing Visits to Texas State Parks

- Suggestions to increase visits to state parks covered a broad range of ideas, most important were:
 - Increasing the number of cabins (more availability, available at more parks)
 - Updating cabins and bathroom facilities
 - Advertising ("*I don't have enough information*"), promoting events.

The concept of yurts was very positively received by this group, and could help meet the need for increased number of cabins and updated cabins.

"A variety of different types of cabins for different types of gatherings."

"Caddo Lake they have cabins and they're all different sizes. They have a nice selection."

"I think for me there are a lot of parks that don't have cabins that I would go through and stay there if they had some." (agreed)

"If I knew they were making improvements that would impress me."

"Just to make them update it to more modern type facilities." (agreed.)

"I put advertise also. I don't feel I know enough about them or where they are or, I don't really know that."

"I put have more cabins..." "Update bathrooms"

“Lake Murray they have lots of different types of sizes, so if you go with 12 people you get a cabin. “Like you can get a cabin for eight. “They have about three different size cabins... “Outside of Texas I’ve found that, but in Texas we haven’t.”

- Other suggestions included:
 - Improving the reservation process
 - More activities such as hiking trails, ranger programs, arts and crafts
 - Ranger orientations and nightly programs (like out of state parks provide)
 - Greater variety of types of cabins (sizes, number of bedrooms, etc.)
 - Friendlier/more helpful staff

“Just be able to call for a last minute trip, you can’t do that at state parks. I mean, if you want to go on a weekend.”

- Participants were quite resistant to the idea of day trips to state parks until they learned that there were five within 60 miles of the Dallas area. Interest increased, although it was dependent on amenities provided such as lakes, fishing, bathrooms, horses, hiking trails, picnic areas, water/swimming, and grills.
- Suggested communication tools to most effectively reach them were:
 - Emails (if solicited) with reminders and features and new programs
 - TV advertising (although they realize it may be too expensive)
 - *Texas Parks and Wildlife* magazine (several familiar with it)

Information that would be most useful are updates on activities and new programs.

“New programs that they might be offering or fireworks on the fourth, just an e-mail of information.”

“I know the New Mexico state parks does that. They have a Yahoo! gram. You sign up; I get those all the time. It says this state park activity, fire ban here; they tell what’s going on. They come in constantly.”

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 quite strong among cabin visitors. They felt it would be different/unique, rustic, providing a good blend with nature. Expected price would be \$25 to \$50 a night. The addition of air conditioning would increase interest and possibly the price.

Group Facilities

- Interest in renting a group facility was fairly strong, with 4 indicating definite interest assuming cabins or tent facilities were nearby/surrounding it.

Expected rental fees were \$200, and several tried to put a price per person rather than a set fee. Discussion arose that they would expect it to be less than what they would pay at a hotel or private facility (“because I consider state parks as being a little less expensive – that’s one of the reasons we like state parks).

Outdoors Workshops

- Participating in outdoors workshops received some positive interest, with 3 finding the hands-on learning/someone to show you what to do and cooking appealing. Expected fees ranged from “free” to \$10.

Some suggested adding other activities, such as building bird houses and conservation/ planting trees.

Summer Camps

- Half had children at home, and had little interest if no transportation was provided.

With transportation, interest increased, with 3 indicating strong interest. Expected prices typically ranged from \$100 to \$150 for the week.

This would provide an opportunity for many children to have their first experience with state parks, and would place them outside/away from television and video games.

Some felt the idea for the camps would be enhanced if an overnight camp was offered.