

ADDENDUM

RV Owners Recent Users 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:



RV Owners (Recent Users) Target

Respondent Profile

A focus group of Recent RV Texas state park users was conducted on July 19, 2007 in Houston.

- Ages 27-62
- Own an RV (4 travel trailers/5th-wheel, 2 motor RVs, 1 pull behind, 1 camper trailer, 1 pop up)
- Stayed 3+ weekday nights in their RV at a Texas state park in the past year
- 4 members of an RV club, All RV with family or friends
- 2 Hispanic, 8 Caucasian
- 7 Males, 3 Females
- 1 retired, 9 employed (not a screening criteria)

RV Camping: General Perceptions, Usage and Decision Factors

Perceptions

- Top-of-mind images when thinking of overnight camping in their RV included enjoying peace and quiet with the sounds and sights of nature, relaxing and getting away. Other images focused on the hook-ups and septic.

“...it really has given us access to the parks...With the RV it's really opened up, more nature access to us and we've really enjoyed that.”

- Images and photos representing RV experiences of the respondents communicated experiences which were social (with family and friends), low stress/peaceful and providing good memories *“to carry with you the rest of your life.”*

The visuals also show that this is available to all ages and all types of people and offers exposure to a variety of terrains and things to do.

Usage and Habits

- Recent RV Users have stayed at numerous Texas state parks and non-state parks, from the Houston area (Lake Livingston, Brazos Bend) to Central Texas/Hill Country (Kerrville, Lake Travis, Blanco, Lost Maples) and West Texas (Palo Duro Canyon, Balmorhea and Ft. Davis).

Private RV parks outside state parks are sometimes used for last minute camping when state parks do not have available sites.

“We have stayed in RV parks outside of state parks, like for spring break when we haven't been able, like Choke Canyon you couldn't get in at spring break, so we took the RV Park by it.”

“Typically you’ll stay in an RV park in the last minute because you can’t get in the state park. It’s very difficult at the last minute to get a reservation.”

“You always look at going to a regular RV resort just because you (know you) can’t get in to the state park.”

- When RV camping, recent state park users:
 - Camp year round, but most prefer Fall and Spring. Summers are considered too hot for many.
 - Half typically camp with their spouses, others camp with family/children and some with friends
 - Some will meet other friends with RVs at the parks

“That’s one of the good things about the state parks though because sometimes we’ll have 30 or 40 people, we’ll have ten campers and two groups in cabins and sometimes we take up whole sections of campground, that the good thing about the park, you can do whatever you want, if you don’t have a camper you can get a cabin.”

- RV users tend to have several favorite places to camp and had difficulty selecting one. Many were Texas state parks, including Garner, Lost Maples, Pedernales, Eisenhower, McKinney Falls and Palo Duro Canyon. Others were Fayetteville (LCRA), Ft. Wilderness/Orlando, and Stillhouse Hollow Lake.
- Appealing features of these parks focused on the terrain and setting of the park and how well the RV sites took advantage of them, such as:
 - Campsites close to lakes or river (most frequently mentioned)
 - Water features and activities
 - Natural beauty/scenery
 - Variety of outdoor activities
 - Peaceful, quiet
 - Tradition/always been there

“I said Garner State Park just because I’ve been going there since I was a child, it’s just peaceful and quite, maybe not on the weekends but it’s quiet and the river, real river. Love it.”

“Lost Maples State Park, when I first went there about 15 years ago, I saying this Lost Maples because of that experience 15 years ago, I’ve been to Lost Maples since then and I’m disappointed, but originally back then... It’s a small campground, now days they’ve added more sites so you’re really just sitting one right beside the other in part of the park and I don’t care for that. “

"I had a hard time deciding (favorite), I put down Fort Parker State Park, one big reason is that the camp sites are close to the water and you can see the water. Sometimes the state parks will put the campsites, there's water but find it, Somerville for example, you might be right on the water but there are so many trees you can't see it. With canoeing and kayaking you can rent canoes or bring your own kayak and there was lots of walking available, and also they had the screened shelters so my daughter could stay in the screen shelter while we stayed in the water. "

- Features that would have made their favorite parks even better were full hook-ups and pull-throughs.

"One of the deciding factors for me because I have a travel trailer, if you don't have full hook-ups, that's a deciding factor for me if I plan on staying more than a day or two. You can only hold so much."

Decision Process

- Key factors in the decision process as to where to go for RV camping included:
 - Full hook-ups
 - Distance/travel time
 - Not crowded/availability
 - Nature/water features/area for kids
 - Other factors mentioned in the decision process were: what parks on the way to destination, time of year (e.g, if need shade), allow late arrivals, on-site registration.

Weekends are always considered more crowded, and many will take a 3 or 4 day weekend to avoid the Friday or Saturday check-in/arrivals and be able to reserve an RV site.

"Weekends are always crowded, they're always full so it makes a difference whether you're leaving Friday night and you're going to be in the Friday evening, the time the office closes."

"We try to make a four day weekend out of it, if at all possible, or at least a three day weekend out of it avoid that, because if you're trying to get there on a Saturday morning it's craziness a lot of times trying to get into the park and get a space, lots of stress."

"There needs to be a better system to deal with the no-shows because there are paying customers waiting there for sites, for people who aren't coming, There's no way to check back with those people and confirm, are you going to be here."

- Information sources used when planning RV camping trips are varied, and include:

- Texas state parks website
- ReserveAmerica.com (reservation services of TPWD)
- Word of mouth
- *Woodall's*
- *Trailer Life*

“... the state park web site, we print out the map so we know what we're doing when we get there.”

Texas State Parks

Awareness and Usage

- At least half are very likely to consider a Texas state park for their RV camping.
- Texas state parks used most frequently are Stephen F. Austin and Galveston because of their proximity to the Houston area.
- Half use state parks for purposes other than RV camping, such as daytrips for historic sites like Washington on the Brazos, Galveston and Brazos Bend for fishing, jet skiing, boating, picnicking, hiking, and bird watching.

Some will camp outside the park or in a parking lot (Wal-Mart) when the parks are full and then will visit the park to enjoy the activities.

Image of State Parks

- Less than half were very satisfied with the Texas state parks.

Those satisfied indicated that they enjoy the natural settings and the large area/plenty of space that the parks provide. Those less satisfied cited the lack of maintenance and lack of facilities.

The satisfaction ratings do not reflect the disparaging comments of the RV Users regarding the lack of maintenance and poor facilities offered by the state parks. In fact, some said they continue to go to state parks “in spite of the facilities.”

“We exclusively go to state parks but it's not because of the facilities it's in spite of the facilities. We're not trying to insult anybody, but we're going there because the beach is there and its easy access and we like being at the beach. The broken plumbing, and the nasty bathrooms, garbage that doesn't get emptied, and half of the park is closed because they couldn't get it together to get the budget together to do x,y,z. Those kind of issues are just kind of detractors from the reason that we go there in the first place, we don't pick state parks because the facilities are super- duper.”

“There are parks that I’d like to go back to, but I refuse to go back to is because of maintenance. Sam Houston is terrible, I camped there for ten years and it was fine then it started to fall apart, so I refuse to go to Sam Houston. There are only a couple parks that I’ll go to, the rest of them they are just not keeping them up. Honestly it’s not the first place that I think about when I go look for a campground, other than Stephen F. Austin.”

- The lack of maintenance and upkeep of the facilities are the primary negatives about state parks.

“There are some parks that I won’t go back to probably until they do some work too, the parks are critically short of money all the time so there’s a lot of maintenance issues, it’s just really disappointing. Other states have state park systems that are just show places, and it’s not necessarily expensive things, it’s just choosing what you spend your money on.”

“We use the restroom in our RV but just so we don’t have to dump so often, I will go and use the shower in the restroom. There’s doors that don’t close and the bugs come in, just getting the screen door so that it closes so that hole is out of it so you’re not indented by mosquitoes or so forth in the restroom, and the restrooms that are air conditioned or heated in the winter are wonderful, make all the difference.”

This perceived downturn in the state parks is attributed to lack of funding and financial instability of Texas state parks.

- The reservation system used by Texas state parks prompted a lively discussion, with one who felt strongly that reservation service (ReserveAmerica) should not be contracted to an outside agency. They were disgruntled with the fee, limited hours, and consistently busy signal.

Some call the park directly or leave a message requesting a callback when the ReserveAmerica number is busy.

The reservation policies and how to deal with “no shows” (the site goes unused) are strong irritants to some.

“I have an issue with that, if we’re taking state dollars and we are now contracting with an outside agency, to do something that people in Austin are already doing via email, which is basically the internet, why are we taking state dollars out of our park system to pay to an outside agency to confirm reservations. I think it’s a waste of state funds to pay a third party to confirm a reservation when you can do the same thing with an email to the parks office in Austin.”

“There’s an add on fee to it. What’s frustrating about it you can’t go to the state web site and find availability in a particular park, you’ve got to go a third party (web site), who is now managing reservations, when it’s the states responsibility to manage them, not a third party .“

"I agree with everyone and their issues, mine is reservations. I have an issue about reservation 330 days from when I want to reserve. The day that I wanted to do it, on the online reservation from New York or whoever controls this, was not working. So me and my wife were call directly at 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock when it starts. When you finally get to talk to someone everything is booked because people reserve two weeks in the time frame where really they camp the second week, they don't use the first week. So they pay the five dollar penalty, and then when you have campers that want to camp during one of those certain dates, they miss out. All year you have to call to see if anyone has cancelled, which is okay, but I think the rules should be a little bit tighter. You have to play the game in order to get that campsite."

"What we have been very successful with, we call the park direct."

- However, Texas state parks offer some features and advantages that other parks and campgrounds do not, such as:
 - Reasonable costs
 - More social, meet the neighbors
 - Lots are larger/more room between sites
 - Park Hosts and rangers offer good support – provides sense of security
 - Security - comfortable with kids/grandkids free to roam
 - If friends/family don't have an RV, they can stay in shelter or cabin

"Reasonable. Price wise, the cost. Privately run RV parks are certainly more expensive. We like pulling into a spot and meeting our neighbors, getting to have a little fire ring while the kids are asleep, so there is some of the social side that's great and then being next to a body of water or what attraction that we're going to is probably the best part. A lot of times the staff is local and they care about the local area and surroundings and they are always friendly and try to help you out."

"I've got grandkids and once you get your trailer hooked up and the kids get their bikes, in the state park you can just relax, and if you fall, if anything happens there are everybody there to help and the kids just ride and they just have a ball. You don't have to worry about them."

The park rangers and hosts provide a definite advantage to the state parks. They provide a personal touch and a feeling of safety and security in numerous ways: assistance with technical problems, answer questions, enforce the rules/hours, help keep the park clean/maintained.

Increasing Usage of State Parks

- Suggested changes to increase RV camping typically focused on maintaining the facilities, followed by the reservation process/lack of availability:
 - Maintain the parks, clean them up, clean and working bathrooms, bathroom screen doors that close
 - Maintain the infrastructure -- Level the sites, get hook-ups and power working correctly
 - Increase number of sites that have electricity
 - Improve/monitor reservation process (several frustrations with reservations such as, campers who reserve 2 weeks but only use 1 week in order to secure a reservation, busy phone lines, having to book almost a year in advance and still not getting a reservation, inconsistent information on availability between website and the park directly)

Other suggestions that would be “nice to have” included:

- Wi-Fi (although many groaned because of the desire to “get away from it all”)
- Self-guided tours
- Bird walks
- Reinstate Discovery Passbooks to track park visits

“I think get the place cleaned up, get everything done, maintenance and everything like that. If they want to go to Wi-Fi let them go into town and spend your money on something else, because that is what you are trying to do, you’re trying to get away from there.”

“I live on a computer so I don’t want to take it with me when I go camping; I would like have a clean and working bathroom whenever I get there.”

“I think getting the sites level, getting the hook ups working correctly, getting the power to work correctly, the infrastructure needs to be maintained, and that’s the first thing they need to do.”

“I’d like to see some level sites that you don’t have to try to level, if you get the power in there and you get them fixed up the people are going to come, they are going to private campsites instead of going to the state parks.”

- Information that recent RV campers want from the state parks is:
 - What’s “new”, events, activities
 - Availability of sites, in particular notifying you by email if certain parks have availability (like Southwest Airlines’ “Ding”)
 - Complete information on the website (some parts have detailed information, other sections lacking, such as fishing/boating requirements)
 - Update information on website (e.g., fire rings removed at Galveston, park reopened)

“The web site doesn’t get updated and I go there to try to get a reservation that says the parks full and you call the park and they say no we have lots of reservations.”

“It’s kind of a sore subject, you can find out general information about the park just by going to the web site, but the reservation system in a word stinks. They need to take it in house and make it right.”

“There’s different companies send email to me, when ever we register there is an option to put your email address down there, and I guess if the state had a system of just sending a little email every month perhaps, hey we’ve missed you lately or isn’t it time you come and check Galveston State Park again, just a little something there to plant a seed, you know I’m really stressed out right now, maybe I just need to take off.”

“I like just having the web site and I agree, they will close the park for maintenance and it will be months again before anyone says boo about it again it still says the old information. You know you call the park and they say we’re open.”

- The best source to receive this information is the internet/website and/or email for most. Respondents would like the website updated regularly, and send emails with newsletters, what’s new in the park, and calendars of special events.

Others preferred *Texas Parks and Wildlife* magazine or *Texas Highways* (enjoying the photography and articles about state parks.)

- Most would prefer to camp weekdays, but are restricted by their work.

A suggestion was made to decrease the rates on weekdays and increase the rates on weekends.

Reactions to Concepts

Yurts

- Interest in Yurts was almost non-existent among recent state park RV campers.

If electricity and water were included, interest increased slightly for three participants. Those with the smaller RVs (pop-ups) seemed more likely to express some interest. Expected price of a yurt was \$5 to \$20 per night.

Group Facilities

A few were interested in renting a group facility, thinking of RV clubs, reunions, church groups or golf tournaments. Expected rental fees were typically \$100 to \$200 per day.

"I think it's a great idea, if you have a family reunion or a get together you want to plan, then you knew the place the was going to be clean and comfortable and accommodate everyone, you could reserve a year in advance or whatever for spring break or for whatever. That would be terrific; I would be interested in that."

Outdoors Workshops

- A few were also interested in participating in outdoor skills workshops, thinking their children would like it or they might learn something new. Fees were expected to be \$10-\$20 per person.

Concern was raised with the safety of archery lessons. A suggestion was made to include Dutch oven cooking lessons.

Summer Camps

- Half were interested in a weeklong overnight summer camp for their children or grandchildren. Some would prefer it/participate only if they would be camping at that park during the same week.

"I can't see doing it with the children in isolation, that's a big responsibility, but I could see having grandparents and kids camps."

"My daughter wouldn't go by herself."

"So many grandparents have their grandchildren in the summer or for part of the summer and if they had this organized activity where they could go with their grandchildren to some of these activities, maybe have a time where they're away from grandparents, but they are still camping with grandparents."

Expected fees were typically \$100 to \$200 a week, two as high as \$250-300.