

Carrying Capacity Survey Summary

October 2017

Survey responses were received from 69 parks professionals in Virginia State Parks and local parks and recreation management and leadership.

1-Experience with Carrying Capacity

- 50.7% reported no park carrying capacity issues.
- 5.7% reported the need to close a park due to carrying capacity issues.
- 23% reported some part of a park had been closed due to carrying capacity issues.

2-Restricted park use in 2016 – 2017

- 36.2% had to restrict use or close a park in summer 2016 – 2017
 - ✓ State parks report sell outs and full capacity at cabins and campgrounds.
 - ✓ City of Hopewell reports capacity for large tournaments and league nights at the Mathis baseball and softball complex.
 - ✓ State park special events (concerts) seating and parking sell outs.
 - ✓ Scotts Run and Riverbend parking consistently reaches capacity.
 - ✓ Campground and swim beach closures in state parks.
 - ✓ Lifeguards reported carrying capacity issues based on safety.
 - ✓ Parking lots fill on holidays, during summer peak & special events.
 - ✓ Maintenance of dog parks require closing and resting the large or small dog sections during the year to aerate, over seed and provide best management practices.

3-How are parks determining if the park or site reaches carrying capacity?

Park managers identified carrying capacity by evaluating available parking, safety and overuse conflicts and damage to the park's natural resources.

- ✓ 78.4% - Available parking
- ✓ 35% - Swimming/Lifeguard capacity for safety
- ✓ 25% - Overnight camping filled
- ✓ 9% - Equipment rental
- ✓ 8% - Numbers of people entering the park reach a predetermined target
- ✓ 6% - Ranger or staff led hikes filled
- ✓ 1% - boating slips for mooring overnight filled
- ✓ 1% - boating tie up for day use filled
- ✓ Fire Marshall limits
- ✓ Overuse causing damage park degradation

4-How many times in the past two summers have you had to restrict use of an area of a park or closed a park due to reaching park capacity limits?

30% of all parks completing the survey reported park carrying capacity issues. The totals for two summers ranged from 35 closures to a few times a year. Most reported carrying capacity incidents occur in the summer on holidays, during a special event or due to construction or maintenance.

5-When your park reached carrying capacity, what measures were taken?

- ✓ Thirteen percent of park managers have needed to close the park.
- ✓ Over 75 percent of park managers responded that an area of the park or parking facilities were closed when a park reached carrying capacity.
- ✓ Approximately 13% of park management recommended visitors go to another park.

Parking is the greatest indicator and control for park carrying capacity.

6-What park uses were most affected by park closures.

The greatest number of carrying capacity issues resulted in water dependent activities being affected. Followed by general park activities, trails, and sports. Driving for pleasure and natural areas were least affected by carrying capacity concerns.

7-Do you feel or did you feel at any time during the peak season the natural resources of the park were compromised?

- ✓ 57% reported that natural resources were not compromised due to carrying capacity.
- ✓ 24.6% reported park resources were compromised.

Top issues reported included erosion, soil compaction, litter and vegetation disturbance.

The resulting issues compromising carrying capacity were reported:

- Increased foot traffic compacting soil, grass and creating erosion.
- Road shoulders rutted by parking.
- Campground design enabling more visitors than sustainable.
- Visitors leaving the trail causing compacted soils and vegetation disturbance.
- Litter resulting when park carrying capacity is exceeded.
- Lack of trail management during peak times.

8-Did you feel at any time during the peak season that the visitor experience in the park or on the trail was compromised?

- ✓ 52% responded no – the visitor experience was not compromised
- ✓ 31% responded yes – the visitor experience was compromised

Park managers report the park visitors' anticipated experience for quiet environment in nature is not met when park or trail carrying capacity is exceeded.

Here is a list of ways the experience was compromised:

- Visitors' expectations of a quiet environment are not met, especially with regard to the visitors' experience in nature
- Too many hikers
- Litter
- Long waits to enter the park
- Off leash dogs
- Problems with shared use trails - Inconsiderate bicyclists

9-Have user expectations been identified for different types of park users?

- ✓ 29% - yes
- ✓ 25% - no
- ✓ 29% - Not sure

This question indicates that there may need to be more explanation and education about the importance of identifying park user expectations.

A list of visitor complaints related to carrying capacity include:

- Not enough parking.
- Overcrowding
- Group camping – noise related complaints
- Crowded water activity areas – fishing, swimming.
- Restroom and bath area cleanliness
- Off-leash dogs
- Cultural conflicts
- Use of alcohol use & drugs.
- Overnight backpackers complain about numbers of hikers on the trail in wilderness areas.

10-Do the park facilities in you park meet visitor demand?

- ✓ 46.3% - yes
- ✓ 33.3% - no
- ✓ 20.2% - not answered

Parking and vehicular access were identified as most important to park carrying capacity management. The number of visitors on trails, at events and in natural areas of parks was mentioned as key to meeting visitor demand and expectations.

A list of park facilities that could help mitigate park carrying capacity concerns:

- Adequate, well defined parking
- Establishing park carrying capacity numbers by number of visitors
- Public water access

- More environmental education facilities
- Interstate access on trails (North Carolina)
- Additional camping
- Additional cabins
- Additional parking
- Improved facilities – restrooms
- Unofficial trails – off trail use in the park

11-What measures do park management take to preserve the visitor experience?

- Park management and staff must define and enforce carrying capacity measures. (Prince William County PD)
- Engage additional staff and parking services companies to manage traffic and parking during holidays and special events.
- Develop signage for parking and identify overflow parking.
- Plan for custodial support and checks during peak visitation.
- Offer free parking passes or park entry if park closures are necessary to sustain visitor experiences.

When were visitor experiences most compromised?

- Summer season
- Spring athletics
- Holidays
- Weekends

12-Are visitors using park resources in different ways from what was intended when the park was planned?

- ✓ 22% - yes
- ✓ 66% - no
- ✓ 12% - not sure

There is an increase in larger groups using parks. Unplanned trails are being forged by users and dogs are impacting park facilities and visitor experiences outside dog park areas.

Comments

- Increased numbers of large families and groups use the park. Special use permits and facility reservations need to specify the numbers of participants in group activities.
- Increased all day group events.
- Increased special events draw up to 100 park visitors (weddings, parties, family reunions)
- Increased off leash dog complaints.
- Camping increased for large families and collegiate groups.

- Increased numbers of extreme exercise enthusiasts run long distances.
- Unplanned trails developed by users.
- Websites could help educate park users.

13-Is your or are your parks experiencing a clash of visitor experience expectations?

- ✓ 18.8% - yes
- ✓ 49.2% - no
- ✓ 11.5% - not sure
- ✓ 14% - no response

Comments

- Group dynamics impact single family park use
- Facility overuse (playgrounds, picnic shelters, tennis courts)
- Dogs off leash
- Bikers creating social trails
- Conflict of anglers and swimmers
- Conflicts between equestrian and bicycle trail users
- Skateboarders and disk golfers sometimes impact each other.
- Cultural differences in park use

14-Are neighboring communities/businesses impacted by park closures?

- ✓ 17.3% - yes
- ✓ 49.2% - no
- ✓ 8% - not sure

Comments

- Visitor park along roads outside the park along roadways and in neighborhoods
- Large electronic user groups cause traffic problems
- Parking and noise create problems in surrounding neighborhoods
- Homeless use of the park
- Off leash dogs

15-Rank what would be helpful to you in learning more about park carrying capacity and how to manage park visitation to provide excellent visitor experience.

- 1- Develop a statewide park manager carrying capacity phone in advisory group (DCR/VRPS)
- 2- Provide a 1- 1 ½ day park staff training on carrying capacity (DCR/VRPS)
- 3- Publish articles in Virginia Recreation and Parks Society publications (VRPS)
- 4- Develop a webinar training on park carrying capacity (VRPS/DCR)