

Introduction: Visitor Studies – 1988

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The First Annual Visitor Studies Conference held in Anniston/Oxford, Alabama, provided an opportunity for professionals to focus exclusively on visitor studies. The Anniston Museum of Natural History and the International Laboratory for Visitor Studies co-sponsored this conference with the Psychology Institute of Jacksonville State University. As evidenced by this volume, an impressive group of professionals attended this meeting. Participants' evaluation of this conference (Bitgood, 1988) included numerous positive responses such as "exciting," "stimulating," and "best conference I've attended."

Visitor Studies Today

Many issues emerged from discussions at the conference. Perhaps most fundamental of which was: "Is 'visitor studies' a distinct field or is it merely an area subsumed under other disciplines such as museum studies, psychology, marketing, and education?" The mood of the conference suggested that visitor studies, if it is not already, is fast becoming a distinct field or discipline. What criteria should it have if it is a distinct field? Ross Loomis in the first chapter suggests that three indicators are already present for a field of visitor studies:

- Existence of a critical mass of workers
- Institutional commitment of increased staff
- Development of a visitor studies literature

I agree that we have a growing number of professionals whose primary concern is the study of visitors. In addition, informal learning institutions are recognizing the advantages of making visitor studies part of their budget. And no one can dispute the exponentially exploding literature on visitor studies. However, as Loomis points out, the emerging body of knowledge is not very well organized yet. There are current efforts to give

a framework for this literature as evidenced by several chapters in this volume. I believe that there are several other signs of the emerging field of visitor studies:

- There is a collection of measurement techniques (albeit borrowed from other disciplines such as social sciences, education, marketing) that are widely used to study visitors.
- There are emerging theoretical principles of visitor behavior (see chapters by Patterson & Bitgood, and Koran, Koran, & Foster in this volume).
- A large number of us are sharing information in a professional manner (e.g., Visitor Behavior; meetings of the American Association of Museums, the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, the International Laboratory for Visitor Studies [ILVS]; and the Annual Visitor Study Conference).
- An organization devoted exclusively to visitor studies (ILVS) has been established.

Despite these encouraging signs, I believe that we need at least three more factors before we can call ourselves a full-fledged field of study:

- A mechanism for formal training in visitor studies.
- Quality control procedures (e.g., credentialing).
- Standards of practice (both scientific and ethical).

While organizations such as the American Association of Museums and the International Laboratory for Visitor Studies may be providing some training/education in conducting visitor evaluation, there are no standards or guidelines for what such training should include. It seems to me that a professional in the field of visitor studies should have, at the very least, the following knowledge and skills:

- Familiarity with the research literature on visitor studies
- Skills in scientific measurement of behavior including direct observation and self-report (e.g., survey) techniques
- Interviewing skills
- Knowledge of research methodology
- Written communication skills
- Ability to work with others (social skills)

What form education/training in visitor studies takes is still undecided. Will museum studies programs take on this task? Probably not, since, as Harris Shettel states in Chapter 2, very few of the museum study programs teach visitor evaluation now. One possibility is to set up training institutes and give continuing education credit for successful completion of courses. Eventually, colleges and universities could establish programs in visitor studies, but that is not likely to happen in the near future, if at all.

Quality control is another aspect of a field of study that needs to be addressed. Most professions have licensing or certification procedures that officially identify those individuals qualified to practice. Should visitor studies develop such a quality control process? I share some of Loomis' skepticism about regulating standards through certification procedures because of the costs and complications involved. However, the quality control problem needs to be resolved. There are consultants and private firms that are charging large amounts of money with very little accountability in terms of evaluating the effects of their work on visitor behavior. There needs to be better protection for the consumer of these visitor research/evaluation services. How do we educate the decision makers at museums/zoos/parks/aquariums so that they can hold consultants and exhibit/graphic design firms more accountable? It is obvious that these firms will not incorporate visitor evaluation unless it is required.

In addition, there are no written standards of practice (both scientific and legal/ethical) for visitor studies. For example, scientific standards for measurement of visitor behavior should include objectivity, reliability, and validity. The Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests (1974) published by the American Psychological Association provide a possible model for the field of visitor studies. We also need some guidelines for ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and accountability.

A second, related theme to emerge from this conference was the issue of how much one needs to know in order to conduct visitor evaluation. On the one hand, there appeared to be one group who suggested that no special skills or knowledge were necessary and a small amount of time and effort can turn up useful evaluation results. Another group of participants (e.g., see Loomis, Chapter 1; Bitgood, Chapter 17) was more cautious concerning the knowledge and skills involved in evaluation. This latter group argued that it is important for evaluators to understand complex measurement problems. Measurements of visitor behavior may be extremely misleading if they are not collected in an objective, standardized

manner and if conclusions made from these measurements are invalid or inaccurate.

Throughout the conference there were persistent discussions of how terms should be defined. Unfortunately, many terms were used by speakers without a definition causing some puzzlement in the minds of the novices to visitor studies. Even the knowledgeable may have been confused because a single term was occasionally used with different connotations. For example, the term "formative evaluation" was used on some occasions to indicate the practice of incorporating evaluation into the development of new exhibits (see Screven, Chapter 8). On other occasions the term is used to refer to evaluation whose purpose is to provide feedback by which to improve the exhibit rather than to simply determine if the exhibit is meeting its objectives. I believe it is important to keep these two meanings separate. It is probably easier to get professionals to agree on the purpose of evaluation (obtain feedback for improvement vs. assessment without attempting improvement) than to agree on the specific model or methods of carrying out evaluation. For example, in this volume Screven offers one model of formative evaluation while Loomis offers another. Both are likely to be effective in the hands of a competent evaluator. Perhaps some of the confusion over formative evaluation could be minimized by using this term to refer to the purpose rather than the stage of evaluation. Since formative evaluation to improve exhibits can be undertaken either during the development or after the completion of an exhibit, the term "developmental" evaluation could be used to describe formative evaluation during the pre-installation stage. A term like "remedial" evaluation could be used to describe formative evaluation after the exhibit has been completed.

Still another issue that arose in the conference was: "To what extent can we predict visitor behavior?" At what stage are we in the development of a science of visitor studies? Patterson and Bitgood (Chapter 4) suggest that visitor behavior is predictable based on what we already know. On the other hand, others suggested that we can't do a very good job of predicting, we must evaluate each situation as it arises. I suspect that both of these sides are correct to some degree. At times we can predict more than some think; at other times, we can predict less than some think.

Several theoretical or conceptual models of visitor behavior were discussed during the conference. Some of these models were cognitive (e.g., Falk, Chapter 6; Koran et al, Chapter 7) and others were more

empirical (e.g., Patterson & Bitgood, Chapter 4; Screven, Chapter 8; Hood, Chapter 9; Thompson & Bitgood, Chapter 10).

Methodological issues were also raised. What are the appropriate methods of studying visitors? When should these methods be used? What problems do each of these methods have? For example, how much knowledge and skill are necessary to lead a focus group? Should interviewers first be trained in interviewing skills before confronting the public?

We hope that future conferences will address the issues raised in the preceding paragraphs. Plans for the 1989 Visitor Studies Conference have already included many of these issues.

Organization of the Book

The papers presented at the conference appear to fall into three types of issues: theoretical; research/evaluation; and practical.

Theoretical. Theoretical issues include: Loomis' discussion of the countenance or appearance of visitor studies; the development of theories about visitors (see the chapters by Adams, Falk, Koran, Patterson & Bitgood); and problems that arise in the implementation of visitor evaluation (Reich, Screven, Shettel).

Research/evaluation. A second focus of the conference was on studies of visitor research and evaluation. Hood's chapter on arboretum visitor profiles is an excellent example showing distinct profiles during each season of the year. A variety of topics are included in this section from exhibit label characteristics (Thompson & Bitgood, Chapter 10) to visitors' naive theories of science (Borun, Chapter 13). These papers span disparate settings – from an arboretum to zoos, to an art museum, to two major world museums (Smithsonian and Royal Ontario Museums).

Practice. The third section of the proceedings includes papers that describe the practice of visitor studies. These papers describe how the theory and methods can be used by visitor studies professionals. Patty McNamara's paper (Chapter 16) on using formative evaluation in the development of new exhibits provides a guide for those who are involved in exhibit design. Bitgood's paper (Chapter 17) on visitor orientation and circulation looks at all stages of visitor orientation from pre-visit to post-

visit. Sydney Donahoe (Chapter 18) shows how evaluation has helped the San Diego Wild Animal Park improve its visitors' experiences. Rubenstein (Chapter 19) on focus groups and Conroy's paper (Chapter 20) on "cheap thrills" round out this section.

References

- Bitgood, S. (1988). An evaluation of the First Annual Visitor Studies Conference. Visitor Behavior, 3(2), 8-9.
- Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests. (1974). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.