

A Comparison of Puerto Rican and International Visitors to El Yunque Rain Forest

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Multicultural audiences can create unique problems for the developers of visitor facilities. Should labels be written in more than one language? Do these audiences differ in terms of interests, knowledge, and attitudes? Evaluation can help to answer these and other such questions. This article is a progress report on a visitor center and environmental education project in Puerto Rico that is being designed to serve both the local Puerto Rican audience as well as the international visitor. The findings reported in this article are based on a report to the Caribbean National Forest (Pizzini, et al., 1992).

The site of this visitor center is the Caribbean National Forest (part of the USDA National Forest Service) more popularly known as the El Yunque rain forest. This is the only tropical rainforest under the National Forest Service. The visitor center will contain exhibits as well as orientation information on the use of the forest. The project will be one of the few incorporating visitor evaluation during all major stages of development (planning, preparation, and post-installation). Front-end evaluation (survey of potential audiences' attitudes, interests, and knowledge) was completed in 1992 and is the focus of the current article. The evaluation plan was originally conceived by Francisco Valenzuela, the Recreation and Interpreter Planner of the project.

The visitor center designer is the Boston firm of Joseph A. Wetzel and Associates. Evaluation is being carried out by the Center for Applied Social Research (University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus) under the direction of Manual Valdes Pizzini, Alfonso Latoni, Virgilio Rodriguez, with the assistance of Fernando Silva. The author of this article (S. B.) is serving as an evaluation consultant.

THE FRONT-END EVALUATION

Interviews for the front-end evaluation were conducted at 10 different stations in the forest. The interview format was developed during a four-day workshop with staff from the National Forest Service, evaluators from the Center for Applied Social Research (University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez), and consultants from the Center for Social Design (Stephen Bitgood and Arlene Benefield).

The survey included interviews with 114 local Puerto Ricans (conducted in Spanish) and with 78 international visitors, mostly mainland U.S.A. residents (conducted in English). The findings of this study suggest that there are

important cultural differences between these two audiences in terms of beliefs, perceptions, and behavior with respect to El Yunque rain forest.

The results of the evaluation were divided into: (1) visitor use of the forest; (2) the meaning of El Yunque; (3) highlights of the visit; (4) forest management; (5) the information needs of visitors; (6) visitors' images of El Yunque; and (7) and benefits of rain forests.

Use of the Forest

Local and international visitors differed in terms of how they used the forest. International visitors (mostly mainland U. S. residents and others from cruise ships) engaged in the following activities in order of frequency: walking, hiking, backpacking, and sightseeing. Local Puerto Rican visitors were most likely to engage in picnicking and swimming than other activities. Local visitation was likely to involve a family outing of long duration, while international visitation was likely to include short visits by groups on tour buses or tourists driving rental cars.

Meanings of El Yunque

Not only did local and international visitors use the forest differently, they also had different perceptions of the forest. In order of frequency, international visitors perceived the following meanings of El Yunque: benefits to visitor (peace, feeling part of nature, enjoyment); importance for Puerto Rico (e.g., promote the Island); and importance in itself (beauty, uniqueness of forest).

Local visitors, on the other hand, appeared to perceive the following meanings: patrimony (the pride of Puerto Rico); a unique natural area (in terms of conserving natural resources); wilderness/relaxation/therapy (refuge from 'civilization'); benefits (provides clear air, savior from hurricane Hugo which many believed was diverted away from the Island after it hit El Yunque, the lung of Puerto Rico; provides leisure activities); God's creation (gift from God, sacred and mysterious place).

Highlights of the Visit

Visitors were asked to describe the three most important things of their experience at El Yunque. The international visitors described the highlights of their visit in the following order of importance: able to see the beauty of nature; view the waterfalls and vistas; chance to see a variety of vegetation; and opportunity to experience the climate, clean and cool air, and water/rain.

The local visitor, on the other hand, described a different set of highlights: contact with nature/air/water/conservation; wilderness/therapy/relaxation/spirituality; sharing with family and friends/recreation.

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Forest Management

Visitors were asked to imagine they were the forest's administrator: what new things would they add or incorporate to the forest? The international and local visitors differed in their view of forest management. International visitors expressed the following attitudes in order of frequency: preserve and conserve; leave it as it is; do not know; information (maps, tours, nature); widen the roads; increase facilities; trails; add restaurant/rest rooms.

Local visitors had a different set of priorities more in keeping with their use of the forest: restrooms/telephone/water; cafeteria/picnic areas; recreational areas/vista points; access to water/ camping areas/hotel; facilities for the handicapped; vehicle flow; parking/trolley; road; cleanliness; leave the forest as it is; and information.

Information Needs of Visitors

Visitors were asked to tell what more they wanted to know about El Yunque. International visitors indicated: kinds of plants-plant life/benefits of the forest; wildlife/animals/ endangered species; nothing; natural and social history; history of trees and forest; who built the roads and towers; and management.

Local visitors desired information on: nature (flora and fauna/natural history); facilities and areas; mysteries (UFOs, the military, lost children); and resource management/ history/ conservation. UFOs, the military, and lost children were related to events that happened, rumors, and/or religious beliefs of some of the locals.

Images of El Yunque

Visitors were asked what images came to mind when either El Yunque or other tropical forests were mentioned. International visitors indicated: green; vegetation/ trees/ rain; nature's beauty; flowers/humidity-mist/wildlife; waterfalls/ pristine/jungle.

Local visitors noted: pure air/ cool and cold; mountain peaks/forest vegetation/nature; tranquility/ therapy/relaxation; and mysteries/Indians/homeland.

Benefits from El Yunque and Rain Forests

The two audiences reported different orders of rain forest benefits. International visitors indicated: oxygen; fresh air; stop global warming; the lungs of the world; preservation/ conservation; protection; pristine/pure environment; vegetation's beauty; wildlife/ rainforests/ flowers/ trees; and personal feeling/tranquility

Local visitors, on the other hand, expressed the following order of benefits: resources; pure air/oxygen; cool air and climate; lung of Puerto Rico and the metro area; water/ swimming; protection against hurricanes; conservation;

wilderness/contact with nature; therapy/relaxation; spirituality; and recreation/enjoyment/family activities.

SIGNIFICANCE

The front-end survey identified some of the major differences between Puerto Rican and international visitors. The local Puerto Rican and international audiences tend to use the forest differently, have different attitudes about the forest, attribute different meanings to it, and generally perceive it in a different way. This information is being incorporated into the facility's design. Because of the differences in these audiences, two separate interpretation approaches will be taken, one for locals and one for international visitors. Labels for locals, of course, will be in Spanish and will be addressed to the needs of locals; while labels for the international visitor will be in English and will address their needs.

The next stage of development (preparation of exhibits) has recently been completed. During this stage, inexpensive mock-ups of exhibits were visitor-tested in El Yunque, and, based on these results, changes are being made to the exhibits.

This project is significant for several reasons. First, it shows sensitivity to the multicultural audience of El Yunque rainforest. Second, the evaluation plan includes visitor input at all major stages of the development (planning, preparation, installation/occupancy) of the visitor center. Third, the evaluation team members have an understanding of the multicultural problems of El Yunque because they are native Puerto Ricans. ElPortal project is directed by a core team of five members with James S. Bedwell as project director. Three of the five are native Puerto Ricans. Blanca Ruiz is the Interpretive Planner who replaced Francisco Valenzuela.

REFERENCE

- Pizzini, M., Latoni, A., Rodriguez, V. & Silva, F. (1992). *El Portal Front End Evaluation of Visitors, July 1992. Final Report*. Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Caribbean National Forest, USDA National Forest Service.

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