



Nature Centers and Outdoor Education: Perceptions of Park Visitors and Community Members

By Robert D. Bixler, Ph.D.

Associate Professor Clemson University

The Division of Outdoor Education is the major provider of “Education” in the three-part Conservation-Education-Recreation mission of Cleveland Metroparks. The Division also assists with two other aspects of Cleveland Metroparks mission by introducing people to recreation activities that open doors to appreciating nature (birding, canoeing to view nature) and help visitors understand the Park District’s conservation initiatives that are conducted primarily by the Natural Resources Division.

In 2011, two surveys of park visitors and community members asked questions about the Division of Outdoor Education in terms of perceptions, use and evaluation. Preference and evaluation questions were asked about specific activities, facilities, programs and familiarity with the publication *Emerald Necklace*. Some of these are direct measures of interest and participation with the services provided by the Division of Outdoor Education. Other questions measure interest in activities that are supported or nurtured by nature centers. Likewise, publishing the *Emerald Necklace* publication is an activity of CM Marketing Department, yet interest in the publication is a measure of interest in programs and services offered by Outdoor Education.

The Community study: A community wide-perspective

Results in Table 1 come from several sections of the questionnaire and provide a community-wide perspective on the Division of Outdoor Education. The percentages in the table reflect the opinions of park visitors and non-users from mail-back surveys and follow-up telephone calls to residents who did not respond. A summary statement of the results are that about one in 5 residents of the tax district visit nature centers and one in six attend programs.

Demand for nature center programs was moderately strong. Between 50 to 80 percent of respondents acknowledged some interest in nature centers, naturalist programs, specific program topics, and opportunities to become involved in nature-appreciation recreation activities. Over one third expressed interest in summer camp programs, an offering of interest mostly to adults with children.

Less than three percent of the sample responded that they do not like nature or outdoor recreation activities. About one-third reported not knowing what is offered, while one in six choose the “not interested in program topic” category. Ten percent or less reported that facility hours or program times were not convenient. (See Table 1)

Table 1. The Community (Telephone) Study Results for the Division of Outdoor Education.

From the following list, please check all of the activities that you currently do: (in any park in northeast Ohio)	Percent Checking
Visit nature centers	22.6
Attend a nature center program	14.9
Going to a facility to shop (Earth Words, golf courses pro shops)	6.6
Attend a special event	31.1
Observe nature/bird watching	26.3
Canoeing/Kayaking	8.5
Geocaching, Letterbox, Questing	1.3
From the following list, please check all of the activities that you currently do when visiting Cleveland Metroparks:	Percent Checking
Visit nature centers	22.6
Attend a nature center program	16.0
Going to a facility to shop (Earth Words, golf courses pro-shops)	4.6
Attend a special event	27.0
Observe nature/bird watching	25.6
Canoeing/kayaking	6.5
Mountain biking on dirt paths	5.7
Geocaching, letterbox, questing	1.5
Please check all the reasons that prevent you or members of your household from using parks more often	Percent Checking
Don't like to participate in nature or outdoor recreation activities	2.4
The following are some ways Cleveland Metroparks might improve your experience in the parks	Percent Checking
Providing more nature programs and nature centers	58.8
Increasing opportunities for viewing wildlife	69.8
Please check all the ways you learn about Cleveland Metroparks facilities, programs and activities	Percent Checking
<i>Emerald Necklace</i> publication	24.9
Please check all the reasons that prevent you or members of your household from going to Cleveland Metroparks programs as often as you would like:	Percent Checking
I don't know what is being offered	31.9
Not interested in program topic	17.1
Don't know how to get information	12.4
Program times are not convenient	10.6
Facility hours are not convenient	5.2
Lack of quality programs or events	4.9
Program class full	1.0
Registration for programs is difficult	0.9

Table 1. The Community (Telephone) Study Results for the Division of Outdoor Education.

Whether or not you use Cleveland Metroparks, the following are some changes...that would allow people to <u>use parks more often</u>. For each change, please answer whether it would help you use Cleveland Metroparks often	Percent Yes
Providing more guided or self-guided activities like hikes, nature center programs, etc.	49.6
Whether or not you use Cleveland Metroparks, the following are some ways Cleveland Metroparks might <u>improve your experience</u> in the parks. Please tell us if you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with each idea	Percent Agreeing
Providing more nature programs and nature centers	58.8
Learning about nature, local history or going to events at nature centers	79.1
Increasing opportunities for viewing wildlife	69.8
Below are some programs that Cleveland Metroparks offers at its parks. Please tell us if you would have an interest in the program by circling "yes" or "no".	Percent Yes
Naturalist led programs	48.7
Cleveland Metroparks Summer Camp programs (i.e. golf camp, Zoo camp, Outdoor education and recreation camp)	37.4
Outdoor recreation programs and nature tours	64.5
Programs that help me make my environment a better place for wildlife (i.e. learning about native plants, rain barrels and gardens, gardening for wildlife).	60.6
Learning how to live more sustainable (i.e. food choices, recycling, green lifestyle)	52.4
Below are some programs that Cleveland Metroparks offers at its parks. Please indicate whether you agree, are neutral or disagree that Cleveland Metroparks is the preferred provider of the program area. (Only asked of those interested in the topic)	Percent who believe CM is the preferred provider
Naturalist-led programs	80
Programs that help me make my environment a better place for wildlife (i.e. learning about native plants, rain barrels and gardens, gardening for wildlife).	74
Cleveland Metroparks Summer Camp programs (i.e. golf camp, Zoo camp, Outdoor Education and recreation camp)	79
Outdoor recreation programs and nature tours	77.6
Learning how to live more sustainable (i.e. food choices, recycling, green lifestyle)	66.6

The In-Park Study: Involvement with Services of the Division of Outdoor Education

Visitors intercepted while using the parks were asked a similar set of questions as the community study about the Division of Outdoor Education. Some questions were direct measures of participation (visiting a nature center) while others measured interest in recreational and educational activities that the nature centers provided instruction in. The numeric percentages from the in-park study are less reliable than the community study for specific facilities and programs for the following reasons:

Because some types of users come to the reservations almost daily (150 to 300 visits a year) for exercise or to walk their dogs, they will show up in the sample at much higher rates than other users. Other visitors who are motivated to participate in activities that do not require frequent visits or who only visit seasonally will be underrepresented in the sample. Additionally, visitors attending programs may be under or over represented. Program attendees arrive at a program on a particular day and time often within 10 to 15 minutes of the program and leave within a similar narrow window. In most cases, they will be underrepresented in the sample simply because the randomly selected sample times and locations did not coincide with a scheduled program.

Results from this study indicate that about five percent of park visitors were visiting nature centers the day they were intercepted and one percent were attending a program at a nature center (see Table 2). When park visitors were asked about what other activities they take part in, seven percent reported visiting nature centers and four percent reported going to programs. When in-park visitors were asked what other services they would be interested in, 44 to 66 percent mentioned programs or experiences associated with the Division of Outdoor Education. Lastly, of those who stated a preference for programs and services provided by the Division of Outdoor Education, about one in five indicated they believed that Cleveland Metroparks was the preferred provider.

Table 2. In-Park Study Results for the Division of Outdoor Education.	
What was your main reason for coming to the park today?	Percent Checking
Visit nature centers	5
Attend a nature center program	1
Going to a facility to shop (Earth Words, golf courses pro shops)	<1
Attend a special event	4
Observe nature/bird watching	13
Canoeing/kayaking	<1
Mountain biking on dirt paths	<1
Geocaching, Letterbox, Questing	<1
What else do you like to do when you come to the park?	Percent Checking
Visit nature centers	7
Attend a nature center program	4
Going to a facility to shop (Earth Words, golf courses pro-shops)	1
Attend a special event	4
Observe nature/bird watching	22
Canoeing/kayaking	1
Mountain biking on dirt paths	1
Geocaching, letterbox, questing	<1

Table 2. In-Park Study Results for the Division of Outdoor Education continued

Please check all the ways you learn about Cleveland Metroparks facilities, programs and activities	Percent Checking
<i>Emerald Necklace</i> publication	21
Below are some programs that Cleveland Metroparks offers at its parks. Please tell us if you would have an interest in the program by circling “yes” or “no”.	Percent Yes
Naturalist-led programs	44
Cleveland Metroparks Summer Camp programs (i.e. golf camp, Zoo camp, Outdoor education and recreation camp)	51
Outdoor recreation programs and nature tours	66
Programs that help make the environment a better place for wildlife (i.e. learning about native plants, rain barrels and gardens, gardening for wildlife).	63
Learning how to live more sustainable (i.e. food choices, recycling, green lifestyle)	59
Below are some programs that Cleveland Metroparks offers at its parks. Please indicate whether you agree, are neutral or disagree that Cleveland Metroparks is the preferred provider of the program area. (Only asked of those interested in the topic)	Percent who believe CM is the preferred provider
Naturalist-led programs	80
Programs that help me make by environment a better place for wildlife (i.e. learning about native plants, rain barrels and gardens, gardening for wildlife).	74
Cleveland Metroparks Summer Camp programs (i.e. golf camp, Zoo camp, Outdoor Education and recreation camp)	79
Outdoor recreation programs and nature tours	78
Learning how to live more sustainable (i.e. food choices, recycling, green lifestyle)	67

Discussion:

Data from the Community Survey indicates a reasonable level of involvement among residents of the tax district with the programs and services provided by the Division of Outdoor Education. With the mission of the Park District squarely centered around conservation, the Division of Outdoor Education is playing a central role.

The importance of the types of services and programs that the Division of Outdoor Education provides was amplified in 2005 by the publication of a book by Richard Louv entitled "*Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*". The book popularized a concern among applied social scientists and natural resource professionals that there was a growing disconnect between recent generations and an interest, understanding, involvement, and affection for nature. The implications of this disconnect is grave for public lands, through decreased interest in wild places, parks and conservation. With the narrowing of school curricula to basics, the responsibility for strategically addressing this issue resides in informal educational services such as the informal non-school services provide by the Division of Outdoor Education.

In the last 15 years there have been several shifts that challenge traditional nature center educational strategies. The first is a dramatic shift in the understanding of what constitutes realistic outcomes from educational programming offered in informal settings during leisure time. Termed "free-choice learning" by John Falk, learning outcomes from programming are now known to be different from the performance based learning associated with schools. We now know that educators have much less control over what people learn in informal settings and that learning is more idiosyncratic than learning in schools—but when learning occurs it is more meaningful and memorable.

Another shift is in the types of programs people now seek. In a society filled with Disneyesque experiences, no longer are there large markets for traditional lecture-style programs. Pine and Gilbert in *The Experience Economy* describe the new marketplace for experiences rather than programs. Informal educators are now tasked with being hosts, decorators, entertainers, story tellers, and musicians. Environmental interpreters must be able to provide aesthetic, prestigious and novel experiences for participants.

Lastly, we are just becoming aware that the traditional methods of environmental (and historical) interpretation were built around the experiences of first time/only time visitors to iconic and exotic locations. Cleveland Metroparks is a regional park district with few out-of-region visitors. Residents of the tax district visit reservations several to several hundred times in a year. Exhibits, programs in nature centers and staff skill sets need to be dynamic and designed to build lasting relationships and sense of communities with area residents. Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* provides guidance for more deeply engaging people from local communities with nature centers. Likewise, the growing body of research and evaluation on significant life experiences of nature enthusiasts describes many informal and peripheral skill sets that park naturalists can help visitors develop.

For more information contact Noreen Lazor, Cleveland Metroparks Research Specialist at nml@clevelandmetroparks.com