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Results of a Pilot Customer Satisfaction Survey of Corps of Engineers Recreation Visitors

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INTRODUCTION: The visitor comment card was developed in the mid-1990's for use by project managers in assessing satisfaction levels of recreation visitors to Corps of Engineer managed recreation areas. Since the introduction of the comment card, customer satisfaction surveys have been routinely conducted at many Corps of Engineers water resources development projects. Results of these surveys have provided managers with ongoing visitor feedback regarding the recreation facilities, services, and information available on their individual project(s). The high value that managers place on monitoring customer feedback is indicated in a survey of project managers indicating that customer satisfaction data was the most useful information managers had available for guiding recreation management decisions (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 2003).

While the original intent of the comment card was to provide managers with a tool for use on their own projects, there has been considerable interest in using existing comment card data to compare customer satisfaction results between projects and to characterize visitor satisfaction across Districts, Divisions, and the entire Corps recreation program. To meet reporting needs, it has become frequent practice to roll up customer satisfaction data originally obtained by projects for their own use to higher reporting levels. Although this practice is widespread, there are concerns that different visitor populations and methods of data collection at different projects may produce inconsistent results.

Visitor satisfaction is a performance measure of the Corps Recreation Business Area. The Corps measures and reports customer satisfaction results to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to meet requirements set forth under the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). As performance results come to play an increasingly larger role in oversight of the Corps Recreation Business Area, it is becoming correspondingly more important that performance measurements produce accurate and consistent results. Up to now, the only customer satisfaction data available for producing a national estimate were compiled from the results for projects that volunteered data collected by varying and largely unknown methods. This survey addressed the need for consistent data for measuring Corps visitor satisfaction at the national level.

PURPOSE: This paper presents results of a pilot national satisfaction survey of visitors to Corps-managed recreation areas. The survey was based on a sampling protocol capable of producing a national estimate of customer satisfaction and on standardized data collection methods ensuring consistency across recreation areas and projects. The survey data were used to 1) produce a national estimate of customer satisfaction, 2) provide preliminary data for benchmarking Corps-managed recreation areas, and 3) evaluate the suitability of the survey protocol for monitoring visitor satisfaction in the Corps' Recreation Business Area.

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METHODS: This survey used project personnel to administer the comment card to a sample of day-use and camping visitors. Standardized field procedures and a calendar of sample dates and locations were developed and distributed to the projects as guides for data collection. After obtaining the required data from visitors, project personnel entered the data into a standardized reporting system and at the end of the survey, provided final data for the project to the authors. Data were collected from July 1 through September 1, 2002.

The current version of the comment card (Figure 1) has been used to collect satisfaction data from Corps recreation visitors since 1999, so most projects (including all of those participating in this survey) had considerable prior experience with its use. In this survey, data collection efforts at all participating projects were either supervised or conducted by the ranger with primary responsibility for customer satisfaction surveys.

OMB 0710-0001

Comment Card

US Army Corps of Engineers

Please give us a minute of your time to help us serve you better.

Project _____ *Date* ___/___/___ *WD* ☐ *WE* ☐

What is the primary purpose of your visit today?
Please ☑ *one box: Camping* ☐ *Boating* ☐ *DayUse* ☐ *Home Zipcode* _____

How would you rate our facilities and services at _____ ***?***
Please ☑ ***one box for each:***

	Very Good	*Good*	*Average*	*Poor*	*Very Poor*	*Don't Know*
Safety and security at the recreation area	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Appearance and maintenance of the area	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Restroom cleanliness	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of staff to answer my questions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Adequate ranger/visitor assistance patrols	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Current and accurate information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Water safety information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Value for fee paid	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Overall quality of facilities and services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

What improvements would you like to see in this area? _____

Figure 1. Customer comment card: survey instrument used in the 2002 national customer satisfaction survey of Corps recreation visitors

Visitors were selected to receive the survey as part of a four-stage selection process in which selection probabilities were approximately known but were unequal. The first three stages of selection identified the projects, recreation areas, and dates on which sampling would occur. A calendar of the sampling schedule (Appendix A) was then produced and distributed to each

participating project before sampling was scheduled to begin. The fourth stage of sample selection involved the identification of visitors to survey on the recreation area on a given date. For this purpose, standardized rules for administering the survey to individuals on designated sample dates were provided to each participating project (Appendix B).

As the study was planned, a total sample of 2,400 visitors was selected in four stages. In the first stage, 20 projects were selected from 456 Corps projects with probability proportional to 1999 project visitation. Next, three recreation areas were selected at each of these projects with probability proportional to area visitation. Five sampling days were then selected for each recreation area with probability proportional to average daily visitation. Finally, a fixed sample of eight visitors was chosen on each sample date. This selection procedure, commonly referred to as probability-proportional-to-size (PPS) sampling, produced a sample for which each recreation visit associated with any of the 456 Corps projects had approximately the same overall chance of being included in the survey.

A project's participation in the study was voluntary. Of the initial 20 projects that were asked to participate in data collection, 6 were unable to do so for various reasons. Therefore, additional project selections were made, again with probability proportional to visitation, until 20 projects had agreed to participate in the survey (Table 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: A total of 2,123 completed customer satisfaction surveys were obtained from 19 of the 20 projects that agreed to collect and provide data for this survey. One project was unable to complete data collection due to staff illness. Of visitors who were asked to complete the comment card, only seven declined to do so, resulting in an overall response rate of 99.7 percent. The extraordinarily high response rate was probably influenced by a feature of the data collection protocol in which rangers hand-delivered comment cards to visitors selected to participate in the sample and then waited to obtain responses from them.

Customer Satisfaction Scores. Of survey respondents, 74 to 90 percent rated nine performance items as either "good" (4) or "very good" (5) on a 5-point rating scale (Table 2). The percentage of visitors rating performance as "good" or "very good" was highest for value for fee paid (90 percent), followed by appearance and maintenance of the area (89 percent), safety and security at the recreation area (88 percent), current and accurate information (84 percent), water safety information (81 percent), adequate ranger / visitor assistance patrols (79 percent), availability of staff to answer my questions (75 percent), and restroom cleanliness (74 percent). Ninety percent of respondents rated the overall quality of facilities and services as "good" or "very good."

Satisfaction levels reported by recreation visitors in this survey were broadly similar to those reported by Titre et al. (1997) for a collection of 24 Corps recreation areas. In that survey, 74-93 percent of visitors rated nine performance items as either "good" or very good." Direct comparison of the results between Titre et al. (1997) and the present survey are somewhat hindered by differences in survey instruments. While the two surveys addressed similar performance items, only three of the nine rating items were identical in both content and

Table 1
Projects Selected for Participation in the 2002 National Customer Satisfaction Survey (Projects that agreed to participate in the survey are noted in bold type)

Order of Selection	Agreed to Participate	Division	District	State	Project	1999 Visits (in millions)
1	**Yes**	**NWD**	**WALLA WALLA**	**WA**	**MCNARY LOCK & DAM, LAKE WALLULA**	**4.2**
2	**Yes**	**LRD**	**NASHVILLE**	**TN**	**J PERCY PRIEST DAM AND RESERVOIR**	**6.6**
3	**Yes**	**SWD**	**TULSA**	**OK**	**OOLOGAH LAKE**	**1.3**
4	**Yes**	**SWD**	**FORT WORTH**	**TX**	**HORDS CREEK LAKE**	**0.5**
5	No	SPD	ALBUQUERQUE	CO	JOHN MARTIN DAM	0.3
6	**Yes**	**LRD**	**NASHVILLE**	**TN**	**DALE HOLLOW LAKE[1]**	**3.4**
7	**Yes**	**NAD**	**NEW ENGLAND**	**MA**	**CAPE COD CANAL**	**3.8**
8	**Yes**	**SWD**	**LITTLE ROCK**	**AR**	**BEAVER LAKE**	**2.4**
9	**Yes**	**SWD**	**LITTLE ROCK**	**AR**	**DARDANELLE LAKE - ARK.RIV.NAV.SYS**	**2**
10	No	SWD	LITTLE ROCK	AR	GREERS FERRY LAKE	5.6
11	**Yes**	**SWD**	**FORT WORTH**	**TX**	**SAM RAYBURN RESERVOIR**	**1.6**
12	**Yes**	**SAD**	**MOBILE**	**GA**	**ALLATOONA LAKE**	**5.7**
13	**Yes**	**NWD**	**KANSAS CITY**	**KS**	**WILSON LAKE**	**0.2**
14	**Yes**	**SAD**	**MOBILE**	**GA**	**WALTER F. GEORGE LAKE**	**6.6**
15	No	LRD	LOUISVILLE	KY	MCALPINE LOCK AND DAM +OHIO RIVER	0.3
16	**Yes**	**SAD**	**MOBILE**	**GA**	**LAKE SIDNEY LANIER**	**7.7**
17	No	LRD	HUNTINGTON	OH	MOHAWK DAM	0.3
18	No	NAD	NEW ENGLAND	CT	WEST THOMPSON LAKE	0.1
19	No	SAD	WILMINGTON	NC	B EVERETT JORDAN DAM AND LAKE	1.2
20	**Yes**	**MVD**	**ST. LOUIS**	**IL**	**CARLYLE LAKE**	**2.9**
21	**Yes**	**LRD**	**NASHVILLE**	**TN**	**OLD HICKORY LOCK AND DAM**	**11.9**
22	**Yes**	**SWD**	**FORT WORTH**	**TX**	**STILLHOUSE HOLLOW RESERVOIR**	**0.4**
23	Yes	**MVD**	**ST. LOUIS**	**IL**	**LAKE SHELBYVILLE**	**2.5**
24	**Yes**	**MVD**	**ST. PAUL**	**ND**	**BALDHILL DAM LAKE ASHTABULA**	**0.2**
25	No	MVD	ST. LOUIS	MO	WAPPAPELLO LAKE	2.1
26	**Yes**	**SAD**	**MOBILE**	**FL**	**LAKE SEMINOLE**	**1**
27	**Yes**	**NWD**	**KANSAS CITY**	**KS**	**MILFORD LAKE**	**0.5**

[1] Unable to complete data collection due to staff illness.

Table 2
Summary of Responses of Corps Project Visitors to the 2002 National Customer Satisfaction Survey

Customer Satisfaction Item	No. of Visitor Responses	Response Distribution (Percent)					
		Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	Total[1]
Safety and security at the recreation area	2092	44	44	10	1	1	100
Appearance and maintenance of the area	2105	46	43	9	1	0	100
Restroom cleanliness	1746	32	42	20	5	1	100
Availability of staff to answer my questions	1921	34	41	20	4	1	100
Adequate ranger/visitor assistance patrols	2063	38	41	18	3	1	100
Current and accurate information	1877	38	46	15	1	0	100
Water safety Information	1758	36	45	17	2	1	100
Value for fee paid	1872	54	37	8	1	1	100
Overall quality of facilities and services	2039	44	46	9	1	0	100

[1] The sum of the reported percentages may actually differ from 100 percent because of rounding.

wording. Of these, restroom cleanliness was the lowest rated item in both surveys, with the same percentage of visitors (74 percent) rating this item "good" or "very good." Overall quality of facilities and services was similar in the present survey (90 percent) and the earlier survey (87 percent), while value for fee paid was rated higher by visitors in the present survey (90 percent) than in the earlier survey (81 percent). Other response differences were also apparent in the two surveys. For example, the availability of staff to answer questions was rated "good" or "very good" by 75 percent of respondents in the current survey, while 93 percent of respondents in the earlier survey gave these scores to a similar item, staff helpfulness. Different ratings given to similar, but not identical, performance items underscores the need for a consistent survey instrument as well as standardized and consistent survey methods so that any performance changes over time are not confounded with methodological differences between surveys conducted at different locations or in different years.

Comparison of Corps with NPS and USFS. The National Park Service (NPS) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) both collect customer satisfaction data from their visitors using the same five-point rating scale currently used in the Corps comment card. The NPS has released national visitor satisfaction results for the years 1988-2001. In their most recent survey (2001), 72-96 percent of NPS visitors gave 15 performance items a rating of "good" or "very good" (University of Idaho, undated). Visitor satisfaction scores in the NPS survey were similar, but often slightly higher than those obtained in the present survey of Corps visitors.

The USFS has released national results for 2002 from customer satisfaction data collected as part of its recently revised visitation survey methodology. The USFS survey instrument uses the same 5-point rating scale as used in both the Corps and NPS instruments. In the 2002 survey, 65-99 percent of USFS visitors gave 14 customer satisfaction items a rating of "good" or "very good" (USDA Forest Service 2002). Visitor satisfaction scores in the USFS were typically several percentage points lower than scores obtained in the Corps for similar performance items.

Visitor Expectations. While the USFS, NPS, and Corps ask visitors to assess satisfaction with their recreation experience, the USFS asks visitors to also rate the importance of the same rating items to their recreation experience. With this additional information, the USFS was able to determine which performance items were most important to visitors and to evaluate agency performance against visitor expectations. While Corps comment card surveys address only the satisfaction dimension, another survey of Corps recreation visitors addresses both the importance and performance dimensions. The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey conducted by the University of Michigan addressed the broader issues in its 2001 and 2002 surveys of Corps recreation visitors (ASCI, undated). Unpublished results from the ASCI show that Corps performance has generally exceeded the expectation of its recreation visitors. The ACSI results also showed that project lands and waters contribute more to visitor satisfaction than do the facilities, services, and information available on Corps projects. This is a dimension of satisfaction that is not addressed in the comment card.

Benchmarking Corps Business Area with ACSI. The ASCI is designed to facilitate comparison of customer satisfaction results among public and private service providers. The Corps has typically scored near the middle in customer satisfaction among federal recreation providers who participated in the ASCI survey between 1999 and 2001. In the 2001 survey, the

ASCI for Corps recreation visitors (71) was comparable to the ASCI for private companies (71.3) and higher than the mean ASCI for the Federal Government as a whole (68.6) (ASCI, undated). In addition, component results from the 2001 survey showed that the Corps recreation program had a high level of visitor trust (79) and received a very low level of complaints (1.1 percent) compared to other federal agencies that participated in the survey.

Component satisfaction indicators from the 2001 ACSI survey tend to agree with satisfaction results of the present survey. In both surveys, the Corps received higher scores for the appearance of recreation areas, moderate scores for visitor information, and lower scores for visitor facilities and services. Results from the present survey tend to support an ACSI finding that the ability to deliver visitor services (typically by rangers) is one of the weaker aspects of the Corps business area. In the current management environment, improving ranger services to the visitor would be difficult to achieve given the adverse staffing trends and the increasing amount of time rangers are spending on office-related duties (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 2003).

Benchmarking Corps Recreation Projects and Recreation Areas. All of the recreation areas included in this survey had mean satisfaction scores of "average" (3.0) or above on each of the nine performance items (Figure 2). However, mean scores tended to vary widely from the middle (3.2) to near the top (4.8) of the satisfaction scale. Recreation areas receiving the top scores are potential "best-in-class" areas from a visitor viewpoint. Studying the facilities, services, and other characteristics of best-in-class recreation areas can provide insights into the kinds of improvements that are most likely to improve visitor satisfaction of lower performing recreation areas.

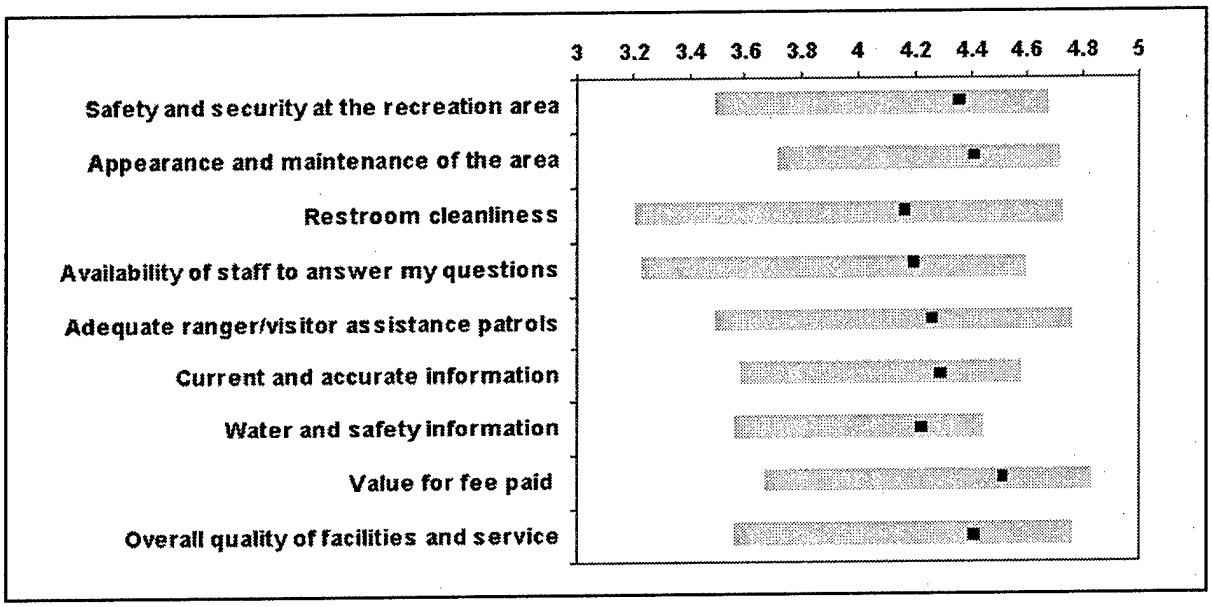

Figure 2. Range and mean of satisfaction scores associated with 57 recreation areas

CONCLUSIONS: The pilot survey results were generally consistent with those previously obtained by aggregating results from independently conducted project-level surveys. Where differences were evident, they may have resulted from either satisfaction trends or changes in wording of the survey instrument. This ambiguity underscores the need to maintain consistent methods over time in a monitoring program.

Successful completion of the pilot survey demonstrates the logistic feasibility of executing a design for a national customer satisfaction monitoring survey with voluntary cooperation from many different project offices. Where they are provided with study design support, it is reasonable to expect the natural resource management staff at different projects to execute their part of a larger plan that requires adherence to a pre-planned sampling schedule and standardized data collection methods. But because survey results may be sensitive to any changes in the survey itself, major survey components, including the survey instrument, sampling design, and data collection protocols should be available in final form before initiating a monitoring program and changed as little as possible thereafter.

A concern arising from a program based on voluntary participation of projects is the potential effect of selective non-participation on survey results. Of the 30 percent of projects that were unable to participate in this survey, some were experiencing flooding, ongoing rehabilitation of recreation facilities, or other disruptions to recreation that might be expected to have a downward influence on satisfaction scores. This could result in a tendency to overestimate overall visitor satisfaction using data obtained only from voluntary project participants.

Many of the projects participating in the survey wanted feedback that would allow them to compare satisfaction at their project with that of other projects. The strong interest of project managers in using customer satisfaction results to assess their own performance suggests that a program for self evaluation and improvement encompassing a) comparative benchmarking, b) identification of best-in-class projects and recreations areas, and c) sharing of best business practices used by best-in-class projects, would be well received in the field.

POINTS OF CONTACT: For additional information concerning this technical note, contact Mr. Richard L. Kasul, U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, Vicksburg, MS (601-634-3921, *Richard.L.Kasul@erdc.usace.army.mil*), or the manager of the Recreation Management Support Program, Mr. Scott Jackson (601-634-2105, *Scott.Jackson@erdc.usace.army.mil*). This technical note should be cited as follows:

> Kasul, R. L., Chang, W-H, and Franco, S. F. (2003). "Feedback from Corps of Engineers recreation visitors: Results of a 2002 national customer satisfaction survey," *Natural Resources Technical Notes Collection* (ERDC/NRTN-REC-14). *http://www.wes.army.mil/el*

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Appendix A. Example of the Custom Sampling Schedule Provided to Each of the Participating Projects

J PERCY PRIEST DAM AND RESERVOIR

Survey Calendar

July 2002

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2	3 SEVEN POINTS	4 SMITH SPRINGS	5	6 SEVEN POINTS
7	8	9	10 SMITH SPRINGS	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20 SMITH SPRINGS
21 ELM HILL	22	23	24	25	26	27
28 SEVEN POINTS	29	30	31			

August 2002

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 ELM HILL	2 SEVEN POINTS	3
4	5	6	7 ELM HILL	8	9	10 SMITH SPRINGS
11	12	13	14	15	16 ELM HILL	17 SMITH SPRINGS
18	19	20 ELM HILL	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

September 2002

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1 SEVEN POINTS	2					

Note: Fill in number of complete surveys in C:_____. Fill in number of refusals in R:_____

Appendix B. Sampling Instructions Provided to Project Personnel

National Customer Satisfaction Survey: Instructions for Survey Personnel

Background

Yours is one of 20 projects that have been selected at random to provide a quota of 120 completed customer comment cards from visitors during the period 1 July through 2 September 2002. The comment cards are to be completed at three designated recreation areas. These areas have also been pre-selected at random from the recreation areas on your project.

The data collected on your project will be combined with data from the other projects to produce a national estimate of customer satisfaction for the Corps recreation program. The national estimate of customer satisfaction is one of the performance measures of the Corps recreation program that will be reported to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as required under the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). The amount of data you collect will not be sufficient nor will it be used to separately evaluate customer satisfaction at your project.

Task Overview

You are being provided with a supply of comment cards, a calendar showing the sampling schedule, and the attached Data Collection Guidelines for conducting the survey. You will also need access to the Data Analysis Software available on the Corps NRM Gateway at http://corpslakes.usace.army.mil/employees/commentcard/card.html.

The comment cards are the same cards you have been using for the past several years. The analysis software is the same software you have been using to enter data from cards to an electronic data file.

The customer satisfaction survey should be completed according to the Data Collection Guidelines described below. This survey was developed around a rigorous sampling plan that will allow us to produce a national estimate of customer satisfaction with minimal data requirements from any one project. Our ability to produce a meaningful national estimate of customer satisfaction depends on adherence to the Data Collection Guidelines as closely as possible.

As you complete each day of sampling, record on the calendar the number of surveys completed and the number of visitors who refused to take the survey. Also keep comment cards completed in connection with this survey separate from comment cards you might collect in connection with any other survey you may be conducting.

As you collect completed visitor comment cards, enter them into an electronic database using the data analysis software. This software requires that you insert a floppy disk on which the electronic dataset will be stored. If you are doing other comment card surveys, please use a separate floppy disk when entering data for this survey so that data from this survey will not be intermingled with data from your other comment card surveys.

Please e-mail the completed electronic dataset to Sammy.F.Franco@wes02.usace.army.mil. Also fax the completed calendar notes to the attention of Mr. Sam Franco at 601-634-4242. Dataset and calendar notes should be completed and returned not later than 15 September 2002.

Appendix B (cont'd). Sampling Instructions Provided to Project Personnel

Data Collection Guidelines

1. Refer to the accompanying calendar to identify the days and recreation areas that have been randomly selected for sampling at your project. You will conduct surveys at each of the three designated recreation areas on five different days throughout the summer.

2. Obtain eight completed customer satisfaction surveys for each designated day and recreation area indicated on the calendar.

3. Recreation areas have been classified into one of four types. The method of administering surveys to visitors will differ for each type of recreation area as follows:

   Campgrounds: On the evening of the designated sampling day, check with the gate attendant to identify campers that are scheduled to leave the following day. Visit their campsites during the evening and obtain one completed survey from each of eight camping parties who are scheduled to leave the next day.

   Day-Use Areas: Obtain eight completed surveys distributed over as much of the day as is practical. Take advantage of routine patrols to minimize trips to the recreation area. The survey should be administered to visitors who show signs of leaving the recreation area. Approach visitors in the parking lot or at their recreation site as they are preparing to leave. Traffic stops are discouraged.

   Recreation Areas With Separate Camping and Day-Use Sections: On the designated sampling day, administer four surveys in the camping section as described above for "Campgrounds" and four surveys in the day-use section as described above for "Day-Use Areas."

   Campgrounds That Allow Day-Use: On the designated sampling day, administer four surveys to camping visitors as described above for "Campgrounds" and four surveys to day-use visitors as described above for "Day-Use Areas."

4. Comment cards should be filled out in your presence and returned directly to you. If you wish, you can read the choices to the visitor and mark the card yourself. **Please do not** leave the comment card with the visitor with instructions to drop it off at a designated location.

5. While administering surveys, keep track of both the number of completed surveys and the number of visitors who refused to take the survey. Record both totals in the space provided on the calendar.

Appendix B (cont'd). Sampling Instructions Provided to Project Personnel

Adjustments for Unforeseen Circumstances:

Extended Closure of Recreation Areas: If the recreation area is scheduled to be closed for an extended period of time during the survey period, please contact Mr. Sam Franco for instructions.

Short-term Closure of Recreation Areas: If the recreation area is closed on the scheduled sampling date because of high water or other short-term events and is expected to reopen in the next couple of weeks, then reschedule the missed surveys as follows:

- If the missed survey was originally scheduled for a weekday, reschedule it for the first available weekday after the recreation area re-opens.
- If the missed survey was originally scheduled for a weekend day, reschedule it for the first available weekend day after the recreation area re-opens.

Rain days: If adverse weather conditions keep most visitors from using the recreation area on the designated sampling day, then reschedule the survey for that recreation area as follows:

- If the survey was originally scheduled for a weekday, then reschedule it for the next available weekday.
- If the survey was originally scheduled for a weekend day, then reschedule it for the next available weekend day.

Inability to fill daily quota: If there are too few visitors available on the scheduled sampling day to obtain eight completed surveys, then fill out the remainder of the quota on the next available day as described under "Rain Days."

Other unforeseen circumstances: Contact Mr. Sam Franco for instructions.

Point of Contact: For clarification or additional information, contact Mr. Sam Franco by phone at 601-634-4205 or by e-mail at Sammy.F.Franco@erdc.usace.army.mil.