

Resource protection, visitor safety, and employee safety: How prepared is the National Park Service?

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NATIONAL PARKS TODAY FACE HIGHLY COMPLEX issues in a rapidly changing environment. Climate change, invasive species, fire, and human activities both inside and outside of the parks threaten natural and cultural resources (Council on Environmental Quality et al. 2011). The changing demographics of the United States and the profile of park visitors also have significant implications for the management of national parks (Rodriguez et al. 2012; National Parks Second Century Commission 2009). Future park visitors may have different needs, knowledge, values, biases, and skill sets than current or former visitors, which may pose significant changes in how staff across the service, and specifically with the Division of Visitor and Resource Protection (VRP), must prepare for and respond to resource protection and visitor safety concerns. Currently VRP staff are responsible for a wide range of tasks, including law enforcement, emergency management services, search and rescue, and wilderness and backcountry management, among others.

To operate in such a complex environment it is vital that the NPS workforce have the capacity to meet the bureau's core mission and the ability to adapt to these changing conditions influencing national parks. In particular, three VRP responsibilities—resource protection, visitor safety, and employee safety—are central to fulfilling the mission of the National Park Service (e.g., National Park Service 2014). Natural and cultural resource protection is critical to the preservation of park resources for future generations, and protecting the safety of visitors is essential for providing enjoyment. The safety of Park Service employees is equally necessary for protecting resources and ensuring visitor safety.

The National Park Service has an obligation to the American people and its workforce to provide effective employee education and training programs that enhance its ability to meet the challenges of the 21st century. To do this and to comply with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1994, the National Park Service has periodically assessed the education and training needs of employees in different career specialties. In 2012 the NPS Office of Learning and Development, in collaboration with the Division of Visitor and Resource Protection and Clemson University, initiated the development of a comprehensive assessment of training needs of all NPS VRP employees. Over the following year, a group of VRP subject-matter experts developed a compre-

Abstract

National parks in the 21st century confront many challenges. In such a climate, the ability of National Park Service (NPS) Division of Visitor and Resource Protection staff to perform specific duties related to resource protection, visitor safety, and employee safety is integral to meeting the NPS mission. It is important that employees be well trained to perform these responsibilities. For this reason the NPS Office of Learning and Development collaborated with Clemson University to assess Visitor and Resource Protection employees' perceptions of the importance and their preparedness to perform a comprehensive list of job competencies. This article reports the most critical training needs of three competency categories: natural and cultural resource protection, visitor safety, and employee safety. Training needs in resource protection included specialized law enforcement skills, gathering and synthesizing data, and collaboration and partnerships. Training needs in visitor safety focused on specialized investigative skills and the ability to synthesize data. Training needs identified with respect to employee safety involved the ability to apply Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements. These findings as well as future training strategies are discussed. This article also reports on how NPS programs are responding to the survey through policy actions, priorities, and planning. By taking these actions in training and education, the National Park Service can support the role of the Visitor and Resource Protection Division in upholding the NPS mission for the future.

Key words

employee safety, National Park Service, needs assessment, resource protection, skill performance, visitor safety, workforce capacity

hensive list of 87 VRP competencies related to 15 categories that were based on accepted best practices and considered necessary to perform successfully in today's park management environment (fig. 1). This led to the development of a survey that examined employees' perceptions of importance and preparedness to perform these competencies. In this article, we report some of the results of this study and examine the most critical training needs related to three categories of competencies—(1) natural and cultural resource protection, (2) visitor safety, and (3) employee safety—because these responsibilities are applicable to most VRP job

descriptions and their relative importance in fulfilling the mission of the National Park Service (e.g., National Park Service 2014).

Methods

Overview

Data reported in this study were collected as part of the larger Visitor and Resource Protection Training and Education Needs Assessment (Wright and Depper 2014, available from the authors). Following procedures outlined by Hammitt et al. (2007), Machnik et al. (2007), and Weddell et al. (2009 and 2013), we surveyed VRP employees to (1) identify the importance of specific competencies within each category, (2) assess the level of preparedness of employees to perform these competencies, and (3) quantify the gaps between the importance and perception of preparedness to perform each competency. We measured gaps using a diagnostic measure called a *mean weighted discrepancy score* (Robinson and Garton 2008; Edwards and Briers 1999; Bullard et al. 2013). These metrics are often used to guide the development of future education and training programs.

Survey instrument

In addition to natural and cultural resource protection, visitor safety, and employee safety, the following 12 categories of competencies were investigated: backcountry management, incident management, emergency medical services, search and rescue, emergency communications and dispatching, public health, employee health and wellness, leadership, special park use management, NPS regulations, project management, and use and management of technologies. Associated with these 15 categories, we investigated the importance and preparedness related to 87 specific competencies.

Because of the breadth and complexity of VRP duties, the size of the survey, and the potential for respondent fatigue, we designed “skip” features in the Web-based survey. We asked respondents to rate the importance of the 15 categories of competencies on a seven point scale from “unimportant” (1) to “extremely important” (7). If the respondent rated a category as “extremely important” to their position (6 or 7), they were directed to a



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Figure 1. The Visitor and Resource Protection Advisory Committee pose with the associate director for Visitor and Resource Protection and representatives from Clemson University at the Visitor and Resource Protection Academy Development Workshop at the National Conservation Training Center on 10 April 2014. The workshop discussed the results of the Visitor and Resource Protection Education and Training Needs Assessment to develop a strategic learning and development plan for the Division of Visitor and Resource Protection.

subsequent series of questions about specific related competencies. If the respondent rated a category of competencies less than “extremely important” to their position, they were skipped to the next category. In this way, respondents were spared the burden of completing those portions of the survey that they felt were unimportant to their current position. This provided the additional advantage of having data only from respondents who believed those competencies were important to their current positions. Respondents also had an option for a “not applicable” category for competency questions, but such responses were excluded from the analysis and treated as missing data. Finally, the instrument included a set of demographic and bureau-related questions pertaining to age, education, grade level, position series, position title, number of years in current position, number of years in the National Park Service, and number of years in the Visitor and Resource Protection Division.

Competencies related to applying specialized crime scene investigation and other enforcement techniques that effectively identify, apprehend, and prosecute resource violators were most critical.

Data collection and response rates

For this Visitor and Resource Protection Training and Education Needs Assessment, we attempted to survey all NPS employees with primary visitor and resource protection duties. We identified 2,494 employees through the NPS human resource database (FPPS). We also added 656 individuals who were subsequently identified by supervisors or requested to participate and had visitor and resource protection duties. This brought our total to 3,150 individuals.

Data collection took place over a five-week period from 3 September to 2 October 2013. First, we electronically distributed a cover letter to 3,150 VRP employees. This letter contained

a unique Web link that provided access to the online survey instrument. After three weeks, we sent a second e-mail to these employees reminding them of the importance of completing the survey. On 2 October 2013, the data collection associated with the study was closed. A total of 1,092 respondents had returned surveys with usable data. This resulted in an effective response rate of 36.4%.

Data analysis

We calculated the frequencies and mean (average) score for the importance of each competency to job performance and the respondents' perceived level of preparedness to perform each competency. Next we calculated a mean weighted discrepancy

Table 1. Scores for natural and cultural resource protection competencies ($n = 684$) sorted by mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS)

Competencies	Importance		Preparation		MWDS	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Natural and cultural resource protection (all items)	5.84	1.39	4.45	1.58	-8.12	9.33
Knowledge of special provisions/allowances (e.g., enabling legislation, special regulations)	5.73	1.40	4.83	1.51	-5.22	7.72
The ability to provide resource education to special audiences (e.g., violators, external cooperators, special use groups)	5.79	1.35	4.86	1.58	-5.47	9.00
Knowledge of threats to resources from illegal activities and damaging visitor behaviors (e.g., resource theft, vandalism, impacts from camping, climbing)	6.33	1.11	5.42	1.40	-5.73	7.97
Knowledge of those natural, cultural, and paleontological resources that are impacted by visitor use activity or illegal behaviors	5.95	1.25	4.73	1.45	-7.28	8.59
The ability to exhibit basic knowledge of social behaviors and outdoor recreation psychology as they influence parks and park resources, and the ability to apply that knowledge to address changing visitor needs and behaviors	5.52	1.49	4.16	1.67	-7.45	9.26
The ability to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of resources that are threatened by commercial value and developing markets (e.g., medicinal plant or archaeological commercial marketing, poaching, looting)	5.89	1.43	4.51	1.53	-8.10	9.35
The ability to evaluate research and science project proposals aimed at better understanding threats to resources at risk from, at least in part, illegal and visitor use behaviors	5.28	1.60	3.72	1.60	-8.26	9.36
The ability to work within an interdisciplinary team to conduct risk analysis to prioritize resource threats, plan and implement mitigation strategies (e.g., physical security, site hardening, setting public use limits, applying targeted enforcement strategies)	5.87	1.35	4.41	1.67	-8.46	10.77
Understanding of and ability to apply federal and state resource protection laws, case studies, policies, and special authorities (e.g., forfeiture and criminal and civil cost recovery actions, such as Endangered Species Act, Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, Archeological Resources Protection Act, Park System Resource Protection Act)	5.86	1.46	4.32	1.58	-8.91	8.50
The ability to work in cooperation with external cooperating agencies and other stakeholders to protect resources at risk across their range	6.10	1.25	4.65	1.61	-8.93	10.11
Knowledge of and ability to incorporate current inventory and monitoring and other research into protection strategies for threatened park resources	5.62	1.41	3.90	1.62	-9.55	9.64
The ability to apply specialized enforcement techniques to effectively identify, apprehend, and prosecute resource violators and to prevent further degradation	6.13	1.41	4.55	1.66	-9.86	10.37
The ability to evaluate public use patterns and behaviors and to modify or establish regulation and policy to mitigate resource impacts	5.87	1.37	4.17	1.64	-10.06	9.74
The ability to apply specialized resource crime scene investigation techniques (e.g., Archeological Resources Protection Act, field forensics, evidence preservation, mapping/diagramming)	5.80	1.55	4.02	1.66	-10.45	10.21

Steps are now being taken by the Office of Learning and Development and the Division of Visitor and Resource Protection to remedy many of these critical training needs.

score (MWDS) to identify the gap between the two. We computed an individual mean weighted discrepancy score using the formula (individual preparedness – individual importance) × importance grand mean (Robinson and Garton 2008; Edwards and Briers 1999; Bullard et al. 2013). This individual mean weighted discrepancy score measures the gap between importance and preparedness while taking into account the overall importance (mean) of a competency as reported by the total number of respondents. For example, an individual rates the importance of a competency as a 7 (extremely important) and then ranks his or her perceived level of preparedness to perform this competency as a 5. The importance grand mean reported in table 1 for this competency is 6.1. The calculation is $(5-7) \times 6.1 = -12.2$. This is the individual's mean weighted discrepancy score for this competency. The mean of the MWDS is the average of all such individual scores for each competency and category of competencies. When interpreting the results, a larger negative number indicates a higher training priority. For example, a –9 MWDS would indicate that employees feel relatively less prepared to perform an important competency than a –2 MWDS; therefore, the competency with a –9 MWDS rises to a higher training priority.

Results

Respondent characteristics

Respondents to the Visitor and Resource Protection Training and Education Needs Assessment (n = 1,092) were, on average, 42 years old, with ages ranging from less than 20 to more than 60. Respondents were also well educated; 83% had completed a bachelor's degree or higher. Approximately 68% of respondents held the equivalent of a GS 9–12 pay grade. Respondents had been employed by the National Park Service for an average of slightly more than 14 years, with most of that time (mean = 13.7 years) being in VRP positions. Most respondents reported holding their current position for more than six years.

Resource protection

Almost 63% of respondents rated the natural and cultural resource protection category as extremely important (6 or 7 on the seven-point scale) to their current position and were directed to

the 14 related competencies (see table 1). According to respondents, all 14 competencies were rated relatively high in importance (5.28 or higher). The competency rated the most important pertained to the “knowledge of threats to resources from illegal activities and damaging visitor behaviors” (6.33). Respondents also felt very prepared (5.42) to perform this competency, thus producing a relatively high MWDS (–5.73). The lowest MWDS, which indicates the highest priority for training, pertained to the “ability to apply specialized resource crime scene investigation techniques” (–10.45). Other low MWDS scores included the “ability to evaluate public use patterns and behaviors to modify or establish regulation and policy to mitigate resource impacts” (–10.06); the “ability to apply specialized enforcement techniques to effectively identify, apprehend, and prosecute resource violators and to prevent further degradation” (–9.86); and the “knowledge of and ability to incorporate current inventory and monitoring and other research into protection strategies for threatened park resources” (–9.55).

Visitor safety

Almost 64% of the study respondents deemed the visitor safety category to be extremely important (6 or 7) and were directed to the eight visitor safety competencies (table 2). The competency rated as the most important was the “ability to recognize and respond to hazardous conditions or unsafe visitor behavior and document decisions that impact visitor safety” (6.50); respondents also felt the most prepared to accomplish this competency (5.60), resulting in a relatively high MWDS (–5.87). The lowest MWDS, and therefore the highest training priority, applied to the “ability to conduct root cause analysis and apply lessons learned to a safety program” (–8.37). The next lowest MWDS pertained to the “ability to investigate or assist in the investigation of a serious visitor incident or near misses” (–8.11), followed by the “ability to integrate safety, health, and wellness into operational programs” (–7.74).

Employee safety

Almost 70% of the study respondents rated the employee safety category of competencies as extremely important (6 or 7) and were subsequently directed to the five corresponding competencies (table 3). Respondents rated the competency “ability to

Table 2. Scores for visitor safety competencies (n = 698) sorted by mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS)

Competencies	Importance		Preparation		MWDS	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Visitor safety (all items)	5.92	1.30	4.75	1.61	-6.94	9.40
The ability to recognize and respond to hazardous conditions or unsafe visitor behavior and document decisions that impact visitor safety	6.50	0.88	5.60	1.32	-5.87	8.15
Knowledge of staff roles and responsibilities for visitor safety, risk management, and tort claims	6.04	1.18	5.05	1.49	-6.03	8.45
The ability to collaborate with internal and external safety specialists on a range of visitor safety issues	5.46	1.56	4.30	1.74	-6.41	9.73
The ability to collect and manage visitor safety data	5.40	1.59	4.20	1.75	-6.50	9.77
The ability to create and implement visitor safety policies and a park safety plan and to lead or coordinate with the park safety committee as applicable to your park unit	5.84	1.35	4.73	1.59	-6.51	9.25
The ability to integrate safety, health, and wellness into operational programs	6.22	1.07	4.98	1.53	-7.74	9.75
The ability to investigate or assist in the investigation of a serious visitor incident or near misses	6.27	1.16	4.99	1.62	-8.11	10.03
The ability to conduct root cause analysis and apply lessons learned to a safety program	5.63	1.58	4.15	1.82	-8.37	10.06

Table 3. Scores for employee safety competencies (n = 755) sorted by mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS)

Competencies	Importance		Preparation		MWDS	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Employee safety (all items)	6.32	1.05	5.45	1.35	-5.42	8.07
The ability to perform work safely, including using proper personal protective equipment	6.79	0.51	6.21	1.01	-3.95	6.44
The ability to apply principles of best safety practices (including Job Hazard Analysis (JHA) and Operational Leadership (OL), and other risk management tools	6.19	1.24	5.54	1.38	-4.02	8.86
The ability to recognize and respond to hazardous conditions or unsafe visitor behavior and appropriately document decisions that impact visitor safety	6.47	1.00	5.63	1.30	-5.41	7.52
The ability to demonstrate knowledge of employee roles and responsibilities for adherence to occupational health and safety policies	6.21	1.11	5.25	1.37	-5.94	7.82
The ability to apply OSHA requirements	5.94	1.41	4.62	1.68	-7.77	9.71

perform work safely including using proper personal protective equipment” the most important; they also indicated a high level of preparedness to complete this responsibility (6.21), resulting in a relatively high MWDS (-3.91). The lowest MWDS, and therefore the highest in training need, pertained to the “ability to apply OSHA [Occupational Safety Health Administration] requirements” (-7.77). The next lowest discrepancy scores pertained to the “ability to demonstrate knowledge of employee roles and responsibilities for adherence to occupational health and safety policies” (-5.94) and the “ability to recognize and respond to hazardous conditions or unsafe visitor behavior and appropriately document decisions that impact visitor safety” (-5.41).

Implications and conclusions

Our results revealed several potentially critical training needs. Pertaining to natural and cultural resource protection, three broad training needs emerged. First, competencies related to applying specialized crime scene investigation and other enforcement techniques that effectively identify, apprehend, and prosecute resource violators were most critical. In recognition of the importance of these competencies, the NPS Law Enforcement Training Center (LETC) provides basic, field, and advanced training. However, not all VRP employees can attend these classes. So the LETC Advanced Training Program developed and offers various courses to train experienced VRP rangers as instructors, who conduct training in the field on specialized law enforcement

skills. Some of these instructor training courses are Use of Force, Law Enforcement Control Tactics, Firearms, Defensive Tactics, and Physical Fitness. The VRP rangers enrolled in these courses have been identified and asked to participate by supervisors or are volunteers. We assumed that these specialized instructors are helping to close this training gap, but the NPS Law Enforcement Training Center, together with the NPS Office of Learning and Development and Temple University, are currently evaluating the program to confirm or reject these speculations.

The second broad resource protection training need related to gathering and synthesizing data from multiple sources. Specific competencies included (1) using visitor use data to inform policy and regulations, (2) incorporating current inventory and monitoring data and other research into protection strategies, and (3) evaluating research and science project proposals aimed at better understanding resources at risk from illegal and visitor use behaviors. These competencies require interdisciplinary training and cross-divisional collaboration with social science and natural resource specialists. Developing the relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities comes with both advanced training and experience working with these specialists.

Skills pertaining to collaboration and partnerships emerged as a third training need. The ability to “work in cooperation with external cooperating agencies and stakeholders to protect resources at risk across their range,” and the ability to “work within an interdisciplinary team to conduct risk analyses on threats to resources and implementing mitigation strategies to combat identified threats,” were both areas for future improvement. Respondents reported that these collaborations are essential to protecting resources, but they also reported being somewhat unprepared to do this. These results are consistent with findings of the previous assessment of partnership training needs reported by Weddell et al. (2009). This raises an important question: How do VRP field staff and managers perceive their respective responsibilities related to collaboration and partnership development? To address this question, we compared the MWDS of respondents with management responsibilities (operationally defined as employees with a pay grade level of GS 12 or above) with respondents with field responsibilities (defined for our purposes as employees with a pay grade level of GS 11 and below). Management staff had statistically higher MWDS scores for both items (-6.49 vs. -9.33 ; $p > 0.01$) and (-5.93 vs. -10.13 ; $p > 0.001$). This suggests that while both management and field staff felt these competencies were important, management felt more prepared to undertake these efforts. This indicates a need for increased training pertaining to partnerships and collaboration particularly focused on staff with grades of GS 11 and below.

As for visitor safety, two broad critical needs emerged: the ability to use specialized investigative skills and knowledge of how to apply data from multiple sources to enhance visitor safety. The two largest gaps in investigative skills training were the ability to conduct root cause analysis and the ability to investigate or assist in the investigation of a serious visitor incident. Both require specialized skills and the ability to synthesize data to inform policy. The ability to integrate safety, health, and wellness considerations into operational programs also had a low MWDS. Statistically there are far more visitor fatalities than employee fatalities annually (Heggie et al. 2008). In-person training programs (Serious Accident Investigation Interagency Training) exist for employee investigations, but generally this is not the case with investigations of visitor deaths. To fill this void in training offerings and augment existing classroom courses, the Office of Risk Management has undertaken steps to design, develop, and test Internet-based training modules focused on procedures and skills associated with both Board of Review Team investigations, which examine visitor accidents, and the Serious Accident Investigation Team inquiries, which focus on employee accidents.

Results suggest that NPS staff generally felt better prepared to undertake employee safety competencies than the two preceding competency categories. Only one specific technical competency was a potential critical training need: the ability to apply OSHA requirements. To address this gap, online training could be devised that considers OSHA requirements in tandem with NPS mandates using real-life situations as examples. However, given the relatively high MWDS for this competency, training and education here may be a lower priority than some of the other competencies.

Periodic assessment of the education and training needs of employees in different career specialties is essential if the National Park Service is going to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Our results related to competencies in resource protection, visitor safety, and employee safety revealed several potentially critical training needs. Steps are now being taken by the Office of Learning and Development and the Division of Visitor and Resource Protection to remedy many of these critical training needs. Additional innovative and creative training and education strategies must be developed, however, to meet changing demands. Once implemented, programmatic evaluation should occur to ensure the effectiveness of these programs and to provide opportunities for programmatic improvement. By taking these actions in training and education, the National Park Service can continue to support the role of the Visitor and Resource Protection Division in upholding the NPS mission for the future.

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