

# Best Practice: Visitor Analysis

## for Interpretation and Education Programming



Prepared by  
**EcoLeaders** Interpretation and Environmental Education  
Box D82, Bowen Island, BC V0N 1G0  
email: [info@ecoleaders.ca](mailto:info@ecoleaders.ca) phone: (604) 947-0483  
[www.ecoleaders.ca](http://www.ecoleaders.ca)





## Introduction

This document provides a best practice model for site visitor analysis with a focus on how this information can be used to focus interpretation and education programming.

### The Importance of Knowing Your Audience/Participants/Learners

The more that interpretation and education staff know about the current site users' knowledge, interest, attitudes and activities, the better they can design, develop and deliver programs that meet visitor needs and the goals and mandates of your site and agency.

### Audience or Participants or Learners?

How is it best to consider the people who will be taking part in interpretation and education programs? Various organizations use different terms. These names can reflect the approach that the organization has toward the people that they serve.

**Audience** implies delivering messages to a group that is passively watching what is going on. Typically, audiences may be very interested in what is going on but there is little or no expectation of interaction, contribution or action. Organizations who view themselves as broadcasters of information often use this term.

**Participant** suggests a group of people that are actively involved. They often expect to take part in active learning and/or stewardship actions that support your site's sustainability. They often expect to be able to communicate their knowledge, discoveries and feelings about your site to your staff. Organizations who have a focus on community involvement and capacity building, stewardship and discovery learning often use this term.

**Learner** implies an education focus. This may involve formal curriculum-based teaching aimed at primary, secondary or post-secondary students or life-long or informal learning aimed at adults and families. In learning-focused agencies, programming is based on understanding of best practice and learning theory. Organizations with connections to formal education often use this term. However, some organizations who focus on informal education and community capacity building do as well.

The overall interpretation and education program at many sites involve all three classifications:

#### Audience Focus

- information and orientation aimed at raising the profile of the your site and your agency in the eyes of visitors and local citizens
- maintaining your site's position on the radar of decision makers in:
  - head office, and higher up the command ladder
  - partner groups, funders and collaborators

#### Participant Focus

- providing site visitors and off-site outreach target groups with discovery and experiential learning opportunities
- building capacity and involving citizens in stewardship and restoration activities at your site
- encouraging and enabling partners and visitors to participate in appropriate recreation activities at your site

#### Learner Focus

- providing formal and informal learning opportunities that are compatible with your site and agency's goals and objectives
- providing life-long learning opportunities to site visitors

### Internal and External Audiences/Participants/Learners

There are two categories of people that you must target.

#### External

This group is by far the largest. It includes all traditional targets including:

- local people who could or do regularly visit your site
- tourists —people who travel from further away who may visit only once or a few times
- community groups and organizations
- neighbours—people who live near your site

This is the category that almost all staff time and effort is allocated to.

#### Internal

This group is made up of:

- your site staff
- regional and head office management
- partners
  - groups, organizations and individuals who fund some of your interpretation and education programs
  - groups that
    - deliver some approved interpretation and education services at your site
    - manage and support stewardship and research into the site's natural and cultural features

With internal audiences, the goals of the interpretation and education program are to:

- keep them informed of initiatives and successes
- show how their support is making a difference
- illustrate how interpretation and education are supporting their initiatives and mandates
- show that they are getting value for the funding and support that they are contributing

Internal audiences are often overlooked, but they are important to many sites and agencies.



## Best Practice in Analysis of Visitors

### External Audiences, Participants and Learners

This category includes current and potential site visitors, supporters and neighbours.

Visitation statistics and user profiles are important data for site management and for the development, delivery and support of effective interpretation and education services.

#### Site Visit Statistics

These are the counts of visitors for the whole site and for various key places within your site. They can show levels of use over several years, seasons, months, weeks, days of the week, and times of day.

#### Statistics Are Important

##### For Site Management

Statistics are key tools that help managers and interpretation and education staff:

- identify areas of high visitor pressure
- decide where to allocate funding for maintenance and enforcement
  - higher visitor use may suggest allocation of larger portion of limited staffing and budgets

Visitor services can assist management through placing more effort into providing the education portion of the 3-E management model (Education, Engineering, Enforcement) for dealing with specific visitor management issues.

##### For Program Planning and Delivery

Statistics tell you where people gather plus when they are there and, in some cases, what they are doing. This information is used to identify:

- key locations to provide interpretation and education programs
  - deliver programs where the people are
- optimum time of year, month and week to provide activities and services
  - concentrate delivery of programs when the people are at your site

Finer-focus daily and weekly statistics and data on the duration of stay can provide interpretation and education staff valuable information. These details assist you in timing programs (time of day, day of the week, etc. for optimal exposure and in efficiently distributing limited

staffing and program funding across the district by moving staff from site to site to deliver programming where visitation is highest.

A clear understanding of the average and range of duration visitor stays along with other factors such as visitor profiles and budget help you determine the range of programming needed.\* For example in parks, sites that have a high proportion of campers staying for a week or more will need a broader range of personal and non-personal programs than those where campers stay only for an average of two nights.

#### Gathering Visitor Statistics can be Difficult

Accurate visitor counts and studies are difficult in large sites that have large numbers of official and unofficial entrances. It is very difficult to keep track of people entering and leaving some sites.

#### Gathering Site User Statistics Can Be Done

Museums and park systems collect meaningful visitor statistics. Most sites that deliver interpretation and education programming can too—see the planning section on our website ([www.ecoleaders.ca](http://www.ecoleaders.ca)).

\* In general, with limited staff and budgets, interpretation and education staff must understand current site users and future potential real and virtual park visitors (see our article, Best Practice in Market Analysis) in order to effectively:

- choose locations for interpretive exhibits, signs and trails where significant numbers of people gather or pass by (to be cost effective)
  - note for site with low visitation, staff must choose non-personal media and methods that are low cost but effective (see our article: Presentation Options)
- choose media and methods that are attractive, and accessible to target audiences



## Visitor Profiles at Your Site

Each site attracts different types of visitors.

Profiling the characteristics of major visitor groups will help you design content, activities, timing and duration and presentation media that suits their interests and needs.



## Visitor Profiles

Visitor profiling includes the development of accurate information about the activities and motivations of visitors, plus their prior knowledge of and interest in site-related issues and potential interpretation and education themes and activities. Because of the increasingly large percentage of new Canadians in Canada, ethnic background and user group activities are often important factors that give site managers and interpretation and education program developers insight into visitor motivations and interests.

This type of data is gathered through a number of direct and indirect methods described below.

### What Information is Needed?

Best practice in interpretation and education programming includes developing detailed profiles on site visitors. The kinds of questions that this information should answer include:

- Who visits the site?
  - multi-generational Albertans and Canadians
  - first, second generation Canadians
  - new Canadians
- What portion are return visitors/new visitors?
- How often do return visitors come to the property?
- When do they come (season, day of the week, time of day)?
- How long do they stay?
- Where do they come from?
- Why do they come?
- What do they do when they visit the site?
- What kinds of groups do they come in, e.g., traditional family (two parents with children)?
- What ages are they?
- What is their cultural background?
  - This can give insight into their
    - attitudes toward nature and local culture
    - needs with respect to location and timing of services
- Who does not visit the site?
  - Are there parts of the local population that do not come to the site?
    - Why?
- What are visitors interested in?
- What do they already know about the site's interpretation and education topics?
- What are their current attitudes about site-related issues?
- What appropriate and inappropriate behaviours do they display?

## Methods for Gathering Visitor Profile Information

The following are techniques that must be on-going. New data must be acquired and analyzed each year.

### Direct Methods

These include:

#### Interviews

- conducted at points of visitor activity including:
  - In Parks
    - at trailheads and along trails in parks
    - at parking lots and other locations where park users congregate
    - as part of special events
  - At Built Facilities (e.g., museums, nature centres)
    - at line-ups to exhibits
    - in cafeterias
- by phone or email contact with people who have recently visited your site
- questionnaires:
  - printed copies distributed at the same types of locations identified for interviews
  - digital copies available through the your website or Facebook page
- direct observation
  - here trained staff or contractors regularly observe visitors visiting exhibits or using specific trails in parks and other facilities

Direct methods are costly and time consuming. In most cases they can only be conducted at wide intervals (e.g., at 5 and 10 years).

### Indirect Methods

These are methods that do not include direct sampling of the visitor population. This includes gathering anecdotal information from long-time site staff (operations, interpretation and education, and enforcement—if they exist) and with long-time regular site users. Here, information is usually obtained through informal conversations, but formal interviews following a set script can also be used.

When budgets are low indirect methods may be the only option available for developing visitor profiles. In our experience these methods can be Quite useful at sites that have observant, long-time staff.

## Segmenting Your Visitor Population

Visitor segmentation is probably one of the most difficult part of this process. It consists of reviewing the data that you have collected about visitors and looking for logical groupings.

Visitor segments will vary in form and size from site to site. Often their composition will change with the season, day of the week and time of day.

For example an urban nature centre may have a large segment of visitors that consists of families with one or more children between preschool and elementary-age and another significant visitor segment that consists of couples and single individuals aged 50 and over who are interested in local birdwatching. Both these groups are multiple repeat visitors who come to the nature centre at least one or two times each month, year-round. They want up-to-date information on nature in the city and are looking for new activities and opportunities to take part in stewardship of local places they have come to love.

As well, there the nature centre has other visitor segments that include first-time visitors who mostly come only once. Many of these are summer tourists visiting the city. They want to know what is special about this part of the world and where to go to see local wildlife.

Over time your visitor segments can grow or shrink in size and even disappear. New segments can develop as local demographics change or in response to developments in programming at your site. As a result, it is good practice to conduct visitor surveys every few years. Many sites follow a five-year cycle.

The more you know about these segments the better you can serve them.

### How is Visitor Profile Information Used?

The visitor segmentation data are then analyzed from the point of view of providing interpretation and education programming to identified audience groups. Lines of analysis for each group include:

- What topics and themes fit the needs and interests of each particular audience group?
- What times and locations are best for presenting programs and services to identified audiences?
- Where are the good locations for specific programs? It is good practice to provide them where the people are.



## Internal Audiences

This group includes decision makers:

- within one's own agency
- within current and potential partner groups
- major funders

The objectives are to:

- achieve and maintain a high positive profile
  - this includes showing connections between programs at your site and the mission vision and goals of your site and agency
- inform them of current successes of the interpretation and education programs
- show how your site and its interpretation and education programs are complying with and contributing to your site and agency's core mandates
- keep them abreast of current initiatives and future plans
- encourage individual managers and leaders of partner groups to participate in your programs as members of the public
- encourage participation and support for the agency in general and your interpretation and education programs in particular

These connections will help you to prioritize these internal audiences and develop specific communication approaches and assign levels of effort based on this prioritization.

The objectives listed above can be achieved through a number of means including:

- informal telephone and face-to-face conversations
- regular emails
- regular internal electronic or printed newsletters
- personal invitations to your programs and special events