

Part 2: Where Do We Go From Here?

Ross J. Loomis
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO

I would like to share some exciting agenda items I see coming up for the Visitor Studies Association and future meetings. Before doing that, however, I would like to note the significance of the Visitor Studies Conference in Ottawa. Nearly 20 years ago, a few of us tried to get a symposium session about visitor research on the national program of the American Psychological Association. We were told that there was not enough interest in that topic. We got the same message from some other groups. Thanks to Ray Newmann and Harris Shettel, we did get on the program at American Association for Evaluation and Research in Chicago that year. They put our session in a large ballroom at the Chicago Hilton. There were barely enough people present to fill up the front rows. What a contrast to the meeting here. As I look at the program I am impressed at the amount and range of work going on. We are at the end of a meeting that has included eight workshops, six plenary sessions and over 45 papers and poster presentations.

In addition to this meeting, we also have regular presentations on visitor research at the American Association of Museums (AAM) national meetings. Harris Shettel and the Visitor Research and Evaluation Committee of the AAM deserve credit for persisting at making visitor research an important agenda item for AAM. And, I know Minda Borun and the current officers of the Committee will continue to see that visitor evaluation and research are part of the AAM agenda. I constantly get comments from museum people about how helpful the AAM sessions on evaluation are to them.

In 1991 then, it is possible to learn about visitors from a variety of publications and meeting sources. Most important, there are opportunities to share interests with others. This opportunity for sharing is especially true for this organization and conference. I see all of this activity as a dramatic contrast to 20 years ago when it was very difficult to get information about visitor research. That was precisely why Pamela Elliot and I worked up the Smithsonian Bibliography of the 1970's so that there would be a resource available.

Now for some thoughts about agenda items for the newly created Visitor Studies Association and future Visitor Studies Conferences:

1. The first agenda item should be the Association itself. We have all benefitted from the tireless efforts of Steve Bitgood and Arlene Benefield to

see that annual Visitor Studies Conferences took place. And now, through their efforts, an international association has been formed. I know Harris Shettel, as President, will provide leadership for the new Association. What has me a bit concerned is all the rest of us. It will take a great deal of work and participation by many to make the Association succeed. I congratulate our Canadian hosts for the effort they have given to make this meeting possible. Each year there will need to be a similar working group to get a good meeting planned and accomplished.

2. There is a lot of interest and concern about the process of evaluation used in visitor studies. People are approaching the field from different backgrounds and with different needs. I feel we are indebted to Chan Screven for his discussions of the evaluation process that moves from front-end to summative and remedial with, of course, a strong emphasis on formative studies. I suspect, however, that there is considerable confusion at the present time as to the best way to do evaluation and how to define different parts of the process. I admit that I am unclear of just what constitutes front-end evaluation and how it relates to marketing research in general. Is remedial evaluation just a variation of summative work? Is summative evaluation really necessary? I envision future sessions that will help answer these and other questions about the evaluation process.

3. Closely related to the process of evaluation are specific methods used. It seems that there is always a "hot" method that captures attention at the time. Right now the world seems full of focus group junkies. These folk want to tackle everything with a focus group. Of course, good evaluation methodology should emphasize more than one method. Multi-method studies have been a recommended approach to evaluation for years. This recommendation means understanding specific methods like surveys, observation and interviews as well as how to combine different methods to get the most helpful information. I am glad to see the agenda of workshops and presentations that emphasize methodological issues.

Related to method, is the practical problem of getting information to decision makers in a short time frame. Jeff Bonner provided in his presentation a good case example of how decisions get made and the need for "quick and dirty" evaluation. How can we develop the best methods possible for meeting these kinds of real world needs that exist? Small sample techniques and effective simulation procedures are two helpful tools. To be sure, one reason why focus groups have been so popular is that they provide a fairly quick way of getting visitor information. How can we make sure these rapid data gathering tools are as valid and reliable as possible?

4. Tied to the point I just made about the need for short time frame evaluation work is the basic problem of overcoming what has been called the "applicability gap." How can we facilitate more application of what we

are learning about exhibits, programs and visitor settings in general? I envision an entire conference devoted to just this problem. It would be important to have sessions where directors, exhibit designers, educators, marketing personnel and other users of visitor studies are able to share directly their needs. More and more, I hear administrators asking about what is being learned from visitor studies and how findings can be applied? I think it is very important that this Association is not just a collection of people doing evaluation and research. We also need the perspectives of curators, designers, administrators, marketing specialists, educators, and others who are on the front line of operating visitor settings.

5. Up until now, I have emphasized evaluation agenda items. Just as important is for the Association to be a forum of research. Here are some research topics I see coming up in the future. One is looking at long range attendance patterns for different kinds of visitor places. Related to understanding and predicting attendance is also understanding the broader social network that exists between different kinds of institutions which depend upon visitation. How do these institutions share a sometimes common audience? How can the overall audience be expanded and networked across different kinds of visitor settings? And, of course, how can cultural diversity goals be accomplished by involving new audiences that have not been a part of existing social networks. Research is also needed to help us better understand why people visit. We all know that opportunity to learn is an important attribute of many visitor settings. What are other attributes, such as time for social experiences and psychological release from everyday demands? How do different kinds of opportunities go together and result in a successful visit?

We also need to research more completely the outcomes of visits and meanings cultural institutions have for visitors. Much of our focus has been on the visit itself. What are longer term benefits? What is the existence value of a museum, for example, even if one does *not* visit it very often? When the city manager wanted to remove funding for the local history museum in my community, he ran into opposition in the form of people saying "I want the museum there even though I do not visit it very often." The city manager lost in his effort to remove museum funding and I learned a valuable lesson in the power of existence value!

6. I see the very real need for sessions that discuss the costs of doing visitor studies. What level of support do institutions need to plan on to do effective studies? How should institutions support, and sometimes protect, resident evaluators? What are realistic cost guidelines for contracted work? For in-house work? For volunteer time? I think there is a great deal of confusion in this area of costs for evaluation and research. There is also a need for frank discussions about how evaluators/researchers relate to other workers in visitor settings.

7. I have been impressed with the number of students I have met at this Conference. Included, are non-traditional students working in visitor-related settings and also on graduate degrees. I hope future agendas will emphasize student work with visitors. It is not easy to combine interest in visitors with formal graduate study. These students need encouragement and recognition as they complete education in a variety of fields such as museum studies, recreation management, leisure studies, education, psychology and business. Perhaps we can have a paper competition for students and awards for outstanding student work included in the meeting agenda.

Finally, I feel we all deserve praise for working in institutions and on tasks that enhance the lives of countless millions of people. We should not underestimate the social value of a visit to a park, museum, science center, garden, theme park, historical setting and the many other places members of this organization represent. As a psychologist, I am sometimes asked why I spend time studying visitors and museum settings when there are so many important problems needing attention such as substance abuse, violence, abandoned children, and so on. My answer is that there are tens of thousands of clinical psychologists who deal with problems. Clinical psychology has been a growth industry for some time now. We need to balance this "obsession with pathology" that pervades our society and much of the media entertainment world with a stronger emphasis on the value of institutions in providing meaning to lives. Visitor settings not only give people the chance for positive shared experiences with family and friends, but personal empowerment in the form of greater understanding of art, science, history, nature and the world in general. I think this cultural empowerment is a very exciting and an important cause to be a part of.