

PARK IMPRESSIONS*

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*A program for
Improving State Parks*

**An adaptation of First Impressions
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Things you should know.....

****History:***

Park Impressions was modeled after the First Impressions program developed in 1991 by Andy Lewis and James Schneider (Executive Director of The Grant County Economic Development Corporation) to provide communities in Grant County Wisconsin with an unbiased evaluation of them as a first time visitor might view them. Over 100 communities in the Midwest have now utilized the First Impressions evaluation instrument. By participating in the program, communities have been able to identify and respond to concerns identified by visitors to the community. In addition, First Impressions participants have learned from the successes and failures of other similar communities.

As a result of the First Impressions program, communities have sponsored hospitality seminars, improved community signing, sponsored "clean-up" efforts, developed informational brochures, developed building improvement loan programs, improved public infrastructures, and other community improvement programs.

Purpose:

To help State Parks and their staffs learn about existing strengths and weaknesses of our parks as seen through the eyes of the first time visitor (To that particular park).

Your Group:

Ideally 3-6 people should comprise a team for the visit. Plan to make the visit together as a group (car pool). It makes for a more enjoyable experience and helps to ensure a better end result as well.

Try for diversity if possible. Work for a mix of men/women, business people/residents, farmers, young/old, educators, political leaders, etc. (Consider including some participants who have never been to a state park, although that may be difficult!) Consider different personal interest...for example, naturalists, bird watchers, hunters, anglers, hikers, photographers etc.

Remember...there are no "experts". Each person's opinion is valid and important. You may want to get together a day in advance to review the manual, ask questions, etc.

The Visit:

Plan to arrive in the State Park by 10 a.m. Review the manual on the way and decide who will be teammates. Develop a story to explain your visit. You get to be an actor for the day. ("I was driving through the area and heard about the Park", "I'm new to the area and wanted to see what the community had to offer", "I'm visiting community X and was told I shouldn't miss a visit to the park")

Stop first at the nearest community and try to note publicity that would indicate that there is a State Park in the area. Drive by the State Park and then pull over at an appropriate location to write down your "five minute impression". Remember, many visitors may not have planned a trip to the park but would stop if they knew it was going on and it looked inviting!

Go back and enter the park to begin your evaluation. Note: Consider having lunch in the surrounding community and spend some time inquiring about the local park.

Tips:

1. Take a pocket notepad for each person (writing in the manual is too conspicuous).
2. Take notes...take notes...take notes or it will all turn into mush!
3. Ask for directions at various communities, information on the park, etc. Send letter to area Chamber of Commerce and Park office and request information ahead of time and see how they respond..
4. Someone may want to take a camera along to document particular points. Send the photos back with the final report (and keep copies that show ideas you want your own Park to know about).
5. Look for problems and strengths...we need to know what we're doing RIGHT, too.
6. There is no wrong way to do this, remember, two people may see the same thing and react differently - that's OK.
7. Have Fun!

Setting Up the Exchange:

Park superintendents could likely gather local visitation teams (members from a "Friends of the Park" group, chamber of commerce, active park users etc. Park superintendents may also be able to be part of the visitation team. Consider using the annual or district Park meetings as a time to contact another park (do these exist?). To keep down costs parks should exchange an equal number of entrance passes. Consideration should be given to doing exchanges with another surrounding state that may do things differently then we are accustomed to here in Wisconsin!

The other park should be similar to yours in size and some characteristics (number of miles to interstate or urban area, number of visitors per year, similar park amenities such as camping, swimming, hiking) The park should be far enough away so your team won't be totally familiar with it, but close enough to make this a one day trip (overnights could be great too, but not everyone can spare the time). Remember, there are no perfect matches...just similarities.

The Report

Use the manual to write the report (need not be typed but write legibly). Use descriptive sentences and give examples and suggestions. "Yes" or "No" answers don't do a lot of good (i.e. hiking areas were not signed vs. The hiking areas were not signed, but we noticed that other areas such as the beach, picnic areas, and bathrooms were. We found these to be very visible and helpful. You might want to consider using this sign format to indicate the trail head locations.).

Do this within 3 - 4 days and return to your contact person.

Contact Person:

When you have all the reports, type up the information in a single composite report. Add a short cover letter that describes:

- a. Profile of team
- b. Weather during visit
- c. Date of visit and time spent
- d. Events and activities the day of the visit
- e. General summary comment on visit and impression of the park and the surrounding community (optional).
- f. Thank them for doing an exchange and include your name and phone number.

Add standard report cover (see sample reports) and mail to the other Park contact person (Park Superintendent?) You may want to hold the report until they have visited your park...whatever you feel comfortable with.

Their Report on You:

As soon as you receive it (but not before you have sent the report on to their park) you should make copies and distribute them in the following order:

1. Sponsoring committee members and people who participated
2. Park staff/volunteers
3. State WIDNR (Dave Weizenicker?)
4. Media
4. General Public and surrounding communities.

Also, please send a copy to _____, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, _____, Madison WI. Copies of any media coverage would also be appreciated.

After conducting an exchange with a different park(s) you will likely want to discuss the reports and how you can best use the information.

As you approach the Park

I. *What was my perception before visiting? What did I expect?:*

II. *The "five minute" impression:*

Drive by the park without entering. After you have passed the park, pull over to the side of the road and write down what you felt about the park with only this quick look. Do this in silence, don't talk with the others in your group for this part.

Take a "drive" around the nearest town:

Is there any promotion or indication of a park in the area (i.e. posters, banners, signs)? Consider stopping at the local Chamber of Commerce or Tourism Information booth to request information on the park...Are they knowledgeable about the park? Could you have found the park without good directions?

III. Driving...evaluate EACH entrance:

Go about 1/2 - 1 mile out each road which provides access to the park. List each road (61 North, etc.) and list positive and negatives for each entrance.

a. Billboards/advertising (Does it detract from the natural beauty of the area?)

b. Directional Signing to Park

c. Is the Park site signed (i.e. "Wyalusing State Park"). Is the sign lit for night time viewing?

d. How well is the traffic flow controlled? Could you easily identify the appropriate entrances? Is it clear how to purchase a State Park sticker or if you are supposed to stop? Are there any safety concerns? Are rules posted in a visible manner?

IV. Parking:

a. Is there an adequate amount of space provided for parking at the park office and at various other locations in the park (i.e. beach, hiking area, picnic area etc.)?

b. Is there adequate support staff at the park office to assist with parking and maintain traffic flow?

c. Is the parking in close proximity to the park activities.

d. Are parking provisions being made for the elderly and disabled?

V. Information/Assistance:

a. Is the Information area/park office visible and easy to find?

b. Is the staff at the information area/park office helpful, and friendly? Are they knowledgeable about the surrounding area and other State Parks?

c. Other points related to park office (hours, appearance, interpretive displays, location - was it easy to find?, etc.)

d. Does the park have any special interpretive centers or educational display areas?

V. Information/Assistance (continued):

d. Is there a public bulletin board system where messages could be posted for park campers/visitors?

e. Are park superintendents, and staff identified in a visible manner (i.e. shirts, hat, or button identifying them)?

f. Are there any directional maps ("you are here") or informational areas which provide a map and directions for the various buildings and activities?

g. Is an events program published and distributed at the park listing events, locations and a map of the park?

h. Is the park office well staffed (Or is there a long wait for help)?

i. Is there directional signing along the road in the park (i.e. which way for the nearest rest room)?

VI. Buildings - Are the picnic shelters, park office, interpretation centers Functional (i.e. do they serve the purpose for which they were intended? Comment also on the aesthetics of the building (did they detract from the natural surroundings?) Are the buildings handicapped accessible?

Park Office:

Educational Exhibits/Interpretive Center area:

Picnic Shelters:

Bathrooms/Shower Facilities:

Facilities for special events (i.e. amphitheater):

b. Appearance of the buildings on the grounds...are they well maintained/clean?

c. Are the buildings signed to identify their purpose?

IX. Concessions Area (If available):

- a. Cleanliness of food booths/areas

- b. Seating areas

- c. Variety of food/merchandise available

- d. Quality of the food (any unique foods or foods produced locally?)

- e. Equipment rental (i.e. boats, inner tubes, bikes, skis?)

- f. What kind of products would you have liked to be able to purchase at the concessions area?

XI Park Amenities (comment on access, cleanliness, condition, and aesthetics):

- a. Trails (Are they well maintained, signed, scenic, and un-crowded?):

- b. Beach/Swimming Area:

- c. Camp Grounds (comment on the quality of the sites, noise levels, location of sites etc.):

d. Points of Interest (i.e. are Indian Mounds, historic sites, scenic overlooks, and other areas of interest interpreted and signed for the visitor?):

e. Boat landings:

f. Recreation Areas (i.e. volleyball & horseshoe pits):

g. Shore fishing/handicapped fishing areas:

h. Dump Stations

i. "Watchable Wildlife" viewing areas

j. Fish Cleaning station:

k. Playground areas?

XII. Written Materials On the Park:

a. Was it well organized and easy/enjoyable to read?

B. List the 5 most positive things you observed about the park:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

C. Describe ONE idea that you will suggest stealing for use in your own park and describe how you will start to implement it within the next 72 hours:

D. What will you remember most about this park six months from now:

E. Other comments (that just didn't seem to fit anywhere else!)