EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Public recreation and park agencies’ efforts to privatize have been hailed by many as an efficient way to deliver government services, but there is very little empirical evidence to support this claim. To date, most researchers have documented the public’s attitude toward privatization through polls regarding basic preferences, but few have afforded citizens the opportunity to discuss their own reasons for supporting or opposing recreation and park privatization practices. This is unfortunate, as understanding the public’s feelings about privatization will help managers decide the best option for delivery of their services and amenities. This study focused on visitors’ opinions of who (private sector vs. public sector) should operate various services/amenities within a state park system and, more importantly, why they hold these opinions. On-site interviews were conducted during the peak season at 13 different state parks in Pennsylvania. According to most state park visitors, Pennsylvania state parks should be primarily responsible for environmental education programs, park maintenance, campground operations, pool and beach staff, and outdoor recreation programs. In terms of why they felt this way, visitors suggested that it was because employees have the knowledge about and the ability to control services and amenities within state parks. They also indicated that operating these services and amenities is what agency employees should do, because they are the stewards of the parks, and that maintaining such operations will eliminate the possibility of over-commercialization. Alternatively, respondents generally felt that food and beverage services, watercraft rentals, and special events and festivals should be operated by private contractors. They perceived that private contractors would enhance the quality of and be more cost effective in providing these services and amenities within state parks. Respondents also
suggested that state park employees should not be responsible for services and amenities that are not central to their job, and allowing private contractors to compete for the opportunity to manage these services and amenities may also result in more jobs in the area. Results of this study can help managers of public parks to consider whether or not privatization is an appropriate option for various elements of their systems. If they decide to privatize, they will need to write clearly delineated and enforceable contracts, which can be difficult in small rural areas where few competitors bid for contracts. Further, in situations where state park managers face intense scrutiny from the public, they may want to consider forming intergovernmental cooperative agreements (i.e., formal and informal agreements between governmental entities to lend support to each other). Such agreements may be easier to manage and may result in less animosity from the general public. Results also can assist non-profit and commercial organizations who provide contractual services at state parks by illustrating the reasons that visitors cite concerning the merits of outsourced services. Given that there will continue to be shifts in the public- vs. private-sector delivery of recreation and park services, particularly in the face of current budgetary crises faced by public agencies, managers are encouraged to continue to document how visitors feel about the operation of their park services and amenities.

**KEY WORDS:** Privatization, state parks, private contractors

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**ACKNOWLEDGMENT:** The authors are indebted to Pennsylvania’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, without whom this study could not have been completed.

In an increasingly dismal fiscal climate, numerous public agencies have shifted (or are being asked to shift) services to the private sector through divestiture, outsourcing, vouchers, or partnerships (Kosar, 2006; More, 2005; Wade, 2005). On a state, regional, or local level, many public recreation and park agencies have outsourced facility and infrastructure construction activities, food and beverage service delivery, golf course operations, lodge and resort management, pool operations, and other functions (Van Slyke & Hammonds, 2003). These efforts to privatize have been hailed by the private sector and free-market proponents as an efficient way to deliver government services (Stormann, 2000). More recently, the current economic downturn’s effect on general tax revenues, coupled with the diversion of dedicated funding away from parks, has brought the issue of privatizing park services, particularly at state parks, to the forefront of legislative debate and decision making. Unclear, however, is whether the public supports privatization. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to document users’ response to privatizing eight separate services in a state park setting. The results of this study will be helpful to managers of public parks who have as their goal, “…ensur[ing] citizen satisfaction…” (Girard, Mohr,
Deller, & Halstead, 2009, p. 161) and balancing what their citizenry wants with managerial and fiscal efficiency.

**Literature Review**

According to Savas (2000), the primary purpose of privatization is not necessarily efficiency, but the goal of “…[introducing] competition and marketing forces in the delivery of public services” (p. 122). This, according to Osborne and Gaebler (1992), spurs economic growth by creating opportunities for entrepreneurs. Warner and Hefetz (2008), however, challenge this notion. They, along with Lowery (1998) and Sclar (2000), argue that there is often an inadequate supply of alternative providers, leading to the erosion of competition within the public sector. In situations where competition is limited or non-existent, researchers have documented that managers have difficulty with oversight and evaluation of contractors (Van Slyke, 2003) and often incur additional transaction costs, particularly costs associated with monitoring (Caiden & Sundaram, 2004; Thomas & Davies, 2005).

Morris (1999), among others (e.g., Moore, 1998; Prager & Desai, 1996), suggested that an additional goal of privatization is to reduce costs and enhance the quality of services. Bel and Warner (2008) and Entwistle and Martin (2005) challenge their supposition. They question whether the “savings” associated with the privatization of services and amenities are realistic. For example, with park services, there are monetary costs connected with training employees to fill multidisciplinary positions as well as productivity/time costs tied to generating expertise and accruing institutional knowledge. Hence, “shifting worker duties to private industry can actually increase costs …” (Wade, 2005, p. 64). And, while a goal of privatization may be to provide higher quality services more efficiently and effectively (Johnston & Seidenstat, 2007; LeRoy, 2005), Denhardt and Denhardt (2003) remind us that private companies are focused on generating a profit, not on fail-safe delivery of services or public accountability.

Proponents of privatization believe “…the public sector is too large and that many functions presently performed by government might be better assigned to private sector units…” (Moe, 1987, p. 453). In essence, they believe government needs to get out of “doing things that it should not be doing” (Kosar, 2006, p. 5). Proponents of privatization also believe that the private sector is unencumbered by bureaucratic processes and, as a result, can be more innovative and more responsive to changing visitor demand (Johnston & Seidenstat, 2007).

While advocates for the privatization of public services staunchly defend their position, challengers suggest that—“there is a socially contractual expectation that [public agencies have] the responsibility and obligation to provide certain services and functions to [their] citizens…” (Price & Riccucci, 2005, p. 224) because “[they] are … subordinate to their mission; they are created in response to a public need, and it is that need which must take precedence …” (More, 2002, p. 63). More (2005), as well as Watson and Herath (1999), question whether segments of the population will be excluded from public recreation services due to the profit-maximizing imperatives of the private sector.

Should a recreation and park agency decide to privatize, there are multiple options available other than complete divestiture of its services and amenities. For example, Crompton (1998) noted that public agencies can limit their outsourcing (i.e., contracting out) of services to those for which they do not have skilled staff (e.g., golf course management). With this privatization option, which has been widely used by the federal government (Light, 2006), management would be responsible for overseeing contractors, could make contract changes, if necessary, and would incur the expenses associated with training employees, medical benefits, or pensions (Kosar, 2006). A second option could be
the creation of vouchers (e.g., a redeemable coupon or document). Vouchers are used when the government wants to fund a service, but not deliver the service itself. A third option involves the creation of collaborative relationships (i.e., partnerships) with other providers who are close geographically (Gentile, 2006). This approach has proven to be especially productive for smaller organizations that don’t benefit from economies of scale. A fourth option is “joint contracting” or “mixed delivery,” which calls for the delivery of services using both public employees and outside contractors (Warner & Hefetz, 2008). Goldsmith and Eggers (2004) found that public agencies can perform better than the private sector when focused on partnerships and collaboration rather than direct competition through privatization.

Documenting perceptions of privatization is critical given the changing composition of local government service delivery. Between 1992 and 2002, direct public delivery of services fluctuated between 41% and 46%, but the percentage of mixed public/private delivery increased from 18% to 24% and complete contracting out decreased from 28% to 18%, suggesting “…wide experimentation with alternative forms of service” (Girard et al., 2009, p. 156). What does the public have to say about this experimentation? We do not know. Mowen, Kerstetter, Trauntvein, and Graefe (2009) reported that state park visitors generally favored government operation of park services over privatization or outsourcing, although visitor opinions varied sharply for different types of services and amenities. State park visitors strongly supported agency provision of services with a long history or tradition of park operation (e.g., campgrounds and maintenance) and those more closely aligned with state park mandates (e.g., environmental education). Conversely, they were more likely to favor outsourcing of specialized functions like food and beverage operations, special events and watercraft services.

Successful privatization is most likely to occur when: a) there is political and popular support for privatizing governmental functions, b) managerial and political leadership exists to maximize the effectiveness of privatized services, and c) a supportive private labor market exists in the community to bid on privatized opportunities (Mowen et al., 2009). Among these conditions, public support for privatization is fundamental in the decision to implement entrepreneurial business activities in public parks (Mowen et al., 2006, 2007).

While researchers have documented the public’s attitudes toward privatization through polls regarding basic preferences, few have afforded citizens the opportunity to discuss, in their own words, their reasons for supporting or opposing park privatization practices. Thus, the primary objective of this study was to examine visitors’ opinions about who (private sector vs. public sector) should operate various park services/amenities within a park system and, more importantly, why.

Method

Study Setting

Data for this study were derived from a larger project focused on (a) documenting visitors’ use of and satisfaction with concessionaires in Pennsylvania’s state parks and (b) exploring ways to create more effective concession management policies. In-depth interviews with park managers, concession operators, and representatives from other state park systems; an on-site survey with visitors; and a telephone survey with Pennsylvania residents were used to address the objectives of the larger project. This study uses the results of the on-site survey only.

When the study was conducted, Pennsylvania’s state park system had 117 different state park units and held contractual agreements with over 175 different concession operators. Parks within the system offer a variety of amenities such as campgrounds, day-
use areas, nature centers, water features (lakes, streams), and trails. Due to the number of parks and concession operators, the research team worked with Pennsylvania state parks to select a representative sample of 13 parks to address the study objective. Parks selected for inclusion in the study included those that: had different size (seven small, six large) food/beverage and watercraft concessions; were representative of the four (three northern, four southern, three western, three eastern) designated state park regions across Pennsylvania; and were proximate to both rural (n=7) and urban (n=6) communities. These parks served an estimated 13,174,738 visitors out of the state park system’s 36,324,430 visitors in 2005.

The on-site park visitor survey was administered by four interviewers at 13 different state parks in Pennsylvania during summer, 2005. To acquire a systematic sample of visitors who were likely concession patrons, sampling was randomized across weekdays and weekends throughout June, July and August, and at different times (i.e., 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., 2 p.m. to 8 p.m.) of the day. The number of days interviewers were in the field per week ranged from two to five, and was dependent on predicted visitation patterns. Visitor intercept locations included popular day-use areas, campgrounds, and trailheads. Interviewers approached every other individual or group they encountered (n=1,551) in a visitor intercept location and requested participation in the on-site survey. If the interviewer encountered a group, he or she asked the group member with the birthday closest to the day of the interview to respond to the survey. The interviews lasted, on average, from 15 to 20 minutes. A total of 1,477 visitors agreed to participate in the interview, yielding a 95% response rate.

**Procedures**

During the on-site interview, users were asked to respond to three questions regarding concession operations in Pennsylvania’s state parks. First, they were asked: “Who [i.e., state parks or private contractors] should operate and manage [list of eight services or amenities] at this park?” The services and amenities included food and beverage facilities, watercraft rentals, general park maintenance, campgrounds, pool and beach staff (including lifeguards), special events and festivals, outdoor recreation programs and classes, and environmental education programs. Interviewers were instructed to ask about each service/amenity separately and to report only one response (state parks or private contractor). Because we were interested in why individuals felt services or amenities should be operated by state parks or a private operator/contractor, we then asked two follow-up questions: “In the previous question, you said that ___(list out services)___ should be offered by STATE PARKS. Why do you feel this way?” and “You also said that _____ (list out services)___ should be offered by PRIVATE CONTRACTORS. Why do you feel this way?” Thus, at this point in the interview individuals were asked to respond in general rather than on a service- or amenity-specific (e.g., food and beverage facilities, watercraft rentals) basis. Respondents’ answers to these questions were recorded and later transcribed.

**Data Analysis**

Visitors’ reasons for who should operate various park services/amenities within a park system were addressed through content analysis of the open-ended responses to the questions listed above. Content analysis involved four steps. First, four members of the research team were given approximately 10% of the data to review independently. They assigned codes to the responses based on the exact verbiage used by the respondents in an effort to increase both face and internal validity (Babbie, 2007). Second, the independent coders met to compare their results. This process involved reading through each response, sharing codes, and generating a common coding sheet. Third, step two was repeated with a second set of data, representing an additional 10% of the data. At this point, inter-rater
reliability was assessed and deemed acceptable (i.e., agreement on at least 80% of the codes; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, a second version of the coding sheet was created and used by all coders when coding the remaining data. The number of free codes at this point was 38 for the responses to the question regarding state parks provision and 21 for the question about private contractors. The fourth step involved reviewing the codes and looking for commonalities in an effort to reduce the number of meaningful categories. This process involved two separate rounds of category reduction. The number of categories associated with the responses to the question about state parks was reduced to 12 (i.e., 1,153 responses), but only five (including sub-themes) included a minimum of 5% of the responses, the level at which categories represent important contextual information (Weaver & Atkinson, 1994). The number of categories associated with the responses to the question about private contractors was reduced to 16, but again five (including sub-themes) included a minimum of 5% of the responses.

**Results**

A total of 1,477 state park visitors was included in the study sample (i.e., 95% of the visitors contacted). The respondents were mostly White (93%) and were nearly evenly divided regarding gender (52% males and 48% females). The majority of respondents (55%) had some formal education beyond high school and 42% reported having a college or postgraduate degree. About one-quarter of the respondents (27%) had household incomes of $40,000 or less, one-third (32%) reported $40,000 to $60,000, and the remaining 41% had incomes above $60,000. The age of respondents ranged from 19-89 and averaged 45 years.

**Why State Parks Should Operate Services and Amenities**

The coding process associated with responses to the question, Why do you feel state parks should operate [selected] services? resulted in five themes: They Have the Knowledge, It’s What They Should Do, Over Commercialization, More Quality Control, and Stewardship. See Table 1 for a complete listing of themes and a sampling of comments.

**They have the knowledge.** Respondents’ primary reason (269 responses) for supporting state parks operating their own services and amenities rather than a private contractor was that state park employees have the expertise to do a good job. They believed that state park employees had the knowledge to do their job was presented in a number of different ways. Individuals made general comments such as, “They have the knowledge already” and “[state park employees] have the best understanding and the most knowledge…” Others suggested, “They might be more engaged and involved and have a higher level of expertise about the technique and the environmental conditions [in this park]” and “Rangers and park staff have expertise, the knowledge and education to maintain the non-commercial feel of the parks.”

Respondents also felt that state parks employees had better training and/or qualifications for the job because “[services and amenities] are the priorities. That’s what [employees] went to school for—teaching, educating the public, providing those services…” and “[state parks] usually have people with all the credentials. They are more trained.” The notion of training was often connected to the importance individuals attach to the resource: “They are trained more in the operation and the importance of the environment and things that have to do with the area,” and “…The naturalist [has] a better feel for the delicate nature of the park…”
Additionally, respondents recognized that state parks employees have been operating services and amenities for some time and, as a result, “have more experience.” Their experience results in “more incentives to take more care of the facilities…” an ability to “educate people;” and, quite simply, “being better.”

The last sub-theme was related to abilities and skills. Respondents mentioned that the abilities and skills of state parks employees have resulted in higher quality and the ability to “handle … and instruct people.” For example, individuals mentioned that state parks employees have “more expertise to provide better quality.” And, beyond expertise they also are “…more likely to understand the area better and be more responsible.” In all, they simply “have the capability of [managing the services].”

### Table 1. Overall reasons and sub-themes associated with why state parks should operate state parks services and amenities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Reason and sub-themes*</th>
<th>Sample Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>They Have the Knowledge (n=269)</strong>  &lt;br&gt; They know what to do (n=83)  &lt;br&gt; Have the degree/education/training (n=62)  &lt;br&gt; Have knowledge (n=54)  &lt;br&gt; Are qualified (n=46)  &lt;br&gt; Have the experience (n=14)  &lt;br&gt; Have the ability/skills (n=10)</td>
<td>“Rangers and park staff have expertise, the knowledge, and education to maintain the non-commercial feel of the parks.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It’s What They Should Do (n=178)</strong>  &lt;br&gt; What they should do (n=137)  &lt;br&gt; What they have been hired to do (n=23)  &lt;br&gt; It’s their responsibility (n=18)</td>
<td>“They need to stick with their core competencies… If it’s to preserve, maintain and provide services to the public, that’s what they should do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Over Commercialization (n=140)</strong>  &lt;br&gt; In it for the money (n=57)  &lt;br&gt; Too commercialized (n=21)  &lt;br&gt; Will result in problems (n=15)  &lt;br&gt; Private will take advantage (n=11)</td>
<td>“…I don’t really come here to buy a moose shot glass. I come here to enjoy the natural environment and private contractors can lose that focus.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>More Control (n=109)</strong>  &lt;br&gt; More control (n=59)  &lt;br&gt; Can control rules, regulations and guidelines (n=46)</td>
<td>“…If the state is going to make the rules and regulations, they should control them and oversee them.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stewardship (n=104)</strong>  &lt;br&gt; Would care for the park (n=62)  &lt;br&gt; Know the park and it’s offerings (n=30)</td>
<td>“…They are the caretakers of the land and the animals and would be more accountable than some yahoo who just wants to make money.”</td>
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*Note: The total number of statements associated with a sub-theme will not always total the number of statements associated with a theme. Ten or more statements were necessary to create a sub-theme.*
It’s what they should do. Many respondents felt that operating park services and amenities is something state parks employees should do because it is their job (i.e., “[It’s] what they’ve been hired to do”). Individuals’ comments (n=178) ranged from simple statements like “It’s their job” to more complex statements that recognized the role of taxes. For example, with respect to the perception that operating services and amenities is their job, respondents suggested that “[park staff] work here,” “…are running the place and they get paid.” Moreover, respondents felt that operating park services and amenities is not only their job, but their responsibility: “It is their responsibility to keep the park in a nice functioning condition,” “Because this is a state park, [the staff] should be responsible for [the operations],” and “[Park staff] are responsible for what is here.” Concomitantly, numerous respondents suggested that they have already paid for park staff to operate services and amenities: “Those things seem more along the lines of what we’re paying our state taxes for, [providing] services for the state parks,” and “Because we give our tax dollars and the environment and safety and those things should be on the state’s shoulders.”

In addition, respondents felt that state parks employees should operate park services and amenities because it is part of the state’s mission/responsibility: “[Services and amenities] are part of the core state parks mission, and no one can understand that mission better than state parks employees.” Other examples of this sentiment included: “They are things that are generic to their mission. The other things can be done by a private firm,” “[They should operate services and amenities] because the park belongs to the state,” and “Those things are more government responsibility.”

Over commercialization. This theme, represented by 140 responses, reflects respondents’ mistrust of private contractors. They fear over-commercialization and that private operators will take advantage, especially because they are in the business of making money. Concern with over-commercialization was expressed generally with comments like, “I’m afraid of commercialization” and “[I] don’t want to get too commercialized.” Respondents also linked their fear of commercialization with their expectations of a state-run park: “This is a state park and it shouldn’t be commercialized. There is too much already” and “[I] don’t like to see a park commercialized. We want a quiet place to go. …”

Respondents also feared that private operators would take advantage of the opportunity to work in a state park. Their fears ranged from private operators “[getting] out of hand,” “[abusing] the privilege,” to “[trying] to take over.”

Some respondents simply don’t trust private contractors: “If you let private enterprise in, sometimes they take advantage.” “…Outside people have a tendency to do whatever they want to do,” including letting “…quality suffer.” This mistrust was also manifested in the belief that privatization will result in problems: “…a private company might not always follow the rules the way they should,” and the result might be that the service becomes “…a carnival and a money making operation.”

More quality control. Juxtaposed with the belief that private contractors can’t be trusted is the notion that state parks should have more quality control (109 responses). General comments regarding a need for control ranged from “[state parks employees] should have control over what’s going on in the park” to “It’s a state park, so they should handle and control it, and provide programs…” to “Since the state owns it, they should control it.” Some respondents felt control would be evident through rules and regulations. Referencing the importance of rules, one individual suggested, “…[The state will] have more stringent rules for people to follow.” Regulations also proved important to respondents who believed that state parks “would be more strict with regulations and [visitors] would get quality service. Things would be consistent and to specifications.” A link between regulations, quality, and safety also was recognized: “Better quality because
it is regulated. [The State] will keep up on things and be monitored…” and “It would be under [state] control and more regulated, which makes it safer and better for everybody.”

**Stewardship.** Some individuals want the state to be the steward of its natural resources (104 references). They believe state parks employees “understand the park … are passionate about the park, and … represent the park.” In terms of understanding the park, respondents suggested that employees “… are in tune with what their park has to offer,” and “… with the natural resources and the facilities …” Additionally, state parks employees “…are the caretakers of the land and the animals and would be more accountable than some yahoo who just wants to make money.”

Stewardship was also reflected in comments made about state parks employees’ passion and caring for natural resources. One respondent suggested, employees are “… in tune [with] the environment and they care about the Earth …” Others said, “[employees] have an interest in protecting what is here;” “[they] are really good stewards of the environment.” Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that they, rather than private contractors, should operate certain services and amenities because: “They are the real stewards of the park. They live and work here…” and “…Outside concessionaires care about the bottom line, making a profit. …Their concern for the people and the park is not as strong as for their income…”

**Why Private Contractors Should Operate Services and Amenities**

Support for privatization was expressed through five themes: Enhanced Quality, Not Central to the Mission, Job Opportunities, More Cost Effective, and Competition is Good. See Table 2 for a complete listing of themes and a sampling of comments.

**Enhanced quality.** Respondents’ primary reason (386 responses) for supporting private contractors operating selected state parks services and amenities was the potential for enhanced quality. For example, one respondent stated, “A private company would have more interest in keeping “… [the quality of the concessions] up.” Similarly, other respondents suggested that private contractors “… are there for profit and would maybe have a better quality of product …,” “… are doing it as a business [so] they are likely to make it higher quality …,” and “have a greater incentive for quality.”

Enhanced quality was also referenced through the notion of “better/more variety.” For example, some respondents addressed the potential for variety in general: “There would be more variety—It would be more attractive for the crowds” and “[private contractors] would have more variety … which is better for the consumer than what the state parks can offer.” Others referred to distinct services in their comments: “Quality of the boats and boat safety; a private company would have more interest in keeping them up,” “better variety of food …,” and “… [private contractors] could provide more options like ethnic foods and stuff.”

Respondents also felt that private contractors were “more qualified to do the job” because “… they would be better equipped to handle some of the concession stands, and they have the personnel and knowledge …” One respondent commented, “Well, you’re not going to hire a park ranger to run a soda stand, there are people who have the expertise to do that.” Private contractors would also have an “incentive to do well.” As one respondent noted, “They would do a better job because they are trying to make a profit and they want you coming back.”

A fourth sub-focus under Enhanced Quality represented the “efficiency” of private contractors. For example, numerous respondents suggested that private contractors are simply more efficient at handling tasks, especially because they are perceived as “… more experienced, more professional” and “… not weighed down by union regulations and restrictions and rules.” Further, because private contractors are more “specialized” they
tend to have “new ideas” and to “… see different things that might be good” or have “… a
different outlook on things.”

Not central to the mission. The 140 responses in this category reflected respondents’
feeling that state parks has a distinct mission, which is primarily tied to the management
and preservation of the environment. Activities that are not necessary or central to the core
mission of state parks should be contracted out. As one respondent noted, “That is not a
natural resource or anything that has to do with the environment, so I don’t know that they
need to be putting their time or energy into [concessions].” Respondents indicated that they
would “rather see the state focus their (sic) resources on improving the environmental areas
…,” “… [dealing] with more important things like maintaining the park and facilities,” or
“… [focusing] on the nature type things.”

Further, many respondents felt that the park and its staff have too many other
responsibilities and as such should not take on additional duties: “The park has their (sic)
hands full with other things. The park’s area is nature and the care of it, they can leave the
[concession] to someone else.” “There are more important things that the rangers could be
doing than cooking food …” or “cleaning the bathrooms or stuff.”

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Table 2. Overall reasons and sub-themes associated with why private contractors
should operate State Parks services and amenities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Reason and sub-themes*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced Quality (n=386)</td>
<td>“…You can privatize and have more variety and competition, which is better for the consumer than what the state park can offer.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better/more variety (n=112)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More qualified to do the job (n=71)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have incentive to do well (n=42)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Better quality (n=35)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More efficient (n=28)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More specialized (n=27)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ideas/creative (n=12)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More access to resources (n=11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Central to the Mission (n=140)</td>
<td>“Those are tangential duties and not really the core goals of [the state].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park has other responsibilities (n=36)</td>
<td>“It gives an opportunity for local businesses to use their products and I’m just more in favor of privatization in general.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State shouldn’t do “business-related” activities (n=25)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>State doesn’t have staff for these activities (n=10)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Job Opportunities (n=76)</td>
<td>“…Private entrepreneurs are going to be able to provide services that are more economical…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Cost Effective (n=57)</td>
<td>“…You can privatize and have more variety and competition…..”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut costs (n=10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition is Good (n=53)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Competitive prices (n=25)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The total number of statements associated with a sub-theme will not total the number of statements associated with a theme. Ten or more statements were necessary to create a sub-theme.
Job opportunities. A total of 76 responses focused on opportunities for others to make money/have jobs, which ultimately will help the local economy. For example, respondents said, “The state is already getting money from taxes and fishing licenses, so they should let someone else make some money …,” “It is an area where a private individual could make a business and the state shouldn’t step in when a private individual could do that,” and “It would give a private business the opportunity to make money.”

Providing jobs to private contractors will also help the local economy. Respondents want parks to “support the neighborhood,” “support the local economy,” and “… stay local to help the economy.” One individual even argued that offering private contractors the opportunity to work in state parks would “… promote more business in the area, [and] promote capitalism.”

More cost effective. Respondents also focused on the potential for price reductions, which visitors would benefit from personally (57 responses). Their belief is that “… private contractors are going to be able to provide services that are more economical to the public.” They can provide services and amenities “… less expensively,” “cheaper,” and “more cost effective[ly].”

Further, some respondents suggested that privatizing services could save taxpayers money and “… would take off the tax burden for the state.” This belief was linked to the notion that having (and operating) services and amenities costs the state money, which is obtained through taxes. For example, individuals suggested, “[Extra services and amenities] would take more money to establish and maintain” and “… be a big expense for the park that private people could probably handle.”

Competition is good. Approximately one-half of the responses (25 out of 53) in this category recognized a need for competition. Respondents felt strongly that private operators would provide a competitive environment and that this would result in greater variety (e.g., “The competition would produce better prices and better variety”); better options (e.g., “more options, better competition”); and improvements in the product (e.g., “They would have to compete with other vendors and so they would try to outdo themselves”). In addition, private contractors were expected to “… put more work into their [service] and change things up …”

Discussion and Implications

Our previous paper (Mowen et al., 2009) examined who visitors feel should operate services and amenities within state parks. This paper builds on that by examining why. The bulk of our respondents were generally inclined to support government operation of park services that are traditionally linked to state parks operations (e.g., park maintenance, environmental education programs, campground operations). Responses from park visitors suggest this is due, in part, to their belief that governing bodies are the stewards of public lands (Watson & Herath, 1999). The government is expected to operate “… in the best interests of the people as a whole and … to set rules whereby the commonwealth is protected” (Wade, 2005, p. 62). There were also instances where private contractors were preferred. In general, visitor comments in support of public and private sector provision of state parks services/amenities were consistent with arguments that have been made within the scholarly literature. The diversity and nuances among the opinions, and the frequency with which various themes and sub-themes were offered, provide additional food for thought. The results of this study and those previously published should (a) be considered in the ongoing state parks budgetary and privatization debates that are raging across the nation and (b) inform communication efforts to support public/private sector operational decisions.
Park visitors support public sector operation of park amenities/services because of their knowledge/expertise, their social contract with the public (it’s what they should do), their concerns that business might over-commercialize natural park settings, and their belief that public agencies provide more quality control/oversight than a third party operating services within a public space. Individuals’ primary and most frequently cited reason for supporting state parks operating services and amenities within state parks was that they have the “knowledge.” They felt strongly that state parks employees have the education, knowledge, experience and skills to provide park services and amenities. Concomitantly, respondents also recognized that, through this experience, employees are aware of and able to respond to the needs of visitors, shifting policies, co-dependent relationships with members of the surrounding communities, and more (More, Urdaneta, & Stevens, 2008). In addition to having the knowledge, visitors noted that public agencies were stewards of these public spaces and that operating these services are “what they should do” as part of their social contract. As Mowen, Kyle, Borrie, and Graefe (2006, p. 77) suggested, “The public trusts a parks and recreation department to do good things in their community, to do those things in a fair manner, and to do them on the public’s behalf.” The general public also views such services as part of the government’s social obligation to its constituents (Price & Riuccucci, 2005).

When asked what types of services and amenities should be privatized, respondents were most likely to suggest food and beverage operations as well as special events and festivals. Bowker, Cordell, and Johnson (1999) and Vogt and Williams (1999) have documented similar results. Perhaps this is linked to growing recognition that some services are better operated and managed by the private sector? Or, it may simply be a reflection of current practices. Kosar (2006), More (2005), and Wade (2005) indicated that the privatization of park services and amenities has been continuous and incremental. It is quite possible that public attitudes toward privatization have changed in response to the diffusion of privatized services into the daily management of public parks. Without further study of preferences for privatization across various geographic/political boundaries and levels of governance, however, more definitive conclusions can’t be reached.

Nevertheless, results from this study show that visitors’ reasons for privatization were linked to increased quality and cost-effectiveness perceptions as well as perceptions that private providers can create a favorable competitive environment to increase the quality of services, particularly those not central to the host-agencies’ mission (Crane & Boaz, 2005). Individuals believed private contractors should operate services and amenities within state parks primarily because of the potential for “Enhanced Quality.” However, when individuals shared what they meant by “Enhanced Quality” their responses included, for example, a perceived greater variety of services/products, more qualified staff, and efficient and resourceful operations due to the private contractor’s need to make money. Thus, in this study, visitors appear to have embraced the notion of market efficiencies, which Johnson and Seidenstat (2007) and LeRoy (2005) have argued is a primary reason for privatization. They have also recognized that the private contractor has one goal—to pursue profits by offering quality products and services—everything else is secondary (Wilson, 1989).

Respondents also recognized that privatization as well as competition from the private sector may result in jobs and financial savings. However, if little to no competition exists in the private sector market, park managers will have difficulty enforcing accountability amongst existing contractors, which could put their stewardship efforts in a precarious situation (Van Slyke & Hammonds, 2003). This issue has been addressed extensively by Miranda and Lerner (1995) who promoted “mixed public/private delivery” rather than privatization as a strategic alternative for public services. Mixed delivery is a middle
position between direct public delivery and privatization. This approach integrates “… markets and planning to ensure efficiency, service quality, and citizen satisfaction” (Warner & Hefetz, 2008, p. 155). One example of mixed delivery, which is the dominant paradigm in today’s state park systems, includes work sharing between the public and private sectors, resulting in reduced costs, greater market reach, and the ability to use and promote new technology (Hickey, 2007).

Being more cost effective, which ultimately benefits government, was also raised as a reason for privatizing park services and amenities. This is particularly germane to today’s economic realities as tax appropriation dollars for state parks have been drastically reduced and dedicated funding sources have been diverted to other purposes (e.g., balancing general fund deficits). As such, public-sector park agencies have had to seek out private partners to provide supplemental services in the face of diminished resources, rising costs, and increased demand for value-added services. For example, Arizona, among a number of other states, has considered the issue of privatizing the entire operations of selected state parks in order to keep them open and accessible to the visiting public. Whether this will be a reality for other states in the future is unknown.

In situations where visitors support state parks operating services and amenities because the staff is perceived as knowledgeable and experienced, managers who choose to privatize services and amenities, especially those that are perceived to be the “responsibility” of state parks employees, will need to write clearly delineated and enforceable contracts that are responsive to the concerns of citizens. This can be difficult in small rural areas where few competitors bid for contracts. When there is no critical mass of competition, Sclar (2000) and Girard et al. (2009) suggest privatization is unrealistic and should, at best, be considered a last option.

Further, state park managers who feel they will face intense scrutiny from the public may want to consider forming intergovernmental cooperative agreements (i.e., formal and informal agreements between governmental entities to lend support to each other). According to Agranoff and McGuire (2004) such agreements may be easier to manage and could result in less animosity from the general public. Alternatively, when managers of state park systems feel they have support for privatization, they must be sure the service will not fail and must “…ensure a higher level of … accountability and involvement” (Warner & Hefetz, 2008, p. 163) through direct oversight of the private operator.

Conclusion

Our results support Conlin and Bernstein’s (2004) conclusion that the merits of park privatization are context and time-frame specific. But further research is necessary to confirm and extend the results of this study. Such research could be further expanded by including a wider range of respondents (e.g., non-users of park services) and by asking individuals about their level of knowledge regarding who is operating specific types of park services or amenities. For example, to what degree are visitors knowledgeable regarding current contractual circumstances in various parks? And, does their level of knowledge influence their preference for who operates park services/amenities? The results of this type of questioning could be used to document misperceptions of current contractual arrangements, visitors’ and residents’ perceptions in general and, if using an open-ended format, insight into the type of information that needs to be shared to correct misperceptions.

The debate regarding the merits and economic necessities of privatizing park and recreation services has come to the forefront of resource allocation decisions, particularly during a persistent and severe recession. Results from this study confirm that visitors understand basic arguments or reasons for private vs. public operation of park services/
amenities, but within the context of this particular study setting (Pennsylvania state parks) there was still a general inclination to have such services operated by state parks, rather than an outside contractor. By understanding the public’s support or opposition to specific operational proposals (public, mixed delivery, complete privatization) managers will be better able to craft agreements with private operators which maximize the relative strengths and responsibilities of each sector.

References


