

Oregon Parks and Recreation Commission

November 19, 2014

Agenda Item: 12a

Information

Topic: Visitor Experiences Program Update – Summer 2014

Presented by: Vicki Sink, Lead Visitor Experience Coordinator – Integrated Park Services

2014 Visitor Experiences (VE) Program Update

The Visitor Experience Program finished its first year of implementation. This program combines Oregon Parks and Recreation Department's various visitor services and programs like interpretation, volunteers and special events.

Program highlights from 2014 include:

- Visitor Experience Assistants (VEAs) increase visitor experience programs in the field
 - 23 seasonal staff hired and distributed throughout the state,
 - Program well-received among park managers.
- Let's Go Camping (LGC) events summary includes stories from LGC participants
 - LGC participant enjoys her experience and decides to volunteer for LGC events later in the summer,
 - Mother shares her childhood experience of sleeping under the stars with her family,
 - Latino campers share dinner and campfire stories at Nehalem Bay.
- Let's Go programs expand statewide and reach more park visitors
 - Introduces urban families to recreational opportunities along the Willamette River,
 - Provides after-school program LG Paddling event at Hat Rock.

Planning begins for continued development of the Visitor Experience program. VE program staff members have been meeting with field managers and rangers to better understand their needs for expansion of VE in the field.

Prior Action by Commission: N/A

Action Requested: None

Attachments: 2014 Visitor Experience Update

Prepared by: Vicki Sink

2014 Visitor Experiences Update

In 2013, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) combined the stand-alone interpretive and volunteer services into a larger, more encompassing program titled Visitor Experiences (VE). This program embraces other visitor-focused programs including environmental education, special events, outdoor recreation, and partnerships. The following identifies some specific programs and stories to highlight the VE program's first year.

Visitor Experience Staff



Jill Sisson and Jaelyn Rushing, VEAs, lead a JR Ranger program at Silver Falls.

The VE Staff use a decentralized approach to deliver programs to the field. One lead coordinator oversees the program at the statewide level, while region coordinators work directly with field staff in their respective regions (Coast, Valley, and Mountain).

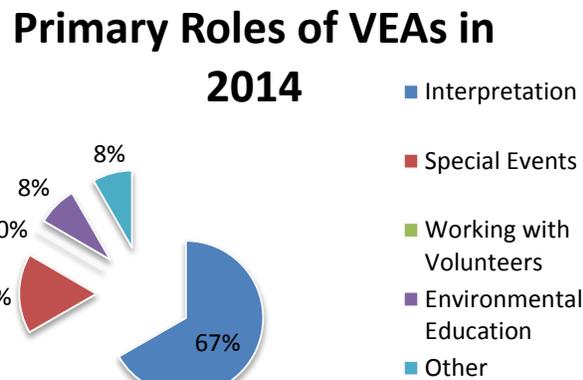
This summer, VE hired 23 seasonal staff to serve as VE Assistants (VEAs). These VEAs were distributed throughout the state to deliver parks' VE programs. One VEA at Salem HQ and three regional VEAs focused on coordinating the Let's Go Camping (LGC) program. The other VEAs were distributed through each region as follows: 5 in the Coast Region, 7 in the Valley Region, and 7 in the Mountain Region.

Together, these staff members provided the memories that exemplify OPRD's VE program.

Park managers reported that the presence and efforts of VEAs increased public outreach and fulfilled a gap in OPRD's mission by having a staff member dedicated to providing VE programs.

Let's Go Camping

The Let's Go Camping (LGC) program offered 15 events this summer, 4 per region plus 2 additional in the Valley Region. There were 404 participants, an increase of 59 from 2013. A total of 28 LGC volunteers gave 1370 hours of their time to support the LGC coordinators, deliver programs, and foster positive participant experiences. (Continued on page 2)





Kyle and Caleb share their enthusiasm for LG at Fort Stevens.

Participant Camping Experience Prior to LGC 2014

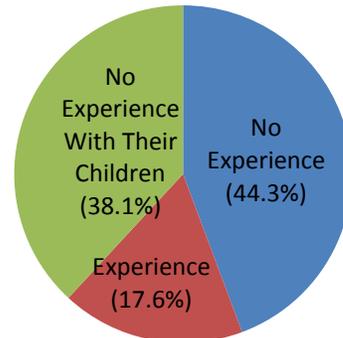


Table 1

As Table 1 shows, most LGC participants had no experience camping and another portion had no experience camping with their children.

The following stories exemplify the positive impacts of LGC.

LGC participant extends her visitor experience to become a volunteer

Erin Olivia had never camped before. After moving to Portland four years ago, she began looking for a way to try camping. She didn't feel comfortable going out on her own and did not have a tent or a sleeping bag. The Cove Palisades LGC event provided her with the opportunity she sought. After a little more camping experience, she decided to volunteer for LGC events later in the summer. LGC not only introduces participants to camping techniques, it provides an opportunity to expand and deepen their knowledge by volunteering to teach others.



Marina and her family enjoy a campfire at LGC Prineville.

Family experiences camping together for first time

Growing up, Marina slept on the floor of her family's home in rural China. In the summer, she would go down to the lake and fall asleep beneath the stars. Marina now lives in Portland and is married with two young daughters, who have never slept beneath the night sky. She fondly remembers those summer nights of her childhood and she wants to share that experience with her family. This is what brought her to LGC at Prineville Reservoir. LGC provides families with the elements to make healthy and fun family experiences.

Latino families engage in visitor experiences at Nehalem Bay

The Nehalem Bay State Park LGC event focused on Spanish-speaking families, an under-represented visitor group at Oregon State Parks. Many of our participants were multi-generational Latino families, where the grandparents and parents were not fluent in English or only spoke Spanish while the children were bilingual and often translated for the older generations. Two Spanish-speaking volunteers, Veronica Araneda and Ellen Lancaster, were invaluable. Saturday evening, Veronica, born and raised in Santiago, Chile, and later relocated to Portland, suggested that all of our participants, volunteers, and staff gather together for dinner. She explained that preparing an elaborate meal and sharing it with friends and family is very important in many Hispanic cultures. We enjoyed traditional Latino dishes as well as simple camping favorites. As the sun went down and the cool coastal breeze picked up, we moved towards the campfire. We brought out the marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers and demonstrated how to make a s'more because many of our participants had not made one or had never heard of one before. As Veronica explained, s'mores are an American tradition and has not been adopted by Latino culture. Some thought s'mores were delicious and others were still not so sure after tasting one. Together, we enjoyed the warmth of the fire and were enthralled by traditional Latino ghost stories, such as La Llorona, late into the night. Ultimately, this event became a sharing of traditions; our participants shared elements of Latino culture, while staff and volunteers shared their experiences and knowledge of camping and the outdoors.



Participants, volunteers and staff at LGC Nehalem Bay

Let's Go

In 2013, the Valley Region launched a LG pilot program designed to introduce park visitors to recreational activities following the LGC model. With the emergence of VE in 2014, the LG program expanded to the whole department.

The following 2 stories provide a glimpse into the memories visitors gain while participating in a LG program.

A young LG Paddling participant displays his kayaking skills.



One LG Paddling program launched from Chehalem Paddle Launch in Newberg, Oregon. This group included several individuals with little or no canoeing experience. Seeing a few of the more urban families discovering an outdoor activity is truly enjoyable. Claudia registered herself, her son and his 3 teenage children for a Let's Go Camping event with the goal of getting the family together and introducing some healthy family activities that got them away from electronic entertainment. The

added LG Paddling was the highlight of the weekend. While Claudia and friend Denise were pleased with themselves for not capsizing, she was particularly grateful to see her son Malik and his children enjoy themselves on the river.

Another LG Paddling event was held at Hat Rock State Park for a 6th Grade after-school group, followed by three tours for the public. The pond at Hat Rock provided the perfect location for teaching paddling skills – with calm, flat water under a picturesque bridge at one end and the dike separating the space from the Columbia River on the other. Beginning with basic paddling skills, participants then move to the water to practice those skills. Meghan Brown, Mountain Region VEA, gave the kids a chance to learn some skills needed for responding to a capsized boat.



6th graders from Umatilla School District's after-school program show off their paddling skills.

Other LG events from 2014:

- LG Fishing
- LG Birding
- LG Star Gazing
- LG Paddling



This Let's Go camper learns how to fish.



LG Paddling participants show their eagerness to learn about kayaking.

Conclusion

Visitor Experience programs were successful during this first year of transition. Overall comments from park staff were positive and supportive of the new structure to VE. We understand that in order to successfully continue new programs we must review and revise appropriately; therefore, we have identified the following as next steps in the development of our VE program.

- Enhance and continue providing Visitor Experience Assistant positions,
- Evaluate LGC and explore new user groups, while increasing number of Spanish-speaking volunteers;
- Expand LGC events to parks like Red Bridge State Wayside's walk-in tent sites to showcase OPRD's diverse camping options,
- Purchase and furnish a third LGC trailer so each region has flexibility in scheduling,
- Define and clarify LG programs,
- Continue defining Visitor Experiences based on park and staff needs.