

KEY TAKEAWAYS & RESOURCES:

Understanding and Building Loyalty Among Visitors and Volunteers

This document is a summary of takeaways that could be useful to practitioners and researchers interested in this topic, especially as applied to the Seacoast region of New Hampshire. Generated from “Learning Circle #3,” organized by the [Bridging Human Dimensions Project](#). Additional shared project files [are available at this link](#).

Practitioner Context & Challenges

- ★ Understanding the **motivations and interests of visitors** to public lands and interpretive facilities: Who comes, why do they come, and what prompts them to come back? What aspects of our facilities and interpretive resources do they find most compelling?
- ★ How could we better **impact hearts and minds** and move visitors along a path toward behavior change? (e.g., becoming more active outdoors people, adopting a culture of stewardship, taking action for our coastal resources) Where should we **invest our limited dollars** to best advance our mission?
- ★ What are the best ways to **track our growing relationships** with visitors and volunteers?
- ★ Practitioners felt their volunteer programs were strong and responsive to the unique **interests of volunteers**, but don’t know why people choose not to volunteer.
- ★ **Visitors to some public lands** in Seacoast NH may not have any interaction with staff or signage and may not even know who owns the land.
- ★ Partners are **updating and expanding signage** and are interested in best practices.

Key Takeaways

- Some visitor centers, such as the [Seacoast Science Center \(SSC\)](#), have more capacity to track visitors and could share best practices (e.g., what information is shared when entering the museum, how their **customer relationships management system** is set up, and what has been learned about visitors that return and become more involved as donors, etc.).
- **Local practitioners shared ideas for engaging visitors in their centers:**
 - SSC relies on skilled facilitation methods to connect with visitors. They train their staff and volunteers to use an “**inquiry based approach**” when talking with visitors. They try to begin every conversation with a question, which gives a place to start a conversation to meet people where they are.
 - [Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve \(GBNERR\)](#) offers signs and activities that **foster a social experience**, recognizing that visitors typically come with a child or friend. This includes signs that encourage a parent to read out loud and explore with their child or a game to play together.
- **Local researchers shared results of work where they surveyed residents around Great Bay ([available here](#)) and learned a few things related to visitor loyalty:**
 - **People tend to learn about Great Bay lands, facilities and programs through word of mouth.** Managers could foster more word of mouth information sharing and referrals through social media or a referral program (ideas shared: engage with social platforms such as Seacoast Moms or Seacoast Hikes).
 - **Elements of “cultural ecosystem services” seem to drive visitor loyalty.** For example, visitors report that they highly value Great Bay because of the aesthetics, the recreation opportunities, its cultural history, and its educational opportunities, which form a **strong sense of place**.

- This study offers **ideas for increasing visitor loyalty, such as offering programs that: (1) interpret the attributes people value** (i.e., cultural history, educational opportunities, and recreation) and **(2) highlight the attributes of Great Bay** to help foster a strong sense of place (e.g., guided walks, birding workshops, fishing tournaments).
- **Researchers have also evaluated the impact of signs** and found that:
 - **Visitors increased their appreciation of the place after reading signs about its biodiversity and perceived more value to their own health as a result.**
 - Generally, **researchers recommend more signage for Great Bay, but noted that too many signs can be distracting** (See: [Onion meme](#)).
 - *(Note: These findings have not been published yet, contact Drs. Ferguson & Ferguson if interested in details).*

Other Best Practices and Examples of Educating Visitors to Prompt a Behavior Change:

- [This study](#) from Boulder, CO shares specific advice for changing the behavior of dog guardians, e.g., designating more on-leash-only sites, installing additional trash and/or compost receptacles and education efforts explaining rules and resources. They used the Theory of Planned Behavior
 - The CO campaign to get climbers to use poop bags was impactful in part because they used humor, social media, volunteer events and the “science of influence”.
 - Use the “Three C’s” - **Clear, Concise, Consistent**, when developing messaging.
- Team at Grand Teton is developing signs about the natural resource that incorporate stewardship messages, vs making the stewardship action (e.g., scoop the poop) the primary message.
- Research in the Lamprey River watershed found that the moral norms of “responsible management of our resources” and “think about future generations” are effective.

Additional examples, related studies, and resources of potential interest:

- See project resources

Featured Practitioners and Researchers

Thank you to the following individuals who were part of the Learning Circle that informed this summary:

- [Kelle Loughlin](#) - Education Coordinator & Director of the Great Bay Discovery Center, Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve
- [Jim Chase](#) - Executive Director, Seacoast Science Center
- [Lauren Ferguson](#) - Assistant Professor of Recreation Management & Policy, University of New Hampshire
- [Michael Ferguson](#) - Associate Professor of Recreation Management & Policy, University of New Hampshire

Resources and Data Sources

- NH Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan - [Overview](#) or [Full Plan](#)
- Cultivating commitment: how cultural ecosystem services affect visitor loyalty attitudes and intention-to-return in parks and protected areas. Link to the [full article](#) and here are [summary slides from the study](#) (Ferguson et al, 2024)
 - This large survey was conducted around Great Bay in summer 2022.
- NH Civic Health Index - [What is civic health?](#) (Summary of [Key Findings](#))
 - This study provides a wealth of data about people in the granite state and how they are changing which can inform our programs.

- Final Report: Dog Guardians' Perceptions and Behaviors Related to the Disposal of Pet Waste in City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks. [Available here](#)
 - This is a great example of how research can help change behaviors.
- An assessment of the effectiveness of in-situ signage in multiple-use marine protected areas in providing information to different recreational users. [Available here](#)
 - Takeaway: Current signs were not adequate to help users understand rules and could be improved through better placement, content and presentation.

Project Resources, Contacts, and Feedback: We appreciate your interest in this project and welcome additional questions or ideas for resources that would be useful. In addition, we appreciate hearing feedback on how you may have used this takeaway summary. Please contact Lindsey.Williams@unh.edu.

- A more detailed summary of this Learning Circle discussion [is available at this link](#). Additional shared project files [are available at this link](#).
- Additional takeaway summaries are available on the following topics:
 - Learning Circle 1: [Conceptual Frameworks for Motivating Behavior Change](#)
 - Learning Circle 2: [Documenting Public Opinion to Guide Programs & Influence Policy](#)
 - Learning Circle 4: [Social Science For Communications and Messaging](#)
 - Learning Circle 5: [Drivers of Local Policy Change and the Role of Technical Assistance](#)
- A listing of academic research papers, data sources, and other resources [is available at this link](#).

Authors: [Lindsey Williams](#), [Lynn Vacarro](#), [Julia Petersen](#), [Melissa Day](#)