

A Report Card on the Florida Park Police: Input from the Field

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Abstract

The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Division of Law Enforcement (DLE), Bureau of Park Police (FPP), is one of the smallest Law Enforcement agencies in the State of Florida. With 86 sworn field personnel to cover 158 parks, more than 700,000 acres of land and 19.1 million visitors a year, this is a task that most agencies would not take on. This survey targeted a random group of Park Managers and Assistant Park Managers, it sees what areas we (FPP) can improve our services to our customers. The survey will also attempt to determine the need of the parks in regards to Law Enforcement presence.

Introduction

The Florida Forever Land Acquisition Program: The Division of State Lands has primary responsibility for the Florida Forever land acquisition program, the world's largest conservation land buying program – having acquired more than 1 million acres in the last 5 years.

Since January 1999, habitat for 190 different rare and endangered plants and animals have been protected including 103 state endangered, 39 state threatened, and 11 of special concern. This includes 8 endangered and threatened species that were not previously protected anywhere on public lands.

We have acquired over 400,000 acres of Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas (FWCC), over 760,000 acres of habitat conservation areas (FNAI), nearly 560,000 acres of ecological greenways (OGT), over 120,000 acres of under-represented natural communities, over 270,000 acres of natural floodplains, nearly 500,000 acres of functional wetlands, nearly 153,000 acres of significant groundwater recharge areas, over 170,000 acres of land to support priority recreational trails, and over 350,000 acres of sustainable forest land...of course, these acreages overlap to include over 1 million acres acquired since 1999...we've also protected over 700 archaeological & historic sites and over 620 listed species locations of 190 different state-listed species.

The mission statement of DEP is; *More Protection. Less Process*, the Mission Statement for FPP is: *To protect the people, the environment, and the cultural and natural resources through enforcement, education and public service.*

Florida Park Police officers provide an array of law enforcement services to the State Parks in Florida. The inland officers deal with everything from conservation violations, poachers, and alcohol violations to regular police matters. The coastal officers deal with resource violations, boating, along with

“park rule” violations. FPP officers also enforce the laws outside of the parks, as fully certified State Police Officers. FPP officers are part of the multi agency contingency that responds to disasters, such as the 2004 hurricanes.

The survey attempts to identify ways to improve the service the FPP provides to the parks from a civilian perspective. The information is derived from some structured questions and some open discussion questions.

I am hoping the information gathered with this survey will assist the DEP and FPP in locating problem areas like manpower shortages, equipment needs, and area specific needs. This survey gave an opportunity to the target audience to express their likes and dislikes on paper and gives an opportunity to compile the information for a presentation.

Methods

The survey was sent out to 51 parks and I received 36 surveys back, a 70% return. Seven questions were structured and nine were open for written answers, with the final question with space for other comments. Keep in mind these surveys were sent out all over the state, so there is a wide variety of demographics.

The survey began with a background of what type of park, size, area, acreage, use, attendance, and busy season. It continued with questions about frequent problems, useful and not so useful tools. It also included some questions on opinions about the FPP.

As in all surveys there will be some problems. Some of the answers, seemed to be sparked by bad feelings or a bad experience with the FPP, but overall the survey was if nothing, interesting.

Results

Question #1: What type of setting is your park located in?

- Urban – 44%
- Rural – 47%
- Both - .05%

Question #2: What is the size (acreage) of your park?

- Smallest Park – 5 acres
- Largest Park – 88,000 acres
- Average size – 13,719 acres

Question #3: Is your park coastal or inland?

- Coastal – 52%
- Inland – 42%
- Both - .05%

Question #4: What is your parks primary use?

- Day Use – 66%
- Camping – 27%
- Historical Site – 16%
- All of the above – 19%

Question #5: What is your park's average annual attendance?

- The average attendance of the 36 parks that responded is 299,442 people per year.

Question #6: What is your busiest season?

- The busy season, according to this survey was about 50/50 split between winter and summer, with about 20 to 30 percent stating they are busy year round.

Question #7: List the 3 most common Law Enforcement problems that occur in your park?

- #1 – Alcohol related incidents
- #2 – Resource violations, vandalism, theft
- #3 – Traffic related problems

Question #8: How often do your Employees handle L.E. issues per month?

- 1-5 times – 28%
- 6-10 times – 16%
- 11 or more – 50%

Question #9: How often do you have to contact outside L.E. agencies to handle L.E. situations, per month?

- 1-5 times – 80.5%
- 6-10 times - .02%
- 11 or more – 11%

Question #10: What do you feel is the most effective tool the FPP uses in your area?

- Presence
- ATV
- Bikes

Question #11: What do you feel is the least effective tool the FPP uses in your area?

- No Officer presence
- High band radios
- Cars

Question #12: The FPP Officer assigned to my park spends adequate time out of his or her vehicle, making positive contact with park patrons.

- Strongly agree – 22%
- Agree – 31%
- No opinion – 13%
- Disagree – 22%
- Strongly disagree - .08%

Question #13: Do you feel the FPP Officer(s) assigned to your park, regularly respond to calls in a timely manner?

- Strongly agree – 30%
- Agree – 47%
- No opinion - .05%
- Disagree – 11%
- Strongly disagree - .05%

Question #14: Do you have confidence in the FPP Officers(s) assigned to your park to provide adequate security for the public?

- Strongly agree – 44%
- Agree – 44%
- No opinion - .05%
- Disagree - .05%
- Strongly disagree - .05%

Question #15: How would you rate your working relationship with the FPP Officers in your area?

- Excellent – 63%
- Good – 27%
- Fair - .08%
- Poor – 0%
- N/A – 0%

Question #16: How would you rate your working relationship with the FPP Command staff?

- Excellent – 41%
- Good – 38%
- Fair - .08%
- Poor - .08%
- N/A - .05%

Additional comments:

I made space available for additional comments at the end of the survey. The largest issues discussed were, more night patrols, the radio system, and understaffing.

Conclusion

To tie this all together you can see that the biggest problem is lack of staffing. Not having enough officers to fill all the shifts that are needed, including a nighttime patrol. Since 1999, the FPP had been allocated only 5 new positions and there has been an increase of land acquisition of over 1 million acres. If our area of responsibility is increasing, the attendance in the parks is increasing, why is our staffing not increasing?

Lieutenant Karin Bergholm has been in law enforcement since 1986. She has worked for the Florida Marine Patrol, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and currently works for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Law Enforcement, Bureau of Park Police. Karin is a supervisor in the Panhandle area of the State. She has a Bachelor's degree in Education from the University of South Florida.

References

Stephens, E. (2005) Chief, Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Bureaus of the Park Police. Personal Interview, DEP headquarters, Tallahassee, Florida.

Gibson, G (2005) Captain, Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Bureau of the Park Police. Personal Interview, DEP Headquarters, Tallahassee , Florida.

Florida Forever Land Acquisition (2005) Retrieved from www.myflorida.com

Appendix A

MEMORANDUM

December 4, 2004

TO: Park Mangers/Assistant Park Managers
Division of Recreation and Parks

FROM: Lt. Karin E. Bergholm
Division of Law Enforcement
Bureau of Park Patrol

SUBJECT: Florida Park Patrol (FPP) Survey

Feedback from our customers is a vital component in finding out “how we are doing”. I am asking your or your APM to fill out this survey on The Park Patrol. Your answers and comments are important to us, in order to improve our service to you.

I respectfully ask that you return the completed survey to me no later than December 31, 2004, to me in the provided self-addressed envelope.

Thank you in advance for your time and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Lt. Karin E. Bergholm
Florida Park Patrol
Southeast District