

What do visitors want?

The Royal Parks recently completed two pieces of visitor research on Richmond Park and other Royal Parks: a visitor count (done with cameras at the gates); and a visitor survey (219 face-to-face interviews).

The visitor count estimates that there are now 5.4 million visitors a year to Richmond Park. This compares to 4.0 million at the last count in 2008, a 35% increase in six years, confirming what many of us have observed and showing the pressure the Park is facing. The estimates show 70% more visitors in August than in the winter.

The visitor survey results are skewed by the dates the interviews were done – two of the three were done in August (2013 and 2014) when many regular visitors are away and occasional or new visitors are at a peak – confirmed by the youngish age profile of the respondents. Indeed it is really a survey of occasional and new visitors rather than of all visitors.

Not surprisingly, 100% of those interviewed rate the overall quality of the Park as excellent or good. They also rate many aspects of the Park excellent, good or satisfactory, with the noticeable exception of the visibility of Park staff (presumably including police) which 28% rate as poor or very poor.

When asked what other “information, activities or facilities” they would like in the Park, 46% “don’t want to see any”, the highest of any of the Royal Parks (the next highest were Greenwich and Bushy at 32%). The rest mention a range of things, including music events, theatre and open-air film screenings (16% or about 30 people), cycle paths and cycle hire (12% – both of these are already available) and 8% more signs.

When asked if they would be happy for a limited number of paid ticketed events to be held in the Park if the money generated went to maintain Royal Parks, 76% said yes. This is a leading question since it includes nothing about the negatives of these events (such as the impact on the fabric and wildlife of the Park).

Nor does the research ask any questions about visitors’ knowledge of, interest in, or concerns about the Park’s protected status, ecology, wildlife, history or conservation, all of which would have given valuable context to their replies. It is a missed opportunity to find out what they know and how to convince them to respect the Park.

It is easy to dismiss these views as coming from people who are unaware of Richmond Park’s special nature and who see it as just another local park. But, as the visitor count shows, their numbers are increasing rapidly and there will be growing pressure to have more of the activities and facilities they want and can find in other London parks.

It will be an enormous challenge for us (TRP and FRP) to explain to and convince these occasional and new visitors why Richmond Park is special – because it doesn’t have the things that every other park in London has.

TRP’s 2014 visitor research can be found at www.royalparks.org.uk/park-management/visitor-research.



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