A Study of Camper's Attitudes and Spending Patterns
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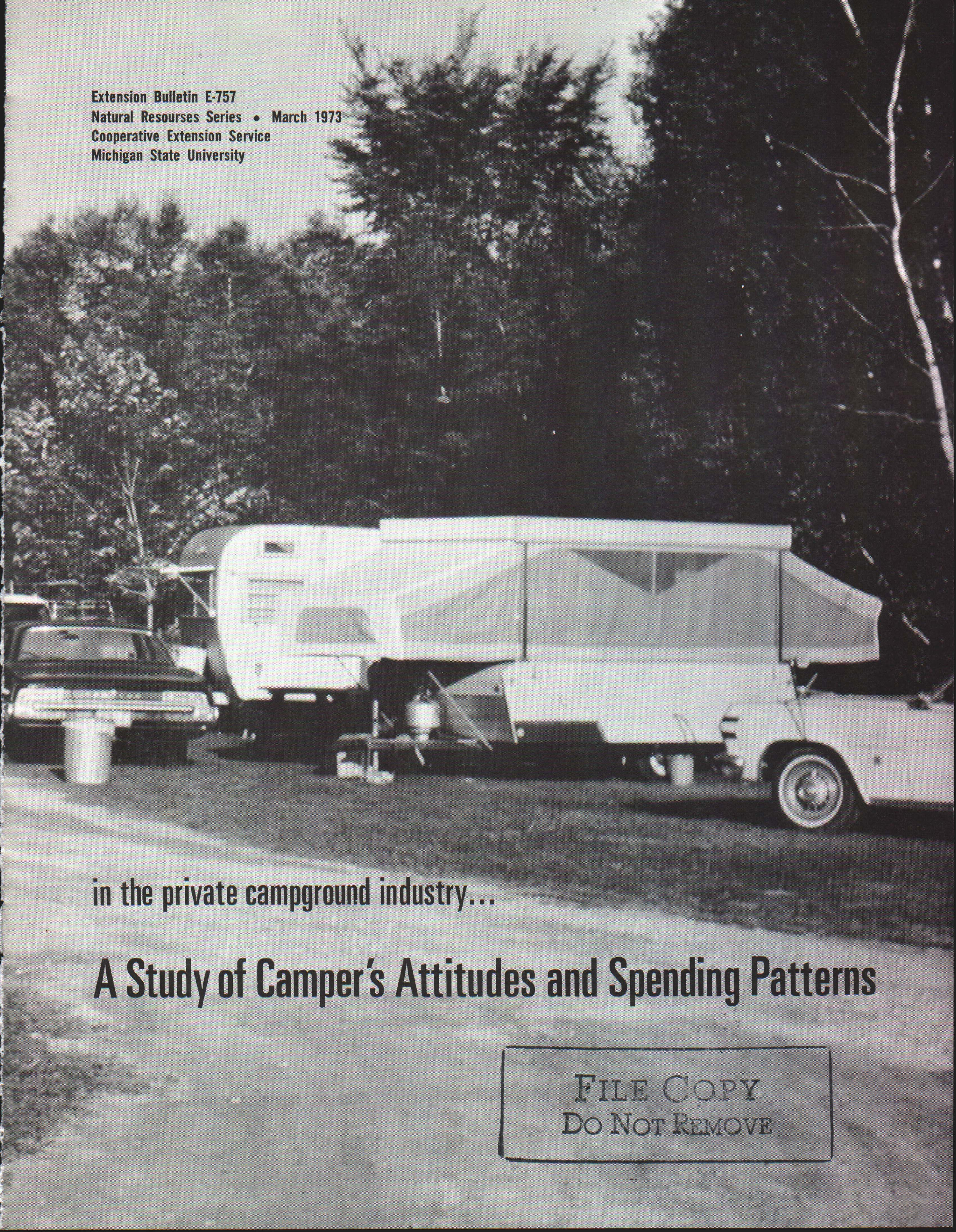

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Presence of water and mature shade trees enhance this Michigan privately owned campground.

Hard-top and fold-down camping vehicles in a heavily used privately owned campground in Michigan.

Family campers in a privately owned Michigan campground enjoy the interview with university researcher.

Variety of camping units with forested background in typical modern campground.

Elsewhere, there have been numerous studies of campground users in both public and privately owned facilities. Most of these studies have been directed toward the social and economic profile and travel patterns of users. Few have been devoted to examination of the basic psychology of why people go camping, although Burch and Wenger[1] have given significant attention to user attitudes in their U.S. Forest Service Research on the Pacific Coast. The NEM-42 Cooperative States Research group investigating the recreation market in the Northeast has also designed research into these factors.

This inquiry into attitudes and habits of campground users in Michigan was designed to provide data on why people go camping and how these people spend their vacation monies. In the process, it was possible to obtain information on what consumers expect and/or prefer in their campground environment.

A total of 1,004 camping families were interviewed over an eight-week period in 100 privately owned campgrounds distributed throughout the state. There were 736 Michigan resident families in the sample, 77 from Ohio, 66 from Indiana, and 29 from Illinois. The remainder were distributed widely throughout the U.S., with 8 from Canada. Within Michigan, there were 504 families coming from the southern half of the lower peninsula. The disproportionate number of Michigan families in the sample is partially explained by the fact that as the interview teams moved from place to place within the state fewer out-of-state campers were available. For example, many campgrounds along the southern boundary are used heavily by out-of-state campers but the interviewers were only in that area for a brief time. Likewise, other data in the sample have shown that the private campground is often used as a near-home commuting camp by Michigan residents. Indeed, there are more privately owned campgrounds in Michigan in those areas easily accessible to the urban population while most of the state and federal camping facilities are located in the more distant, lightly-populated forest and water wonderland areas of the state.

Table 1 is a portrayal of the history of camping by the 1,004 family units responding to the question of "How long ago did you start camping?"

This group of campground users breaks into two halves at about six years of camping history — those who have camped six years or less, and those who have camped more than six years. These results are in keeping with the trend of increase in the number of campground facilities and sales of camping equipment. The extent to which this increase results from newly motivated consumers is a market question which deserves sophisticated research.

Table 1. When 1004 Family Camping Units in Privately Owned Michigan Campgrounds Started Camping.

Year Started	No. of Responses
This year (1972)	100
Last year (1971)	94
2 to 4 years ago	248
5 to 10 years ago	270
11 to 20 years ago	149
More than 20 years ago	140
No Response	3
Total	**1004**

Campers were also asked when they had purchased their camping vehicle. The question was, "when did you buy your present rig?" Table 2 indicates 50% of the respondents purchased their current camping rig in the last two years, and only about 8% made their purchase 6 or more years ago. The data from Tables 1 and 2 show an outstanding correlation between the recent increased interest in camping and investment in vehicles for camping. It poses the interesting question of whether interest in camping has resulted in stimulated production of vehicles, or if sales promotion of vehicles has stimulated the urge to camp.

A total of 542 campers indicated their rigs had been purchased new while 392 purchased their pres-

Table 2. When Present Camping Rigs Were Purchased by Users of Privately Owned Campgrounds.

When Purchased	No. of Responses
This year (1972)	288
Last year (1971)	209
2 years ago (1970)	121
3 to 5 years ago	245
6 to 8 years ago	45
9 or more years ago	31
No Response	65
Total cases	**1004**

[1] Burch, W. R., and Wenger, W. D. Jr., *"The Social Characteristics of Participants in Three Styles of Family Camping,"* U.S. Forest Service Research Paper PNW-48, Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Portland, Oregon, 1967.

Table 3. Previous Rigs Used by Campers in 100 Michigan Privately Owned Campgrounds.

Rank and Type	No. of Responses
1. Tent	222
2. Nothing or borrowed	216
3. Tent trailer	128
4. Small travel trailer	126
5. Trailer (unspecified)	92
6. Rented Equipment (various)	48
7. Pickup campers	31
8. Large travel trailer	19
9. Motor home	14
0. No data	108
Total	**1004**

ent rigs as used equipment. Table 3 indicates the nature or style of rigs owned or used prior to the present rig.

Length of Stay

Campground users were asked how long they would be staying at the campground in which the interview took place. As indicated in Table 4, the two to four week length of stay is the smallest group of users among those interviewed. There is a fairly even distribution of the other three categories. It is uncertain whether the two-week to one-month category differs significantly from the other three categories. If it does represent a valid difference in length of stay by family camping groups, then both campground owners/managers and campground users will benefit from conscious efforts to plan facilities and services to meet the implied need of time-controlled package rentals. Even though this data cannot be assumed to be representative of all users of privately owned Michigan campgrounds for the 1972 season, it is nevertheless noteworthy that only 28% of the campers were in camp for one to three days. The

Table 4. Length of Stay in Campground by Users of Privately Owned Campgrounds in Michigan.

Length of Stay	No. of Responses
Weekend (1 to 3 days)	278
Week (4 to 13 days)	273
Two Weeks to Month (14 to 30 days)	172
More than a month	253
Uncertain responses	28
Total	**1004**

longer stays suggest that users are being satisfied and that "destination" rather than "overnight" traffic typifies the users of privately operated campgrounds in this state.

Camping Days Per Year

The interviewers asked each family unit to estimate the total number of days they spend camping each year. Answers ranged from one day to more than 120 days. The results are shown in Table 5, ranked according to the most common responses. Most fall in those categories between 1 and 60 days. The 85 camping a total of more than 120 days could reflect the trend toward season lease of camping sites. This type of camping is also found in all categories above 40 days.

Table 5. Estimated Total Number of Days of Camping Per Year by Users of Michigan Privately Owned Campgrounds.

Rank	No. of Responses	Camping Days Per Year
1	340	21-40
2	285	41-60
3	214	1-20
4	85	120 or more
5	17	61-80
6	15	101-120
no data	18	
Total	**1004**	

It should not be implied that all these camping days are in Michigan. The importance of these data to campground owners and the equipment industry lies in the fact that more than half of those interviewed spend at least 30 days camping during the year.

Campground Preference

The growth of the privately owned campground industry has apparently offered the camping customer the opportunity to make the choice of using either privately or publicly owned facilities according to a set of perceived needs that are as yet not totally clear. Buist[2] has found in researching both public and private facilities in Michigan (preliminary) that distance to campground, facilities offered, and cleanliness were ranked higher than type of ownership as major reasons for selecting a particular campground.

[2] Buist, Leon J., *"Preliminary Findings of the 1972 Private - Public Campground Study"* (mimeograph) Nov. 18, 1972, Office of Planning Services, Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

Table 6. Private Campground User Preferences for Type of Campground Compared to First Camping Experience.

	Public Campground	Private Campground	No Preference
1st Camping Experience	583	366	—
Present Preference	144	678	162

In the current study, campers were asked which type of campground they had first camped in and which they now camp in most often (Table 6). It should be noted that there were no private campgrounds available when some of the respondents first went camping. However, observers, owners, and researchers are aware that users have an expressed belief that the private owner/manager is interested in the customer (more like a guest-host relationship than a customer-business relationship). Furthermore, family campers tend to make up most of the users of the privately owned campgrounds. There also seems to be a belief held by some that most public campgrounds are very large and massive, and therefore, undesirably crowded. This generalization has no doubt become part of the selection process but the private campground users surveyed did not react in this way. When asked whether they preferred a "small" or a "large" campground, 396 indicated "small"; 51 "large". However, "no preference" responses exceeded the total of all others by the sizable margin of 545 to 447. This evidence supports the theory that what is offered within the campground is more important to the user than number of sites or acres.

Reaction to Current Fees

Opinions about the levels of fees in private campgrounds were obtained to determine whether users feel the relationship between facilities and fees is fair. The question was worded to reflect the perception of fees and services (Given the kind of things you look for in a campground, what do you think about the levels of present camping fees?"). Table 7 ranks the responses after grouping the initial reactions into three categories of prices: low, reasonable, and high. This suggests that most of those sampled are receiving the kind and quality of facilities and services they desire at prices they are willing to pay. The data does not suggest that fees could be raised without losing some of the present customers. Typically, price increases mean the loss of some campers, and their replacement by new users.

Table 7. User Opinions of Price Levels in Michigan Privately Owned Campgrounds.

Rank and Description of Prices	No. of Responses
1. Reasonable, fair, all right	795
2. High	177
3. Low	8
0. No Response	24
Total	**1004**

Needs in the Camping Experience

The camping experience fulfills a variety of personal and family group needs. Satisfaction of these needs provides opportunities for the campground owner. Since most users of privately owned campground enterprises are family units, a variety of experiences are needed for the different ages within the camping unit (dad, mom, son and daughter like to do some things together and other things separately). Furthermore, their satisfaction with the camping experience is not complete unless they have had opportunity to fulfill these different psychological needs.

There is a general tendency to associate the camping experience with the need to fulfill a back-to-nature or an outdoors psyche of some sort. This general belief has led to some successful efforts to simulate nature and the "great outdoors" in some campgrounds. However, the data in Tables 8, 9 and 10 suggest that private campgrounds of the future may well be designed to replace the nature idea with other features that will be equally as attractive for some segments of the camping public.

Table 8 shows outdoor experience is not as important to adult campers as escape and freedom from back home schedules and commitments. There is further evidence that the urge for relaxation is a primary one, which the campground can provide. The low frequency of responses to family experience and togetherness are surprising.

A tentative explanation for the low ranking of outdoor experience is that these kinds of experiences are

Table 8. Rank Ordering of Adult Responses to the Question "Why Do You Go Camping?".

Rank and Reason	No. of Responses
1. Escape and Freedom	399
2. Relaxation, peace & quiet	286
3. Outdoor experience	143
4. Change of pace	70
5. Family experience, togetherness	69
0. No Response	37
Total	**1004**

Table 9. Adult Responses to the Question "If Someone Who Has Never Camped Asked You What is So Good About Camping, What Would Your Answer Be?"

Rank and Reason	No. of Responses
1. Escape and Freedom	208
2. Relaxation, peace & quiet	201
3. Outdoor experience	120
4. Change of pace	84
5. Family experience, togetherness	47
0. No Response	344
Total	**660**

available outside camping or on noncamping vacations. The consistency of these responses is supported by Table 9. It ranks responses to the question of what respondents would tell others who had never camped before as reasons to go camping. The rankings in Table 9 are the same as in Table 8 and there is little relative difference in the number of responses to each reason. The questions were open ended with categories of responses separated after the field research was done.

The two previous questions were asked in separate areas of the interview, as was the next question.

An attempt was made to determine whether adult campers in privately owned campgrounds see different reasons for children to go camping than for adults. There is a decided difference in rankings (Table 10) and a significant new reason (opportunity to develop skills and independence). This ranking fits more closely the generally assumed purposes of camping for the total public, that is, a combination of the desirable aspects of outdoor experiences and family togetherness.

Table 10. Adult Responses to the Question, "What is There About Camping That is Good for Kids?"

Rank and Reason	No. of Responses
1. Outdoor experience	318
2. Escape and Freedom	173
3. Skill and independence	172
4. Family experience and togetherness	134
5. Change of pace	34
6. Relaxation, peace & quiet	25
0. No Response	148
Total	**856**

This suggests that the private campground sector should change their emphasis from back-to-nature camping opportunities to some new meaningful opportunities for adults while maintaining an opportunity for "kids" to learn and experience about nature. At the same time, there should probably be less, not more, forcing of social activities among adult campers, and perhaps less investment in facilities designed to force a community spirit among adults in the campground. Instead of having forced activity schedules, the wise campground owner will attempt to allow maximum opportunity for his customers to make their choices freely among a large variety of activities or social "neighboring" events. In other words, make it possible to do "get acquainted" things, but don't impound campers with a formal, forced schedule that makes them feel guilty if they don't participate.

Without attempting to exhaust possible opportunities for changes in direction, one new design suggestion in private campgrounds is rather obvious: rather than trying to imitate a faraway woods, waters, and forest scene within the campground at considerable expense, design a well-landscaped, turfed, campground with flowering plants and trees, neat water impoundments and attractive, but modest, buildings. Such a facility could incorporate sufficient nature elements for children and a real and fulfilling replacement for the outdoor and back-to-nature concepts for adults.

It should be noted that 51% of the 1,243 persons interviewed in the 1972 private-public campground study by Buist[3] felt that there are opportunities to study nature in public campgrounds, while only 5% felt private campgrounds have this facility. Thus, the general public believes there is a correlation between publicly (state) developed campgrounds and nature appreciation. Both the Buist study and the MSU study of campground users show that most campers use both public and private facilities, suggesting that they perceive a difference in what is offered. Recognition of this fact could lead to an ideal statewide system of rustic campgrounds, provided by the public sector, and modern convenience campgrounds, provided by the private sector.

The Camping Urge

An attempt was made to determine what stimulates the camping urge. Campground users were given several factors and asked whether each played a major, minor or no role at all in their decision to become campers. Unlike the open-ended questions previously referred to, users were asked to respond with one of

[3] See footnote 2, P. 3.

Table 11. Relative Influence of Five Factors Upon the Decision to Become a Camper, as Reported by Private Campground Users in Michigan.

	Influence		
Stated Factor	Major	Minor	None
Your childhood camping experience	202	195	458
Opportunity to take children camping	321	206	304
Outdoor life and nature	692	222	77
Escape from pressures	688	200	107
Friends and relatives go camping	143	210	628

three answers (major, minor, none). The data (Table 11) indicate that outdoor life and natural surroundings, rank differently when suggested than when users were asked why they go camping (Tables 8, 9). Responses to the questions: "Why do you go camping?" and "Is nature and outdoor life a major reason that you go camping?" are quite different. This suggests the need to refine the research of these factors under a variety of designs and conditions.

Most prominent among other major influences is the repetition of escape from the pressures back home. This item must not be overlooked by those who provide camping facilities. It stands as a powerful argument against forced organization of schedules and social events for grownups, and for maximum freedom of choice.

The lack of influence of friends and relatives as motivators was unexpected. Perhaps this influence would be greater among club campers (about two thirds of the users questioned were neither camping-club nor group campers). Among this sample, however, 62% indicated that friends and relatives played no role at all in their decision to become campers. In the larger population of all campers, one could expect a greater influence by friends and relatives, due to the club and caravan phenomena.

It was also expected that childhood camping experiences would have a greater influence upon the camping urge. Opportunity to take children camping was rated only slightly higher as an influence.

When asked with whom they discuss their camping experiences, neighbors and friends ranked highest by the same adult campground users (Table 12). Those to whom they talked most were ranked highest at the one extreme and those with whom they discussed camping trips least were ranked lowest. Table 12 shows again that club memberships have a relatively low influence upon users of privately owned campgrounds. It should be recognized however, that there were not sufficient group camping units for fair comparison.

Table 12. Ranking of Responses From Adult Private Campground Users in Michigan to the Question "With Whom Do You Talk Most About Your Camping Trips?"

	Ranking			
Types of Persons or Groups	1	2	3	Total
Neighbors and friends	492	185	109	786
Family and relatives	480	191	100	771
People at work	279	115	159	553
Travel / club members	80	25	20	125

Table 13. Persons From Whom Private Campground Users Sought Advice About Camping Rigs and Equipment Before Purchase.

Persons Sought Advice From	No. of Responses
Salesman	46
Relative who camps	125
Someone you know (non-relative) who camps	281
All of these	36
None of these, we decided by ourselves	505
No Response	11
Total	**1004**

Table 13 suggests that selection of the camping rig and equipment was done largely by the campers themselves. Interestingly, campers do not give much credit to the salesman, although his function and effectiveness are implied in each of the other categories. Both the advertiser of camping equipment and the campground owner should understand the impact of the quality brochure and advertisement in helping the user come to his own decision about purchases. The combination of relative and nonrelative who camp represent about 40% of the response by this sample and should not be overlooked in promotion. This data lends support to the adage that a satisfied customer is a prime source of advertising.

Only 33% of the sample indicated they would do less camping if their income were to double. While it might be expected that increased income would not result in more camping, these data indicate more than half of the families interviewed would camp about the same amount of time while at least 43% would do more camping than with their present income (Table 14). This is not sufficient evidence that

Table 14. Responses of Users in Michigan Privately Owned Campgrounds to the Question "Would You Do More Camping or Less Camping if Your Income Were Doubled?".

Amount of Camping	No. of Responses
Would do less camping	33
Would camp about same amount	526
Would camp more	431
No Response	14
Total	**1004**

they would in fact do the same or more camping with doubled income. It does support the contention that the interest in camping is a firm trait as presently perceived by these campers. It is also related to their perception of how long they expect to be campers. Table 15 indicates that many present day campers do not foresee an end to their camping activity, but expect to continue long into the future. These two responses — as much or more camping with doubled income and plans to camp well into the future are indicators of the strength of the psychological reasons that stimulate the practicing camper.

This examination of psychological reasons behind the camping urge points out the importance of understanding these basic motivators. Greater clarification of these motivators will serve both the campground consumer and the operator of the facility. Better understanding of what activates the basic camping urge will make it possible to provide the goods and services that will satisfy the consuming public. Greater clarification of these factors, will allow the owner and manager to concentrate on providing those things that satisfy the customer and reduce investment in unimportant or uncertain facilities.

Spending by Campground Users

The way in which camping families spend time and money differently in the campground environment is a topic of growing interest. Do spending habits follow a strict budget allowance or do they more closely resemble impulse buying? These would be two obvious extremes. It is probable that users of privately owned campgrounds cannot be positively identified at either extreme but rather fall somewhere in-between. There is evidence, however, that campers tend toward impulse buying. Once one decides to become a camper, certain kinds of purchases are made to stamp one as a "real" camper. The initial step, however, is taken only after deliberate consideration of whether to make the investment to become campers.

Users were asked how they plan their campground spending. Data in Table 16 show that most of the campers do not bind themselves to a general or set budget, but rather have an open budget. Most of those who had no planned budget insisted they were not spending thoughtlessly, but felt they owed themselves the opportunity to spend for enjoyment and satisfaction as long as such purchases were not extremely unwarranted. This suggests that they invoke a form of monetary stewardship that is within reason for their available capital and desires and expectations regarding the camping experience.

Table 15. Responses of Users of Privately Operated Campgrounds in Michigan to the Question "How Many Years Do You Think You Will Keep on Camping?"

Length of Time Expect to Camp		No. of Responses
0 to 5 years		21
6 to 10 years		29
11 to 20 years		15
More than 20 years	(19)	
long, forever, till I die	(474)	
Indefinitely, many years	(374)	867
No Response		72
Total		**1004**

Table 16. How Campground Users in Privately Owned Michigan Campgrounds Plan Their Spending.

Rank and Method of Budgeting	No. of Responses
1. No planned budget, spend within reason for what we want	712
2. General plan on how much to spend	139
3. Plan ahead how much to spend	105
4. Daily spending limit for family	28
5. Each member has allowance	6
No Response	14
Total	**1004**

Respondents were asked to categorize the family income in order to relate this factor to the use of budgeting and spending patterns. Family income is made up of two sources in this analyses: the income of the first breadwinner and the income of any second breadwinner in the same family. There were 212 full-time and 99 part-time second breadwinners. The range of family incomes based upon first and second breadwinners is shown in Table 17. Two thirds of the responses fall into the $10,000 to $20,000 income brackets, identifying them as middle income units.

Another indicator of spending habits among the family camping units is derived from the kind of attached equipment on the camping rig. In Table 18,

Table 17. Family Incomes Among Users of Michigan Privately Owned Campgrounds.

Income Range	No. of Responses
Less than $10,000	272
$10,000 to $15,000	444
$15,000 to $20,000	196
$20,000 to $30,000*	44
$30,000 to $40,000*	3
$40,000 or more	1
No Response	44
Total	**1004**

* Note that the range for these two categories is $10,000

Table 18. Equipment Included in Camping Rigs of Users of Privately Owned Campgrounds in Michigan.

Equipment	No. of Responses
Gas or other cooking range	849
Heater — built in	801
Refrigerator	793
Fresh water hookup	761
Toilet	605
Air conditioner	70

Table 19. Categories of Cost Estimations for Rigs by Users in Privately Owned Campgrounds in Michigan.

Cost Estimate	No. of Responses
Less than $1,000	245
$1,000 to $1,500	128
$1,500 to $2,000	127
$2,000 to $2,500	72
$2,500 to $3,000	65
$3,000 to $4,000*	128
$4,000 to $7,000*	144
$7,000 to $10,000*	8
More than $10,000*	5
Unknown	82
Total	**1004**

* Note increases in the cost ranges in these categories

it can be seen that most of the rigs are rather fully equipped with home conveniences. A total of 762 of these pieces of equipment were on the rigs when purchased; 55 rigs were partially equipped at purchase time and 81 had added the items reported after the initial purchase of the rig. Table 2 shows that half of these rigs had been purchased since 1971.

The investment made in the equipped rigs gives another measure of the spending patterns of campground users. Data in Table 19 show that the purchase cost of one-half of the rigs was in the price range of $2,000 or less, but almost one-third were in the $3,000 to $7,000 range. In addition to these estimated costs, campers revealed what they had spent for

Table 20. Estimated Investments in Non-rig Camping Equipment by Users of Privately Owned Campgrounds in Michigan.

Amount Invested	No. of Responses
$100.00	297
$200.00	226
$300.00	139
$400.00	46
$500.00	77
$600.00	21
More than $600.00	106
Unknown	92
Total	**1004**

Table 21. Campers Opinions of Relative Costs of Meals in Camp and at Home, Michigan Privately Owned Campgrounds.

Relative Cost	No. of Responses
Less in camp than at home	182
More in camp than at home	247
Same in camp as at home	563
No answer	12
Total	**1004**

camping-related equipment which was not attached to the rig. Most camping families spend less than $400.00 for additional equipment, like sleeping bags, extra awnings, cooking utensils, etc. (Table 20). When asked to speculate about their next camping rig, 371 campers indicated they would purchase a new rig about the same as their present one while 405 said they would have more modern conveniences on their next rig.

The amount spent on food and meals provides another measure of the spending habits of campers. An attempt was made to relate costs of meals while camping with cost of meals at home. More than half of those responding said there was not any particular difference (Table 21). However, 579 family units reported that they sometimes eat in restaurants while at the campground. The frequency of these meals is given in Table 22.

Table 23 gives an indication of the amount of money usually spent on these out-of-camp meals. These are considered to be a part of the experience of camping or vacationing by the users of private campgrounds since there is a particular effort to make this a family type outing. Campground users in this sample also tend to take an appreciable food supply from home. Approximately one-half take about a three day food supply. Expenditures on non-food purchases while in camp range from nothing to $4.00 by half of those in the sample.

Table 22. Frequency of Restaurant Meals by Michigan Private Campground Users as Part of the Camping Experience.

No. of Restaurant Meals Per Week	No. of Responses
One	238
Two	142
Three	82
Four	22
Five	17
Six	7
Seven	41
More than seven	8
None	404
Unknown	43
Total	**1004**

Table 23. Estimated Cost of Out of Camp Meals by Campers in Privately Owned Campgrounds in Michigan.

Estimated Meal Cost	No. of Responses
$3.00	57
$4.00	69
$5.00	91
$6.00	80
$7.00	46
$8.00	59
$9.00	25
$10.00 or more	187
Total	**614**

Summary Points

1. A significant percentage of the camping families interviewed have become campers within the last six years.
2. A significant number of these camping families purchased their camping rigs during the past 2 years.
3. Campers in this sample look forward to many years of camping and expect to purchase equipment with increasingly modernized vehicles.
4. Camping families in this study expect quality in the campground they choose and believe that fees are in keeping with quality.
5. Escape from schedule and other pressures and opportunity to relax are primary reasons for adults to camp but they feel that nature and the outdoors is an important reason for their children to go camping.
6. Families in this study feel they would increase their camping experiences if their income were to double.
7. Most camping families do not establish a rigid camping budget but rather feel they should spend (within reason) an amount necessary to have a good time while camping.
8. Camping families in this sample also go on non-camping vacations, that is, camping is not their only means of recreation and leisure travel.

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