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Risk Management Realized: The Case of the National Mall and Memorial Parks 2007 Independence Day Celebration

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to present an analysis of the effectiveness of the checkpoint and safe haven system developed by the NPS, which was put to the test during the 2007 event. The open park space used for festival activities, combined with a severe lightening storm that occurred, created a life threatening situation that mandated complete evacuation of the National Mall. Therefore, as part of a larger study, researchers were able to provide detailed documentation regarding how well NPS facilities and services met the crisis challenge that emerged at the 2007 National Independence Day Celebration. Overall, the study found that the NPS evacuation plan worked effectively. The designated shelters utilized existing facilities near the festival area. These safe havens were accessible and comfortable. Further, the emergency headquarters area was well organized and included representatives from key organizations. Despite the overall success of the risk management plan, weaknesses were detected. Communication after the initial evacuation was extremely poor. While most visitors took the waiting period in stride, there were a number who exhibited frustration due to a complete lack of weather updates as well as an unknown plan of action for the remaining event. A structured means of providing ongoing information with the public during an evacuation waiting period is essential so that visitors can make informed decisions regarding whether to stay or leave. Managers of outdoor festivals around the globe are subject to the precarious temperament of Mother Nature. Much can be learned from analyzing large-scale events, where both the points of success and the areas in need of improvement can be applied to festivals of any scope.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism-based events are subject to a myriad of risks that planners must anticipate and subsequently mitigate in order to protect both people and assets. For a large scale festival held in an open space, weather conditions present a particular challenge (Jones, Scott & Khaled, 2006). In a study regarding thirty attributes that lead to festival failure, weather was perceived as the second most likely contributing factor, following lack of corporate sponsorship (Getz, 2002). The unpredictability of weather coupled with recent trends in climate change and global warming make management control particularly challenging. Accordingly, contingency planning becomes pivotal in festival management in order to set up advance decisions that can be used to address complex emergent situations (Glaesser, 2006).

The National Mall and Memorial Parks (National Mall), a unit of the United States National Park Service (NPS), is comprised of over 1,000 acres of parkland in Washington DC, where the equivalent of 14,000 event days are held on an annual basis (NPS, 2007; 2008). One of the largest of these events is the National Independence Day Celebration. This one-day event is held in conjunction with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, includes a variety of activities such as the National Independence Day Parade and the PBS broadcasted Fourth of July Concert, and culminates with a massive fireworks display. While government regulations prohibit event planners from taking headcounts on the National Mall, ad-hoc evidence suggests that the National Independence Day Celebration draws between 500,000 and 1 million revelers annually. Thus, the level and intensity of visitation places extreme demands on the National Mall's infrastructure, management, and services. Further, the National Independence Day Celebration presents unique security demands, as the parklands are surrounded by historic monuments, memorials and federal administrative buildings. Accordingly, the presence of security checkpoints and the establishment of elaborate contingency plans for risk management are a necessary part of the planning process.

The purpose of this study is to present an analysis of the effectiveness of the checkpoint and safe haven system developed by the NPS, which was put to the test during the 2007 event. The open park space used for festival activities, combined with a severe lightening storm that occurred, created a life threatening situation that mandated complete evacuation of the National Mall. Therefore, as part of a larger study, researchers were able to provide detailed documentation regarding how well NPS facilities and services met the crisis challenge that emerged at the 2007 National Independence Day Celebration.

METHODS

Using a participant observation approach, systematic data collection occurred in two major time periods, broken into four shifts, on July 4, 2007. Six researchers were present from 10:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. and then a new team of six researchers was on site from 4:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. Four data collection zones were defined, each of which had a minimum of one dedicated researcher who would systematically record observations. After a 3-hour shift, researchers would switch places and collect data in a different zone for another 3 hours. All members of the research team wore NPS volunteer hats and badges. Data collection was purely observational and no attempt was made to interact with the festival visitors. Relevant visitor

comments that were overheard were documented, but no interaction took place and no requests for information were made.

The data collection instrument was constructed with considerable input from NPS staff. The instrument facilitated an "observation trail" approach that reflected the sampling area. The instrument included a checklist and comment form that allowed for systematic assessments of checkpoints, information transmission and public safety. Additional services (e.g., food/beverage service, restrooms, etc.) were documented, but are not being considered for the current study.

The sampling area was identified and mapped based on subzone information provided by the NPS. Based on the layout of the National Mall and surrounding areas, these subzones were categorized into four data collection zones, moving from east to west across the National Mall. The two maps at the end of this abstract illustrate the layout. The first map includes the zones and notations of the checkpoints that were observed for the study (Figure 1) while the second includes the subzones (Figure 2). Zone 1 comprised the east end of the National Mall from 3rd Street to 7th Street. Subzones L, M and N were contained in this area. Zone 2 encompassed the west end of the National Mall from 7th Street to 14th Street. Subzones O, P and Q were contained in this area. Zones 1 and 2 also included Folklife Festival activities. Zone 3 included the Washington Monument and the surrounding vicinity. Subzones R, S, T, U-1, U-2, V, W-1, W-2, X-1 and X-2 were contained in this area. Zone 4 housed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Korean War Veterans Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial and the surrounding vicinity. Subzones GG-1, GG-2, II, JJ-1, JJ-2, JJ-4 and 00-3 were contained in this area. The area encompassing the World War II Memorial, Constitution Gardens, and Reflecting Pool enclosed the ignition area for fireworks and associated safety zone where visitors were not permitted and therefore was not considered for data collection.

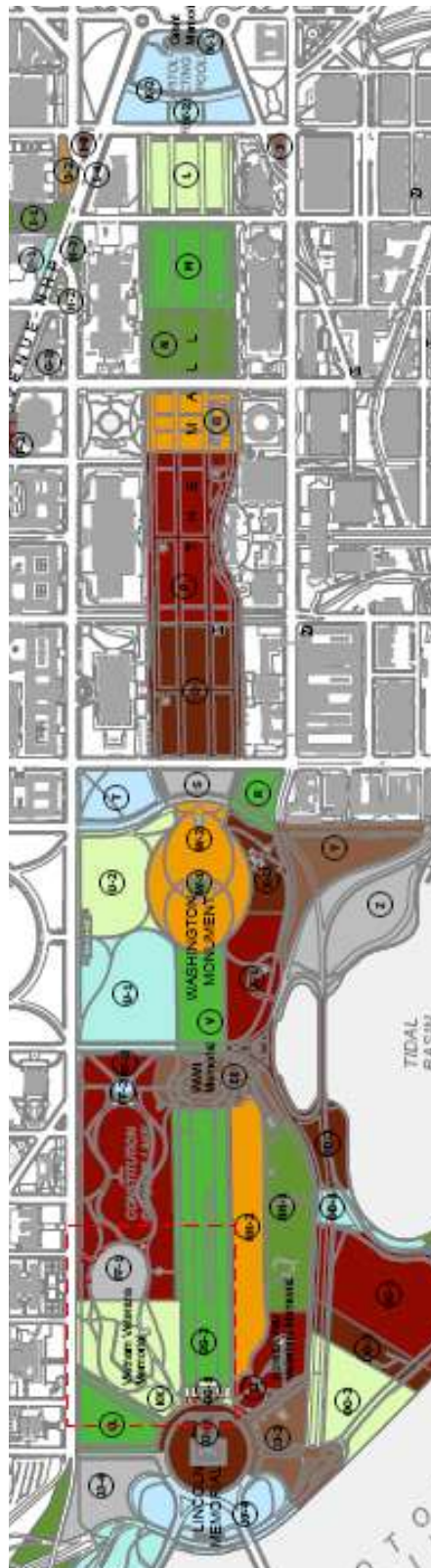


Figure 4. Subzones

FINDINGS

At approximately 5:10 p.m. public announcements regarding a National Weather Service advisory for severe thunderstorms began. This statement was followed by information pertaining to a mandatory evacuation and the location of “safe havens.” However, as there was no central announcement system for the entire National Mall area, police officers were dispatched by car, bike and on foot to quickly spread the message by loudspeaker for those not in the immediate proximity of one of the several public address systems. Visitors were sent to the nearest museums (e.g., Smithsonian Museum of Art), monuments (e.g., Washington Monument), or federal buildings (e.g., US Department of Commerce) that were pre-designated as safe haven shelters. Because visitors could only exit from security checkpoints, the police officers, firefighters, and security guards facilitating movement were able to answer questions and guide people to the nearest shelter. By 5:45 p.m., the entire festival area was evacuated.

During the evacuation period, visitors were given access to exhibits and displays in safe havens where such diversions were available (i.e., museums). Visitors were not required to stay in the safe havens; however, most remained based on the anticipation that the fireworks display would still take place. No update was given until the National Mall was reopened at 7:00 p.m. When the festival area reopened, visitors were required to go through the checkpoints again. Although reentry lines were long, the process was facilitated by the removal of several barricades that allowed many of the checkpoints to be widened. The surge led to inconsistencies in processing, however, as it was noted that at some checkpoints the rigorous standards documented earlier in the day were being enforced while officials at other checkpoints were simply waving visitors into the festival area during the post-evacuation reentry period. At one checkpoint, when lax reentry oversight was detected by a lead official, security guards were sent out to recall as many of these visitors as possible, who had to wait in line yet again. This resulted in a significant amount of irritation and complaint.

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

With heightened awareness of catastrophic events such as terrorist attacks and natural disasters, there is an increasing sensitivity regarding risk management and contingency planning for large tourism-based events. As the case study of the 2007 National Independence Day Celebration illustrates, having a structured plan of action to address the possibility of inclement weather is an essential part of ensuring visitor safety.

Overall, the NPS evacuation plan worked effectively. The designated shelters utilized existing facilities near the festival area. These safe havens were accessible and comfortable. Further, the emergency headquarters area was well organized and included representatives from key organizations such as the National Weather Service, DC Police, NPS Police, Smithsonian Museums and additional emergency services. Once the evacuation was deemed necessary, the rapid communication of essential information allowed for a timely and orderly evacuation.

Despite the overall success of the risk management plan, weaknesses were detected. Communication after the initial evacuation was extremely poor. While most visitors took the waiting period in stride, there were a number who exhibited frustration due to a complete lack of weather updates as well as an unknown plan of action for the remaining event. A structured means of providing ongoing information with the public during an evacuation waiting period is

essential so that visitors can make informed decisions regarding whether to stay or leave. This waiting period plan must be communicated among all levels of security personnel to avoid inconsistency and confusion when the reopening and reentry occur. Further, when reentry takes place, safety standards should not be compromised in the interest of efficiency.

CONCLUSION

Managers of outdoor festivals around the globe are subject to the precarious temperament of Mother Nature. Much can be learned from analyzing large-scale events, where both the points of success and the areas in need of improvement can be applied to festivals of any scope. While just one of many significant risks to be accounted for, inclement weather is perhaps the most likely to be realized.

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