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Vermilion Lakes Visitor Survey: Asking First Saves Regrets

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The case of the Vermilion Lakes Survey is a prime example of how social science research can be indispensable for effective and proactive decision making. It demonstrates how this research can provide improved direction for allocation or reallocation of resources. It indicates that visitor needs are not always apparent to managers unless we ask the visitor. The Vermilion Lakes Study also shows that visitor surveys should not be regarded as another barrier to making decisions, but rather should be considered tools which are complimentary to the decision making process.

The Vermilion Lakes Wetland area in Banff National Park is located northwest and immediately adjacent to the town of Banff. Its north side is bordered by the TransCanada Highway, while the Cana-

dian Pacific Railway mainline runs along its southern border. The area focuses around three small lakes with interconnecting drainages. The land base is mostly wetland in nature. In recognition of its biological and archaeological importance, the area was designated an Environmentally Sensitive Site in the Banff Park Management Plan.

The Banff Park Management Plan guided the preparation of an area plan for Vermilion Lakes, completed in April, 1990. One of the area plan's main components involves giving direction to development and redevelopment of the area's interpretive and recreational amenities. Three key plan objectives stem from this component: first, to promote awareness and education regarding wetland environments; second, to promote the area as an

opportunity for a relaxation/getaway type of experience in a natural setting close to the town of Banff; and third, to encourage and increase pedestrian and bicycle use of the area as opposed to additional vehicle use.

The Vermilion Lakes survey of July and August, 1992, focused on five areas: development issues, management issues, accessibility, learning preferences, visitor trip information, transportation, and visitor demographics. Visitor reaction to the proposed resurfacing of Vermilion Lakes Drive, as measured by this study, allowed management to redirect funds from paving the road in this delicate wetland area to other priority projects. The level of support visitors gave short term closures

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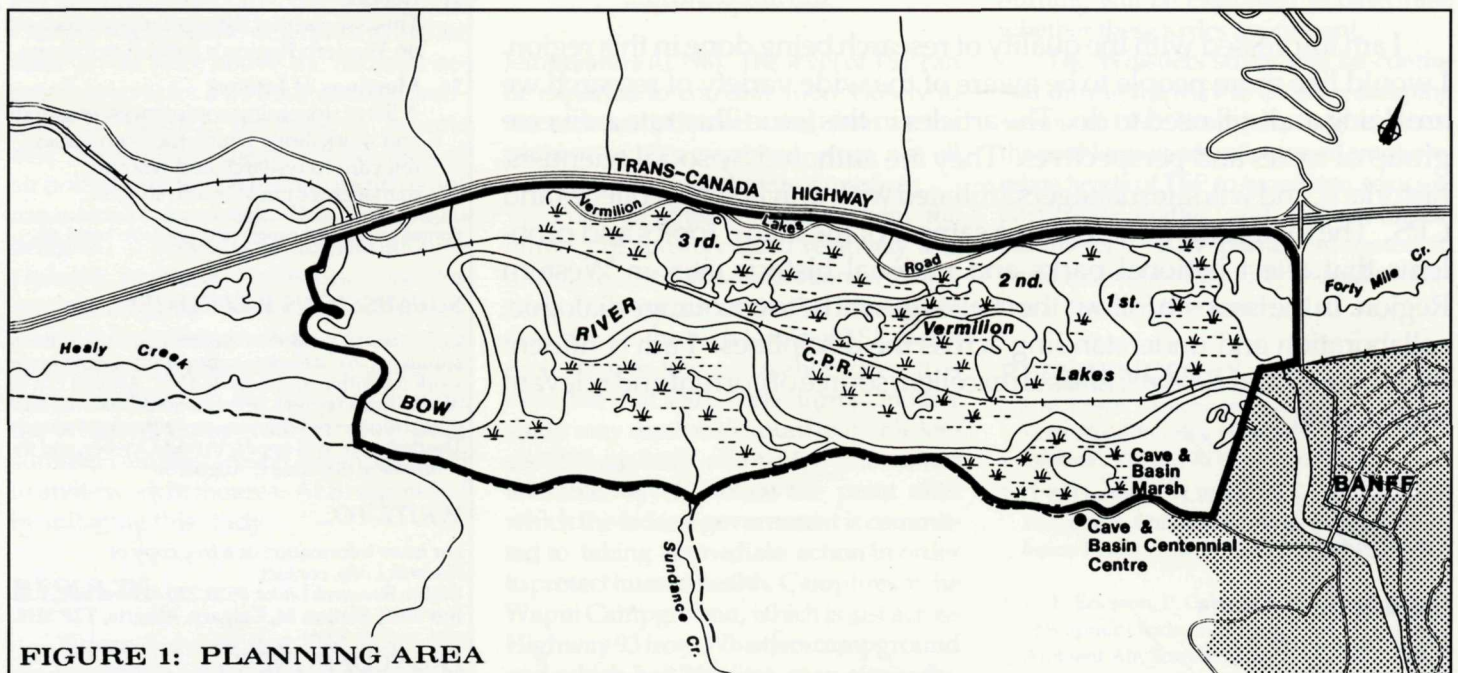


FIGURE 1: PLANNING AREA

Figure 1: Vermilion Lakes planning area. Planners in Banff National Park used a visitor survey as one tool in deciding whether to pave the road running through this delicate wetland area.