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# NEWS RELEASE

## **Valles Caldera Visitation Tops 97,000 in 2011**

### **Visitation Undercounted in Years Past**

**Jemez Springs, NM-** “We always suspected more people were visiting the Preserve. We just didn’t have a better method for quantifying the exact number.”

That frustration articulated by Recreation Program Manager Rob Dixon has been shared by many Valles Caldera Trust employees past and present.

Valles Caldera Trust Management also harbored the concern that an accurate number of current visitors was not only necessary for day to day management of the Preserve but also to establish a baseline for public access and use planning. Preparing for growth from a base number of almost 25,000 visitors is far different from planning for a count which approaches six figures. It was that uncertainty and the absolute need to know that led to investment in a visitor traffic count project.

“In previous years we manually counted visitors to the information centers and used a voluntary sign in sheet for our free trails.” said Dixon. “In 2011 we purchased and installed traffic and trail counters that logged visitation at ten areas in and around the Preserve including several areas where visitation occurs but was not previously counted.”

Dixon enlisted the skills of the Trust's Dr. Tim Haarmann to manage the project. Haarmann called on the National Park Service Public Use Statistics Office to help design a VCNP specific counting program. The office manages the collection, auditing and analysis of monthly visitation data provided by individual NPS units. Since each park is unique a specific counting program is designed for each. NPS statistician Butch Street helped design the VCNP program and provided tips on eliminating counting errors and misinterpretations, and guidance in final data analysis.

“We wanted to design a visitor counting system that is consistent with those of other public land agencies” noted Haarmann. “As a result the system provides a reasonable comparison of visitor counts with other public lands and will ultimately allow a better analysis of visitation patterns in years to come.”

The raw data were analyzed and adjusted to account for Las Conchas Fire personnel, employee activity and double counting. For statistical purposes the Preserve was considered closed and all visitation numbers were omitted from June 27-July 13 period of the fire. Of particular note is the 160,000+ visitors to the two N.M. Highway 4 overlook pullouts who were not included in the final visitor count.

“We wanted to be consistent with NPS procedure which does not count pullout visitation on public roads it does not maintain,” explained Haarmann. “While we are certain vehicles stopped at the two interpretive pullouts to enjoy the view of the Caldera and read the posted information, we did not perform the surveys to quantify how many stopped to have lunch, switch drivers or take a nap. But the numbers are still very valuable for planning purposes.”

Despite the exclusion of the pullout data and the impacts from the Las Conchas Fire the results are startling. The number of visitors to the VCNP during Fiscal Year 2011 is reasonably estimated to be 97,552 which is almost four times (4x) the official visitor count of FY 2010 using the former, manual method.

“The numbers confirm what we have known for a long time; that thousands upon thousands of people visit the Preserve and most enjoy it without spending a dime,” said Dixon.

The counters remain deployed and Haarmann continues to collect the data. Haarmann says some adjustments will be made to refine the collection process and include other areas not monitored last year. Another year of data to compare with 2011 will provide an even clearer picture of visitation and trends moving forward.

Dr. Haarmann's full report is posted on the Valles Caldera Trust website at <http://www.vallescaldera.gov/about/trust/docs/VCNPVisitorCountReport.pdf>

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