

# VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK RECREATIONAL USE ASSESSMENT

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## OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of the Recreational Use Assessment is to determine the extent to which proposed uses at Virginia Key Beach Park meet or do not meet present and anticipated future recreational demand. Information has been gathered from a variety of sources including Miami Dade County Parks and Recreation staff and research as well as other sources cited in the assessment.

## I. INFLUENCES ON USE LEVELS

Beach utilization is influenced by six main factors: 1) custom, 2) service area or location, 3) season, 4) type of facilities and activities available, 5) design and operation of facilities and 6) access. Miami Dade County beaches provide relevant comparisons for Virginia Key Beach Park. Of particular relevance is Crandon Beach Park, which has the same service area as Virginia Key and offers similar activities and features.

### **Custom**

Beach users in Miami Dade County tend to show a preference for a particular beach park or area of a beach based on custom. A typical user profile for the five most popular county beaches prepared by the County Parks Department showed a tendency for beach users of similar ethnic background and age to frequent the same beach. While this utilization pattern is influenced by the ethnic make up of the service area closest to the beach, as discussed further under "Proximity," this pattern is also influenced by the custom of using a beach where a level of cultural comfort exists. Haulover and Crandon attract a high proportion of teens and young singles. Other county beaches, including Miami Beach, Bill Baggs, Matheson Hammock and Homestead Bayfront Park attract a higher proportion of young families and older users. Teens and young singles use beach facilities differently than families, showing a higher preference than families for some activities such as large gatherings and loud music. Similarly, beach users of different ethnicity show preferences for different activities. Hispanics show a preference for family group gatherings lasting a half day. African Americans show a preference for all-day, large group gatherings.

### **Proximity**

A Miami Dade County study of beach preferences conducted in 1986 indicated that utilization of the five most popular county beaches reflects their location in the county, both in terms of total number of users and in the typical profile of the users. Census data indicates that the population of the county has remained relatively stable in terms of density and ethnic make up, which suggests that utilization patterns have remained the same in the intervening years.

Haulover Beach, located in the northeastern part of the county, attracts users from the county's northeast and northcentral neighborhoods. Neighborhoods in this part of the county have a large proportion of African American residents and this is reflected in the user profile of Haulover Beach, which has the largest utilization among African Americans. Crandon Beach is located in the central-eastern part of the county and attracts users from

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the central and western neighborhoods, where the relatively large proportion of Hispanic residents are reflected in the user profile of the beach. Crandon, however, attracts a broad spectrum of users of all ethnicities.

## **Season**

Miami Dade County Parks and Recreation Department records indicate that beach utilization in Miami Dade County follows a seasonal pattern that reflects tourist visitation. At Haulover Beach, attendance is highest during the summer season and on weekends. Crandon Beach shows a more seasonal pattern of utilization, with peak attendance during the Thanksgiving to January holiday period and the April-May Spring Break period. Both parks experience higher utilization on weekends and the lowest utilization during the October-Thanksgiving period. Crandon Beach attracts a larger number of seasonal tourists and one-time users as a result of its proximity to other tourist destinations such as Seaquarium. The Crandon Beach service area is the same as that of Virginia Key and therefore attendance figures provide a good indicator for demand for activities at Virginia Key.

Cyclical attendance patterns can influence use levels in a variety of ways. A stable attendance level is needed to support any kind of concession. The quality of concession offerings is affected by the quality of the business opportunity. Uneven concession quality can in turn influence perceptions about the beach experience and reduce the overall appeal of the beach, lowering use levels. Heavy concentrations of users can also leave an impression that facilities in general are inadequate and reduce repeat visits. Seasonal or event related crowding can pose maintenance challenges that also influence beach use levels by turning off first time users.

## **Type of Facilities and Activities**

Use of county beaches by residents and visitors is highly influenced by the quality and type of activities and facilities. According to Miami Dade County Parks and Recreation Department research, going to the beach is the most popular recreational activity in the county. A recent opinion survey by the Trust for Public Land related to access to the waters of Biscayne Bay indicates that swimming and picnicking are the two most popular activities at county beaches. Approximately 60% of users at the most popular beaches cite swimming as the activity they enjoy; approximately 30% cite picnicking as the activity they enjoy. All other activities are enjoyed by fewer than 10% of beach users. Use levels are higher for specialized activities available only at a specific beach park. For example, approximately 25% of Matheson Hammock users enjoy boating, fishing or paddling. A high proportion of users cite "other" as the activity they enjoy at county beaches. Activities popular at local beaches include:

- Swimming
- Picnicking
- Walking/Jogging
- Motor boating

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**Sports  
Beach sunning  
Bike Riding  
Fishing  
Special Events  
Wildlife Observation  
Eating  
Paddling  
Nature Trails  
Skating  
Playgrounds  
Diving/Snorkeling**

Swimming and picnicking are overwhelmingly the most popular activities and the demand for these activities is therefore very high among county residents.

The Greater Miami Convention and Visitor Bureau indicates that going to the beach is also the most popular activity for visitors and the main reason for non-business visits to the Miami area. Similarly, swimming is the most popular activity among visitors, along with sunbathing and eating.

Swimming and eating are the two most in-demand beach activities among both visitors and residents and the availability of these activities, as well as the quality, has an overwhelming influence on the use of local beaches. The quality of the swimming experience is by far the most influential factor in attracting beach users. Miami Beach is the destination of choice for swimming in the county, for visitors and residents alike. Miami Beach is the most frequently visited beach, indicating satisfied users who are attracted by the high quality swimming experience offered. Among non-residents, Miami Beach is also the most popular beach destination.

The Trust for Public Land statistics indicate that the availability of special activities and facilities also influences beach use. Matheson Hammock is the second most frequently visited beach after Miami Beach. Motorboating, fishing and paddling are the most popular activities at Matheson Hammock after swimming and picnicking and are nearly as popular as these. The high frequency of use of Matheson Hammock and the popularity of these activities suggests that repeat visitors are interested specifically in these activities. Bill Baggs attracts frequent users as well, with swimming by far the most popular activity. Trail-related activities such as biking, walking, and jogging are also popular at Bill Baggs, suggesting that repeat visitors are attracted to the availability of these activities. Crandon has been visited by almost as many county residents as the overwhelmingly popular Miami Beach, but is not as frequently revisited. Special events, such as organized picnics and sports events attract large numbers of one-time users to Crandon.

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While Virginia Key, including the Rickenbacker Causeway, the city beach and Virginia Key Beach Park is not among the most frequently visited beaches, it has attracted a high number of visitors as well as a small number of frequent users. Virginia Key has been visited by only slightly fewer county residents than Haulover or Matheson Hammock. Special activities available at Virginia Key include Seaquarium, which accounts for the overall high number of county residents who have visited the island. Other activities such as windsurfing, sailing, jetski rental and special events at Virginia Key Beach Park attract smaller numbers of repeat visitors. Rickenbacker Causeway is also a dog-friendly beach. These uses are in high demand among small special interest groups.

Some extremely specialized users create a strong, consistent demand for facilities that are not available widely. These include dog owners, boating and fishing enthusiasts, specialized sports participants such as windsurfers and kite sailors, and nudists. Boat launches and storage facilities, boat rental and waters appropriate for fishing account for the popularity of Matheson Hammock. Similarly, nudists account for a strong demand for the clothing optional beach at Haulover. Demand for this activity is so intense that revenue generated by the north parking lot at Haulover, which serves the clothing optional beach, supports the entire beach.

#### **Design and operation**

Beach users cite the condition of facilities as an influential factor in their selection of a beach and in the frequency of their use. Well maintained facilities, such as at Miami Beach, Bill Baggs State Park and Matheson Hammock, attract repeat visitors. Maintenance issues and a lack of variety in facilities were cited by Haulover Beach stakeholders as reasons for low repeat visitation.

The design of facilities is also influential. Users show a preference for parks where a theme carries through the design of all facilities in the park. In addition, design can influence the ability of users to identify recreation options and has a strong influence on their perceptions of the extent and quality of facilities. Wayfinding is an important limiting factor at all county beaches. Use patterns on Key Biscayne, for example, indicate that users show a preference for Bill Baggs State Park and that only after parking spaces at Bill Baggs are full, do use levels at Crandon rise. Unclear access points, confusing internal circulation patterns, large, centralized parking lots and the fact that the beach is not visible from the access roads or parking facilities deter visitors at Crandon. Visitors show a preference for the clear relationship between access, parking and the recreational options at Rickenbacker Causeway and Bill Baggs, where parking lots are aligned with the beach and the visitor can see where beach space is available. Visitors also show a strong preference for minimizing the distance between their parking space and the beach. Large, centralized parking lots at Crandon are perceived as distant from the beach and tend to concentrate users within a short distance of the parking lot. As a result, the central portion of Crandon Beach, near the north parking lots accessed from the first entrance to the park along Crandon Boulevard, is the most highly used while the majority of the beach, which must be accessed by foot or from the south parking lot, is largely underused, even on high use days. Similar problems

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exist at Haulover, where circulation and wayfinding problems concentrate users in areas of the beach that are the easiest to access while large areas are virtually unused. Large concentrations of parked cars also convey an impression of crowding on the beach, which deters some visitors.

Conditions of riptides, lightning, littoral pollution, etc. can limit the number of beach users. Fluctuating factors, such as weather and pollution levels influence daily use levels but long-term factors such as currents, persistent pollution, seaweed deposits and murkiness influence the swimming experience and have an impact on overall use levels. Beach utilization is highest on clear days with low pollution levels.

## **Access**

Income level influences beach utilization. Transit-dependent, low-income county residents without cars do not use county beaches. TPL statistics indicate that a large percentage of inner city children have never visited a beach.

## **II. BROADER TRENDS IN THE RECREATIONAL MARKETPLACE**

### **Missed Opportunities**

Facilities and activities that are scarce and which attract loyal followers are in high demand. Clothing Optional Beaches attract a highly loyal following. The scarcity of clothing optional beaches means that unmet demand for this beach activity is extremely high. This strong demand translates into revenue dollars. As noted, for example, the parking lots serving the clothing optional beach at Haulover generate sufficient revenue to support the entire beach park. The clothing optional section of Haulover Beach is close to its capacity.

### **New Demands**

Low income county residents without access to automobile transportation have low participation rates in recreational opportunities of all kinds, including beach going. Programs and alternative transportation options that provide access to this population are a potential generator of demand for beach activities.

Beachside overnight accommodation is in high demand throughout south Florida, as real estate and hotel prices attest. Camping sites are available at only five parks in Miami Dade County. Ecotourist type accommodations are non-existent. The feasibility study for the ecotourist campground proposed for Virginia Key lists only five comparable facilities that include overnight camping and short term rental opportunities. Only two of these were within 100 miles. The feasibility report indicated a high demand for this type of facility.

Rental cabanas are in high demand at Crandon Beach Park. In contrast to day-use cabanas, which are available as changing rooms, rental cabanas are leased annually and provide storage for recreation equipment such as beach umbrellas, chairs and bicycles.

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## **Competitive Trends**

Black Heritage Tourism is a small but growing niche within the tourism industry. Heritage tourism is currently a \$30 billion a year industry. The most recent Travel Industry Association report stated that as a small segment of the total tourism picture, the African-American market is a \$10 billion a year market. It also stated that African Americans are more likely to visit heritage sites and ethnic museum exhibits than any other segment of the market. (da Silva, Angela, "African American Heritage Tourism," Preservation Issues, Volume 7, Number 3)

Synergy with other Black Heritage initiatives in Miami Dade County could enhance demand for this kind of experience. The Overtown Folklife Village, the Miami Dade County Black Heritage Trail, Coconut Grove's Junkanoo Festival are possible complimentary attractions that could draw Black Heritage Tourists to the area, establish Miami Dade County as a Black Heritage destination and create a larger potential audience for a civil rights memorial and museum.

## **III. CONCLUSIONS**

The poor quality of the swimming experience possible at Virginia Key Beach Park limits the park's recreational potential. Dangerous currents make parts of the beach relatively unsuitable for swimming. Although methods of improving the safety of the beach can be explored, the potential of the beach to attract and retain typical beach users is severely limited, since swimming is the primary activity enjoyed at the most popular beaches. Virginia Key Beach Park is in a poor position to compete with Miami Beach and Crandon as a swimming destination. However, attendance at other county beaches indicates that demand for well-maintained, unique activities other than swimming is also high and can take the place of swimming in meeting the recreational demands of county residents and visitors. In addition, unique activities and features increase repeat visits and help to stabilize attendance. Stable attendance reinforces the appeal of facilities by ensuring the viability of concessions and by building familiarity with the recreation options available. Design and operation of facilities can strongly influence attendance and build loyal repeat visitors. Table 1, **Recreational Uses at Virginia Key Beach Park**, summarizes the suitability of Virginia Key Beach Park for the most popular beach activities.

Virginia Key Beach Park is well-positioned to serve a broad spectrum of Miami Dade County residents and visitors of all ages and ethnicities, especially from the south and central areas of the county. Virginia Key Beach Park's proximity to other parks, recreation options and tourist destinations such as Seaquarium, Crandon Park, and a restored Miami Marine Stadium, enhances its potential as a recreation destination. The park also holds high potential demand as a Black Heritage tourist destination. Because Virginia Key Beach Park is positioned to attract tourists visiting nearby destinations, it can potentially serve as a gateway to other Black Heritage Trail destinations in Miami Dade County including Overtown and Coconut Grove.



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**Design and maintenance of facilities, especially those related to access such as parking and alternative transportation options and programs, are essential to ensuring that Virginia Key Beach Park fulfills its potential to meet demand for recreation.**