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**OCTAVE is a newsletter of the Orange County Business Council. Send us your questions, tourism success stories, needs, challenges, best practices, skills gaps, and emerging trends, and we will try to include the most relevant ones in OCTAVE!**

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## **Tracking the Hard-to-Track: Measuring Visitor Use Across Orange County’s Open Spaces**



By Zoot Velasco

In a meeting with Kristi Quon, Strategic Communications Manager for OC Parks, she outlined one of their largest challenges: “We have too much visitation at times.” This can damage ecosystems and ruin popular destinations if not managed. The problem is compounded by the fact that they collect data, mostly using a formula based on proxy measures such as vehicle counts multiplied by assumed occupancy rates, but can’t track visitors. A problem they are addressing by evaluating tracking systems.



This is not just an OC Parks problem. Orange County, California, is one of the most visited regions in the United States, yet much of its tourism activity takes place in open, ungated spaces—beaches, downtowns, trails, parks, cultural districts, and informal gathering spaces. Unlike ticketed attractions or gated venues, most outdoor recreation spaces are open systems with multiple access points, fluid boundaries, and little to no controlled entry. This makes it difficult to answer even basic questions: How many people visit? When are they coming? Where are they from? How long do they stay? Accurate visitor tracking is inherently difficult, even as the need for data-driven management has never been greater. For agencies like OC Parks, the scale of the challenge is significant. The system estimates 15 million visitors annually, but that is most likely an undercount. Beaches present an even greater challenge, where visitation is often inferred rather than directly measured. It is one of the industry’s most persistent data challenges: understanding who is visiting, when, and how.

This challenge stands in sharp contrast to Disneyland Resort, which represents a best-case scenario for visitor measurement. With fixed boundaries and mandatory ticketing, the resort can accurately track daily and hourly attendance, length of stay and dwell time, visitor flow and congestion patterns, repeat visitation, spending behavior, and per-capita yield. The “Happiest Place on Earth” operates in a finite, controlled environment where visitors enter through ticketed gates and every movement can be precisely measured, allowing management to find ways of making it “happier” and more productive. This level of insight allows Disneyland to optimize staffing, transportation, pricing, guest experience, and capital investment. Importantly, decisions are made using hard, continuous data, not estimates or surveys alone. By comparison, Orange County’s beaches, downtowns, parks, and cultural corridors, despite collectively attracting millions of visitors, often rely on fragmented proxies such as parking counts, hotel occupancy, or periodic surveys. The disparity highlights a core issue for Orange County tourism planning: while one of its largest attractions is data-rich, much of the county’s broader tourism ecosystem remains data-poor. Advances in visitor analytics now offer Orange County new ways to close this gap... without gates, tickets, or physical barriers.

Traditional visitor tracking relies on defined entry points: Ticket booths, gates, or turnstiles. In contrast, Orange County’s outdoor assets feature multiple informal access points, including trailheads, neighborhood connections, and coastal entries. This creates challenges of incomplete counts with no single point to capture data; dynamic visitor movement, who may enter and exit multiple times or traverse large areas; and peak-congestion blind spots with viral social media exposure or seasonal spikes, such as great-weather days when visitors can overwhelm parks without advance warning. The



result is a reliance on estimation rather than precision, which is problematic for staffing, safety, infrastructure planning, and environmental protection.

To address these gaps, park systems in Orange County and beyond are increasingly adopting a hybrid approach that blends traditional methods with emerging technologies. Platforms such as Placer.ai use aggregated, anonymized mobile device data to estimate visitation patterns. These systems analyze location signals from smartphones to provide insights into total visits and trends over time; dwell time and frequency; and visitor origin and travel patterns. Advantages to these platforms include that no physical infrastructure is required, they are easily scalable across large, open areas, and they provide longitudinal trend data. However, they have limitations, too. They only capture users with location services enabled, and accuracy varies and often requires validation. In addition, there is potential demographic bias (such as undercounting older or lower-income populations). OC Parks has identified geo-tracking tools like Placer.ai as a promising solution, but acknowledges that they are not a complete answer.

Privacy concerns are addressed by visitor-tracking technologies by relying on aggregated and anonymized datasets. This involves removing individual identities and analyzing data only at the group level. For example, mobile analytics tools typically collect signals from apps where users have opted in to location services, then strip out personally identifiable information before generating insights such as visit counts or dwell times. In addition, many providers apply thresholds that prevent reporting on very small groups to reduce the risk of re-identification. Public agencies often supplement these safeguards with internal policies aligned with frameworks such as the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), ensuring transparency, data minimization, and the ability for users to opt out. Despite these protections, concerns remain about sample bias and informed consent, which is why best practices increasingly emphasize combining privacy-compliant digital tools with traditional methods such as surveys to maintain both ethical standards and data reliability.

Physical sensors placed at key spots such as trailheads, parking lots, or high-traffic corridors can offer another layer of data collection. These technologies include infrared beam counters, thermal sensors, radar detection systems, and AI-enabled cameras. Such tools offer high accuracy in defined locations and real-time data collection, but have limitations due to high installation and maintenance



costs and limited coverage in expansive or porous landscapes. These systems are particularly effective for monitoring specific trails or entrances, but struggle to capture system-wide visitation.

Despite technological advances, traditional approaches such as on-site surveys and questionnaires, manual counting by staff or volunteers, and passive trail counters, remain foundational. OC Parks currently relies heavily on survey data, though this does not provide a complete picture of total visitation. Such tools provide qualitative insights, including visitor motivations and satisfaction, while remaining independent of technology adoption and the costs associated with it. These low-tech tools are labor-intensive, episodic, and difficult to scale for continuous monitoring.

In research settings, agencies such as the National Park Service use GPS-enabled devices or mobility datasets to track movement patterns across large landscapes. They offer detailed spatial insights and are effective for understanding visitor flow. But everything has its limits. They require participant consent and are often limited to smaller sample sizes.

Additional signals come from social media geotags and fitness apps (e.g., trail usage heatmaps). These sources can reveal emerging hotspots, often driven by influencers, but they also raise questions about representativeness and privacy.

Orange County faces a unique convergence of challenges: high population density, global tourism appeal, and the growing influence of digital media. As Quon notes, “Parks can become overcrowded almost overnight when featured by influencers or ‘mommy bloggers,’ creating demand that is beyond our control”.

This phenomenon underscores a critical gap: real-time or predictive data systems are not yet robust enough to anticipate or manage sudden spikes in visitation. Without accurate tracking, agencies must react rather than plan—often after environmental or visitor experience impacts have occurred.

No single method can fully solve the visitor tracking challenge in open systems. Instead, the future lies in integrated, multi-source approaches that combine the mobile analytics for macro-level trends with sensors for localized accuracy, surveys for behavioral insights, and external data (e.g., social media) for early signals of extreme use.

This layered strategy allows for cross-validation, improving both accuracy and reliability. For example, mobile data can estimate total visitation, while sensor counts at key spots help calibrate those estimates. In addition, advances in artificial intelligence and data integration platforms are likely to enhance predictive capabilities, helping agencies anticipate peak periods, allocate staff, and protect sensitive environments.



Tracking visitor use on the water across coastal zones, marinas, and inland waterways introduces an additional layer of complexity compared to land-based parks, as there are typically no fixed pathways or entry points, and movement is highly dynamic. Agencies often rely on a combination of proxy measures and technology-assisted monitoring to estimate usage. In marina environments, slip rentals, launch ramp ticketing, and vessel occupancy rates provide baseline data on boating activity. Coastal managers may also use aerial surveys, drone imaging, and satellite observations to estimate the number and distribution of vessels, particularly during peak recreation periods. In some cases, Automatic Identification System (AIS) data, originally designed for commercial vessel tracking, is analyzed to understand broader traffic patterns, though its applicability to smaller recreational boats is limited. Emerging technologies are beginning to fill these gaps. Mobile device data, like land-based applications, can approximate visitation to beaches and waterfront access points, indirectly informing water usage patterns. Additionally, GPS-based tracking through voluntary apps (e.g., boating navigation or fishing apps) and geofenced data collection are being explored to map movement on the water, though these approaches face the same privacy and sampling limitations noted in terrestrial settings. Some regions also integrate sensor systems at launch points and harbor entrances, along with camera-based monitoring, to capture vessel counts within defined zones. However, as with open park systems, no single method provides a complete picture; instead, blended datasets are required to estimate total use and inform management decisions.

From a management perspective, understanding on-water visitation is increasingly difficult, as coastal destinations, such as those in Orange County, experience rising demand driven by tourism, recreation, and social media exposure. Accurate tracking supports resource protection from erosion and wildlife disturbance, and aids safety enforcement and infrastructure planning, particularly in high-use areas such as harbors and popular surf or boating zones. As with land-based visitor tracking, the future lies in integrating multiple data streams—administrative records, remote sensing, and anonymized mobility data—while maintaining strong privacy protections and acknowledging inherent data gaps.

Tracking visitors in open parks, beaches, and wilderness areas remains one of the most complex challenges in tourism management. In Orange County, where visitation is both high and highly variable, the stakes are particularly significant. While no perfect solution exists, the combination of emerging technologies and traditional methods offers a path forward.

Ultimately, better data is not just about counting people—it is about achieving what OC Parks describes as the “perfect balance”: serving visitors while preserving the natural resources that draw them in the first place.



**NOTE:** You can learn more about the balance between visitors and conservation in our article, published as part of our Earth Day Newsletter #5, released April 28th, entitled *GREEN INITIATIVES: Balancing Access and Conservation in California State and Local Parks: Frameworks, Challenges, and Management Strategies*.

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## Avatars Visit Us

By Zoot Velasco

Yes, Avatars are important in tourism. Not human approximations of the Navi, James Cameron’s creation from his top-selling films, or animated approximations of ourselves we use for texts and video games. I’m talking about something more realistic. As a former professor at Cal State University Fullerton, I taught several classes, including an *Introduction to Marketing* course. There, we discussed “Marketing Avatars.” These are detailed, fictional profiles based on research that represent a business’s ideal customer and serve as a “best-case scenario” persona. It goes beyond basic demographics to define a specific person’s goals, fears, pain points, and behaviors, tailoring marketing, improving product development, and increasing ROI. Once created, a company and its marketing people think of these “people” as their real-life clients. Talking about them as real helps put a face and a name to marketing efforts. We are working for THESE PEOPLE. We want their vacation to be great.



I don’t have a marketing department, except for research help from my one and only assistant, ChatGPT, and I like to think of them (they are not gendered) as a real person as well. I call them PT, short for ChatGPT, and in honor of PT Barnum, a real-life person in the business of making spectacular marvels.

So, I asked PT to create three Avatars for me based on research of who visits Orange County: a visiting family, a visiting couple, and a solo traveler. What would be their best vacation? This is what PT came up with:

<b>Strategic Insight Across All Avatars</b> <b>Orange County's competitive advantage</b> is its <i>diversity of experiences within short drive times</i> —theme parks, beaches, luxury, culture, and food all within 30–45 minutes. However, <b>price perception and crowding</b> remain the biggest universal barriers—so successful marketing increasingly emphasizes <b>off-peak travel</b> , <b>Geographic dispersion</b> (beyond Anaheim), <b>experience bundling</b> , and <b>value framing</b> .		
<p><b>The “The Memory Builder” Family</b></p> <p><b>Profile Snapshot</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents: 30–45 (parents)</li> <li>• Kids under 16</li> <li>• From primarily drive markets (CA, AZ, NV)</li> <li>• Combined Income: \$90K–\$180K</li> <li>• Travel Style: Planned, value-conscious but willing to splurge on experiences</li> </ul> <p><b>Motivations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create lasting family memories</li> <li>• Safe, clean, easy-to-navigate</li> <li>• High-density attractions in one area</li> </ul> <p><b>Core Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theme parks (especially Disneyland)</li> <li>• Beach days at places like Huntington</li> <li>• Casual, kid-friendly restaurants</li> <li>• Short excursions (aquariums, whale watching, harbor cruises)</li> </ul> <p><b>Behavior Patterns</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Books 2–4 months in advance</li> <li>• Stays 3–5 nights</li> <li>• Heavy mobile usage for itineraries and wait times</li> <li>• Bundles experiences (tickets + hotel deals)</li> </ul> <p><b>Pain Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost</li> <li>• Crowds and wait times</li> <li>• Parking and logistics</li> </ul> <p><b>Marketing Hooks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Stress-free planning” messaging</li> <li>• Package deals and bundled savings</li> <li>• Emphasis on safety, cleanliness, and convenience</li> <li>• Visual storytelling of happy, multi-generational families</li> </ul>	<p><b>The “The Experience Seeker” Couple</b></p> <p><b>Profile Snapshot</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ages: 25–55</li> <li>• Married, dating, or empty nesters</li> <li>• Income: \$100K–\$250K household</li> <li>• Origin: Mix of drive and fly markets (San Francisco, Seattle, Texas)</li> </ul> <p><b>Motivations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relaxation + curated experiences</li> <li>• Romance, escape, and indulgence</li> <li>• Food, wine, and aesthetic environments</li> </ul> <p><b>Core Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coastal stays near Laguna, Newport, etc.</li> <li>• Art galleries, festivals, and shopping</li> <li>• Spa/wellness experiences</li> <li>• Upscale dining, sunset experiences, Instagram moments</li> </ul> <p><b>Behavior Patterns</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Books shorter trips (2–4 nights)</li> <li>• More likely to choose boutique hotels or luxury resorts</li> <li>• Prioritizes quality over quantity</li> </ul> <p><b>Pain Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcrowded tourist zones</li> <li>• Difficulty finding “authentic” or less commercial experiences</li> <li>• High-end pricing without perceived exclusivity</li> </ul> <p><b>Marketing Hooks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influenced by travel social media</li> <li>• “Hidden gems” and curated itineraries</li> <li>• Romantic imagery</li> <li>• Culinary storytelling (chef-driven dining, local flavors)</li> <li>• Wellness and recharge positioning</li> </ul>	<p><b>The Single Traveler “The Flexible Explorer”</b></p> <p><b>Profile Snapshot</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ages: 24–44 (skews slightly younger)</li> <li>• Includes solo leisure travelers, digital nomads, and leisure travelers</li> <li>• Income: \$70K–\$150K</li> <li>• Origin: Strong fly market presence (U.S. urban centers + international)</li> </ul> <p><b>Motivations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom and flexibility</li> <li>• Enrichment (food, culture, fitness)</li> <li>• Blending remote work + travel</li> </ul> <p><b>Core Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walkable districts like Costa Mesa, Fullerton, Balboa, and Santa Ana</li> <li>• Food halls, craft breweries, &amp; coffee culture</li> <li>• Fitness (surfing, yoga, hiking)</li> <li>• Day trips and self-guided exploration</li> </ul> <p><b>Behavior Patterns</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shorter &amp; last-minute bookings</li> <li>• Prefers boutique hotels, Airbnb, or lifestyle hotels</li> <li>• Reliance on apps (reviews, social)</li> <li>• Flexible itineraries, not rigid plans</li> </ul> <p><b>Pain Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost of solo travel (no cost sharing)</li> <li>• Safety perception</li> <li>• Limited social connections</li> </ul> <p><b>Marketing Hooks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Do it your way” messaging</li> <li>• Highlight walkability and accessibility</li> <li>• Promote social experiences (group tours, classes, events)</li> <li>• Emphasize Wi-Fi, work-friendly spaces, and digital convenience</li> </ul>

Now that we have our avatars, I asked PT to make a detailed narrative of each. I tweaked these stories myself because PT is a remote worker and has never actually been to Orange County, only via computer. So, I embellished PT’s work quite a bit. Let me introduce you to our travelers...

## The Family: “The Ramirez Vacation”



The Ramirez family leaves Phoenix just before sunrise, their SUV packed with snacks, swimsuits, and the kind of anticipation that only “the Happiest Place on Earth” can generate. Joaquin works as a manager for a local utility, and Tammy leads a small business as a marriage therapist. They have two kids. Joaquin, Jr (they call him Jack) is almost 8 and loves dragons and *The Lord of the Rings*. Thea is 10, wears pink every day, and thinks she is a TikTok “influencer” at her school.

For them, Orange County is less a destination and more a rite of passage. Like many family visitors, they’ve planned this trip for months—timing school schedules, watching ticket prices, and booking a mid-range hotel within a short drive of Disneyland Resort. They were able to find two rooms within their price range: one in Garden Grove, closer to the beach they want to see, and one in Buena Park, close to the theme parks. They opted for the beach-adjacent location in Garden Grove.

Their first two days are consumed by the park. They use mobile apps to track wait times, reserve ride slots, and manage food orders—reflecting the growing reliance on digital trip management among family travelers. Studies show that theme parks remain the single largest draw for family visitation, accounting for a significant portion of overnight stays in the area.

On day three, the Ramirez family shifts gears. They head to Huntington Beach, where the kids encounter the Pacific Ocean for the first time. They rent bikes along the boardwalk, grab casual fish tacos, and stay until sunset. This “two-destination” pattern—theme park plus beach—is one of the most consistent behaviors in Orange County tourism data.

Their final day includes a harbor cruise out of Newport Beach, where they spot sea lions and, if they’re lucky, dolphins. Experiences like this reflect a broader trend: families increasingly seek educational and nature-based add-ons to balance high-energy attractions. They also take in Balboa Pier and drive to Buena Park for dinner at Medieval Times, because their son, Jack, loves horses and knights.

By the time they drive home, the Ramirez family has done what most OC family visitors aim to do—maximize memory-making within a compact, experience-rich geography.

## Maya & Jordan: “A Weekend in Laguna”

For Maya and Jordan, a couple from San Francisco, Orange County represents a different kind of escape—one defined by aesthetics, intimacy, and curated experiences. They fly into John Wayne Airport on a Thursday afternoon and check into a boutique hotel perched above the coastline in Laguna Beach.

Their itinerary is intentionally loose. Mornings begin with coffee and ocean views, followed by walks through Heisler Park and visits to local galleries. Laguna Beach’s long-standing identity as an arts colony, home to festivals like the Pageant of the Masters, continues to attract culturally motivated travelers seeking more than just sun and sand.

Afternoons are reserved for wellness and exploration. The couple books a couple’s massage at a coastal spa and later explores tide pools along the shoreline. Data from Visit California indicates that wellness and experiential travel have grown steadily among higher-income couples, particularly in coastal destinations.

Evenings are the highlight. They dine at oceanfront restaurants, timing reservations with sunset. For couples, food is not just sustenance; it’s a central part of the travel experience. Orange County’s restaurant scene, shaped by its multicultural population, offers both upscale dining and globally influenced cuisine within a small geographic footprint.

By Sunday, they leave feeling restored. Jordan buys Maya some artist-made pearl earrings as a reminder of the tidal pools and their trip, which reflects a broader pattern: shorter stays, higher per-day spending, and a preference for immersive, high-quality experiences over packed itineraries.



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## The Single Traveler: “Alex’s Flexible Escape”

Alex, a 32-year-old remote worker from Seattle, didn’t plan much before arriving in Orange County, and that’s exactly the point. After landing at John Wayne Airport, Alex checks into a lifestyle hotel in Costa Mesa, chosen for its central location and reputation for food and culture.

The next morning begins with coffee at a local café, laptop open. Like many solo travelers today, Alex blends business with leisure, a trend often referred to as “bleisure” travel. Reliable Wi-Fi and flexible workspaces are essential, and Orange County’s many boutique and business-friendly hotels, alongside Airbnb/VRBO listings, cater to this need.

By midday, Alex heads to Santa Ana to explore the arts district. Murals, galleries, and independent shops offer a contrast to the more polished coastal areas. This kind of self-directed exploration is typical of solo travelers, who tend to prioritize authenticity and local culture.

The afternoon brings a surf lesson in Newport Beach, a bucket-list experience made accessible by the area’s beginner-friendly waves and abundance of rental shops. Outdoor recreation consistently ranks among the top motivations for solo travelers visiting coastal California. After the lesson, a bike rental fills out the afternoon.

Evenings are fluid. One night, Alex joins a group food tour; another, ends at a brewery and includes conversations with locals and other travelers. For solo visitors, these moments of spontaneous connection are often as valuable as planned activities.

By the end of the week, Alex has built a personalized version of Orange County, one shaped not by a fixed itinerary, but by flexibility, curiosity, and digital discovery tools.

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## Upcoming Job Fairs



### 📌 July 2026

- **ORANGE COUNTY In-Person Community Employment Day Career Fair**
  - 📍 Holiday Inn Santa Ana-Orange County Airport
  - 📅 **July 23, 2026, 11:00 am – 3:00 pm**
  - Large community hiring event with many local employers.*
- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair](#) – Jul 30, 2026

### 📌 August 2026

- **Orange County Job Fair & Career Fair**
  - 📍 Courtyard Marriott Santa Ana
  - 📅 **August 13, 2026** — regularly scheduled fair series.
- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair](#) – Aug 18, 2026

**NOTE:** Additional Job Fairs are available to registered students at all local Colleges and Universities. Check with your College Counselors.