

The importance of “nature” in geocaching

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Geocachers and their attitudes towards nature

Geocaching is a modern form of a treasure hunt. Within recent years this activity has become increasingly popular. The game is about hiding small boxes – so called geocaches or caches – in mostly public spaces. Thereafter, the coordinates of these geocaches and hints for finding the hiding place are posted on specific websites for treasure seekers who are equipped with GPS-receivers or smartphones with GPS. Growing numbers of geocachers have been documented within the last years (e.g. <http://aj-gps.net>).

Geocaching is an activity going on during day- and night-time, in urban areas as well as in natural landscapes. Forests and countryside are attractive for geocaching, whereby geocachers often enter areas that have been so far untouched by humans (Reimoser et al 2012). Because the search for the hiding place of the geocache is focused on a specific area, the activity can have negative impact on flora, fauna and land-use and can also cause disturbances for wildlife. As consequence of these disturbances of wildlife damage can be caused by game through browsing.

Methods

In order to learn more about geocachers and the importance of nature for this activity, a survey has been conducted (06-09-2012 to 18-11-2012). Since geocachers are organised through websites, the online survey was considered as a suitable approach to reach this target group. The link to the survey has been posted on several geocaching-websites, on discussion panels and on the facebook-page of geocaching.com, the biggest geocaching-community worldwide.

Besides socio-demographic data of geocachers, the survey also collected data on their spatial and temporal behaviour, their motives for geocaching, as well as their awareness of disturbance of wildlife. Furthermore, the significance of the characteristics of the hiding place of geocaches and conflicts with other people have been evaluated. In total 434 questionnaires have been analysed.

Results

The participants were asked for their motivation for taking part in geocaching, most frequent answers were “new activity in nature” (73%), “new perspective on city/region” (71%), “combining outdoor activity and technology“ (65%) and “geocaching can be combined with other leisure activities (e.g. hiking)” (63%).

When asked for reasons to continue participating in geocaching, nature has been an important factor, for instance “experiences of nature” (94%) and “spending time in nature” (93%) were frequently declared as very important or important.

The results of the survey show that geocaching is practised more often in natural landscapes or cultivated landscapes than in urban areas or settlement areas.

The relevance of certain characteristics of geocaches and hiding places has been investigated; the results show that „nature” plays an important role even in those topics. A majority of respondents assessed the location of the geocache “in nature/ natural area” as well as “in secluded areas or areas that are not frequently visited” and “off path” as very important or important.

Relevance of characteristics of geocaches

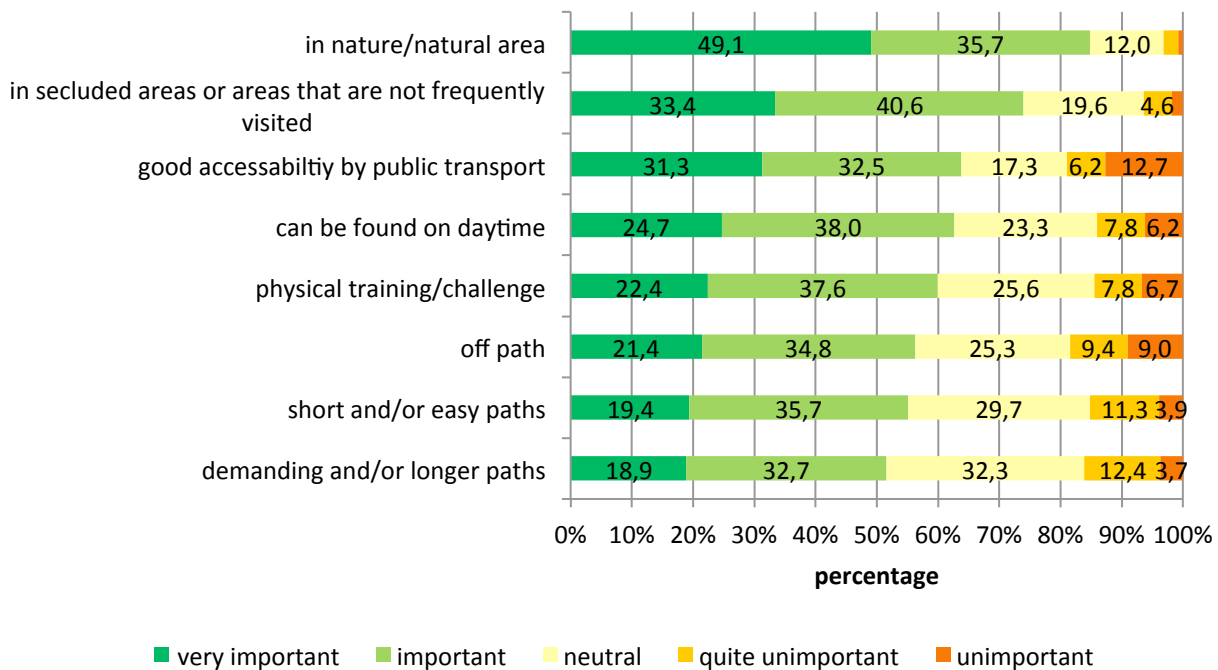


Figure 1: relevance of characteristics of geocaches (n=434)

The participants indicated that the experience of nature in the course of geocaching is evaluated as high. Approx. half of the participants responded to observe more wildlife during geocaching than e.g. during mountain-biking or hiking. About the same amount of respondents declared “the more unaffected and close to nature an area is, the more fun geocaching is for me”.

Use of natural hiding places such as tree caves or holes in the ground has been assessed as unimportant or neutral by the majority of respondents. Though, nearly two thirds of respondents agreed with the statement “hiding geocaches in tree caves, holes in the ground etc. is no problem if done carefully”.

Participants showed high awareness for disturbances of wildlife. For instance, dogs off leash or noise were assessed as a disturbance or a strong disturbance for wildlife. Furthermore, “entering clearances, glades or feeding ground of game” as well as “visiting forests in dusk or dawn” and “visiting forests in winter” have been classified as disturbance for wildlife. Geocaching itself was assessed as disturbance for wildlife only by a small percentage of respondents.

Codes of behaviour for geocachers can be found on most of the geocaching-websites, furthermore nature conservation or youth organisations developed environmental codes of conduct. The majority of participants stated that they are aware of these codes of behaviour (82%).

Conclusion

Socio-demographic results of the online-survey regarding gender ratio (approx. 72 % male), age (average age 37 years) and education (high level of education) match with the results of other studies (Chavez et al. 2004, Telaar 2007 in Reimoser et al. 2012). The relevance of nature and experience of nature for geocachers has been documented in other studies (Telaar 2007).

Since the number of geocachers is still rising and geocaching can be regarded as a trend in leisure activities, conflicts with foresters, farmers, hunters or conservationists are likely to occur more frequently.

The results of this survey show that geocachers generally are aware of the problematic of wildlife disturbances. However, geocaching itself is not regarded as disturbing leisure activity – participants seem to blind out that going off the path, taking dogs off leash and visiting e.g. forests at dusk often occurs in the course of geocaching and that this can disturb wildlife.

There seems to be a gap between knowledge and behaviour of geocachers and therefore awareness rising within this user group is necessary. Furthermore, research to quantify the wildlife disturbances and negative effects on nature conservation as well as conflicts with other land users is essential.

References

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