

How I see myself and how I see others: How do the values of visitors to an urban park Influence their behaviour?

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Usually visitor surveys carried out in natural or semi-natural areas consist of questionnaires that explore visitor behaviour in order to define different park-user profiles. The information obtained is used by the park administration to justify the implementation of specific programs regarding environmental education, improvements to infrastructure or the establishment of certain environmental management programs. Our study took place at the Parque Zoobotânico Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi (PZB), a botanical park and zoo in the northern Brazilian city of Belém that contains various enclosures with captive wildlife. In this study we compared questionnaire responses given by visitors to the PZB against their actual behaviour. The behavioural data was collected via a pre-organised set of direct observations made within the park. We found that when questioned about their personal behaviour visitors typically responded with the most socially acceptable answers. However when questioned about the behaviour of other visitors the responses were more critical, pointing out problematic behaviour that interfered with the quality of the experience for everyone else. This discrete evaluation of visitor behaviour was made by anonymous observers at pre-determined locations, and complemented the data collected through the questionnaire. We contend that in combining these two datasets one can gain more reliable information regarding the true values of park visitors, and that this combined data would be of great use in park management programs.

Methods

Summary of a typical visit and local user.

The data was obtained through the use of structured questionnaires including yes-or-no questions, multiple choice and more open questions that allowed personalised answers. Data was collected on 14 different pre-selected dates, encompassing both weekdays and weekends. We were able to work with a reliable sample set of 345 questionnaires representing around 2% of total park visitors for the evaluated period. Only visitors appearing to be older than 12 years were approached for an interview.

Visitor behaviour over time and in different locations.

The choice determining activities and the live experience in a natural area is influenced by the social group that an individual belongs to (Christensen & Davis, 1985). Urban planners can therefore perceive the quality of recreational experiences in a different way to users (Sowman, 1987). The preferences of the two groups studied by Magro et al. (1997) confirmed this tendency,

the authors concluding that public perceptions are different to those of professionals that plan or manage protected areas. Collecting information via questionnaires without taking into consideration direct observations of user behaviour could therefore fail to adequately inform the management of public use of natural areas.

Observation of visitor behaviour was performed through direct observation of individuals and groups, these subjects being chosen in a systematic way at the principal entrance to the park. Information on visitor behaviour was compiled at specific sites. General survey data, obtained via questionnaires, were used in this study, but the direct observation of visitors permitted us to perform a more complete analysis of the way individuals organised their time in the PZB and to test for a correlation between the visitor questionnaire data and their subsequent behaviour. 88 observation records were taken at in the vicinity of the animal enclosures and 51 were taken at various other sites in the park.

Results

The results discussed within this study refer principally to the identification of values that demonstrate whether or not the respondents would be receptive to programs related to the environment, and to the suitability of conducting these within the PZB in front of captive animals. One of the problems facing analyses of survey data is to know whether the actions of the respondee correspond with what they have said. This problem arises from the fact that faced with the quantity of information in the public sphere concerning the natural environment and climate change, most people feel an almost moral obligation to state that they are concerned about the quality of the environment.

45.5% of interviewees declared that they think about environmental problems everyday, around 43% think about them occasionally and 10% were brave enough to admit that they did not think about these issues on a daily basis.

To offer food or not to the captive animals would reflect a basic awareness of PZB philosophy, and 89.85% of respondees were aware of these rules. Through the data taken from direct observations presented in Figure 1, we see that the majority of interviewed visitors behaved properly in this regard. Nevertheless, 43% of respondees declared that they had seen others offering food to the animals in the enclosures. Probably, visitors are aware that this action is wrong, but still do so in order to gain the attention of the animal. This behaviour was seen during the direct observations. Amongst the interviewed visitors that saw others trying to feed the animals 57.15% took no action, 17.8% gave some kind of advice to the offender and only 2.28% called park staff. It is important to point out that the people observed were not the same people who filled in the questionnaire.

Do you offer food to the captive wildlife?

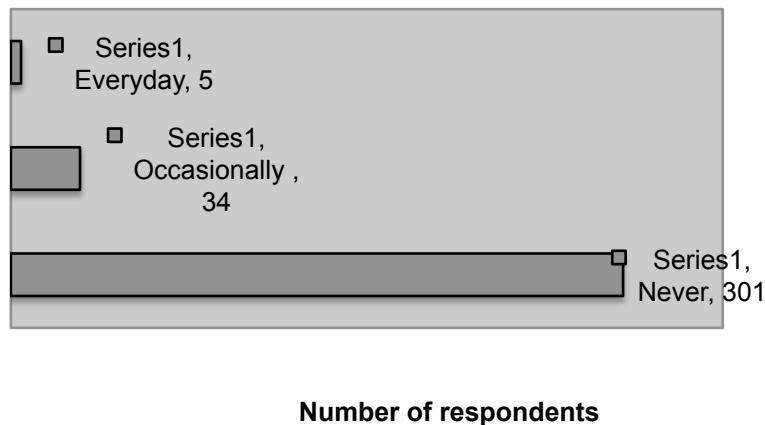


Figure 1: Most of the interviewees declared not offer food to the animals.

It was noticeable how adult visitors attempted to induce inappropriate animal behaviour around the enclosures of caiman, turtles, feline species and spider monkeys. The reaction of the animal was commonly provoked through sudden movements, the throwing of objects or shouting. Unfortunately images presented in the media (principally television) tend to exclusively show animals in the midst of an action or movement, generally induced by the film-makers. It is exactly this type of animal behaviour that visitors wish to see, and indeed which visitors describe as their principal motivation for visiting the urban park in the first place. Future management prescriptions for this particular park could be in part based upon the usage of several particular indicators that we have established through this dual method of data collection. These indicators correspond to particular user behavioural profiles. We present here as an example four of these indicators: 1) Individuals that occasionally offer food to animals (<2%); 2) Individuals that occasionally view another person offering food to animals (<10%); 3) Individuals with complaints regarding the inability to find bins for rubbish (<10%;) 4) Individuals with complaints regarding the inability to find somewhere to sit down.

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