

Assessing indicators of attractiveness in the Krkonoše Mountains National Park Trails, Czech Republic

Luís Monteiro, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic, monteiro@fzp.czu.cz

Kamila Svobodova, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic

Petr Sklenička, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic

Introduction

Balancing between the protection of natural and cultural values while trying to provide high levels of satisfaction among visitors is the main challenge and goal of protected areas management agencies. With the continued growth of national designated protected areas in the world and increasing popularity and participation in nature-based activities, potential conflicts may appear threatening the principles according to which these areas were classified. This is particularly so in protected areas' trails since they represent the main recreation facility on which recreation activities are performed.

Nowadays, there is an on-going need to manage visitor uses and its effects, as such, objective data is essential to inform and support trail managers, so they can evaluate the level of need for visitor management and control the related impacts before they become unacceptable. Although, studies documenting social science issues continue an uncommon trend, when comparing with the numerous well-established research programs to assess the ecological health of trails. This represents an eminent concern for these protected area facilities with high ecological, cultural and managerial value and great visitor demand, since its vulnerability requires for their planning and management the understanding of the multiple and complex aspects related with visitor participation in recreational activities.

In the Czech Republic, a country with a wide network of protected areas with natural characteristics of outstanding value and a long tradition on the practice of outdoor recreation in natural areas this presents an important concern. Studies on the outdoor activities in the Czech Republic protected areas' trails have mostly focused on the negative effects of tourism and visitation rates. However, there is a lack of studies exploring visitor attitudes, motivations and preferences and their relation with the character of the trails visited. In this light, this paper presents a research method for assessing the main aspects behind certain recreational choices, more specifically why visitors prefer particular type of trails in the Krkonoše Mountains National Park (KRNAP).

Methodological Approach

The KRNAP is a protected area located in the north-eastern part of the Czech Republic, occupying an area of about 54,969 ha. Historically it's the crown jewel of the national protected areas, being the first national park of the country. It is dominated by one of the most original and interesting types of landscape, where vigorous and stunning natural features are combined with diverse forms of humanization. Because of its singular landscape and privileged location, the park is one of the most visited protected areas in the Czech Republic, and for this reason, park visitors have been monitored by on-site counters since 2011.

The proposed methodology was divided in three different complementary phases (Table 1). First, a direct data collection method was used to monitor visitor numbers in protected area trails. With this effect, 27 on-site counters have been placed in the most valuable parts of KRNAP, registering the number of visitors who crossed main sectors of the vast hiking trail system. In this way, it is possible to understand which are the most visited trails within the study area and group them according to their popularity.

Subsequently, field analyses of pre-selected characteristics along the trails are conducted during field trips in order to validate features that are not presented in cartographic information (e.g. number of vistas, character of views, number of attractive places, etc.). The collected data is then inserted into a database and analysed using appropriate statistical software. Thus, it is possible to recognize and relate the influence of particular trail and surrounding landscape characteristics with the popularity of different KRNAP trails. These features of the trails and surrounding landscape are named as indicators of attractiveness and are considered the physical and ecological aspects behind visitors choices.

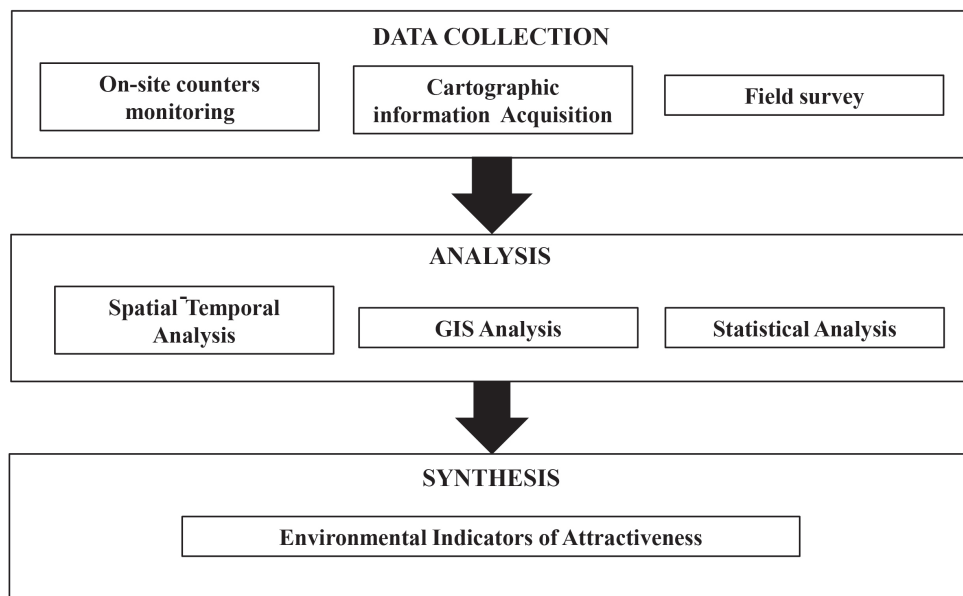


Figure 1 - Methodology diagram

Conclusions

The monitoring of visitors' aspects is nowadays an essential part of the integrated management of protected areas trails. The present study and its methodology allows a better understanding of public use dynamics and preferences at KRNAP trails, serving as a basis to implement a high-quality management of these important park facilities. Visitor numbers and its preferences are essential since they represent basilar information required to address a variety of issues, including the capacity of the existing trail system to accommodate the current demand. Thus, further planning and management of protected areas must involve the adoption of long-term monitoring programs on visitors' aspects, so that the values due to which they were classified do not succumb under the current tourist demand.