

Outdoor recreation and visitor profile of protected areas in Portugal

João Nuno Crespo Godinho de Oliveira, FCUL, Portugal, jn.oliveiraa@gmail.com
Ricardo M. Nogueira Mendes, e-GEO/FCSH-UNL, Portugal

Introduction

Leisure, recreation and adventure activities in nature have been growing at a considerable speed, following a new type of tourism, especially since the 70s, responding to a demand of contact with nature and local cultures, particularly in Protected Areas (PA). The National Program for Nature Tourism (*Programa Nacional de Turismo de Natureza - PNTN*) created in Portugal in 1998 follows this trend and defines the assumptions for the consolidation of the country's image as a quality tourist destination, assuming PAs as designed areas for the nature tourism. This program included a set of criteria and regulations regarding hosting and environmental animation, across the documents created such as Nature Sports Charts Plan (*Cartas de Desporto de Natureza - CDN*) that should complement the management plan for each PA. This policy was latter reinforced by the National Tourism Strategic Plan that included Nature Tourism as one of the 10 national strategic touristic products of Portugal.

The Serra de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park (*Parque Natural das Serras de Aires e Candeeiros - PNSAC*) was the first PA in Portugal to have CDN (published in 2004) that, in conjunction with the last Management Plan (published in 1998) is responsible for the regulation of open air activities within this natural park. Being the CDN in review, it was tried to understand who PNSAC's visitors are and what are their preferences and motivations, in order to improve the park's recreational offer. The second objective of the current study was to define a monitoring methodology that could profile PA users and visitors, and overcome the lack of information regarding this issue in Portugal.

Study Area

The current study was applied in the Serra de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park (PNSAC) that occupies an area of 39000ha in one of the most remarkable Portuguese geomorphologic and characteristic units, "Estremadura Limestone Massif" with a central position an hour from Lisbon. The protection interest, conservation and management is also underlined by the fact of being part of the site PTCO00015 (*Serra de Aire e Candeeiros*) from the National List of Sites of Natura 2000 Network due to the presence of high conservation values, assuming an important significance in terms of fauna, flora and culture, due to an ancestral human occupation of the territory. Under the CDN of PNSAC nine recreational open air activities are allowed: hiking and Mountain biking are the most popular ones, beyond free flight, ballooning, climbing, orientation, horse riding, speleology and canoeing.

Methodology

Following Nogueira Mendes *et al* (2012), the best location for the field surveys was collected from webshare services (using Voluntary Geographical Information – VGI), for the most important recreational activities offered by the Park. Data from mountain biking, trekking/hiking and all wheel drive was uploaded to a GIS project, and analysed to define the higher use intensity areas.

In-sito assisted questionnaires were collected in 8 places and *In-sito* non-assisted questionnaires were collected in other 6 places/park facilities, suggested by the park authority where visitors were asked to fill the surveys by themselves. For speleology and free-flight (the most specialized activities that are allowed/practiced within the park, online surveys were also used.

Results

A total of 330 surveys were collected through the various methods cited above (134 were collected in-sito, 124 were collected within the park facilities and 72 were filled on-line). According to the results, it was possible to define the following average user profile: male, within 35 to 44 years old, married and with sons. PNSAC users are mainly residents from the surrounding localities and municipalities with a high level of education and an average monthly income between the € 971 and € 1940. Aware that they are in a PA, an average user comes to PNSAC with a regular frequency, mainly to spend some quality time with his family and friends, mostly to hike or to ride a mountain bike. The average duration of these visits are between 2 and 4 hours and he uses his own vehicle to get to the park. He does it mainly with friends, not using accommodation and spending on average € 62 throughout his stay. Regarding the park perceptions, PNSAC users rated "hospitality of the local population" as the most relevant item from answers about what they value most.

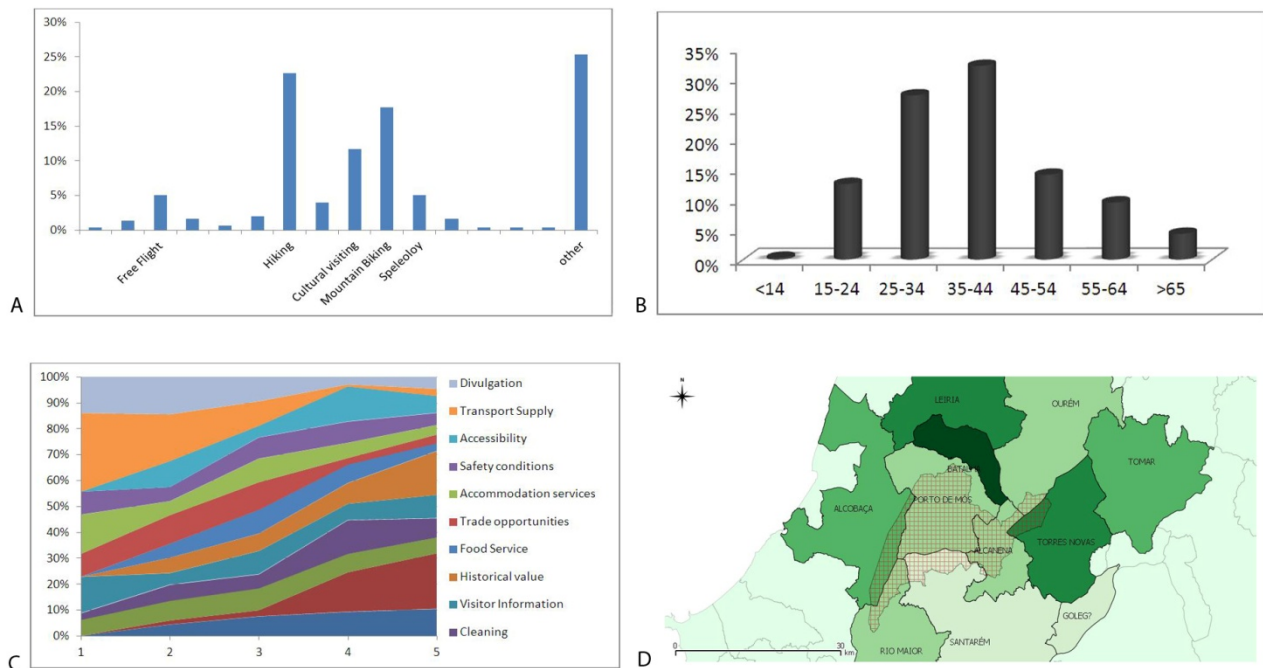


Figure 1. a) Open Air activities in PNSAC; b) Age Groups of PNSAC visitors; c) PNSAC Users preferences; d) PNSAC Users distribution.

Conclusions

The results allowed checking if the proposed methodology worked and if it could be easily replicated in other PAs helping to increase the effectiveness of management of recreational activities. Besides, it allowed profiling park users, which simplifies any communication strategy since people recognize the existence of a management entity. In addition to the natural and cultural

characteristics of PNSAC, any strategy to promote this PA should take into account the great appreciation of the hospitality of the local population by the park's users and visitors.

VGI was used in this case to select the better places to collect the field surveys, but further analysis on these services might be of special use to PA managers, due to the polyvalence provided by nowadays' social networks.

Acknowledgements

This paper presents research results of the Strategic Project of e-GEO (PEstOE/SADG/UIo161/2011) Research Centre for Geography and Regional Planning funded by the Portuguese State Budget through the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia.

References

Nogueira Mendes, R., A. Silva, C. Grilo, L.M. Rosalino, C.P. Silva (2012). MTB monitoring in Arrábida natural Park, Portugal. In P. Fredman et al., eds. 6th International Conference on Monitoring and Management of Visitors in Recreational and Protected Areas. pp. 32–33. ISBN: 978-1-908272-66-9 ISSN: 2048-8912 <http://www.mmv2012.se/MMV-2012-Proceedings.pdf>.