30 Managing “over-tourism” of natural and sensitive areas using visitor data

Laurent Guennoc, Eco-Counter, France

For several years now, visitor management in nature parks has been an ongoing discussion. The fragile balance between welcoming the public and preserving natural areas has always been at the heart of decisions, sometimes difficult to make, by natural area managers.

The current health context reinforces these tensions, with the increased importance of natural spaces, between periods of lockdown and the human need for outdoor spaces for exercise and leisure.

In sensitive natural areas, and particularly in areas with high tourist pressure, the management of overcrowding has become a major topic, in the light of the COVID-19 crisis.

Two specific topics have come to the fore: on one hand, health constraints may now require a specific threshold not to be exceeded, and on the other hand, the overall visitor experience and the preservation of sites, which requires measuring the number of visitors to avoid trampling and natural site degradation, whether they are natural parks, beaches but even periurban spaces.

Recently, the Calanques Park in Marseille announced the launch of a "demarketing" campaign to reduce tourism pressure on the site and preserve the site, its fauna and flora. This campaign was done by exposing the reality of the site and counter the "Instagram" effect which tends to over-publicize natural sites by minimizing difficulty of access, overcrowding in summer, etc.

Eco-Counter has been working for 20 years with natural areas managers on these issues. Through the example of Miribel Jonage natural park, this presentation will show how visitor data can guide choices.

Spreading the number of visitors over the whole year through the development of educational activities in Miribel Jonage natural park (Lyon)

This presentation will highlight the topic of “over-tourism” and natural site attendance management with the example of the Miribel Jonage park in Lyon.

The Grand Parc Miribel Jonage is a 2,200-hectare park located in the Lyon metropolitan area, which is both a leisure and recreation area, as well as a drinking water reserve for 95% of the Lyon region, and a site with an exceptional natural heritage: it is classified as a Natura 2000 site, a Natural and Sensitive Area, and a Natural Area of Ecological, Fauna and Flora Interest (ZNIEFF).

The management and the animation of the site in all its diversity of objectives includes 4 main missions:

1. protection of the Lyon urban area against floods,
2. protection of the drinking water resource,
3. protection of the natural heritage,
4. reception of the public, through a lake, a leisure centre (“L'atôl'”) and an environmental & educational center (“L'îloz'”

Set up to the east of the park in 2015, the Ilôz' educational center for environment and the park's peninsula are equipped with permanent counters to monitor visitor trends at these two emblematic sites for nature-related educational activities.

The peninsula is physically distant from the parking lot by about 500 to 800m and is also separated from the recreation areas, which means that it attracts a specific public. Thanks to data collection over several years, the site managers were able to conclude that these places attract a specific public, with high attendance in mid-season (September/October), periods of the year presenting ecological interests, but rather average in summer period (ratio between the period from May to October and the period from November to April is only 1,41, meaning the average monthly attendance is 10,000 people for colder months, 15,000 for hotter months). On the other hand, the same ratio for the leisure center is 2,68, with average monthly attendance for colder months reaching 10,500 and attendance for hotter months 28,233.

With the goal to spread out the use of the park throughout the year, data collected validates the relevance of developing ecological activities (observation of migratory birds, beavers, etc.), which attract a different public, and help reduce the

summer peak in use and the associated human pressure.

Identify parking saturation on the site

Data on car traffic was also collected and made it possible to determine the number of cars physically present on site, through different thresholds of site saturation: regular parking, unauthorized parking and site saturation. Park managers calculated using IN and OUT flows the level of site occupancy, and identified different thresholds when parking is made either:

- legally on dedicated areas (which corresponds to an estimated cumulated occupancy of 1,500 cars),
- illegally, but does not prevent site access (up to 2,900 cars)
- illegally, preventing site access (more than 2,900 cars)

This saturation is problematic, especially since it has an impact on bus traffic, which can no longer access the park. And in a logic of reducing pressure on the site, it is essential to favor access via public transport to individual cars. The data collected justify actions and policies to be implemented to prevent this phenomenon.

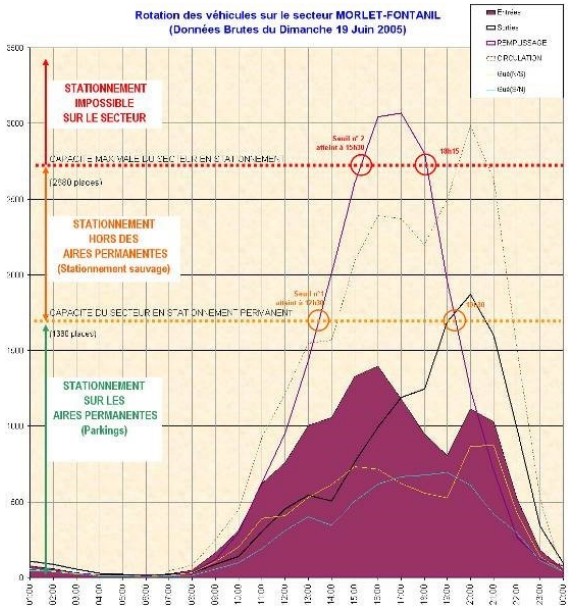

Figure 1. Hourly traffic profile and site saturation thresholds, (credit Christophe Jarraud, Segapal)

Conclusion

Beyond quantifying different usages of natural and sensitive areas, attendance data also allows the construction of occupancy indicators, to help managers make decisions and inform the public. With permanent counters installed outside and inside buildings if necessary, site managers can communicate if necessary in real time to adapt the opening hours or to intervene on site.