

Exploring relationships between visitor motives, satisfaction, recreation quality and attitudes towards protected area management in the Gesaeuse National Park, Austria

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Introduction

Managing recreational use in national parks requires information about general visitation, visitor motivation, satisfaction, social impacts, perceived quality of the recreation experience, and attitudes towards protected area management (Manning 1999). Unfortunately, such knowledge does often not exist in Europe for natural resource management (Arnberger & Mann 2008, v. Ruschkowski 2009). This study explored relationships between visitor motives, satisfaction, recreation quality and attitudes towards protected area management in the Gesaeuse National Park, Austria.

Study site

Situated in the north of Styria, the National Park is the most recent of the Austrian National Parks. It was founded in 2002 and accredited by the IUCN in 2003. Since 2006, 94% of the National Park area is part of the Natura 2000 network according to the Birds- and Habitats-Directive of the EU. With an area of about 11,000 hectares, it stretches for about 10 km along the river Enns, surrounded by several high mountains. The difference in elevation of approximately 1800 m between the river and mountain peaks results in a high relief-energy.

Method

On-site interviews were conducted in the National Park at the main access points of trails on nine days during the summer and autumn of 2008. The interviews took place on randomly selected workdays and randomly selected Sundays covering the holiday and off-holiday season. The small sample of days may be seen as a limitation of the study. The sample size was 405 visitors. The response rate was close to 60%. One main reason for refusal was that the user group of cyclists was less likely to stop for an interview. The study was financed by the Gesaeuse National Park (Arnberger et al. 2009).

The survey instrument asked socio-demographic characteristics such as age, origin, education, and visit-related questions such as length of stay, trip and area satisfaction, the role the park played for destination choice, frequency of visit, as well as motivations, perceived crowding, crowding expectations, and attitudes towards protected area management. Fifteen visiting motives such as solitude, experiencing nature, meeting family, friends, observing fauna and flora, quietness and stress reduction were surveyed using an answer scale from very important (1) to very unimportant (5). Attitudes towards protected area management addressed the topics of dead wood, visitor management, nature conservation and regional effects of the national park, using an answer scale ranging from totally agree (1) to totally disagree (5). A factor analysis was employed to determine the underlying dimensions of the respondents' motives.

Results

Mostly pairs of hikers were interviewed. The majority (88%) were from Austria, predominantly from Styria. The average age was 47 years. About 57% were day tourists and one third of the overnight

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tourists stayed in mountain huts. More than 20% were first time visitors. For about 7% of the respondents the National Park played a crucial role for their decision to come to the area (explicit national park visitors), for further 26% it played an important role, while for the others, the status of the Gesaeuse as National Park had not influenced their destination choice.

The factor analysis of the motives resulted in 4 factors explaining about 59% of the total variance. Factor 1 included motives which indicated fun and escape; Factor 2 addressed nature experience; Factor 3 recreation; and Factor 4 solitude. Reliability analysis resulted in acceptable values for all the factors except for Factor 4.

Relationships between motives and satisfaction, crowding, and attitudes towards protected area management were found. The motive dimension "nature experience" was particularly related to attitudes towards the area management. The more important this motive dimension, the more visitors agreed to a management which prioritises nature conservation, while the motives "fun and escape" and "solitude" showed correlations with crowding. Visitors who were specifically attracted by the National Park were more in favour of a management which prioritises nature conservation and scored higher on the motive dimensions "nature experience" but lower on the "fun and escape" dimension.

The results indicate that for the majority of visitors the existence of the National Park had not influenced their destination choice. This group is less interested in nature conservation related topics and was less likely to support visitor management measures. On the other hand, approximately one-third of the respondents were interested in nature conservation and national parks. The study results support the Gesaeuse National Park administration in managing recreation use and developing public awareness campaigns targeted on visitor types.

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