

The Contribution of Proximity-Based Analysis to Outdoor Recreation Management

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Managing outdoor recreation requires close coordination between stakeholders. This leads to a more complicated situation, because the majority of stakeholders involved do not know each other well. Better integration of visitors into the management process calls for a fundamental change in the way, conceptual and practical models are designed. To this end, we propose an original analytical framework, inspired by the fields of economics and geography, based on various definitions of proximity.

Analytical framework: the multiple sides of the proximity concept

Proximity to recreational areas

Proximity is present in the literature on outdoor recreation. Numerous works have studied the effects of distances to recreational assets on people's practices, such as the frequency of visits (Hanley, Shaw et al. 2003). More recently, additional works adopted a more relational perspective by considering the special attachment that people may develop to particular places (Entrikin, 1991), the latter being not necessarily correlated with spatial proximity. Despite their undisputable contributions, these studies have tended to focus on the behaviors of individuals, while neglecting the social relationships that exist between them.

Proximity between recreational users

Our second definition of proximity comes from a complete distinctive field of research. From an economic geography perspective, several authors have demonstrated that the relationships between individuals are based on a variety of factors, rather than just monetary considerations. They highlight three different types of proximity between stakeholders: geographical, organizational, and institutional proximity. Geographical proximity refers to the physical distance between individuals. Organizational proximity refers to the sharing of common productive practices or routines; while institutional proximity refers to the sharing of a common system of representations, a set of beliefs and values. Such an analytical framework has not yet been tested on outdoor recreation management (Torre & Zuideau 2009), though we believe that it could be proved to be relevant in this particular field. We propose to couple both analytical frameworks to study the management of recreational uses in forests.

Empirical application: forest recreation in South West France

Study site and methodology

Our previous research has shown that many attempts to regulate use conflicts in the selected areas failed because they gave little (if not) consideration to the visitor's perspective (e.g. the "demand side"). To gain a clearer understanding of how these users could be included in management schemes, we ran several surveys that brought together both quantitative and qualitative techniques (500 & 60 obs. resp.). A brief summary of the results is provided below.

Results

For the first definition of proximity, we observed that the effects of the distance on visitor's behavior were not as obvious as would normally have been expected: for example, 22% of the interviewees who declared that they lived "in a forest" in our quantitative survey (e.g. 26 out of the 118) did not use it for recreational purposes. More generally, people living in the vicinity of a forest are statistically different from the other participants in a number of ways: activities, forests attributes, etc. Furthermore, our qualitative surveys show that people are able to describe the values they attach to the forest. These values help us to understand the relationship with the forest and its appropriation via a certain way of life (Tuan, 1990). Despite their limited knowledge of forest regulations, they share indirect common interests with other local stakeholders, including private owners.

Regarding the second definition of proximity, our quantitative survey confirmed that the majority of visitors do not fully understand basic regulations and property ownership rights, nor are they able to identify the specific areas they visit either. To a certain extent, this contributes to the lack of organizational proximity. At the same time, we show that visitors tend to share specific practices, preferences and values in relation with forest-based recreation. One may suggest that some form of institutional proximity could be at least part of the way towards correcting some of the identified organizational failures. The effect of geographic proximity (i.e. living in the same area) on organizational and institutional activity is not obvious. As a matter of fact, many of the usual spatial patterns (i.e. rural versus urban) did not show up in our surveys, except the "Département" and "massif" scales for which some preferences were expressed relating to specific landscapes.

This last result leads us to say that the interaction between these three previous forms of proximity (geographic, organizational and institutional) is scale-dependent. In contrast with the preferences expressed at larger scales, the preferences expressed by people that live in the vicinity of a forest tend to focus on more specific details, such as the sentimental values perceived by certain pine trees, contact with fauna, and open and varied underbrush depending on the season. Such values are coupled with dedicated (not necessarily intensive) practices. Though our work is still at an explanatory stage, we believe that coupling the above-mentioned definitions of proximity may greatly improve the analysis of the territorial dimensions of outdoor recreation management.



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