

Place-based approach to outdoor recreation economics: empirical analysis of recreational demand in forests

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Introduction

Since Tuan's seminal work on sense of place (Tuan 1990 [first ed. 1974]), there has been an increased focus on place-based approaches and place-related values. While understanding the complex origins of such value in places remains a challenging issue, there is now widespread acceptance of the idea that recreational sites are not just about functional (either natural or man-made) attributes, but are also made up of unique socio-spatial recreational qualities. In the broad field of social sciences, significant work has been done in disciplines such as environmental psychology, environmental philosophy, sociology and geography (Farnum, Hall *et al.* 2005). In contrast, economics seems to have taken less interest.

Place based values as the results of several proximity relationships

In this paper, we take a first step towards the introduction of more place-based perspectives into the field of outdoor recreation economics. We examine the possibility of coupling two conceptual traditions, as synthesized by a dual definition of "proximity".

In the standard (neoclassical) paradigm, the spatial dimensions of outdoor recreation are frequently confined to the effects of physical distance between sites and individuals. Spatial distance appears as a proxy for "prices", as is the case in the travel costs and hedonic pricing methods (Hanley, Shaw *et al.* 2003). From this perspective, distance and space are considered as exogenous factors, with greater emphasis placed on market based mechanisms (fees, taxes, travel costs). The main focus is on individual behavior, with little attention paid to social (spatial) interactions

By comparison, economic geography has placed great emphasis on analyzing coordination patterns and socio-spatial relationships. A good example of this is the longstanding tradition of research into industrial clusters, which aims to identify the economic benefits for firms of being close to each other. From this viewpoint, the "places" where human activities develop are not predefined (by physical nor administrative limits) but rather appear as endogenous social constructs, *i.e.* the results of social interactions. To characterize the diverse nature of such interactions, another form of "proximity" between actors may be suggested; bearing in mind that "proximity" is not confined to the geographical sense of the word, but also incorporates similarity or adherence between actors or organizations (Torre *et Zuindeau* 2009). By focusing on social interaction, it is regrettable that the former approaches somehow neglect proximity with natural environments.

Methods and results

We apply this combined analytical framework to analysis of recreational demand in forests in southwest France. Most of our empirical material comes from second-hand data collected in

prior research projects. The material comes from a telephone survey (n=500) carried on a representative sample of the regional population (Aquitaine) in 2012.

Our preliminary results confirm the importance and intertwined nature of various types of proximities toward the definition of “recreational places” from an economic perspective.

First, we identify several types of proximity between individuals: henceforth referred to as *organizational* proximity (as it refers common practices), *institutional* proximity (shared values and common knowledge), and *geographical* proximity (relating to living areas). Such a typology is comforted by prior results on recreational demand as exemplified by the high popularity of walking, the time spent with the family, expectations for calm and quietness. Similarities (i.e. proximities) between individuals were also found when they expressed opposition (to waste or motorized activities) or lack of information (on property rights and forest names). In this context, the first two categories of proximity may be perceived as “non-geographical” proximities in the sense that individuals do not need to live close to one another in order to share common ground. Nevertheless some characters seem to be spatially distributed. This is particularly the case for many characters (practices, equipment, types of forests appreciated) falling under the scope of organizational proximity. By comparisons, the variables used to evaluate institutional proximities do not show statistical dependence with geographical origins.

Introducing the notion of proximity to site (measured in terms of physical distance) adds another valuable aspect of place-based characterization. Once again, characters involved in the definition of organizational proximities seem to be more statistically dependent on site proximity than those involved in institutional proximities. Some results may appear counterintuitive. For instance, we did not find any strong opposition between people who declared that they “live in a forest” (i.e. distance from site = 0) and of the rest of the sample when they were presented with the principle of increased wood exploitation. Similar results occurred with the payment of access (although they do visit forests more often). Surprisingly, fewer of the “locals” were able to name their most visited place although they live closer.

Additional results, more complex empirical techniques (multivariate analysis) and the challenges offered by more refined data (PPGIS) will be discussed in the paper.

Discussions

Though our work must be conceived as explanatory in nature, we believe that introducing place based approaches in outdoor economics can be highly relevant.

Regarding organizational issues, we expect that common ground and shared values, potentially built upon recreational places, may be powerful instruments to improve economic coordination between stakeholders. To fully exploit this issue, we now need to extend our analysis to other stakeholders (forests owners, public organization, local elected people, etc.). Defining place as social constructs may also partly account for the failure of planning processes. From a theoretical perspective, place based approaches offer a refreshing view of several traditional economic assumptions.

Further innovations in development strategies may also be expected. Using a similar analytical framework, some authors supported the idea that many of the above-mentioned socio-spatial relationships (i.e. “social proximity”) favor the appearance of a specific local social resource that ultimately turns into profitable economic product differentiation. This has traditionally been tested in the case of agricultural products. We believe that it may also be useful for many nature based tourism services. In France, the National Forestry Office has launched a label (*Forêt d'Exception*) which puts great emphasis on the quality of the governance and coordination processes. Our research may help in identifying possible outcomes in terms of the economic added value stemming from such labelling process.

References

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