

Visitor's experiences with wildlife in protected nature areas

Akke Folmer¹

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What role does wildlife play in creating a sense of place among visitors to protected areas? This is the central question of a pilot study, carried out in National Park Lauwersmeer, The Netherlands. The main question is further subdivided into two questions: "How do visitors experience wildlife in protected areas?" and "which external circumstances and personal characteristics of visitors have an influence on wildlife experiences"? The pilot study was carried out to explore what approach and which research methods are most useful to gain insight into these aspects and how to adapt these for further research. The pilot study took place in January, February and March 2010 in the Lauwersmeer area, which is situated on the border of the provinces Fryslân and Groningen in the north of The Netherlands.

In the spatial policy plan of the National Park, 'experiencing nature' plays a central role as the first step towards involvement and participation of visitors in nature management (Logemann et al 2003). According to Curtin (2009), understanding people's attitudes towards wildlife is an essential component of the management of wildlife-oriented recreation. In this research project, attitudes are related to visitors' sense of place. More understanding of how wildlife experiences shapes a sense of place of visitors in protected areas may contribute to nature management of the National Park.

How could 'a sense of place' be defined in relation to protected areas? To understand the meaning of 'place', it is also necessary to define 'space' as these are interrelated concepts (Malpas 1999). The term 'place' is often associated with security, stability and feeling at home (Tuan 1977, Massey and Jess 1995), while 'space' is associated with openness, freedom, fear and threat (Tuan 1977). For visitors, wildlife may impose threats or evoke feelings of fear. On the other hand, visitors may identify with or feel attracted to wildlife. Wildlife may contribute to a sense of place either way. Notions of place and the meaning of place also vary among people. Understanding of place may vary over time because the world is changing and because of shifts in the way in which different groups in society think about place and how places are represented (Massey and Jess 1995). Different groups might have different views of the places and different senses of identity.

Tuan (1977) suggests that more (intense) experiences are more likely to create a sense of place. According to DeMares and Krycka (1998), experiences with wildlife sometimes have spiritual and emotional effects on people, leading to a peak experience. Maslow (1970) defines a peak experience as a disorientation in time and space, or even a lack of consciousness of time and space. He suggests that a peak experience with wildlife may create a feeling of being at home in nature.

Many experiences are difficult to express as visitors know them via senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing or vision. This does not mean that these experiences are less important than experiences that can be expressed; but it does raise the question of how to get insight into these experiences.

The methodological approach for the pilot study was a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods; participant observation, in-depth interviews and surveys were used. To explore visitor experiences with wildlife, a phenomenological approach was used, consisting of participant observation and in-depth-interviews (Moustakas 1994, Phillimore and Goodson 2004). The primary question of the interviews was: "Tell me about your most memorable experience with wildlife in the Lauwersmeer area". To get insight into which external circumstances and personal characteristics

¹ Stenden University of Applied Sciences, P.O. Box 1298, 8900 CG Leeuwarden, The Netherlands.
akke.folmer@stenden.com

of visitors have a part in wildlife experiences and a sense of place, a survey was done. The survey included both closed and open questions. From the results of the survey, an attempt was made to classify experiences from 'everyday experiences' to 'peak experiences', and to relate this to visitors' sense of place, which is divided into place identity, place dependence and care for a place.

Each method will be evaluated on the results and on the role of the researcher in the interpretation of tourist experiences with wildlife and the role of wildlife in creating a sense of place. The results and conclusions will be used to alter the research methods and to set up a research project in another protected area in Europe.

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