

Predicting Outdoor Recreation – Experts vs. the Public

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Future participation in outdoor recreation is of interest to authorities as well as tourism and outdoor recreation organizations, but at the same time difficult to give an accurate answer for. It is not possible to study the future as such, since there is no empirical data to be analyzed which measures the time ahead of us. But the future is nevertheless a very important field of research because predicting the future is inherent important to make the right management decisions, improve adaptation, inform policy makers and ultimately support a more sustainable development. Alm et al. (2012:7) argue that “...we can use our knowledge about history and about the current situation for a discussion that also involves our values. The basic idea is that we can better shape our future in the way we want if we do this on an educated basis”. Elements in building this educated basis with regard to social science is for example information about changes over time for activities and attitudes, as well as presumptions concerning the future expressed by different groups. Hence, among the techniques that can be used to get a better basis for speculations about the future are predictions by experts and surveys among potential participants.

It is reasonable to believe that some groups are better informed and “ahead” of other people with regard to for example future attitudes and behaviors among the public. This technique of asking experts is sometimes called the “Delphi method” according to the ancient habit of asking the Delphic oracle in Greece about what the future will be. With regard to outdoor recreation and nature based tourism it could be entrepreneurs (always keen on discover new markets), producers of equipment (looking for new fashions) and public officials and politicians (trying to avoid upcoming conflicts and keen on establishing laws and regulations to adapt with changing patterns). Important aspects of using this method is that these groups are often limited in size, interested of the issues and quite easy to reach. But there is of course a risk that such groups are mainly thinking “inside the box” and could be instinctively reluctant towards new perspectives that challenge their own competence, products and/or current management methods.

However, if interested in the future changes in outdoor activities among the public at large – why not simply ask the same public about their plans for the future? Important pros with such an investigation technique is the simplicity – you can ask specifically about the attitudes and behaviors you are interested in, and the method of doing so through structured questions to a random sample of the population is a very much established approach.

Predictive data

Panels of experts were in 2003 and 2013 asked about their predictions of increases in outdoor recreation activities in the Swedish high mountain area in a ten year perspective. The groups involved 54 persons in 2003 and 65 in 2013, and consisted of researchers, tourist industry, government agencies and organizations with an inter-

est in the mountain area. The surveys of the public were done in 2004 (n=1067) and 2013 (n=1000) to reflect the opinion among the general adult population of Sweden. The same set of questions used for the experts were included in the surveys among the public.

When comparing the predictions done by the public and the experts in 2003, the differences are quite striking (Figure 1). First of all, we note that the public in general are more prone to predict increases in activities than the experts are. The only activity experts believe will increase more compared with the public is snowmobiling. Other activities experts predict to increase in the next ten years are short hikes (1-3 hours), day-hiking, mountain biking and angling. Looking at the answers from the public, we instead find backpacking, day-hiking, downhill skiing, angling, and snowmobiling (in decreasing order) to be expected to increase in the future. Hence, differences in predictions between the two groups are quite significant, especially when it comes to backpacking and downhill skiing, the two major recreation activities in the mountains.

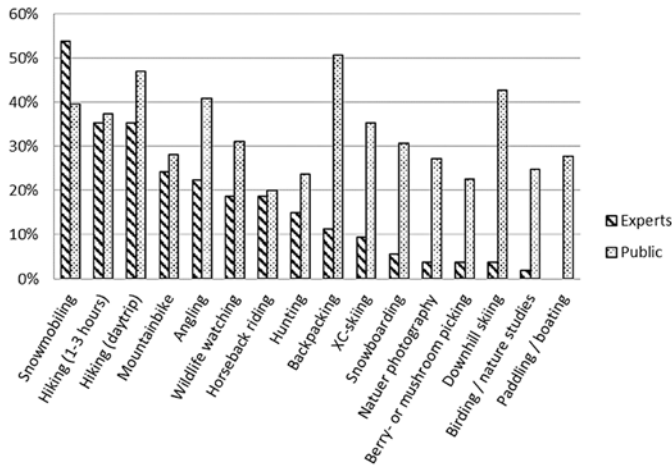


Figure 1. What activity will increase in the coming decade? Results from a survey among the public compared with an expert panel in 2003.

Actual changes

The next issue to look into is then which of the two sources of information – public surveys or expert panels provide the most accurate predictions of the future? The answer is to be found in statistics of actual changes in outdoor recreation participation during the study period, i.e. from 2003 to 2013. Since we are interested in recreation in a specific region, we can not only rely on data from a particular population (e.g. Swedes), but need to look at “on-site” data that include also other nationalities visiting the region, as well as those age groups that population surveys typically do not include (e.g. young and old persons). A preliminary analysis of selected data reveal a significant increase in overnight stays at backcountry mountain lodges (+33%)

and cabins (+10%), reflecting an increase in backpacking during the study period. For downhill skiing we observe a 39% increase in ski-pass sales, while the annual number of “skier days” have increased only slightly (+0,6%). Hence, our results indicate that predictions of future outdoor recreation by the general public are at least as accurate, perhaps even more so, than those done by experts.



Alm, Susanne; Palme, Joakim & Westholm, Erik (red.) (2012). Att utforska framtiden: valda perspektiv. Stockholm: Dialogos.