An importance-performance study of visitor opinions concerning access into the countryside of Ceredigion

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Abstract ó It is important that countryside resource managers gain a full understanding of visitor needs and develop suitable facilities and infrastructure to respond to them. Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) is a simple and effective technique that can be used to identify those attributes of a product or service that visitors consider to be important and to gain responses on how these attributes are performing. This study based in the county of Ceredigion in Wales, used IPA to find the relationship between importance and performance for a range of attributes relating to the management of access into the countryside, covering the areas of infrastructure, information and product acceptability. The results indicated that attributes relating to infrastructure such as signposting and stiles were not performing to visitor expectations and issues relating to dog mess caused visitors the greatest concern. When sub-divided by user type the results showed a clear segregation as to what different user types considered important and their perception of performance.

Index Terms ó Access, Importance-Performance Analysis, infrastructure, service quality.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This study uses the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) technique to help understand aspects of the management of access into the countryside of Ceredigion in Wales as part of the process of developing a Rights of Way Improvement Plan for the county. The study sought to find out which aspects of the management of access into the countryside visitors thought important, and how these aspects were performing in practice. Gaps between importance and performance are 'service gaps' that need to be considered for future management.

2 IMPORTANCE-PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

IPA is a research technique developed within the discipline of marketing that has since been applied to a wide range of subject areas [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]. IPA seeks to establish the relative importance of different service and product attributes and compares them with how they are performing. This is carried out using a three stage approach. First, a set of product or service attributes is developed. These will be in the form of statements such as 'It is important to me that paths are fully signposted and easy to follow'. Secondly consumers are asked to rate how important these attributes are and how they are performing using a Likert scale [8], [9]. In this survey a five point Likert scale of 'extremely important'; 'somewhat important'; 'neutral'; 'not very important'; 'not at all important' was used with an additional option of 'I have no opinion'. Finally importance and performance

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values are calculated from the collected data. For this survey these were calculated by allocating a score of +2 for responses under the 'extremely important' category; +1 for 'important'; 0 for 'neutral'; -1 for 'not very important' and -2 for 'not at all important'. For each attribute a mean score for all respondents for importance and performance can be calculated (referred to as the IP value) such that the mean score of the importance and performance of each attribute can be compared.

3 Methodology

This survey was conducted using a one-to-one questionnaire research instrument by means of a representative sampling methodology [9], [10], [11], [12]. The questionnaire form and the sampling methodology was developed using a two phased approach. An initial draft questionnaire and sampling method was developed by the author, based upon a review of relevant literature. This draft was used as the basis for discussion with a range of experts from within Ceredigion, representing a range of organisations who have an interest in the management of countryside access. This included the academics from Aberystwyth University, staff from the International Centre for Protected landscapes, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Forestry Commission and Ceredigion County Council. A large amount of consideration went into the selection and wording of attributes that were to be explored. Following from their comments and constructive criticism, the survey form and sampling method was further developed before three days of pilot testing in the field. Further alterations were made based upon the pilot test prior to full implementation.

Sampling was carried out at nineteen countryside locations chosen to represent coastal access, managed sites, managed walks and open countryside. Visitors were sampled on site using the random sampling technique of choosing to interview the next person to come past the interviewer after two minutes. Individuals from groups were selected by asking who from the party had the next

birthday. The survey was completed over the months of July, August and September 2005 with survey days running from 10am to 4pm. Each site was surveyed twice, once on a weekday and once on a weekend day. A total of 259 individuals were selected for interview of which 211 agreed to take part giving a refusal rate of 19%.

4 Results

4.1 Analysis of all user groups

Fig. 1 shows that for the majority of attributes that performance was not matching importance. Some general patterns are present:

- There was concern about signposting with people feeling that there was a need for paths to be fully signposted and they should contain distance and destination information.
- There was a large gap between importance and performance with regard to the attribute 'I think it is important that paths are clear of dog mess'.
- There was no discernable gap between importance and performance with regard to attributes concerned with the availability of 'named managed sites', 'named managed routes', 'short circular walks' or 'challenging walks'.
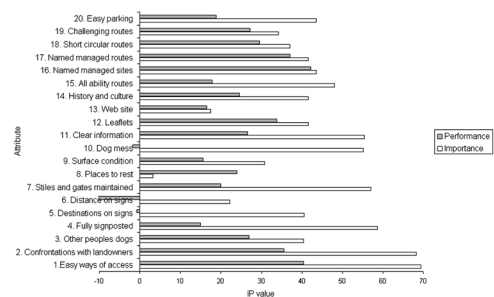

Fig. 1. Importance-performance values for all interviewees.

- The performance score for information for the attribute 'I think it is important that there is clear information about where to go in the countryside' does not match with the perceived importance for that attribute.

4.2 Analysis by user type

To find out if IP scores were influenced by the type of user a question was asked that allowed interviewees to be categorised. This followed the model used by the Wales Tourist Board to categorise visitors to Wales. Interviewees categorised themselves as belonging to the following classes:

Dedicated active – Almost all time away spent doing a specific outdoor activity (9.6% of interviewees)

Heavy active – Majority of time spent away doing a specific outdoor activity (22.5% of interviewees)

Light active – Like to do outdoor activity but interspersed with non-energetic pastimes (49.8% of interviewees)

Stroller – Do little energetic outdoor activity but want to spend time exploring the area (18.1% of interviewees)

When analysed using these categories some interesting patterns emerged with clear differences apparent between the different user types. Within the limitation of this paper the two categories of user will be used as illustration, namely dedicated actives and light actives.

Fig.2 shows the results for the group of interviewees who considered themselves to be dedicated actives. This group:

- Have concerns about dog mess and confrontations with landowners.
- Feel that the signposting needs to be improved and should contain distance and destination information.
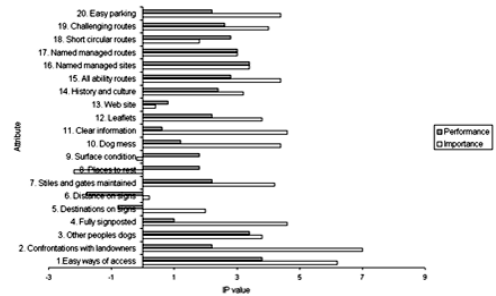

Fig. 2. Importance-performance values for interviewees who considered themselves to be dedicated actives.

- Would like stiles and gates to be better maintained.
- Feel that the surface condition of paths is OK and that having adequate places to rest is not very important.
- Would like clearer information including leaflets.
- Do not feel there is a need for more named managed sites or named managed walks.

Fig.3 shows the results for the group of interviewees who considered themselves to be light actives. This group:

- Appear to be very concerned about confrontation with landowners.
- Would like better signposting, including destination information to be added to signs but are less concerned with adding distance information
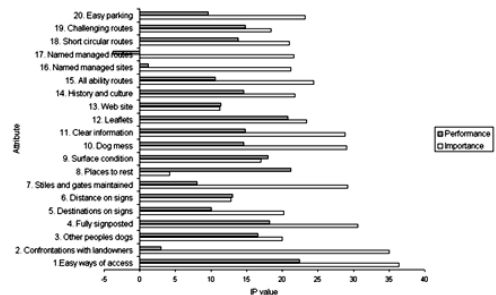

Fig. 3. Importance-performance values for interviewees who considered themselves to be light actives.

- Would like better maintenance of stiles and gates.
- Would like more provision in the way of all ability routes, named managed sites and named managed routes.

5 Conclusion

The results give a graphic demonstration of the issues that need to be addressed in the future management of access into the countryside of Ceredigion. Of particular interest are the differences in the responses of different user types. The two user groups illustrated in this paper show considerable variation in the importance they attached to the differing aspects of the provision of infrastructure such as signs and gates and of managed countryside. There are also clear differences in how the two user groups rated performance, probably reflecting different behavioral norms.

This research has clearly demonstrated the potential of the Importance-Performance Analysis technique to yield useful management information about the management of access into the countryside. The technique is simple to use, easy to analyse and produces data in a form that is easily understood by a range of managers, funding agencies and politicians. As such it is a useful tool in any countryside resource managers toolbox.

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