

Perception of Forests and Forest Management by Germans and Migrants using Photovoice

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Introduction

Following the definition of landscape perception according to Nohl (2001), the perception of a forest is not only based on physical existing elements, but also aspects such as experiences, previous knowledge about forests, attitudes, expectations, memories, desires and needs. With a changing society (ageing population, changing values and lifestyles, migration), forest perception might change.

Literature suggests preferences for natural forests, which correlate with high biodiversity (e.g. Gobster et al., 2007). Other studies suggest that people prefer more open forest types, supported by the “Information Process Theory” by Kaplan & Kaplan (1989). However, most of this work is related to North-American or Scandinavian forest ecosystems and not Central European ones with different management practices.

Methods and selection of interviewees

Recently, Photovoice as a qualitative approach has received increasing attention. People take photos of features considered relevant for the respective research questions. Afterwards, individual photographers explain in semi-structured interviews why they have taken these pictures (Wang & Burris 1997, Heyman 2012).

In our study, volunteer participants, both Germans and migrants (persons not having been born in Germany) walked a 4 km loop trail in the Weltwald Freising near Munich and took pictures of the forest. At the end of the walk, persons explained why they had chosen to take the respective pictures. 26 Germans participated (15 female, 11 male, 50% below the age of 40, 31% over 60). 14 persons were born and grew up abroad (Luxemburg, Poland, Ukraine, Norway, France/Spain, Croatia, Turkey, Tunisia/Saudi-Arabia, Syria, USA, Canada, Peru, China).

Results

Almost all participants enjoyed the hike in the forest. Especially the Germans took fewer negative than positive photos. In both groups, a large number of particularly colorful pictures were taken. Interviewees stated that they wanted to express the joy associated with discovering a large number of different attractive tree species. Moreover, they mentioned liking the different colors of the deciduous trees. Also the benches and signage in the Weltwald were recorded as explicitly positive features of the forest. Almost all photographed elements such as ant hills and small insects were considered positive features of the forest. Also a group of huge Douglas Firs (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) trees was photographed as a particularly attractive forest impression. It was associated with “nature”, “wilderness”, “impressive size” and “power”, although they are a non-native tree species and were planted in this forest around 70 years ago. The Germans considered deadwood as a positive feature of forests, while the non-German group often perceived it as negative. According to the explanations given by the interviewees, liking or disliking this element related to their knowledge of deadwood in forest ecosystems. This difference was also observed on a plot

with goats grazing intended for maintaining an open space in the forest for biodiversity purposes. While the Germans photographed it as a positive aspect, the migrant group felt that it was a particularly bad thing that would destroy the forest ecosystem, especially thus perceived by persons from Mediterranean countries. Ponds in the forest were portrayed as a positive element in the forest by the German group. However, only one migrant photographed them. Both groups disliked noise, trash and vehicles in the forest as well as traces of timber harvesting. While traces of skidding timber were photographed as a negative feature by all persons in spring, persons participating two weeks later did not record them, since vegetation growth had already covered them in such a way, so that they were not recognized in a negative way.

Migrants often stated that they rarely visit forests and enjoyed being invited to participate in the study. They claimed they had a lack of knowledge on recreation opportunities in local forests. Furthermore, this group mentioned friends not going out together to enjoy nature. These interviewees suggested providing offers to encourage an initial contact with the local forests and their recreation opportunities. Also a lack of mobility (e.g. own car or bike) was frequently mentioned to be a hurdle to be able to recreate in the forest. The older Germans participating in this study also complained about a lack of mobility for access to local forests.

Discussion and conclusions for management

Natural looking forests were perceived very positively in this study and support postulations such as those by Gobster et al. (2007). However, at a second glance, many forest types and features are considered attractive, such as huge and bizarre trees, regardless of whether they are a native species or not. Also experiencing domestic animals in the forest is attractive for forest visitors, however, for non-Germans, some explanation is necessary, since they might have negative connotations based on knowledge and values gained in other forest ecosystems in their homelands.

The statements by migrants show a need to provide some assistance initiating a first contact to the forests and their recreation opportunities. Also for the older group of Germans, better access to the forest is a vital issue enabling them to use the forest for recreation. Offers such as guided tours, information on recreation opportunities in forests and better access by public transportation and signage would allow more user groups to visit forests more frequently.

References

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