

Visitor Satisfaction Surveys and the Development of Access Standards for National Nature Reserves in England

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Abstract: It is estimated that National Nature Reserves in England receive around 15 million visitors each year, and this number is increasing. Since the mid 1990s English Nature has undertaken a series of visitor satisfaction surveys on a number of the National Nature Reserves in England. The purpose of the initial studies was to establish the visitors' understanding of National Nature Reserves and what it was that those visitors wanted by way of facilities to improve the experience of their visit.

The results of the surveys influenced the development of 'access standards' for use in work planning and financial resource allocation across the suite of 160 National Nature Reserves managed by English Nature.

Following major investment between 2002-2004, a further round of visitor satisfaction surveys has been completed and this paper discusses the results of these and the implications for future access improvement funding and works.

Introduction

English Nature is the government agency that champions the conservation of wildlife and natural features throughout England; work which includes the identification, declaration and management of National Nature Reserves. There are more than 200 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) in England, of which around three quarters are directly managed by English Nature¹.

Background to visitor satisfaction surveying

Since the creation of English Nature's predecessor, the Nature Conservancy, in 1949, there has been a significant change in the view taken by the statutory nature conservation organisations in the United Kingdom of the value and use of National Nature Reserves (NNRs). Their original purpose, to be managed for conservation and as a source of scientific and conservation management advice, has not been lost but expanded to include their potential for recreation and

public enjoyment. In the early 1990s, it was estimated that some 3 million visits were made annually to NNRs in England. We currently believe that figure to be around 15 million visits. Visitors to NNRs form the largest single defined and accessible target for English Nature to promote its messages relating to nature conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity.

Early in the 1990s English Nature instigated a programme known as Public Appreciation of National Nature Reserves (PAN) through which a series of projects were set up to promote the knowledge and use of NNRs in England by the general public. One of the projects was to obtain an understanding of visitors perceptions about the sites and how they were managed.

Methods

Following an initial qualitative stage of research and benchmarking, English Nature employed consultants to carry out a series of interviews on 15 NNRs during the Summers and Winters between 1995 and 1997. At each Reserve, three days of interviews took place in the summer and a further

¹ National Nature Reserves in England fall into four categories with regard to their tenure. They may be owned or leased by English Nature, subject to statutory Nature Reserve Agreement or be owned and managed by an 'approved body' (or a combination of these forms of tenure). Only NNRs in the first three are subject of this paper.

day during the winter. Over the six stages of interviews the following numbers of interviews were achieved:

Table 1: Number of interviews achieved in each season.

1995		1996		1997	
Summer	Winter	Summer	Winter	Summer	Winter
247	109	297	120	304	94

Visitors were approached when leaving the Reserve and asked to take part in a short survey during which the interviewer asked inter alia:

- How do you know of the site?
- How often do you come?
- How long have you been coming?
- Why did you come?
- How do you rate the importance of the following aspects of service provision?
Car parking, Well marked paths, Information panels, Easy paths, Signposting to the NNR, Maps/ path guides, Toilet facilities, Disabled access, Remote area access, Visitor/Information centres, Seats/Benches, Visitor events, Picnic areas, Café/refreshments,

- How do you rate the performance of each of these aspects of service provision?, How satisfied were you with your visit?
- Do you know who manages the NNR?

They were also asked personal, demographic information.

Interpretation of results

These surveys showed that most (two thirds) of visitors were male, and tended towards higher socio-economic groups (again two thirds being ABC1). Over 75% of visitors were aged over 35. Those who had visited the sites previously had generally been doing so for many years – around 25% had been visiting for over 20 years; fewer than 10% made their first visit in the current year.

There were distinct differences between summer and winter visitors, the former travelling further, tending to come in groups rather than singly, coming less frequently and being more likely to be on their first visit. The implication of this is that winter visitors tend to be local

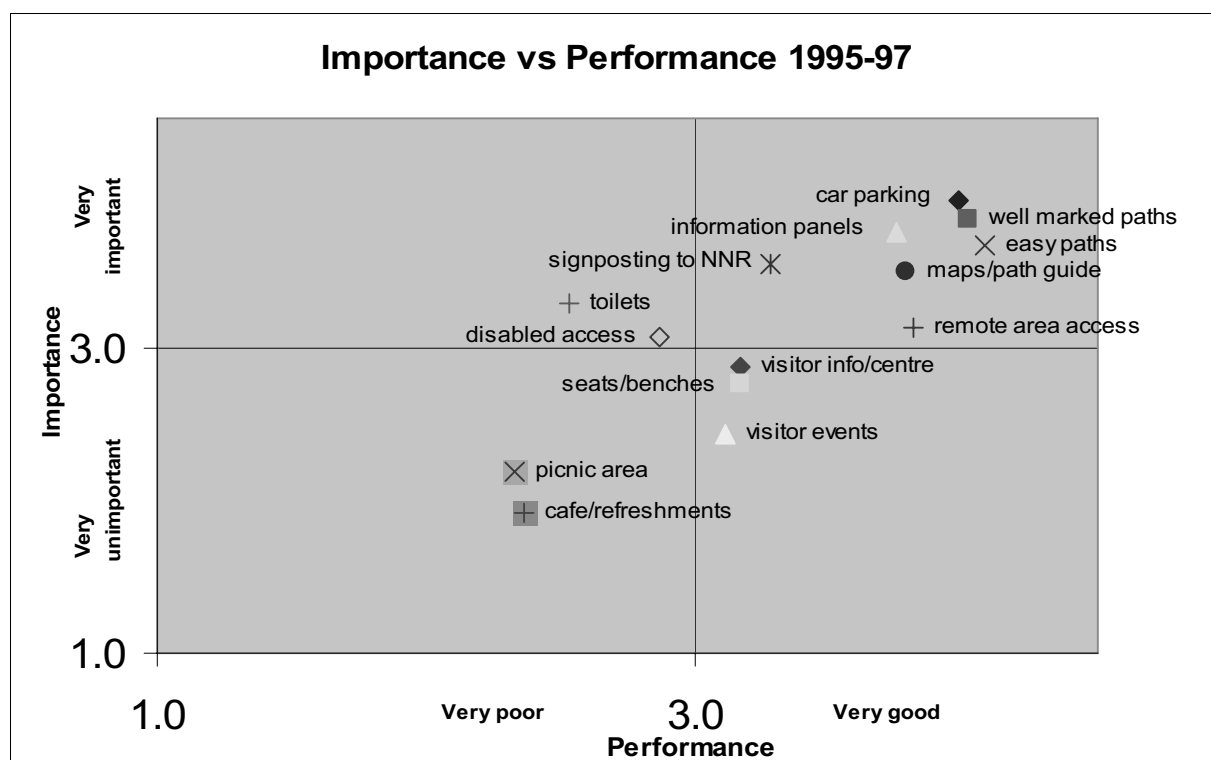


Figure 1: Visitors' perceptions of importance and performance 1995-97 (mean scores are shown).

people who are regular and frequent users of the sites (often for dog walking). However, winter visitors were more likely to arrive by car.

Figure 1 shows the performance of various aspects of 'visitor facilities' on the Reserves in the context of their importance as perceived by the visitors during the first phase of the study (1995-97). Ideally, all items should be toward the top right hand corner – where the performance of the most important items is best. Items in the top left quadrant, deemed by visitors to be important but performing badly, are those that need to be prioritised for attention by site managers.

The aspects of the site which were consistently most important to visitors throughout all of the surveys in this first phase were car parking, well marked paths and information panels. Aspects of service 'not required' – especially by winter visitors - were visitor events, café/refreshments, picnic areas, disabled access (although visitors did place some significant importance on this facility, even though not for themselves personally). Overall, 84.6% of visitors expressed themselves as either 'completely' or 'very' satisfied with their visit. Only a very small percentage (around 3%) expressed any degree of 'dissatisfaction'. The two items in the top left quadrant, toilets and disabled access, will be referred to later in this paper.

Awareness of English Nature as managers of the sites was 48% for summer visitors and the mean figure for the period of study was just 52%. Awareness by visitors of English Nature as an organisation was somewhat higher at 69% (compared to just 2% recognition in a national MORI opinion poll).

Implications for resource allocation

The results from the survey clearly showed the areas that visitors considered to be important to making their visit more pleasureable. It also indicated that, generally, English Nature was already providing these facilities to a high standard on the Reserves where the study had taken place. While around 40% of visitors wanted no change, what appeared to come from the study was that visitors wanted 'more of the same' rather than an investment in different kinds of facilities.

From an organisational management point of view, while satisfaction was felt at the general tone of visitors' comments, some dissatisfaction was expressed in the poor recognition of English Nature.

There did not appear to be any particular urgency to provide improvement to any particular service to satisfy visitors needs although it was recognised that a programme of continued investment in the 'capital' estate fabric of the Reserves was required. On the other hand, it was suggested that an overhaul of information panels and other signage across the Reserves could bring about an improvement in visitor recognition of English Nature's role as managers as well as improving the performance of this third-most-important service.

Other factors influencing the allocation of resources for visitor-related works on NNRs included impending changes to disability discrimination law in the UK and new legislation to improve countryside access in England and Wales. There was a recognition of the part that National Nature Reserves had to play in the provision of better countryside access; in particular, following the impact of restrictions during the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis. At the same time, English Nature was undertaking a rebranding of its house style which gave opportunity for new on-site signage; while developments in sustainable transport brought consideration of its application to National Nature Reserves, many of which are in relatively remote areas.

Development of access standards

Clearly, improvements to physical estate attributes can be costly. When one is considering works over some 160 sites, of varying size/habitat/proximity to urban areas/etc, the costs soon begin to mount up. For example, to provide basic replacement of entrance signs to all of the Reserves was estimated to cost around £160,000 (232,000 Euros). Yet this allowed just £1,000 per site (1,444 Euros) – a miniscule amount.

Other works are needed to be considered to upgrade facilities on sites - both where the surveys had taken place and others - to take account of the results of the visitors' opinions as well as the effects of the legislation changes referred to above and other 'political' pressures. Upgrading popular

paths to make them easier for visitors – whether with or without disabilities, new roadside signage to sites, better waymarking of paths and improvements to car parking arrangements all come at enormous cost and would need to be carefully prioritised to ensure that scarce resources were well spent.

As a first stage in the process of prioritisation, it was determined that the Reserves themselves needed to be categorised according to their appropriateness for development for public access. It was decided that four groups should be identified and the criteria for this categorisation were as follows:

- **Spotlight NNRs**
These Reserves should be robust and able to be managed for large numbers of visitors; provide the opportunity for visitors to enjoy the wildlife experience and be suitable for making a significant contribution to promoting core nature conservation messages.
- **Gold NNRs**
These Reserves have robust species and habitats and no intractable problems of access. They will be developed in order to attract more visitors and may aspire to Spotlight status. It is likely that most NNRs will fit this classification.
- **Silver NNRs**
These NNRs are used mostly by local people. They are robust enough to allow modest numbers of people to visit them, using predominantly marked paths and tracks.
- **Bronze NNRs**
These Reserves may contain a high degree of risk to the public or, in most cases, have access restraints linked to tenure. They will have restricted access but may include access for specific purposes such as scientific research and education.

The next stage was to consider which of the range of ‘facilities’ were felt to be appropriate for each category of Reserve.

These 26 facilities, shown in Table 2, became known ‘the standards’ and site managers were subsequently asked to report progress towards achievement of each for the NNRs under their control.

Subsequent works schedule

Fortuitously, at this time English Nature was allocated £10 million (14.4 million Euros) through the government’s Capital Modernisation Fund (CMF) which was set up “as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review in 1998 to support government departments’ capital investment projects to improve key public services or public infrastructure.” (Treasury 1).

The aims of the funding to English Nature was “to improve Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and increase public access to National Nature Reserves”. (Treasury 2).

Site managers were invited to bid for funds for particular projects which would deliver improvements against the targetted standards and which could be completed within the allowed 2 year time frame dictated by CMF. In addition, two corporate projects were run concurrently to achieve re-signing of all of the NNRs and to pilot visitor counting apparatus (Melville & Ruohonen, 2004).

Follow-up qualitative survey

Following the substantial completion of the works funded through CMF, with additional funding from English Nature’s core funds, a second phase of visitor opinion surveying was carried out using the same set of questions as in the first tranche. As with the first phase, specialist consultants were used to carry out the field work and assessment. Single day-long surveys were carried out during Winter 2004 and Summer 2005 on 15 sites, 6 of which had been included in the original phase. 125 interviews were conducted during the winter survey: 443 during the summer.

Figure 2. shows the importance and performance of the same set of ‘visitor facilities’ perceived by the visitors during the second phase of the study (2004-05). Comparing this figure with Figure 1 shows that, again, the majority of items fall into the top right quadrant. Disabled access appears in this quadrant now (having moved from the top left).

The only item in the top left quadrant (‘very important’ but ‘very poor performance’) is toilets and, in comparison with the earlier survey, their

Table 2: The 'standards' required for each category of National Nature Reserve.

Standard	Spotlight	Gold NNRs	Silver NNRs	Amber NNRs
Off-site signing – brown 'tourism' sign	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>	<i>Not required</i>
Off-site signing – white sign	Required	Preferred	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>
Reserve leaflet – full colour	Required	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>
Reserve leaflet – b/w or two-colour info sheet	Required	<i>Not required</i>	Preferred (b/w or full-colour)	Preferred
Web site	Required	Required	Required	Required
Media relations ongoing	Required	Required	Required	Required
Media training	Required	Required	Required	Required
Interpretation training	Required	Required	Required	Required
Interpretation plan	Required	Required	Required	Required
Green travel plans	Required	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>
Educational facilities	Required	Required	Required	Required
Community involvement and volunteers	Required	Required	Required	Preferred
Links to other places	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>	<i>Not required</i>
Entrance signs	Required	Required	Required	Required
Orientation panel(s)	Required	Preferred	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>
Interpretation panel(s)	Required	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>
Self-guided walks	Required	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>
Access for all abilities	Required	Required	Required	Required
Risk assessments	Required	Required	Required	Required
Structures in safe condition	Required	Required	Required	Required
All year access	Required	Required	<i>Not required</i>	<i>Not required</i>
Visitor counting mechanisms	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>	<i>Not required</i>
Staff presence (% time)	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>	<i>Not required</i>
Events programme	Required	Required	Preferred	Preferred
Car parking	Required	Preferred	<i>Not required</i>	<i>Not required</i>
Cycle parking	Required	Required	Required	<i>Not required</i>

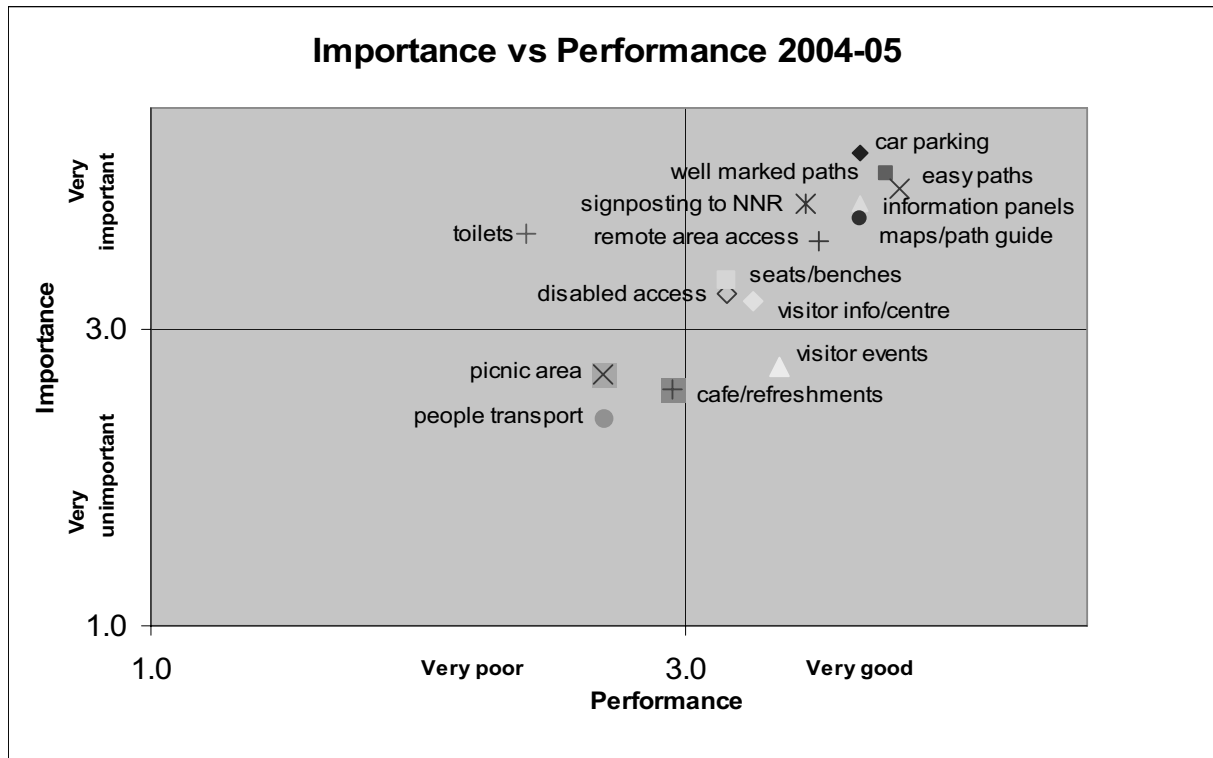


Figure 2: Visitors' perceptions of importance and performance 2004-05 (mean scores are shown).

importance to visitors has increased while their performance is worse. It is suggested that the reduced 'performance' is a result of the increased perceived 'importance' of facilities and relates to lack of availability as opposed to poor standards. Because visitors think that toilets are more important, they express greater dissatisfaction at the fact that none are available.

Opinions of changes

These surveys showed that overall satisfaction with the visit had actually fallen from the original phase, at 84.7 to 84% (winter) and 84.7 to 83% (summer). Figure 3 indicates that visitors to NNRs were less satisfied following the improvement works than before they had been carried out. However, it is important to consider the individual changes, as this can shed some light on the views expressed in the importance and performance section.

Respondents who had visited the area more than once were asked if they noticed any changes at the site since they started visiting it. The question was firstly asked spontaneously and then prompted. In Winter 2004, the largest proportion of respondents

noticed a change in the ease of paths to walk on, with 18% of respondents mentioning this spontaneously and 42% when prompted. In second place were car-parking facilities with 13% of spontaneous and over a third (35%) of prompted mentions. When prompted, information panels on site and way paths had now been marked were mentioned by 33% and 31% respectively. Positively, all of these aspects of on-site service provision were previously named as the most important to visitors. As an aside, it is interesting to consider just how unobservant people are about changes to their surroundings. If the highest spontaneous response identifying changes was only 18%, it means that a staggering 82% had not realised any changes had been made to the facilities on the sites. There was a substantial contrast between Summer 2005 and Winter 2004 in terms

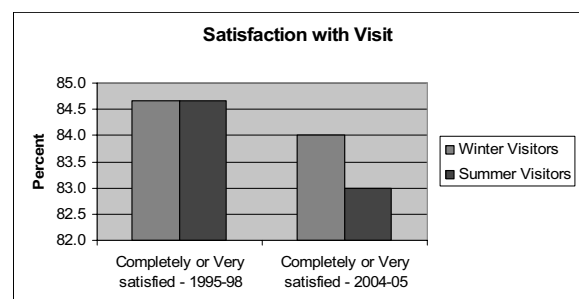


Figure 3: Visitors' overall satisfaction ratings.



Figure 4: Visitors' opinions of the changes to the standard of facilities on sites.

of the visitors noticing changes but this can be explained by the differences examined in these two audiences examined above (summer visitors being more likely to be first-time visitors). Generally, summer visitors noticed far fewer changes and of the changes they did notice were principally related to car parking and to the ease of paths to walk on. Respondents were also asked to assess if changes they observed have been for the better or for the worse (Figure 4). Overwhelmingly, changes observed were for the better as the negative responses were negligible.

Taking these results with the assessment of importance and performance, it appears that our visitors are expressing a need for increased comfort and guidance, building on the work that has already been carried out. Bearing in mind the high proportion of visitors who have previously visited (90%), this need cannot be attributed to a new, more cosseted, audience now visiting the sites but must indicate greater expectations amongst long-term visitors generated by the works that have recently taken place – whether they consciously noticed them or not.

Implications for future development work

When asked to suggest further improvements to on-site facilities, 43% of those interviewed in the first tranche suggested that English Nature was do-

ing a good job and nothing needed doing. Following the works identified above, only 31% respondents in the second tranche made the same comment. Of the specific improvements respondents asked for, requests for better information and signage by 18% in the first tranche had fallen to 7% in the second survey, indicating that the improvements to information availability and signage made from the CMF funding had been noticed and appreciated.

In the second survey, 6% were asking for more and improved paths – a slight increase on the 4% in the first survey. The 6% who were wanting more seating were still wanting it but the 8% demanding toilets had grown to 11% in the second survey. The surveyors reported that ‘overwhelmingly, the provision of more/better toilets is the improvement that the greatest number of respondents wanted to see’. Currently, English Nature has no proposals to provide toilet facilities at its NNRs but should consider including directions to those nearest available in information about the Reserves.

This project has shown that the use of visitor satisfaction survey data has been valuable in informing the priority of access improvement works to be undertaken on NNRs and, taken with other ‘political’ priorities, has shown that the use of ‘standards’ for reporting progress in implementation has worked. The analysis of two

sets of survey data from ‘before’ and ‘after’ the works were carried out has shown somewhat conflicting results but these can be explained by the increasing demands and expectations of visitors to National Nature Reserves.

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2 Further information is also available at: <http://www.english-nature.org.uk>