

Let's Count with Geocaching

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Geocaching appeared only some 12 years ago but has now developed into a very popular outdoor activity in many countries. It is a more “sophisticated” form of traditional tourism, where a geocacher visits interesting places, learns something, finds a hidden treasure (a geocache), and logs his visit into a paper logbook in the cache as well as into an internet logbook. Various cache types, sizes, degrees of difficulty, and other attributes give the geocacher opportunities to make choices and go places that align with personal interest and ability. Cache listings contain information about the place and sometimes include interesting information that may not be found elsewhere.

Despite its origin in California, geocaching is today most intensive in Monaco and the Vatican (when measured by cache density). From the states that are comparable in size, the highest cache density was detected in Luxembourg (0,855 per sq. km) and Germany (0,712). Geocaching is very popular in other European countries, too: Denmark (0,546), United Kingdom (0,507), the Netherlands (0,450), Belgium (0,432), Switzerland (0,411), Czechia (0,381) and Austria (0,305). Although there are countries without any caches, we can say that geocaching has spread all around the world. Nevertheless, in some countries, geocaching is performed mainly by tourists (e. g. in Croatia).

Intensity of geocaching is still increasing, thus the activity has an exponential trend. This trend can be easily observed on the internet by number of caches created or by cache log numbers. The chart below shows the intensity in Czechia of the numbers of newly created caches between 2001 and 2011.

In the countries mentioned above, the geocacher community represents approx. 0.5–1 % of the total population. However it is very difficult to get useful data on geocachers (number of geocachers per state, their activity, etc.) from the web.

Most of the caches are placed in cities because a cache should be placed near the owner's home in order to maintain it. But traditional tourist points of interest host caches, too. Nature, and especially in protected areas, is one of the main targets to place a geocache. Because sensitive natural features can be impacted by visitation through the creation of caches, managers of protected areas need to be aware of newly established cache sites. Communication between managers and geocachers is necessary to prevent or solve conflicts and should be used instead of restrictions. According to geocaching rules, every new cache should be discussed by its owner with the landowner and land manager. So far, such cooperation is not a custom among cachers, at least in Europe. Problematic caches can be altered through a message to the owner (adjustments can be done by changing attributes, listing, hint, placement; and in very specific cases, removal). If the cache owner does not react properly, such caches can be archived by volunteer reviewers (this means that the cache listing exists and can be found by its

code, but is not published among available caches). Reviewer permission is also essential for publication of every new cache.

Geocaching can effectively serve for natural heritage interpretation through cache listings or geocoins. This is similar to what protected areas managers do, but geocaching costs significantly less than their usual measures (information boards, leaflets, information centres, etc.). Cache listings can be compared to information boards or to educational paths. It is well known that young people do not read interpretive signs. Geocaching, however, is popular mostly among such youngsters and therefore may be a way to spread information among them. In listings, cachers often find information about the place (what could be interesting here) including flora and fauna, geology (especially in earthcaches), architecture, etc. On the other hand, many geocachers are interested only in getting “a point” for finding a cache and do ignore the listing. This is typical for “traditional-type” caches that are found by coordinates and require no further description. Interpretation of an area could also be done also through geocoins. Geocoins are mostly made of metal and can carry any graphic and a short text (name, sentence, URL address...). Geocoins, as well as travel bugs, are marked with a unique code. Their aim is to travel from one cache to another cache and their journey is logged through its code and their total travel distance is measured and visualised on a map. These data can be observed on a web listing of each trackable item.

Because geocaching is a volunteer activity, it should not be funded by state or companies. The Geocaching community is quite sensitive to any marks of profit in cache listings (as the world nowadays is crowded by advertisement), but the community is fond of various stuff dealing with geocaching (cloths, outdoor equipment, stickers, etc.).

In the Czech Republic, experience offers examples of good and bad practices, which can help inspire other cache destinations. Generally, for protected area managers it is important to know about all caches in maintained areas and to be in contact with the local reviewer.

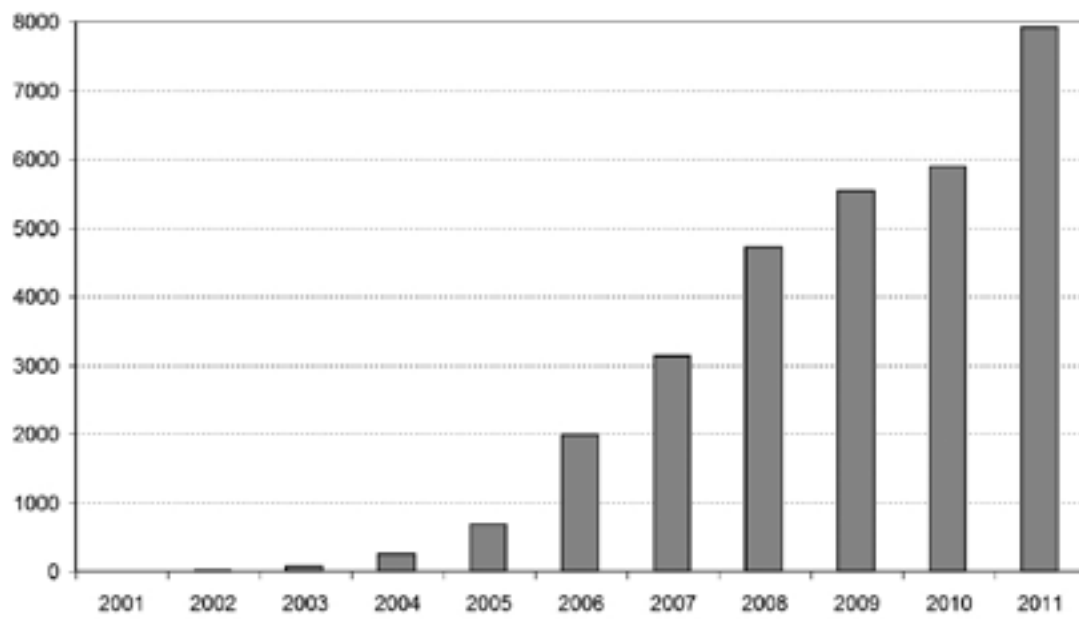


Figure 1. Numbers of newly created caches in the Czech Republic by year