

Managing tourism in a popular wilderness destination

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Introduction

Visitors go into the wilderness to see beautiful unspoiled nature where human presence is absent, or is believed to be absent and therefore human-made constructions reduce wilderness experiences considerably (Manning, 1999). The idea of tourism carrying capacity (TCC) has been used in wilderness and tourist destination management for assessing the impacts of tourism, both from the point of view of the impact of visitors on the environment, the physical carrying capacity, as well as from the point of view of the impact people have on other people, that is the psychological carrying capacity. Butler's (1980) model of tourism area life-cycle describes the stages that tourist destinations go through as the various capacity (e.g. environmental, social and economic) levels are reached. As the destination develops, the type of tourist changes, from adventure seekers in the involvement stage, to mass tourism in the stagnation stage. Many different variables can be used to distinguish visitor segments. Tourists can, for example, be analysed by the type of trip, characteristics such as nationality, age and sex, or their attitudes towards various factors. One of the most notable such models, was the so-called Purist Scale which was developed by Stankey (1973) in order to compare visitor perceptions and use of different wilderness areas. The TCC concept and the models Purist Scale provide valuable tools for managing tourism. The TCC concept structures the information gathered, which can then be used when deciding how many visitors are suitable for each tourist destination, what type of tourism is appropriate and how to manage tourism according to target groups. When that has been decided, decisions regarding capacity can be taken and if the destination is threatened by overuse, maximum numbers of users should be set.

Wilderness is often used as an image in the promotion of Iceland and is an important part of the tourism product (Sæþórsdóttir, 2010). Tourism has expanded rapidly in the country in recent decades. Nature is the main reason that 88% of foreign visitors come to Iceland and more than one third visit the Central Highlands which is the uninhabited interior of Iceland (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2012). Landmannalaugar is by far the most popular tourist destination in the Highlands. This very fast growth of tourism to the country and into the wilderness raises concerns regarding the difficulties of maintaining the qualities of the resource and the experiences of visitors. This study focuses on tourists' attitudes in Landmannalaugar and whether they have changed in a decade by comparing data that was collected in the year 2000 and in 2009. The research questions addressed in this paper are:

- Has the composition of tourists changed?
- Is there a change in the attitudes and satisfaction of the visitors in this period?
- How should tourism in the area be managed in the future?

Methods and main results

The study was conducted in Landmannalaugar which is a nature reserves of 470 km² located in the southern part of the Icelandic Highlands. A questionnaire survey was handed out in Landmannalaugar in the summers of 2000 and 2009 by two interviewers, who stayed in the area for a week during the high season of tourism. Questionnaires were in English, German, French and Icelandic. Completed questionnaires were received from 546 guests in the year 2000 and 1105 in 2009. The data was analysed with the help of the statistics software SPSS. Descriptive statistics are used to present the data. In the questions related to visitor's attitudes a five point Likert-scale is used, and t-tests and chi-square tests are used to test whether there is a significant difference between the two years.

The main conclusion of the study is that in 2000 20% of the visitors experienced that there were too many tourists in the area but in 2009 this had increased to one third of the visitors. The area now appeals to visitors characterised by less puristic attitudes than before as the proportion of purists has declined from 29% in 2000 to 20% in 2009. At the same time, many visitors are very satisfied with Landmannalaugar. The place is a symbol of wilderness in many people's minds and they value it and use it to gain a wilderness experience.

Planning tourism in a wilderness area is a complex issue, as tourism inevitable changes the area. To provide recreation opportunities in a wilderness area like Landmannalaugar is a complex issue, as pluralism exists in values and interests and there are conflicts of opinion about the development of tourist facilities. When finding the appropriate use level it is, though, not enough to identify the main target group at a destination and find what the visitors consider to be acceptable change. As Butler (1997: 18) points out:

Adopting an approach which relies on identifying what users regard as acceptable change, and basing usage levels on user norms and expectations can only result in increasing levels of use and development as those users concerned by development and increasing numbers will go elsewhere and will be replaced by those with higher use threshold levels.

Therefore, many destinations would exceed their appropriate use level and would not be able to maintain themselves at existing levels of quality and thereby not be sustainable.

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