

Visitor monitoring from a management perspective – Experiences from Sweden

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Introduction

Outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism are two increasingly important uses of Swedish landscapes which put greater demands on high quality visitor data. In order to support and develop outdoor recreation statistics and visitor monitoring, it is important to analyze what kind of methods managers use and their experiences from using them. In many recreation areas different interests need to co-exist. Visitor monitoring can provide knowledge that supports management of visitor experiences, visitor needs, motives, hindrances, as well as planning of future developments of outdoor recreation and tourism (Kajala et al., 2007).

This study reports preliminary findings from an evaluation of visitor monitoring in Sweden from a managerial perspective. Questions asked include *how* and *why* information on visitors is collected and used in planning and management. Several different visitor monitoring methods are available (e.g. visitor counters, observations, interviews and questionnaires) that can measure outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism participation. The applicability of these methods depends, e.g. on what kinds of questions are to be answered, the type of area, what activities are to be studied and number of visitors.

Method

For this study, 12 management representatives of Swedish nature areas were selected to participate all of whom had used different visitor monitoring approaches within the last five years. The selection of managers was based on the methods used and the geographical representation of different nature areas (both densely populated and more peripheral regions were considered). The semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out in March 2012 and consisted of questions regarding the methods used, the reasons for executing visitor studies, the managers' experiences and their reflections on future use and thoughts regarding development of new methods. A short questionnaire including 22 statements concluded the interview where the managers were asked to evaluate the use of information from their visitor studies for different purposes. The interviews (40-60 minutes long) were recorded but also noted down.

Results

Visitor counters

Visitor counters was the most common method among the interviewed managers, followed by questionnaires while personal interviews, focus groups and observations were the least used methods. Visitor counters was also the method which was most continuously used in longitudinal studies. The costs for the methods varied depending on the number

of visitor counters, if a consultant had been engaged or not and whether the visitor study had been included in a project which financed the study.

Visitor counters were used to get knowledge of the number of visitors and their patterns of movement in the nature areas during different time periods. The results were often gathered in databases and in some cases summarized in written reports. Information from visitor monitoring was primarily used to apply for money when managers thought that numbers and statistics were an effective means to communicate with decision makers. Another important use was to get a foundation for future decisions and as arguments in negotiations between managers and other stakeholders. Results were, however, not always perceived as reliable since some of the informants also experienced problems with the equipment and with the field workers' engagement. The need of creating an understanding of the purpose of visitor studies among the field workers was believed to be of large significance. Furthermore, the methods used for visitor counters differed among the managers, who had different experiences in terms of education and guidelines, how to use and apply the methods, handle the equipment and read the data. The managers were in agreement that knowledge of the area's landscape characteristics in combination with visitor use is fundamental when using visitor counters.

Questionnaires, interviews, observations and focus groups

The managers' reasons for doing visitor monitoring (i.e. questionnaires, interviews, observations and focus groups) were to get knowledge why people visited an area, as well as their attitudes regarding the area, services and management. The results of this type of methods were also thought of as a complement to the data of visitor counters. It was perceived to some extent as being time consuming and expensive to use questionnaires and interviews. In the development of the questionnaires, some of the managers had solved this problem by copying questions from other investigations since this approach was sometimes perceived to be a difficult task. One of the managers in the study thought that visitor monitoring requires experts and previous experience at a 'research level'. In daily operations, there are no such resources available as managers need easy and fast answers to be used in their work.

Evaluation of information usage

Figure 1 shows the results from the short questionnaire evaluating the usage of visitor survey information among the managers. Visitor counters were mainly used to get an understanding of (i) how many people that visited the nature area, (ii) trends in visits and visitors over time, and (iii)

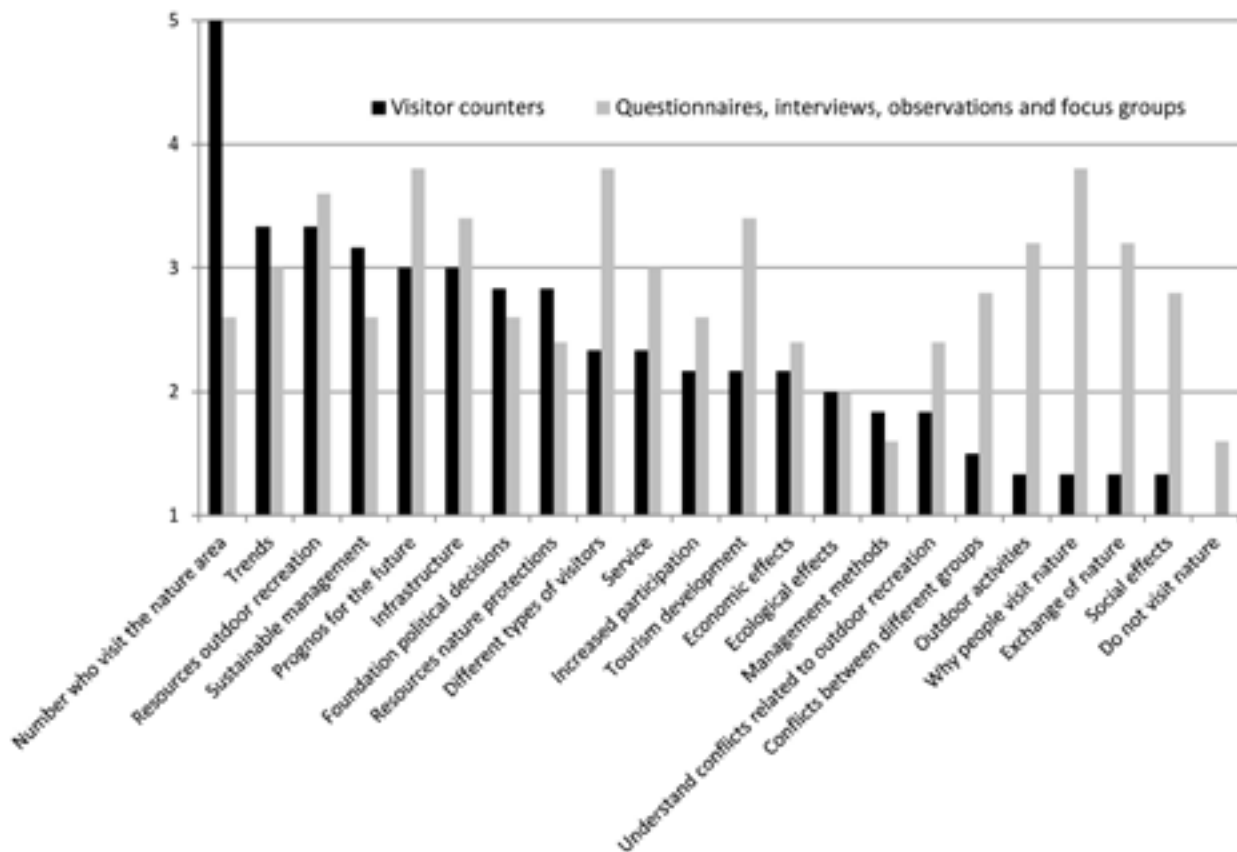


Figure 1. The managers' use of visitor counters and other monitoring methods evaluated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a large extent).

arguments for more resources to recreation management and nature protection. The results of other methods used were to (i) make prognosis of future visitation and usage, (ii) identify different types of visitors, and (iii) map out why people visit nature.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyze the purpose of visitor monitoring, to identify managers' experience of methods used as well as the practical use of monitoring data and results. Information for further improvements but also further research is also provided. Even though most managers know that different methods provide different information, and therefore would like to use or combine different methods, the lack of financial resources, time and understanding how to apply new methods are identified as

hindrances. Most of the managers want to use visitor monitoring data in their daily work, but are not fully there yet. How to reach decision-makers with this type of information is another issue pointed out in the study. In addition, there is no national coordination of collected visitor data, nor any co-operation between the local managers of Swedish nature areas, which could be another way to further progress methods of visitor studies as well as the actual use of the results.