Method for managing visitor experiences

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Introduction

A visitor experience is 'a complex interaction between people and their internal states, the activity they are undertaking and the social and natural environment in which they find themselves' (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 1998). Managers of leisure destinations wish to know what kind of experiences are popular. A visitor typology of experiences can help in effective marketing, to adjust the physical environment and infrastructure to visitor behaviour, and to minimize negative social, cultural, and environmental impacts of visitor use (Raadik and Cottrell, 2007). Cohen (1979) provided a theoretical and conceptual classification of visitors based on their experiences. Based on Cohen's experience domains, Elands and Lengkeek (2000) identified five modes of experiences with specific experiential and motivational characteristics. Cottrell et al. (2005) successfully applied the dimensions developed by Elands and Lengkeek in a study of Dutch forest service visitors. In his study Cottrell found a difference between tourist experiences for people on a vacation versus a day trip. Based on the results of Cottrell, Goossen and Boer (2008) reformulated Elands and Lengkeek's modes of experience into five short stories with the following motives: amusement; having a break; interest; immersion and physical challenge.

In our research we try to identify the salient quality conditions in the supply and preferences for each motive. Research shows (Goossen, 2010) that there are very distinctive elements and facilities for each motive. Each motive 'claims' its own quality conditions in natural settings with its own landscape preference and facilities. The focus in this research is to translate these conditions and preferences into concrete managerial items. A method is developed to help managers to work more demand-driven according to the motives. The method is an assessment of the suitability of a park for each motive.

Method

The method has a demand-driven base, consists of an internet analysis, map analysis, field analysis and an interview with the park manager. The method will end with results and recommendations for the park manager. The implementation must be done by an independent expert in recreation and not by park managers. The reason is that park managers have too much inside information to be objective. The method starts at "the visitor's home" with an investigation of the amount and kind of information about parks in the vicinity using internet and tourist information offices. The next step is to invest the accessibility between "the visitor's home" and the park to visit. How easy is it to reach the park using your car or bike and what kind of scenery do you encounter during your travel. The third step is to invest the experience atmosphere and the facilities at the entry of the park. The last step is to invest the experience atmosphere and facilities of the park itself. Starting point is a walk for 1.5 hour through the park. A total of 190 indicators are distinguished. Most indicators can be scored with a yes or no. The assessment of the park is designed as an app for smartphones. At the end of the assessment, there is a direct result.

Amusement has the most indicators and Challenge the least (table 1). Important to notice is that Amusement has more utility indicators than experience value indicators. To a lesser extent this also applies to the motive Challenge. For the motive Immersion, the indicators which are a part of the experience value are more in number than any other motive. For Have a break the experience value is also more important than the utility indicators. The indicators are weighted, partly based on the results of the literature study and partly based on expert judgement.

Results

The method was tested in a recreational park of 110 ha of the Dutch Forest Service. The land use is mostly forest with some open spaces and some ditches. There are many poplars and birches. Along the ditches nature is developed. There are trails and one cycle path. There is also a children nature playground. In the park, there are some references to the Roman period. The results of the assessment show that the park is more suited for the motive Have a break, and to a lesser extent also for the motives Interest and Challenge. The park is not very suited for the motive Amusement. Main reason is the lack of facilities such as restaurants and other meeting places such as barbecue and campfire places in the area. There are no marked trails. To a lesser extent the park is also not suited for the motive Immersion. The biodiversity is not high enough. It is not a real wilderness, it is too much designed.

Conclusions

Although the translation into concrete managerial items is not doing justice to the scientific complex relationship between motives, recreational use and nature conditions, the method is a practical tool for managers. By enlarging the motives and the features, the preferences of divers target groups becomes more understandable. It helps in the communication about (desired) recreational use. The result of several meetings with park managers was that they understand and recognized the motives.

Research on motives helps managers understand why and how people make decisions about travel to their area. It give the manager an simplified insight into the physical elements, products and services he could develop to make the park more suitable for recreationists searching for an experience based on a certain motive. Advertising can focus on those attributes in order to persuade the potential recreationist toward specific destinations or activity choices.

Table 1. Amount of indicators per motive

Indicator	Amusement	Have a break	Interest	Immersion	Challenge	Total
Information	14	7	12	8	10	18
Accessibility	8	5	5	5	7	9
Utility entrance	22	5	10	9	12	39
Experience value entrance	6	5	4	5	3	11
Utility park	32	16	18	8	21	57
Experience value park	24	33	32	36	12	56
Total	**106**	**71**	**81**	**71**	**65**	**190**

With this, managers have a tool to guide visitor flows to those areas which are most suitable and/or away from more vulnerable parts.

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