Joined and online-based visitor monitoring and benchmarking

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Detailed knowledge about visitors and their expectations is an important pre-condition for the monitoring and management of recreational and protected areas. Traditional methods used to gain information, such as face-to-face on-site surveys and counting systems are time-consuming and expensive. This paper presents an innovative approach for visitor monitoring, which integrates web-based survey technologies and at the same time allows just in time data analysis and benchmarking.

In the State of Brandenburg, in Germany, 15 visitor centers of Nature Parks, Biosphere Reserves and a National Park, which are state-owned or by NGO´s, have come together to form a network. The main object was to create a substantive strategic networking through the establishment of common quality criteria, a mutual market presence, mutual products and an innovative joint visitor monitoring. The visitor centers are the main entrance-doors to the protected areas and are therefore the ideal location to carry on visitor monitoring. Visitor centers offer basic information to discover the area and they are starting point for individual and guided tours.

The specific idea of a joint monitoring system is to build up a shared survey with a common set of questions rather than establishing singular visitor surveys in the individual centers. In this way, the questionnaire consists of 70% of common questions that can be compared among the visitor centers. In addition, it is possible to integrate individual questions, which include the specific regional characteristics of the individual centers. This joint visitor survey offers the potential to establish a continuous data base and to compare the data of the different centers for benchmarking purposes. It allows to review the performance of the own centre, but also to find out how the latter is ranked in comparison with other centers.

The (monitoring) system is designed as an online survey based on the questfox©-software, in which all data are entered into one system. Therefor the survey operates without media discontinuities.

The survey can be carried out in different ways (face to face, in written form or computer-assisted), depending on the individual technical or personal equipment of the visitor centers. For this purpose a standardized paper questionnaire and a to a large extent identical online questionnaire were developed.

The survey questionnaire can be filled in by visitors in various was:

- directly on touch-screen computers at the visitor centers. Where touch-screen computers are not yet available, paper questionnaires are used. The latter are typed in the online system later on by the visitor center staff.
- in their personal computer or their smartphone, by retrieving a web-link, which is written on a post-card available at the visitor centers.
- on the mutual visitor centers website, by selecting the visited center

Through differently generated links is possible to retrace, which was the most efficient survey tool.

The data analysis is possible at any time for any visitor center, according to pre-defined rights, because the survey is linked to an instant/live evaluation website. Moreover the data can be evaluated from all project participants without further knowledge of statistics or of the data collection and analysis software. Each visitor center has its own access and it can therefore retrieve only its own data. In the analysis section, several predefined reports are available and can be recalled. Through the website each visitor center can evaluate each question and compare them to all other participating centers anonymously.

The advantages of a joint and online-based survey are:

- comparability of the collected data (for benchmarking)
- a permanent and continuous all year-long data-collection and evaluation
- digital data collection without media discontinuities
- the usage of the different systems (e.g. touch-screen, personal computer) can be verified in order to measure the performance of each system
- low costs for the ongoing operation of servers and software after the initial implementation
- sustainability in terms of an long-lasting action (no use of paper on a long-term)
- corrections on the questionnaire are possible from a central server, moreover it is possible to include supplementary questions for temporary survey
- data collection also outside from the visitor centers
- no additional workload through the online survey for the participating institutions is necessary (data input directly into the computer)
- no specific computer performance is required (except for a fast Internet connection).

Challenges

- different content focus of the project-partners, e.g. concerning mutual content in the questionnaire
- motivating visitors to answer the survey (time factor, sometimes fear of using computers e.g. for elderly people)
- transparency about the benefits and advantages of the joint survey, motivating the employees to carry on the survey continuously

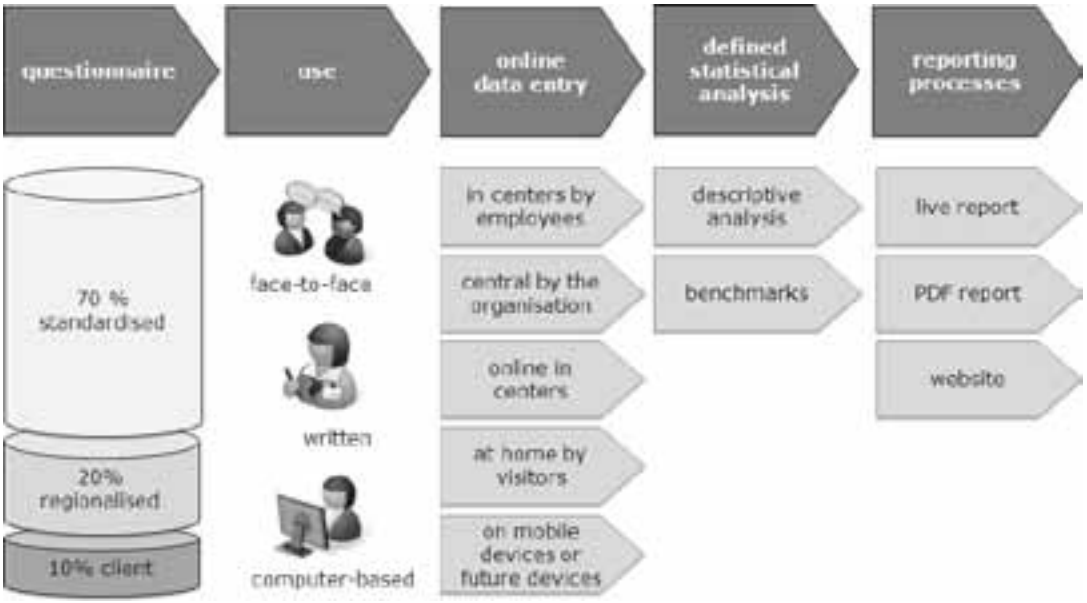

Figure 1. The visitor monitoring system at a glance

- partner's fear of the comparisons with other visitor centers
- find an agreement and observing mutual commitments among the partners
- too high expectations of the partners (e.g. in terms of number of interviews)
- partners' openness to criticism, same consideration of both positive and negative feedbacks
- stable, good internet connection
- Length of the survey questionnaire
- confusion between the different links during the data input of paper questionnaires.

In 2010, the system was already tested in detail and a total of 1.179 questionnaires were completed by the 10 initial visitor centers. The questionnaire was optimized again in 2011 and used for the first all year survey of 15 visitor centers. 1.240 full interviews could be generated. Also in 2012 the survey is being continued. The survey results from 2010 and 2011 indicate an overall high guests' satisfaction with the services of the visitor centers. Their suggestions, criticisms and compliments provided valuable information for the centers work. When asked what other centers and protected areas they know, the guests always mentioned two specific visitor centers. Other centers are less well known. This answer shows the potential that could be tapped through the centers network.

The survey also investigated socio-demographic data of the tourists and how they have heard about the centre and area. One result is, they visitors have come to know about the centre and the nature service by brochures / flyers and trough the recommendation of friends and relatives. The internet as an advertising tool had a minor relevance.

To sum up, the cooperation among the visitor centers and the use of a joint online-based monitoring system has generated several benefits. The contribution will present the joint system, summarize its challenges and explain the main advantages and success factors.