Quality assessment of public use in National Parks. Application to the Spanish National Park System

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Abstract — In recent years, we have observed how, worldwide, the goal of nature preservation has to be developed in a scenario of continuous increment in the number of visitors who are interested in experiencing PA resources, landscapes and stories. Spain is a good example of this process. It's estimated that the whole Spanish PA receive over 50 million visitors a year, ten of them to the National Park System. The progressive influx of visitors in a short period of time has made administrations and managers to offer and develop a broad network of facilities and programs in order to provide these visitors with information, knowledge and recreation. But, are we doing it in the best way?

In this context, this investigation defines an evaluation tool to asses the quality of public use programs developed in National Parks which has been applied to the Spanish National Park System, and could be applied to other parks and systems. It examines different trends and provides with some future recommendations.

Index Terms — Visitor information and visitor management, Visitor monitoring methods, Public use quality

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1 INTRODUCTION

Protected Areas (PA) have been used for recreation for a long time. Current levels of demand, however, indicate an unprecedented situation, initiated in the 60s. More than ever, the desire of nature preservation has to deal with a growing increase of visitors who look for recreation in these areas. In this context, public use has become one of the most powerful tools for connecting protected areas with society and one of the most valuable ones for sustainability.

Spain is a good example of this process. The traditional "sun and beach" tourist offer is being complemented by nature tourism, converting PA into important tourist destinations. It's estimated that the whole Spanish PA receive over 50 million visitors a year, ten of them to the Spanish National Park System (SNPS) [1]. As an example of this situation, the most visited one, is receiving more visitors a year (3.3 million) than territories like Costa Rica [2] . The progressive influx of visitors in a short period of time (from 2.2 million in 1984 to 10 in 2007) [3] has brought Spanish administrations and managers to offer and develop a broad network of facilities and programs in order to provide these visitors with information, knowledge and recreation. After years of investment, now is the time for evaluation.

There is a growing concern amongst PA professionals that many PA are not achieving the objectives for which they were established. As a response to this concern over the last decade, a number of assessment tools have been developed to assess management practices (as the existence of a wide range of situations and needs require different methods of assessment).

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In this way, this investigation (funded by the Spanish National Park Service) defines an evaluation tool to asses the quality of public use programs developed in National Parks (NP) which has been applied to the Spanish National Park System (Fig.1), and could be applied to other parks and systems. It examines different trends and provides with some future recommendations.

2   Methods

2.1 The evaluation tool

In order to asses the quality of public use programs in the SNPS an evaluation tool was designed by a panel of experts as an external evaluation based on HOCKINGS et al. (2000) and CAYOT & CRUZ (1998) [4][5]

The final version has 9 general categories which have been identified as essential for public use in PA. These categories are divided in 17 sub-categories, which comprise 78 semi-quantitative indicators (adjusted inside each sub-category).

Each of the 78 indicators is divided into four benchmarks which reflect a similar level of progress across all the indicators, ranging between 1 (bad) to 4 (excellent).

A series of four alternative answers are provided against each question to help assessors to make judgements as to the level of score given.

The categories and indicators are included in Fig.2.

2.2 Data gathering

The indicators are to be applied by a panel of external assessors (at least three) with experience in public use in PA in cooperation with PA managers.

Each indicator specifies its information source: interviews to NP managers, observation, questionnaires, documentation, etc. Triangulation is preffered whenever possible.

The final result for each indicator is the

avarage between the results of the assessors given that there is not more than a point of difference between them. In that case they should achieve a reasoned agreement.

3   Results: an assesment of the Spanish National Park System

The methodology has been applied to the SNPS. The information was gathered during years 2005 and 2006.
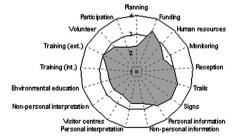

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 3 shows the main results of the application of the evaluation model to the SNPS. The columns show the different NP and the rows the different sub-categories analysed. In order to emphasize the main differences they are organized decreasingly from left to right and for top to bottom.

The results show a medium-high level of quality of public use for the SNPS (69.55% of optimum). No NP shows excellent or poor levels. Although the studied Parks belong to the same network, in general, there is a great heterogeneity between the different units and the analyzed areas.

All sub-areas are valued over the accepted value (2.0 points). The areas most valued are the economic resources, signs, trails and personal information. The lower value is for planning, followed by participation and the quality of visitor centres.

The lack of planning has been reported in different documents as one of the main problems of the PA in Spain [6], [7], and, as the results show, of the public use in National Parks. Planning should be the base of management but, in Spain, the high increase of visitors in the last decades has allowed little time for planning [8]. If we have good funding but not planning, how can we be sure that we are investing in the more sensible way? We aren't. Although the good values in the other areas show that things go reasonably well, there's space for improvement.

The low value for the visitor centres contrast with the high inversions that have been made in these facilities over the last decade.

4 Conclusions

The evaluation tool has proved itself as a useful tool contributing to detect deficiencies and best practices, enabling the managers to correct the first and use as models the last.

The public use model of the SNPS shows a medium-high quality. Although it is a network, there are important differences between its units.

No program shows a low quality value, but greater efforts should be placed on the communication programs. Visitor centres design should be reconsidered. Special attention is required by the planning process and the participation program.

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