

The visitors' perspective of visitor monitoring: results from two recreational areas in Eastern Austria

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Visitor monitoring in recreational areas enables park administrations to consider the needs and demands of visitors and the effects of the recreational use on the ecosystem in management strategies and day to day practice. However, many of the numerous methods used for visitor monitoring in recreational and protected areas (Hornback, Eagles, 1999, Cessford, Muhar 2003) can also affect the visitors' privacy. So far little systematic research exists on how visitors perceive this aspect.

This paper investigates the acceptance of different monitoring methods and takes under consideration what people think about visitor monitoring in recreational areas and how they feel about privacy issues related to such methods. On-site interviews were held in two recreational areas in Eastern Austria. The Wienerwald is a large forest area adjacent to Austria's capital city Vienna. It is intensively used for short time leisure activities such as hiking, dog walking and biking. The Rax is an Alpine mountain range about 80km south of Vienna, offering a great range of outdoor activities such as rock climbing and hiking.

The survey was conducted using written questionnaire based interviews with mostly closed questions regarding the awareness of visitors for the need of visitor monitoring, their attitude towards individual monitoring methods such as automated counters, video counting and interviews. In addition, demographic data and information about the visitors' leisure profile was also surveyed as well as their perception of use conflicts in the recreation area.

Visitors were intercepted at rest places in the recreation areas. The willingness to participate in this survey was very high (84%) compared to similar studies in hiking areas (e.g. Muhar et al. 2007). As acceptance of being interviewed was a key aspect of this survey, people who refused to participate were also asked for their reasons to do so. Less than half of the deniers were willing to substantiate their refusal. The most prevalent arguments were language problems (non German-speaking visitors), lack of time and missing eyeglasses. Only a few persons explicitly mentioned that they refuse any kind of interview or did not want to be disturbed. With regard to age and gender there was no difference between the deniers and the participants. A total of 313 validly filled in questionnaires were gathered for further analysis.

The results show a considerable awareness of the necessity for visitor monitoring. 79% of the interviewees agreed that visitor monitoring is needed to improve the management of an area and 85% stated that the visitors' needs and expectations should be incorporated into management processes. With regard to observation and counting, human observers and automated devices such as infrared-detectors had a higher acceptance compared to video observation. Video surveillance is meanwhile widely accepted by the public as part of our everyday environment (Hempel, Töpfer, 2004). However, outside the urban areas there still seems to be a demand for more privacy, and visitors are more sceptical about this monitoring technique. There was no correlation between age and gender of the interviewees and their attitude towards visitor monitoring; in general persons with a higher educational level tended to have a more positive view. For all devices, the acceptance of installation near entrance points was slightly higher than inside the recreation area. On-site interviews were strongly preferred against phone interviews. The timing of an interview (during the visit, at the end etc.) was not seen as a significant factor, but interviews should of course be conducted in resting situations (restaurants, picnic spots...).

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Regarding the disclosure of personal data, there was a willingness to communicate age, occupation, educational level and location of residence, while the personal income situation was frequently mentioned as not to be asked about.

The results show that visitors can be motivated to participate in visitor monitoring activities such as surveys if they are aware of the usefulness of such data to provide better visitor management. However, when planning a visitor monitoring scheme, the acceptance of the various methods to be applied need to be studied more carefully in order to avoid obstruction and vandalism.

References

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