

Introducing visitor produced pictures as a strategy for studying and monitoring visitor experiences in outdoor recreation management

Andreas Skriver Hansen, Unit for Human Geography, Department of Economy and Society, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. andreas.hansen@geography.gu.se

Visitor monitoring is an invaluable tool and source of information in recreation planning and management (Kajala et al. 2007). Traditionally, monitoring activities involve investigations on visitor numbers, profiles and spatial behavior, which is used for overview and information purposes. Unfortunately, monitoring activities that involve acquiring information about visitor experiences are rarely prioritized by managers (Elands & Marwijk 2008). This is problematic, especially because **recreation management** “includes managing both material and symbolic [...] landscapes” (Hall et al. 2013, p. 122). This is also emphasized by McCool (2006), who states that the state-of-art in visitor experience management needs improvement and that studying visitor experiences can be a way for managers to go beyond what he calls ‘superficial’ monitoring, which is monitoring efforts with a focus on visitor statistics only. Consequently, it is important that visitor monitoring efforts are not narrowed down to numbers and figures only, but also include detailed information about the details and specifics of various visitor experiences (McCool 2006). Indeed, it is an essential part of what has been referred to as experienced-based management, where securing and monitoring of high quality experience opportunities is put forward as a crucial part of area planning and management processes (Bushell & Griffin 2006).

From a management point of view, visitor experiences are particularly important to study and monitor because they reveal information about the physical, cognitive, and affective outcomes of recreational participation in a given setting (Jacobsen 2007). These outcomes can be both positive and negative, but they have in common that they influence visitor attitudes and opinions, and thereby also visitor satisfaction (Kajala et al. 2006). In order to secure high quality experiences and high levels of visitor satisfaction, visitor experiences therefore need to be examined by recreation managers as parameters and guidance for management decisions and planning measures. To gain information and knowledge about visitor experiences is, however, not an easy process, as it concerns moving beyond mere descriptions of different recreational activities in a natural setting (i.e. numbers and observations), to a focus on the experiential content and different symbolic meanings that visitors associate with recreational settings (McCool 2006). This calls for new thinking about how to both study and monitor visitor experiences and relate results to management practices.

Challenges

A particular challenge is that the study and monitoring of visitor experiences requires experiences to be examined on an individual level (Elands & Marwijk 2008). Furthermore, recreational experiences often contain very detailed content, which can be difficult to express or describe to other individuals not sharing the same

experience. Looking broadly in the literature on visitor monitoring, conventional based monitoring methods, such as questionnaire surveys and interviews, have most commonly been employed by recreation managers to study visitor opinions, attitudes and behavior (Kajala et al. 2007). However, when it comes to acquiring information about visitor experiences, these conventional monitoring methods often come short, as the depth and details of information they provide often is limited. This is especially the case when it comes to retrieving more qualified information about what experiential values and qualities visitors appreciate or seek in a given setting (Bushell & Griffin 2006). Consequently, recreation managers are in need of alternative study and monitoring measures that allow them to gain a more precise understanding of the visitor experience as a central part of recreational management.

On this background, the aim of this presentation is to explore how visitor produced pictures can be developed and applied as a potential study and monitoring tool in recreation management to provide important information about what visitors consider important experience values and qualities. To support this aim, a qualitative based case study from Sweden is introduced wherein visitor produced pictures have been applied as the main methodological approach. The case study itself took place during the summer of 2014 and involved 41 participants who via smart phones took pictures of important recreational experience values. Results show that recreational participants tend to focus on six different categories of experience values and qualities:

1. Natural elements
2. Social situations
3. Cultural environments
4. Recreational activities
5. Emotional reactions
6. Disturbing factors.

In the presentation, these categories will be described both broadly and in depth, and with special attention given to management implications in terms of studying and monitoring important experience values and qualities. The paper concludes that visitor produced pictures have considerable potential as an informative and efficient tool to capture important visitor experience values and qualities. It is therefore important that future research continues with the development of visual methods as a monitoring approach in recreation management.



Bushell, R. & Griffin, T. 2006. Monitoring visitor experiences in protected areas. *PARKS*, 16(2), 25-33.

Elands, B. & Marwijk, R. 2008. Keep an Eye in Nature Experiences: Implications for Management and Simulations. In Gimblett, R. & Skov-Petersen, H. (Eds.): *Monitoring, Simulation, and Management of Visitor Landscapes* (pp. 59-84). Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 449 p.

Hall, D.M., Gillbertz, S.J., Horton, C.C. & Peterson, T.R. 2013. Integrating Divergent Representations of Place into Decision Contexts. In Stewart, W.P., Williams, D.R.

- & Kruger, L. (Eds.): *Place-Based Conservation: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (pp. 121-136). London: Springer, 264 p.
- Jacobsen, J.K.S. 2007. Use of Landscape Perception Methods in Tourism Studies: A Review of Photo-Based Research Approaches. *Tourism Geographies: An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment*, 9(3), 234-253.
- Kajala, L., Almik, A., Dahl, R., Dikšaitė, L., Erkkonen, J., Fredman, P., Jensen, F. S., Karoles, K., Sievänen, T., Skov-Petersen, H., Vistad, O. I. & Wallsten, P. 2007. Visitor monitoring in nature areas – a manual based on experiences from the Nordic and Baltic countries. *TemaNord* 2007:534. Stockholm: Naturvårdsverket, 207 p
- McCool, S.F. 2006. Managing for visitor experiences in protected areas: promising opportunities and fundamental challenges. *PARKS*, 16(2), 3-9.