

Barrier-free nature experience in national parks – Evaluation of visitor guidance through experience engineering

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More than 7 million people in Germany are known to be severely handicapped and about 17 million are limited in daily life. Barrier-free accessibility in sport and tourism is therefore very important in the light of equal opportunities and social participation. Installing the trail “Wilder Weg” has been a first step of the Eifel National Park Administration in 2014 to grant everyone access to experiences with and within nature. The trail to experience nature is a barrier-free circular route with ten partly interactive stations providing information about various forest-related subjects as well as the biological diversity within the Eifel National Park. The fully accessible Wild Kermeter area for experiencing nature is situated on the slopes of the Kermeter hills about 500 m above sea level between two water reservoirs. The forest covering the Kermeter is one of the biggest deciduous forest areas in the Rhineland and is characterized by red beeches that are up to 200 years old. It is said to be the “ecological core element” of the national park.



Figure 1. Ecotainment stations with full accessibility distinguish themselves not only by ways free of obstacle and free of gradient, but also stimulate several senses. Thus the station “bark beetles” includes audio records (also into language easy to understand), photographs, and tactile galleries of the bark beetles. Beside its function guiding to the next station, the tunnel makes it able to experience the habitat of the bark beetles between bark and wood. (Photo: BRSNW, Disabled Sports Association of North Rhine-Westphalia)

The purpose of the study has been to discover the actual accessibility and usability for all people, either handicapped or not, to prove the attractiveness of each station to the visitors and to find out whether the measures of experience engineering can take over the tasks of visitor guidance effectively. 137 people, aged from 6 to 82 (49% female, 51% male), have taken part in the evaluation of the Wild Kermeter in the period of 07.2015 to 10.2015. Half of the sample was physically and/or mentally handicapped. The evaluation of the barrier-free utilization possibilities in the investigation area is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative researching methods. Paper-pencil surveys, participatory observations and an adjusted Visitor Employed Photography have been applied.

The results show the needs “experience nature” and “movement” to be the main reasons for visiting the trail “Wilder Weg”. The offerings at the trail and in the Wilder Kermeter area for experiencing nature are attractive and therefore visited selectively. They are perceived as being “instructive” and “eventful”. It seems to be important that a successful visit is dependent from an innovative character of experience engineering and the possibility of getting to know something new or to experience something already known in a new way. Regarding the full accessibility, it is important to take different perceiving senses into account (figure 1).

The barrier-free trail is therefore gladly being visited, also from people without handicap, for its simple and even paths, that offers a high sense of security. The study confirms the statement of the German Society Tourism For All, NatKo, that barrier-free accessibility is compelling necessary only for 10% of the visitors, helpful for 30%, and indeed, for 100% comfortably. In addition, 98 % of the interviewed persons were completely satisfied by this offering and enjoyed using the trail.

Adjusted to the individual needs of a selected target group, in this particular case for handicapped people, and offering convenient possibilities to experience something special, measures of experience engineering like the trail “Wilder Weg” at the Eifel National Park are a very helpful instrument to manage visitor flows. Even target groups which were not primarily focused are addressable by qualitative measures.



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NatKo – Tourismus für alle (n.d.): *Tourismus für alle*. Retrieved on 2016-05-30 URL: http://www.natko.de/index.php/tourismus_fuer_alle