



Using volunteer-employed photography to inform tourism planning decisions: A study of St David's Peninsula, Wales



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Participatory approaches, such as volunteer-employed photography (VEP) can enhance tourism planning.
- Using participant-generated visual images can widen and deepen planners' insights.
- Locals and residents have different understandings and perceptions of place.
- VEP has considerable potential as a participatory planning tool.

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ABSTRACT

More effective tools are needed to empower stakeholder participation in tourism planning processes, and volunteer-employed photography (VEP) is a promising option. This paper discusses the use of VEP to inform tourism planning on St David's Peninsula in Wales. Locals and tourists were given cameras and photo diaries, and asked to use VEP to comment on what they do and do not appreciate about the area, existing planning problems and ways to avoid future planning problems. Through this case, the paper examines the appropriateness of VEP as a tool for assisting tourism planning. The major finding is that a richer, deeper and more valuable dataset can be generated through the participation of host communities and visitors using the VEP approach. As a means of visually representing participants' views, VEP can be a powerful data collection and analysis tool, making a significant addition to the tourism planning toolkit at the local level.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have argued persuasively that effective public participation is crucial to the success of tourism planning (Gunn & Varr, 2002; Jamal & Kim, 2005; Wearing, Wearing, & McDonald, 2009). Spencer (2010) suggests that failing to incorporate public participation into the tourism planning process can compromise the success of what is being planned. Reed (1997), meanwhile, has noted that tourism planning is fundamentally a political process, with many stakeholder groups, all with different interests, competing against each other over different land uses. Participatory planning may be useful in such circumstances to reduce the power differentials involved, thereby producing more equitable planning

outcomes. Another emerging view is that “inside” knowledge of local resources and ecosystems can and should be used in making planning decisions (Schultz, Folke, & Olsson, 2007).

Such arguments have, however, largely failed to persuade tourism planners to adopt such techniques. The preferred approach among tourism planners in developed countries thus remains one of public consultation, as opposed to public participation (Shiple & Utz, 2012). Public consultation implies seeking people's approval of plans that the authorities have already developed on their behalf. Public participation, on the other hand, seeks to involve members of the public in the production of the plans. The failure of tourism planners to embrace participatory approaches may be due to a lack of recognition of their potential to enhance planning. Alternatively, tourism planning authorities may believe they lack the resources needed to implement such approaches (Hall, 2008). The latter seems more likely, in that the practical application of participatory planning remains rare, even among authorities that acknowledge its potential to enhance planning outcomes (Wearing, Grabowski, Chatterton, & Ponting, 2009a; Wearing, Wearing, et al., 2009).

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The perceived impracticality of participatory planning techniques may, however, be simply that: a perception. Indeed, few studies have attempted to apply participatory planning in the real-world context of planning and fewer still have considered its practicality. The practicality of any given technique, should, of course, be considered in the light of its benefits: the additional insights that using it is able to bring to the tourism planning process. The aim of this study is to assess of the practicality of a particular participatory planning technique, known as volunteer-employed photography (VEP), in relation to its potential to enhance the tourism planning process. This will be assessed through the experimental application of VEP in the St David's Peninsula, which is part of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park (PCNP) in Wales (see Fig. 1).

The objectives are:

- (i) to assess the potential of VEP to generate data that are both appropriate and useful in enhancing the tourism planning process. This will be examined through the application of VEP to tourism planning in St David's Peninsula;
- (ii) to use VEP to attempt to identify points of similarity and difference in the opinions and experiences of locals and tourists with regard to the area's built and natural environments. The study will also assess the potential for the technique to help inform the situation analysis of a busy tourism area (Lavery, 2002); and
- (iii) to demonstrate the potential of VEP to assist in conflict resolution by identifying problems and generating potential solutions. Indeed, according to Wearing, Grabowski, et al. (2009), the first step in conflict resolution is to identify the sources of the conflict.

In order to address these objectives, the theoretical arguments for using VEP as a means of assisting in tourism planning are first investigated. The main findings of the application of the technique in the St David's Peninsula in Wales are then discussed. Finally, the costs and benefits of the use of VEP as a tool to assist in tourism planning are assessed.

2. Use of photography in the social sciences and tourism research

2.1. Use of photography in social science research

Social scientists have historically tended to use pictorial images in their writings merely for illustrative purposes and often simply to break the monotony of text (Prosser, 1998). As such, artwork and photographs have tended to be used essentially to supplement more traditional forms of research, rather than as data (Emmison & Smith, 2000). Becker (1995) notes the sparse use of photography in sociological research and finds the slow development of the field of visual sociology astonishing. Becker attributes this to a widely held perception on the part of sociologists that the use of visual images is basically a ruse to persuade readers to accept poorly justified conclusions. Becker finds this particularly perplexing, since photographs are used routinely by natural scientists, including astronomers and biologists.

The most contentious issue in the use of visual data in the social sciences is that they best lend themselves to qualitative analysis, which is often considered to be too subjective. Harper (1988) counters this allegation by proposing that the researcher is fundamentally charged with the task of interpretation in any form of social research: the findings of social research are always passed through the researcher's personal filter as he or she is drawing conclusions. Prosser (1998) argues that photographs present the

real world in the much same way as paintings, or indeed writing. Data embodied in any of these media require interpretation and this task must fall to the researcher. Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty (2006), meanwhile, suggest that researchers should embrace the inherent subjectivity of the photograph for the very reason that it reflects the photographer's views, biases and knowledge: the very things they are seeking to understand. Sketches, paintings and photographs are simultaneously both technically and socially created (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). The pen captures the world as it is perceived by the writer and, in much the same way, the camera captures what the eye sees (Jokinen & Veijola, 2003). Taylor, Czarnowski, Sexton, and Flick (1995), meanwhile, argue that the camera lens and the human eye both represent the point of view of the person looking at something and taking a photograph of it.

While photographs have generally been under-used in tourism research, this is not to suggest that they have been entirely overlooked (Garrod, 2008). A major use of photographs is in a technique known as 'photo-elicitation'. First described by Collier (1967), the method uses photographs which the researcher has either taken personally or collected from secondary sources as visual cues in questioning the research subject (Jenkins, 1999; Loeffler, 2004). It has been argued that photo-elicitation can afford more and better insights into social phenomena (Matteucci, 2013). Even so, photo-elicitation cannot achieve maximum insight because of the filter that still exists between the intended meaning of the photograph when it was taken or collected by the researcher, and the participants' own understanding of the subject and its meaning in the context of their particular view of the world.

The solution to this dilemma is, to allow the research subjects to supply their own photographs (see Fig. 2). This potential was first explored in the 1970s by two studies in which participants were given cameras and asked to photograph their experiences of a particular subject. These studies were the first to use participatory photography techniques. Traweek (1977) used VEP (which Traweek called "visitor-employed photography") to investigate visitors' perceptions of a river environment. In the same year, Ziller and Smith (1977) used participant-generated photographs to study participants' perceptions of themselves. Since that time there have been over 300 studies undertaken using what is essentially the VEP technique (Balomenou & Garrod, 2014). One problem in trying to estimate the use of studies using VEP is that at least 34 terms have been proposed to denote the technique (Balomenou & Garrod, 2014).

The major strength of VEP is that it embraces subjectivity, previously understood to be a disadvantage of photographic methods in social research. People's lives are best understood by those people themselves, and the researcher's role is to interpret their stories and opinions. Subjectivity is an inescapable feature of all social research, and VEP recognizes this, working with it rather than against it. Further advantages include the empowerment afforded to participants to express their views (Armstrong, 2005; Hubbard, 1994; Rhodes, Hergenrather, Wilkin, & Jolly, 2008), the ability to collect and study personalized, "verbatim" experiential accounts (Garrod, 2008; Luttrell, 2007), and greater enjoyment, and hence engagement, on the part of participants (Castleden, Garvin, & First Nation, H.-A.-A., 2008; Kaplan, Lewis, & Mumba, 2007) and researchers (Thompson et al., 2008). Negative features of VEP as a technique, meanwhile, tend to be associated with the administration of the research, including its tendency to be resource intensive (Bijoux & Myers, 2006; Kaplan et al., 2007) and the greater possibility of technical failure, for example due to equipment malfunction (Goodhart et al., 2006; Johnsen, May, & Cloke, 2008). Common ground among almost all commentators, however, is that such methods are under-utilized in social research (Garrod, 2007; MacKay & Couldwell, 2002).

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