Tourism Management 31 (2010) 357–366

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tourism Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tourman

Planes, trains and wheelchairs in the bush: Attitudes of people with mobility-disabilities to enhanced motorised access in remote natural settings

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 16 October 2008
Accepted 28 March 2009

Keywords:
Mobility-disability
Motorised
Access
Wilderness
Nature
Environmental attitude

ABSTRACT

Managers of remote and wilderness environments have been among the last to accommodate the needs of tourists with mobility-disabilities – partly because of the physical difficulties and expense of doing so, but also due to a wider desire and mandate to preserve the natural and wilderness character of such areas. This research explores the extent to which those with mobility-disabilities desire enhanced access to natural areas. Do they share the same desires and values with respect to wilderness and access as the able-bodied? This paper reports upon a survey of over 400 residents and tourists, some with mobility-disabilities and some able-bodied, and compares their attitudes with respect to the development of various forms of motorised access to wilderness environments. Significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of their desire for greater access and also in how they view the impacts of such development. The group with mobility-impairments expressed a stronger desire for enhanced access in such environments. The environmental values of both groups were also examined using the revised New Ecological Paradigm scale, however no significant differences were found between the groups. The implications for tourism providers and wilderness managers are discussed.

1. Introduction

Within a three year period, from 1999 to 2001, three companies developed proposals to enhance access to Milford Sound, in the south of New Zealand. Milford Sound is one of the nation's tourism icons – it is a magnet for both international and domestic tourists, but is something of a tourist transport nightmare. Located on the remote south-west coast of the South Island, visitors staying in the nearest transport hub of Queenstown are required to travel by car or bus for a period of 5 h to reach the Sound. The road journey involves travelling over an alpine pass that is subject to avalanche and is periodically closed. To complicate matters there is very limited overnight accommodation for visitors at the Sound and they must generally travel back to either Queenstown or another accommodation centre, involving a further 2–5 h travel. The alternative is access by chartered flight, the expense of which precludes the majority of visitors, and is not without problems due to severe limitations imposed by weather and by the limited number of permitted landings at the Sound.

The above access plans involved various combinations of motorised transport, including boat, bus, monorail, gondola and also a tunnel. A significant portion of these transport developments would cross remote natural landscapes, mostly within protected areas. All of the access proposals attracted immediate and strong criticism from the environmental lobby. The nation's largest environmental group, Forest and Bird, launched a "Say no to the Gondola" campaign, addressing the first and most contentious proposal, with banners reading "No Cables in the Caples [Valley]", "National Parks not Theme Parks".

The proposers of these transport developments appear to have anticipated such opposition and accordingly, the environmental sensitivities of each proposal were highlighted in associated publicity material from the companies concerned. But in addition to espousing the environmental virtues of their proposal, one company provided further justification for their development by noting that their Skytrail would: "…allow those aged and less physically mobile visitors to experience… wilderness landscapes en route to Milford Sound" (Skytrail, 2001). These were, of course, the very wilderness landscapes that the environmentalists were arguing to protect.

This tack immediately cast into opposition the ethic of universal access with that of the primacy of nature. Interestingly, the company touting access for the less physically mobile produced no evidence that this segment felt wilderness-deprived, nor that the aged or people with disabilities would grasp the opportunity to participate in a wilderness experience – albeit from the confines of a gondola cabin or monorail compartment. Despite this, the

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doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2009.03.014

environmental movement chose not to engage in this debate – likely because they preferred to fight the battle on more familiar grounds of protected area legislation and environmental impact – but perhaps also indicating the power of the mobility/disability argument that the developers had used: The scramble for the moral high-ground was on.

The awkward silence that ensued – at least in respect to the case for developing motorised transport for those with mobility-disabilities within wilderness settings – reflects our lack of knowledge about the relationship between disability and environmental values at the individual level. The aim of this paper is to explore this relationship: through presenting the findings of an empirical study of mobility-disabled and able-bodied people, the paper offers an exploratory analysis of how living with a disability may impact upon environmental worldview. Does this segment view the environment in the same way as the mobile, and do they share the same aspirations in terms of access to wilderness? Is there a tension between these ambitions, and if so, what are the implications for nature-based tourism managers and providers in terms of enhancing access and visitor satisfaction, yet protecting resources (natural, cultural, spiritual)?

This paper uses the term persons with disabilities, and adopts the definition employed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (Article 1 (United Nations, 2006: 3)). As such the paper considers and responds to calls for tourism studies to consider/engage with the social model of disability (Shelton & Tucker, 2005). The focus of the paper is, however on people with disabilities that impact upon their physical mobility and capacity to visit and enjoy the full range of physical destination environments. Note that these disabilities may be developmental or acquired – for example through illness or accident, or through reduced motor activity in older age. It should also be noted that many of the latter group may not consider themselves to be persons with disabilities. For example, an older person with impairments may not be disabled "…if he or she can find ways to compensate for the impairment" (Mann, 2005: 2). To address the range of scenarios discussed above, this paper adopts the terminology "persons with mobility-disabilities".

1.1. Tourism and mobility-disability

Despite the recent turn in the tourism literature towards mobility (e.g. Burns & Novelli, 2008; Coles, Duval, & Hall, 2005; Hall, 2005) surprisingly mobility is viewed in just about every aspect apart from *lack* of mobility in the individual physical sense. This is worrying considering the demographic projections for most tourism-generating nations, pointing to populations with increasingly high proportions of the aged. Tourism destinations globally face the challenge of how to address this growing segment, a significant proportion of whom experience mobility problems. In addition to this, the number of people with disabilities is growing in size and wealth and increasingly engaging in travel (Groschl, 2004).

It is estimated that ten percent of the world's population has some disability (United Nations, 2006). This equates to around 650 million people, and while disability is skewed towards the developing world, there are over 50 million people with disabilities in the European Community alone. Of course not all of these people have mobility-related impairments, although this is still estimated to be a substantial group. In the United States for example, it has been estimated that as many as 14.4% of the population has some form of mobility impairment (Hartmann & Walker, 1988). In New Zealand, the site of this research, where 22% of adults and 11% of children are reported to be disabled, mobility-disabilities are the most common type, with 346,300 adults having mobility-disabilities (Ministry of Health, 2004).

Typically, older people are more likely to experience disability, with the elderly representing approximately three-quarters of the people with physical disabilities (Matthews & Vujakovic, 1995). This figure is expected to rise, with demographic projections pointing to the total number of people with disabilities growing substantially with aging populations. The number of older persons globally will double by the year 2050 (United Nations, 2007). In Europe, while 15.5% of the total population were reported as having a disability in 2000, this is projected to increase to 24.3% by 2030. Similarly the increase in North America will be from 12.6% to 20.3%, and in Oceania, from 10.2% to 16.3% (Mann, 2005). In the United States, 14.3% of the population over the age of 65 years have difficulty walking, and 15.9% have difficulty getting outside (US Bureau of the Census, 1991). Older people also lose the ability to drive, with older men living on average seven years, and women 10 years, beyond their ability to drive (Justiss in Mann, 2005). This decline in physical mobility that is associated with age, ironically occurs at a stage in people's lives where they have increased disposable income, fewer family ties and greater free time for travel (Fleischer & Pizam, 2002).

Notwithstanding criticisms that a disproportionately small number of persons with disabilities participate fully in mainstream tourism (Packer, McKercher, & Yau, 2002), there have been incremental gains in terms of enabling visitors with mobility-impairments access to tourist sites. Rather than being a tourism industry specific outcome, this is perhaps more of a product of an "…increasingly inclusive social climate in which the existence of persons with [mobility-disabilities] and their right to equal access to the world are acknowledged" (Silvers, 2003: 321). The gains have come about in two ways – through enhanced enabling technology and through legally mandated changes to improve access to buildings and to various modes of public and private transport. The tourism industry appears to be giving some recognition to the mobility-challenged both in terms of their being a significant stakeholder in relation to tourism site planning and development, but also a potentially valuable market. The US 'disabled consumer market' alone is 50 million strong, and as one disability researcher notes, American adults with disabilities collectively spend on average $13.6 billion a year on tourism. Thus "Creating ….accessible tourist destinations is not charity. It is good business" (Rains, 2007 in UNESCAP, 2007).

1.2. Mobility-disability and wilderness

However, arguably, there is an identifiable limit in terms of how far off the beaten asphalt or concrete path, persons with mobility-impairments are able to go. Most of the gains alluded to above are in the context of urban tourism, rural tourism and to an extent, nature-based tourism – but predominantly in the "front country". Access to the "back country" or remote natural landscapes for this segment is relatively rare. Of course there is a paradox in the sentiment of wanting to offer access to such wilderness for people with mobility-disabilities, for how do we develop such access without compromising the very values that constitute the wilderness in the first place?

While an estimated 37 million people with mobility-impairments travel (Murphy & Baig, 1997 in Ray & Ryder, 2003), people with disabilities, as a whole are under-represented as users of nature-based tourist settings. Their under-use (relative to enabled visitors) of outdoor recreation areas in particular has been identified (Hartmann & Walker, 1988). In the US, while 14.4% of the population is reported to have a mobility-disability, only 2.3% of users of public recreation areas are mobility impaired (Bricker, 1995).