



Reducing car-use for leisure: Can organised walking groups switch from car travel to bus and train walks?



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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the significant leisure travel sector, focusing on the attitudes of organised walking groups towards public transport use. A series of interviews with walking group leaders explored the design of organised walks, and factors affecting journeys to and from start points. The themes presented suggest an underlying group culture involving mainly circular walks, reached by car. The research indicates an underlying engrained dependency on cars to reach walks and a degree of opposition to using public transport, which generally contradicts widely-held attitudes towards protecting the environment. Future research should focus more in depth on the long-term removal of psychological barriers to using public transport for leisure, and persuasive measures aimed at groups.

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1. Introduction

Travel behavioural change has been the focus of increasing attention from governments and academics in order to reduce energy consumption, pollution and CO₂ emission levels and combat the worst effects of climatic change. Transport is a significant contributor to global CO₂ emissions, and the reduction of car use is considered as one of three key areas to address (in addition to air travel and road freight), but as technologies alone are not enough to stabilise emissions, behavioural change through policy is required (Chapman, 2007). A wealth of academic studies have sought to understand travel behaviour change in overall terms, focusing on aspects such as the application of psychological principles (Seethaler and Rose, 2004), assessing which segments are most likely to switch mode (Stradling et al., 2000), the travel habits of households (Ampt, 2003) marketing techniques (Brög et al., 2002), the evaluation of persuasive measures (Fujii and Taniguchi, 2006, Stopher et al., 2009) and the potential of increased use of alternatives (Ogilvie et al., 2004). Generally, these studies concentrate on all trips, or primarily on utility travel. Comparatively little attention has been given to non-utility travel.

Travel for leisure and tourism purposes is a focal point in efforts to reduce car use. Recent literature has identified that transport geography studies can play a substantial part in understanding sustainable tourism mobility behaviour and perceptions, particularly as transport represents

the most significant contributor to tourism-based greenhouse gas emissions (Hall, 2010). Whilst Hall's paper rightly acknowledges Gössling's work (Gössling, 2002a, 2002b; Gössling et al., 2005), focusing on the ecological footprints of international trips for tourism, and studies on walking and cycling (such as Lumsdon and Tolley, 2004; Ingold and Vergunst, 2008) all of which represent 'common areas of substantial research and policy interest', there is considerable potential to build on current understanding of sustainable mobility by focusing on domestic travel for leisure. In this context, Gronau and Kagermeier (2007) note that despite the high proportion of trips which are made for leisure, generally the use of public transport is low. To understand car-use reduction there is a need to further investigate attitudes towards modal choices for leisure travel.

This paper explores the issues underpinning high car-use for leisure, using recreational walking groups in Central and Western England as the focus of enquiry. In particular the study addresses transportation to and from organised group walks. This is a niche of recreationists in terms of the proportion of car journeys made for leisure in the UK, as there are hundreds of groups travelling on a regular basis throughout the year to walk in countryside locations (Ramblers Association, 2013) and visit points of interest; mainly by car and often using multiple cars per group (Curry and Ravenscroft, 2001; Dickinson et al., 2004). The paper adopts a qualitative approach to understand further the wider context surrounding travel for leisure activities, and to explore issues affecting public transport as an alternative to the car. The research focuses on the attitudes of designers of group walks towards changing the present culture of high-car use particularly to, from and within

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rural areas. Recommendations are then made to inform future actions to increase sustainability amongst leisure travellers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Managing the impact of leisure trips to the English countryside

The English National Travel Survey found that approximately 30% of all journeys made in 2013 were for leisure purposes, accounting for 41% of total mileage (Department for Transport, 2014). The same study found that approximately 61% of leisure trips are taken by car. Day trips to rural areas are more likely to be car-based, with a modal share of 89%, as opposed to a 78% average for all trips (Visit England, 2013). Walking is amongst the most popular activities undertaken for leisure, and is the most frequent outdoor recreation activity (Natural England, 2015). Travel to countryside locations often entails longer journey distances (Cracknell, 1967) which result in higher levels of climate-changing greenhouse gases (Golob and Hensher, 1998), air pollution (Small and Kazimi, 1995) and water pollution (Hensher, 1998).

Car-use by leisure travellers is detrimental to the countryside in a number of ways. The design of the infrastructure often cannot handle large numbers (Jaarsma et al., 2009). Increasing numbers of cars in the countryside result in high levels of noise pollution (Gray et al., 2001). Parked cars are also a form of visual pollution (Tolley, 1996) and, particularly at honey-pot sites, rural car-parks often become overloaded, increasing the likelihood of road-side parking and disturbance to local residents (Phillip and MacMillan, 2006). There are other problems relating to the increased visitor pressure associated with large groups walking in rural areas. They include added erosion of the ground, an increase in off-path deviation (Kierle and Stephens, 2004) and increased noise (Gramman, 1999) which amongst other things disturbs wildlife and reduces tranquillity.

Efforts to reduce the impact of vehicles in rural areas include traffic calming, road closure, car sharing schemes, speed reduction and the enhancement of publicity for public transport and routes for walkers and cyclists. Dickinson and Dickinson (2006) reviewed tourism and transport initiatives in the UK and reported that 70% were focused on public transport provision or promotion, whilst the remainder concentrated on traffic management, cycling or walking. Dickinson and Robbins (2008) found that any policy which restricts car-use or parking generally increases the public transport share. Road-pricing, a method used primarily in urban settings to reduce vehicle numbers, was trialled on rural roads in the Yorkshire Dales National Park (Steiner and Bristow, 2000). In this case, modal switch was achieved because of the additional presence of park and ride and complementary access measures. However, a study based in the Lake District National Park concluded that road-user charging was unworkable as a demand management instrument, as the forecasted equity costs exceeded road network efficiency gains (Eckton, 2003).

In terms of shifting leisure travel from car-based journeys to public transport, measures are often implemented at site level, by the management of National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) or other heritage sites, local government organisations or specific attractions. Understanding the organisational preferences and travel behaviour of groups and individuals engaged in leisure activities is a viable compliment to fulfilling policy goals to protect rural environments and promote sustainable travel behaviour.

2.2. The potential for changing leisure travel behaviour

Leisure travellers have several main motivations to visit the countryside. Experiences within natural settings which are pleasing, relaxing and exciting are more likely to achieve higher levels of satisfaction with the 'tourism product' than experiences associated with boredom and frustration (Chhetri et al., 2004). This encompasses travel experiences in which the primary motivation is pleasure. An attraction to natural settings, often accompanies a higher than average responsibility

for the health of the natural environment. A general profile of visitors to the English countryside, obtained by the Countryside Commission, highlighted strong attitudes towards threats or changes to the countryside, a high level of concern for conserving the environment and the identification of the countryside as a place for experiencing peace and solitude (Phillips and Ashcroft, 1987, cited in Macnaghten, 1995). However, car-dependency is prevalent amongst visitors to the English countryside (Dickinson and Robbins, 2007). Therein lies the paradox: whilst on one hand this segment of society sees the countryside as a place to engage in positive experiences and one which should be protected, they are also responsible in part for potential damage to the environment caused by their travelling habits. Furthermore, the reliance on a car to and from walking locations may ultimately contribute to reducing the perceived benefits of the activity.

Determining the relationship between public attitudes to conserving the countryside and their actual behaviour is difficult, as people's views are complex, often ambiguous and are bound by perceptions of the environment as an 'exemplary arena where societal and policy agendas are often contradictory, paradoxical and highly controversial.' (Macnaghten, 1995). Social psychologists have long attempted to understand public attitudes and the relationship strength or shortfall between attitudes and behaviour (Schwartz and Tessler, 1972; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977; Fazio and Zanna, 1978; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Situational factors have some influence on the likelihood of realising attitudes through behaviour (Davidson and Jaccard, 1979; Ajzen et al., 1982). In the context of walking, situational factors which might prevent groups from acting within the best interests of the environment include the weather, path condition, parking or the current public transport provision. An additional element of understanding the attitude-behaviour gap is the range of psychological barriers associated with changing travel behaviour. These include perceived behavioural control (the perceived ease of making the behavioural change), self efficacy (the individual's level of confidence in their making the change), denial, instrumental and affective barriers, knowledge or awareness of the consequences and habit (Anable et al., 2006). A further barrier, perhaps more relevant to a group activity such as group walking, is the effect of 'group norms'. This refers to the social influence of groups on individual behaviour, and has been cited as a strong contributory factor to explain differences between attitudes and intentions on the one hand and actual behaviour on the other (Terry and Hogg, 1996).

Human activity approaches to transport behavioural study position travel as a link in the process of fulfilling needs through the formation and accomplishments of daily sets of activities (Fox, 1995). This refers to a more routine form of travel, and whilst timetables, route network layouts and the geographical positioning of 'social facilities' have an effect on increasing or constraining public transport use (Lenthorp, 1976), travel for leisure is considered as discretionary and gives the individual a greater freedom of choice regarding when and how to travel. There is therefore an opportunity for walking groups to consider a mode of transport other than the car. Walking groups may potentially change travel habits by encouraging walks which use public transport. This study analyses the findings of a project named 'Bus and Train Walks'. The phrase 'Bus and Train Walks' has been used to describe walks which reduce energy and pollution by

- (a) using existing public transport rather than the car to access the countryside for circular walks
- (b) featuring public transport as part of a linear walk, for example, between stations.

The principal aim of the project was to explore the extent to which walking groups might consider changing the emphasis from car based circular walks to public transport based walks to reduce their environmental impact. There were three relevant objectives:

- 1) To review existing walks programmes of a sample of groups to understand existing travel behavioural patterns.

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