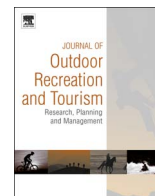




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

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

Managers' experiences of visitor monitoring in Swedish outdoor recreational areas

Rosemarie Ankre^{a,*}, Peter Fredman^a, Anders Lindhagen^b^a Mid-Sweden University, Department of Tourism Studies and Geography, ETOUR, Mid-Sweden University, Kunskapens Väg 1, S-83140 Östersund, Sweden^b Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SPM Box 7008, Vallvägen 9A, S-75007 Uppsala, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 February 2014

Received in revised form

21 April 2016

Accepted 22 April 2016

Keywords:

Visitor monitoring

Counting

On-site survey

Recreation manager

ABSTRACT

Systematically collected information on outdoor recreation participation, motives and behaviors can improve recreation opportunities and reduce the risk of user conflicts. There are many uses of this type of information for managers of recreational areas including analyses of environmental, social and economic impacts, development of infrastructure, and marketing to appropriate audiences. One key component in building this knowledge is the application of visitor monitoring. This study takes an exploratory approach by analyzing managers' experiences on different on-site monitoring methods at 12 recreational areas in Sweden. Results show that knowledge of these methods and their use are strongly linked to individual managers' skills and competence. Contemporary changes in recreation behavior calls for more innovative monitoring approaches, but managers included in this study primarily work with rather traditional methods, which is likely representative of the overall situation in Sweden. Networking, educational programs and closer collaborations with universities could facilitate some of the challenges identified.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- The study showed the relevance of improved visitor monitoring practices, and tailor-made monitoring guidelines, based on actual use and experience-based data.
- Adequate visitor monitoring practices:- help to better incorporate recreation activities and values in natural resource management decisions,
- increase the awareness of possible conflicts between recreational and other resource users,
- show the possible need for increased management capacity, additional training or new ways of visitor management and provide a better foundation for decision making.

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1. Introduction

Sweden is a northern European country rich in natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities. Official statistics show that 80% of the adult population walks for pleasure or hikes in a forest at least once a year, and 30% does so more than 20 times a year (Statistics Sweden, 2009). More recently, there has also been an increased focus on the social dimension of environmental and natural resource policies in Sweden (Writ. 2001/02:173; Writ. 2007/08:108; Writ. 2008/09:214), and in 2012 national goals on outdoor recreation were decided by the national parliament (Writ.

2012/13:51). Among the causes for this shift of interest towards outdoor recreation are urbanization (i.e. increased demand for urban proximate nature), promotion of public health (outdoor recreation as physical exercise), and an increased recognition of economic values associated with visitation to protected areas (e.g. regional development through tourism). This new interest in outdoor recreation (and nature-based tourism) also stresses the need to collect information about participation, both on-site and through population surveys (Kajala et al., 2007). Manuals on visitor monitoring were published by the Swedish National Board of Forestry and Environmental Protection Agency (Lindhagen & Ahlström, 2005; Kajala et al., 2007), but to what extent different monitoring methods are used and what experiences managers have with them is largely unknown.

Despite this recent interest, there is currently no systematic

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 010 142 78 36.

E-mail addresses: rosemarie.ankre@miun.se (R. Ankre), peter.fredman@miun.se (P. Fredman), anders.lindhagen@slu.se (A. Lindhagen).

visitor monitoring in use across the nation (Naturvårdsverket, 2009) and a recent study by Stenseke and Hansen (2014) argues that Swedish management policies of landscapes and protected areas are not up to international standards when it comes to outdoor recreation. Petersson-Forsberg (2014) also found that outdoor recreation interests are given low priorities when it comes to decisions on physical planning in Swedish municipalities. A reason for this somewhat contradictory observation could be the strong outdoor recreation tradition (Sandell & Sörilin, 2008). Outdoor recreation has been part of the every-day life to many people in Sweden, facilitated by the large supply of recreation opportunities vis-à-vis the population size and high accessibility (e.g. the Right of Public Access, public transportations and forest roads open to the public). For a long time, it was taken for granted that outdoor recreation is something for everyone to participate in – something that makes you feel good, and something that is good to society. So why spending public resources on something that people do anyway?

There are several arguments in favor of collecting visitor data in nature areas. The collected information can be used to improve recreation opportunities and reduced the risk of conflicts between different user groups (Gimblett & Skov-Petersen, 2008; Hornback & Eagles, 1999; Pröbstl, Wirth, Elands, & Bell, 2010). Protected areas are increasingly seen as key attractions in the tourism system, which further justifies the needs for visitor monitoring (Cessford & Muhar, 2003; Priskin & McCool, 2006; Wall Reinius & Fredman, 2007). Such knowledge is useful for the analysis of environmental, social and economic impacts, for development of infrastructure, and for marketing to the appropriate audiences (Muhar et al., 2002; Arnberger, 2006; Sievänen et al., 2008; Yuan & Fredman, 2008; Ankre & Wall Reinius, 2010). An important aspect in building this knowledge is to better understand what monitoring approaches are actually applied in practice and for what purpose. Hence, the aim of this study is to focus on managers' perspectives of visitor monitoring and analyze their experiences with different types of on-site methods in Sweden. The resulting information can facilitate future policy decisions that support visitor monitoring at a regional and national scale in Sweden (Writ. 2012/13:51).

While the concept *visitor monitoring* comprises many different forms of data collection, the focus in this study is on on-site visitor counting and surveys following the definitions in Kajala et al. (2007):

“Visitor counting means monitoring of area use by one or several methods, e.g. direct observation and immediate recording, measurement by instrument, or recording by registration form.”

“Visitor survey is a study by means of which researchers or managers obtain up-to-date information about an area's visitors and their opinions, expectations and behavior. The survey is performed on an area's visitors, using questionnaire or interview methods”.

This means that information gathered through population studies (e.g. surveys addressed to the residents of a particular municipality, region, country, etc. by letter, telephone or the Internet), is not discussed in this study.

2. Methods

A qualitative research design with semi-structured telephone interviews with managers was chosen for this study. Each interview lasted for 45–60 min, was recorded and transcribed. Interviews were done by telephone because of the

geographical dispersion of respondents, however physical meetings and focus groups could be an option in further research. A more quantitative approach (e.g. postal, on-line or telephone surveys) was not deemed appropriate until the number of sites using visitor monitoring has increased further in Sweden. Still, the selection of respondents was challenging since there is no public registry of nature areas or associated managers working with visitor monitoring. Hence, potential informants were identified by experts familiar with the Swedish nature areas. Contacts were first made by e-mail with 30 managers of natural and recreational areas throughout Sweden to investigate if they had monitored visitors in the past five years. Based on the responses from these contacts, a sample of twelve interviewees was identified. Among the 18 managers not included in the study, nine never responded to the e-mail despite several reminders and the other nine managers reported that they had not done any visitor monitoring in the past five years. While the low number of respondents should be taken into account when interpreting the results of this study, we believe that they are still informative. In this respect, a larger separate survey directed to a broader range of administrations, municipalities and destinations could be of interest in the future.

The twelve selected managers, each representing one of the nature areas shown in Fig. 1, had varying skills in visitor monitoring. Monitoring activities included were: visitor counting (by counting devices), surveys (mail, phone or online with initial contact on-site), qualitative interviews conducted on-site and/or observations of visitors on-site. Hence, the focus of this study is on more traditional methods, in the light of recommendations from the above mentioned monitoring manuals.

The geographical locations of the nature areas included in this study are well distributed across Sweden and reflect the higher population density in the south (i.e. greater need for monitoring). Interior forests, mountain and coastal areas, as well as more urban proximate areas in the southern parts of Sweden are all represented (Fig. 1). Together, the twelve interviewed managers have conducted six visitor surveys (on-site, postal and electronic), three on-site interview studies (semi-structured and structured) and two on-site observations. In eight of the areas, visitor counters (e.g. Radio Beam and Eco-counters) were used. Listed below is a description of the nature areas, the management organizations in charge and the monitoring methods used:

1. *Tyresta National Park and Nature Reserve* – Tyresta Forest Foundation (6 counters).
2. *Blekinge archipelago* – Blekinge county administrative board (on-site survey).
3. *Nature reserves Örnköldsvik municipality* – Örnköldsvik municipality (on-site surveys with postal and electronic follow-ups, 3 counters).
4. *Nacka nature reserve* – Nacka municipality (focus groups, semi-structured interviews, on-site survey).
5. *Nature reserves the west coast* – West coast foundation (25 counters).
6. *Djurgården, Haga and Ulriksdal* – The Royal Djurgården Administration (manual observations, 6 counters).
7. *National parks and nature reserves in Stockholm County* – Stockholm County Administrative Board (structured interviews, on-site surveys, 18 counters).
8. *Naturum Gotland Storsudret* – Gotland county administrative board (on-site survey).
9. *Västra Götaland nature reserves* – Västra Götaland county administrative board (10 counters).
10. *Nature reserves and nature areas Uppland County* – The Uppland Foundation (on-site survey with postal follow-up, structured interviews, 5 counters).
11. *The Skåneleden Trail* – The Scanian Landscape Foundation (on-site survey with electronic follow-up survey).

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