



# Examining the relationship between recreation settings and experiences in Oulanka National Park – A spatial approach



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## ABSTRACT

The management of recreation areas can presumably affect visitors' experiences by altering the settings where experiences are constructed. Thus, several methodological approaches have been used in the past to explore the relationship between recreation setting and experiences. Most of these approaches have ignored spatial aspects of experiences. This study explores a participatory mapping technique, as one form of Public Participation GIS (PPGIS), to examine recreation satisfaction in Oulanka National Park (ONP). The applied mapping technique asked visitors to mark on a paper map where they had the highest and lowest quality experiences in ONP and to explain why. The study shows that positive and negative experiences are spatially clustered and often concentrate in the same locations within the park. In addition, different types of visitors identify similar places that produce high-quality experiences. These positive experiences are dominated by perceptions of scenery, while recreation facilities are often the reasons for dissatisfactory experiences. This study improves the understanding of the spatial nuances of visitor experiences and further encourages developing participatory mapping techniques that can aid recreation management of natural areas.

## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

This study used a spatial approach for exploring recreation experiences in a national park setting. The participatory mapping method was valuable in producing spatially explicit information to help national park managers to facilitate visitors' high-quality experiences while avoiding low-quality experiences. The study also provides information for developing indicators for future place-based monitoring of visitor experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

The dual purpose of many national park systems is to protect the physical environment while also providing quality recreation experiences for the visitors. While the demand for outdoor recreation within national parks has increased and diversified, the task to manage any particular experience in a certain area has become more challenging (Williams, 2008). Correspondingly, today park managers must pay more attention to the type and quality of the experiences offered (Priskin & McCool, 2006). In practice, the task of managing recreation experiences is difficult since experiences are constructed through a complex interaction between people and their internal states, the activity they

undertake, and through the environment in which they find themselves (Barrie, Roggenbuck, & Hull, 1998). Therefore, recreation experiences are unique, dynamic, evolving, and multi-phasic in nature (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001; Priskin & McCool, 2006).

Although the recreation experience has been acknowledged as complex, recreation research and management has been dominated by a goal-directed approach that simplifies the experience construction process. According to the goal-directed approach, recreation activities and settings are considered substitutable properties that recreationists 'pick and choose' depending on their desired experience goals (Backlund & Stewart, 2012; Manzo, 2008; McCool, 2006; Pierskalla, Lee, Stein, Anderson, & Nickerson, 2004; Williams, 2007, 2008). The recreation setting has been assumed to strongly influence one's experience (Cole & Williams, 2012; Stewart & Cole, 1999). According to McCool (2006), settings are places that contain attributes (e.g., natural or cultural heritage) sought by visitors that are subject to biophysical impacts (e.g., erosion) and can be managed for visitor experiences. The

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relationship between the recreation setting and the experiential outcome is considered vital for recreation managers to facilitate quality experiences (Cole & Hall, 2009; McCool, 2006; Stewart & Cole, 1999; Williams, 2007). Recreation area managers are assumed to be able to influence the experiential outcome by shaping the physical, social, and managerial attributes of a setting to provide opportunities for rewarding experiences (Backlund & Stewart, 2012; McCool, 2006; Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2012; Pierskalla et al., 2004).

Belief in this axiom has led many leisure scientists to conduct studies to identify the relationship between settings and experiences for almost 40 years (Borrie & Birzell, 2001; Williams, 2007). Although multiple research methods have been applied, traditional research methods may not be well suited to examine the relationship between a setting and an experience (Stewart & Cole, 1999). Fix, Carroll and Harrington (2013) suspect some methodological issue behind contradictory results and therefore suggest to develop new methods or modifications to existing methods. In support of this argument, situational effects require non-traditional research designs to redefine old problems (Stewart & Cole, 1999), to discover real-time measures of the dynamic and meaningful aspects of a leisure experience (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001), and to integrate with other methodologies to understand how setting contributes to recreation experience (Fix, Carroll & Harrington, 2013). Therefore, in this study, we explore a participatory mapping technique to examine the setting–experience relationship in Oulanka National Park, located in Northern Finland. A spatial approach is applied since national parks, as tourist destinations, are considered to be spatially and experientially heterogeneous places (Saarinen, 2004).

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Traditional approaches to measure the setting–experience relationship

The methodological approaches that have been used to examine the relationship between settings and experiences can be divided into direct and indirect approaches. With direct approaches, respondents' are directly asked about their perception of multiple factors that are assumed to affect experience. With indirect approaches, secondary measurements form the basis for statistical analyses that examine the setting–experience relationship.

The most common direct approach in recreation research has been the *satisfaction approach* (Newsome et al., 2012). It relies on evaluating the overall satisfaction of the visitor by evaluating satisfaction with multiple setting factors. One type of multiple item evaluation is called importance–performance analysis (IPA) (see e.g. Tarrant and Smith (2002); Tonge and Moore (2007); Wade and Eagles (2003); Tonge, Moore, and Taplin (2011)) where respondents are asked to rate both the importance and the performance of setting attributes. When an inconsistency between the perceived importance and performance is observed, management action for a particular attribute may be needed (Newsome et al., 2012).

Another direct approach, often referred to as the *normative approach*, is where respondents evaluate the extent that they consider various hypothetical setting attributes to add or detract from having an optimum recreation experience (Cole & Hall, 2009). The effect of crowding has received much attention with this approach (see e.g. Manning, Wang, and Jacobi (1999); Manning, Valleri, Minter, Wang and Jacobi (2000); Manning and Freimund (2004); Manning and Krymkowski (2010)).

In contrast to direct approaches that assess predefined experience indicators, the *experience-based approach* focuses on the

nature of the experience itself. This approach allows visitors greater freedom to describe their experiences and the aspects that affect their experiences (Borrie & Birzell, 2001; Cole & Williams, 2012). The particular technique, called Experience Sampling Method (ESM), has been used to capture the multiphasic nature of the experience by asking the respondent to describe their experience at random times during the visit (see e.g. Borrie and Roggenbuck (1996); Doherty, Lemieux, and Canally (2014)).

Yet another direct approach is called the *laddering technique*. Based on means–end theory, the laddering technique provides a framework for forming a 'means–end chain' that describes the relationship between setting attributes and their consequences for the recreationist (Gutman, 1982). In practice, the technique is implemented using semi-structured interviewing to identify the elements of the means–end chains. The process commonly begins by eliciting the key attributes for decision making, followed by questions asking *why* a particular attribute is important to the respondent and *why* the perceived consequence of the attribute is important, aiming to discover the personal values of the respondents (e.g. Goldenberg, Klenosky, McAvoy, & Holman, 2002; Hill, Goldenberg & Freidt, 2009).

Finally, *indirect approaches* have been applied by using statistical analyses to determine if recreation experiences differ by the setting. In these studies, recreation experiences are first operationalized and measured using Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scales that identify the importance of different domains of experience such as physical rest or privacy (see Driver (1983)). After identifying REP scores for each respondent, the studies have used either the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) or the respondents' preferences to represent the setting. ROS-based studies typically divide the recreational landscape into heterogeneous zones of recreation opportunities and test for differences in the REP scores across the zones (e.g. Backlund & Stewart, 2012; Fix et al., 2013; Pierskalla et al., 2004). An alternative indirect approach asks recreationists to evaluate their preferences for various setting characteristics (e.g., accessibility, use density) and then measures whether these setting preferences differ between homogeneous groups of recreationists based on the REP scores (e.g. Floyd & Gramann, 1997).

### 2.2. Importance of spatiality in recreation management

Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses in capturing the setting–experience relationship. Yet, all of them have common limitations from a managerial perspective. The direct approaches aggregate the experiences across the entire area of interest, but tourist destinations such as national parks are internally heterogeneous 'space–time mosaics' (Saarinen, 2004). Because a primary task of recreation managers is to ensure a diversity of experiences (Clark & Stankey, 1979), approaches to measure the setting–experience relationship should also help managers understand the spatial dimension of the phenomenon. Indirect approaches may include a spatial aspect, but have yielded unclear conclusions (Backlund & Stewart, 2012; Fix et al., 2013; Pierskalla et al., 2004). Therefore, research should explore approaches that account for the spatial components of the setting–experience relationship.

The importance and advantage of incorporating spatiality into recreation management are found in the geographical concepts of *space* and *place*. The traditional top–down approach to natural resource management has been based primarily on data about the physical and biological elements of the environment but lately the interest to integrate social dimensions more systematically into the planning processes has increased. Conceptual thinking has evolved from considering conservation areas as *spaces*, i.e. locations comprising certain physical features, into regarding them as

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