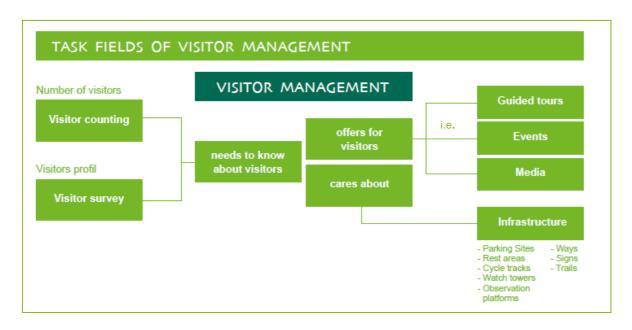# Visitor management strategy

Introduction

Protected areas attract people. Sometimes the protected area management is glad about people who are interested in their work and activities, sometimes protected areas are forced to open up more to the public to improve the number of visitors, and sometimes the pressure of visitors is too strong. In any case the management of a protected area has to take care of their "guests"

Information on visitors is important at various levels: Locally it is essential i.e. for tourism development and at regional, national and international level. It is needed for policy, planning and comparisons. The number of "interested people" depends of course on the activities of the protected area management, but it is also influenced by the concrete location of a protected area: close to a big city or neighboured to a well developed tourism destination there are "automatically" more visitors coming to the area.

Nowadays visitor management is a significant tool, sometimes even one of the main jobs within the protected area management. Visitor management comprises many very different tasks – on the one hand activities to get knowledge about the guests and on the other hand services for visitors to satisfy their expectations.

A successful visitor management requires quantitative and qualitative knowledge of visitor numbers and activities undertaken in the protected area as well as accurate information on visitors' needs and wishes. But the situation in most European protected areas shows that a systematic gathering of recreational uses and visitor flows is rarely carried out.

Therefore, the demand for qualitative and quantitative, spatially related and standardized data about visitor numbers is striking, in particular for areas with high visitor numbers and for conflict zones. The aim of visitor management is not only to observe visitors and report about them, but the management has to deal with the visitor flows and activities so that negative impacts on nature and the wider environment are minimized. If all tasks are carried out systematically and on a permanent basis it is a monitoring system – parts of this system, in particular the techniques to gather information about visitors are also called visitor monitoring. While monitoring of vegetation and wildlife in protected areas has a long tradition, a systematic monitoring of recreational uses and visitor flows is rarely carried out.

However it is widely accepted by park managers to develop at least a visitor management plan – a step towards a comprehensive monitoring system. Of course, the protected area management can not plan, prepare, organize and conduct all necessary tasks themselves. Regarding pressure and problems coming from tourism related activities it is recommended to develop a system of cooperation between protected areas and tourism operators / businesses. Cooperation can support the visitor management and provide better services and more qualitative information to visitors.

Visitor Counting and Visitor Survey

The "number of visitors" is the most important data as it is the most essential indicator and basis for various planning and marketing activities. There are several observation and collection techniques and technical tools to gain this information. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses.

Methods of visitor counting

Indirect methods:

– Signs of use: e.g. on tracks, wear and tear on vegetation and terrain
– Guest books in cabins, trail logs, and other self registration methods
– Fishing and hunting licenses, permits, parking and entrance fees, statistics and other documents
– Information from other agencies or companies

Direct methods:

– Observation by staff at ground level
– Observations from the air

Automatic methods:

Mechanical and electronic counters:

– Vehicle counters
– Person counters
– Electronic counters combined with digital or video cameras.

The knowledge about characteristics, behaviour and wishes of visitors is very important for protected areas. Referring to those data series the management can evaluate them by using the previously defined targets (e.g. minimizing impacts. The determination of targets should be the first task of a monitoring process. On the basis of scientific socio-economic, biological or environmental data, every monitoring can accomplish specific aims. To find out changes in tourism behaviour and wishes, to check the carrying capacity of certain zones within the park, to consider changes in population of endangered species or soil erosion caused by tourism, it is very important to repeat the data collection regularly. Comprehensive knowledge and accurate information on visitors of protected areas are essential not only for the planning and managing of visitor services and tourism infrastructure, but also for the sustainable protection of natural and cultural heritage.

The best way to collect this information is the direct questioning (face-to-face interviews). Unfortunately this technique is time-consuming and cost-intensive. Nevertheless many protected areas conducted already such visitor surveys. But as these polls are usually developed individually for each protected area results are not comparable. Thus, the project PARKS & BENEFITS developed a common questionnaire and gathered techniques to create a standard and make the results comparable. A jointly developed questionnaire has been used for the survey in season 2010. The results were disappointing:

- The conduction of the survey has been too complex and too expensive. Thus not all involved parks carried it out.

- Many questions were not answered due to long and time-consuming interviews of the visitors.

- The results gained for the individual protected area was satisfying, but the comparison between protected areas provided only little new information.

Based on this experience a revised questionnaire is now recommended as core for any visitor survey. The questionnaire can be obtained at:

➢ **www.parksandbenefits.net**

Lessons learned:

Each survey has to be as short as possible to limit the effort and to avoid any annoyance. The size of the questionnaire is limited to at most two pages. Any attempt to ascertain data on expenditures for calculation of regional economic effects within a general visitor survey is time-consuming and expensive. To include only a few questions dealing with spending behaviour is not sufficient for the economic modelling. On the other hand a long detailed list of possible expenditures takes much time and might not be answered by most visitors. Thus: Surveys to gather the data for an economic impact study should be conducted as stand-alone capture! Such additional surveys offer interesting results.

Visitor Flow Management

Visitors can disturb the natural environment or other visitors. Visitor impacts are not always negative. But in case of a risk for the natural development, particularly the disturbance of sensitive species or habitats in protected areas such influence has to be observed and managed. Several guidelines are published which recommend tools and techniques to control and limit impacts of usage - the most common are listed below. However, each protected area has to find its own successful way of managing visitor flow.

Visitor monitoring instruments

– Visual monitoring and counting of tourism sights and objects

– Digital photo or video monitoring

– Electronically or mechanical registration of visitor numbers

– Counting of total number of visitors to a concrete territory

– Self-registration of visitors

– Surveys (questionnaire-based, face-to-face interviews)

– Analysis of secondary data and statistics

– others

Visitor guidance and information instrument

– Access points, visitor centres, observation facilities and resting places (environmental education + information + establishment of highlights)

– Network of accessible hiking paths, cycle tracks, waterways

– Specific theme-oriented hiking routes, cycling routes and water tourism routes

– Information boards

– Information material such as maps, brochures, route descriptions (print media and online)

– Information and visitor navigation by offering GPS-based IT-solutions

– Public transport access to certain starting points

– The existence or non-existence of parking places > access to certain starting points

– Guided tours offered by rangers of the protected area

– Limited licenses to tourism companies or to freelance-guides to offer organised guided tours

– Specific visitor guidance and visitor facilities for disabled

Visitor Restriction Methods

– Seasonal or temporal limitation of visitor numbers

– Zoning, area closures

– Restrictions by group characteristics

– Technology requirements

– Steering visitor flows by nature trails and roads

– Park information and interpretation

– Differential pricing

– Operator qualifications

– Tourism marketing

Visitor flow describes the spatial and temporal distribution of visitors in a particular area. The flow management is not limited to restriction methods – an active information policy and guiding tools are often much more effective. Visitor guidance can be put into practice by hardware (e.g. marked trails, signs) or by software (i.e. information, education).

Information

The availability of information is very important. The benefits include data, facts and advices which help inform the visitor about what is happening where in the park and which routes to take. It may result in more visitors adopting appropriate behaviours that will reduce impacts and provide the visitors with a more satisfying visit.

The following tools can be used to provide information to visitors:

– Printed materials (maps, travel guides, brochures, information boards and sights, journals)

– Verbal information given by rangers, guides or environmental educators; also radio and TV broadcasting

– Internet (website of protected area, social networks).

Environmental education and interpretation

A lack of awareness or a misunderstanding of nature conservation by local people and visitors can cause many problems in the protected areas. Thus, environmental education and interpretation adapted to modern society have to be an integral part of the visitor management. The environmental education activities, which combine ecological knowledge and emotional nature experience, can broaden people's minds; develop new skills for the daily life; promote sustainable behaviour; form understanding of nature processes and their importance both for children and grown-ups. In the long run it may result in preserved nature and cultural heritage, cleaner environment and sustainably minded people.

SWOT - Analysis

Visitor monitoring measures

Good examples:

- Statistics and evaluation of guided tours are already available in many parks

- Experiences & knowledge of rangers & their involvement in NGOs

- Self-registration boxes in Dovrefjell National Park, photo monitoring and surveys to monitor changes in the area throughout the year

- Collection of data from tourism stakeholders (hotels, attractions, tourist offices)

- Central Visitor monitoring database system ASTA in Finland combined with the Paavo database on economic benefits of protected areas

- Electronic monitoring of specific areas/ trails & hot spots (i.e. nature school in Maribo Lakes Nature Park)
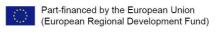
Problems & challenges

- To count 1 day visitors to the area, that are not using guides

- To estimate total number of visitors in the area

- Limited staff and budget

- Not priority for government

- Different methods in each park >> hard to compare data

- Presenting data in easy way to public, businesses, NGOs etc.

- Data are not used afterwards (by governments)

- Data feedback from regions is missing & therefore the whole "picture"

- Missing data on nature monitoring / lack of comprehensive monitoring of both – nature & visitors

Visitor guidance and information

Problems & challenges

- Overcrowded hot-spots vs. less-visited, unknown areas

- To identify & promote "pearls of nature" instead of using restrictions

- The need to inform in many ways:
    - On hot spots
    - At visitor centres
    - Online
    - For different target groups
    - About alternatives elsewhere

- Information has to be put together with facilities
    - Parking lots / trash cans
    - Toilets
    - Information boards
- Conflicts between target groups on cycle and hiking tracks or boating / overcrowding - there is a need for alternatives
- Conflicts with landowners, residents, hunters >> usage of park without caring of the park / agriculture and forest use
- Vandalism

Visitor restriction

Good examples
- Legal background & the information about it
- Guided tours: limitation of participants, visiting hours (space & time)
- Information on restriction in local press
- Contract between private stakeholders and municipality
- Creation of common understanding among stakeholders before law got into force (Zoning <-> Maribo Lakes Nature Park)
- Traffic concept in order to limit cars in the protected area / planning of parking spaces / bus shuttles (National Park Bavarian Forest)

Problems & challenges
- Lack of control
- Easy understanding of restrictions
- Question of responsibility
- Communication style
- Are the Natura 2000 habitat type sites protected against growing visitor pressure (access)?

Strategy: goals & measures

Visitor monitoring

- Better combine monitoring of environment & visitors to better guide visitor flows
- Information at different levels (public/ staff) & topics
- Keep the monitoring scheme as simple as possible (to ensure that it is carried out regularly)
- Link the action plan to the data
- Set up a regular monitoring system used in the whole BSR
- Awareness raising for the need of visitor monitoring at political level; staff level
- Enhance possibilities to report problems in the protected areas & make better use of the feedback received from rangers & visitors

Visitor guidance and information

- Promote variety of pearls and inform about their places
- Develop new routes and info signs and maintain them
- Discuss with stakeholders how to enforce legislation >> keep them involved that they work in positive way
- Offer trainings for SMEs & tours for stakeholders
- Use a wide variety of information methods
- Use IT solutions as means to get more accessibility to handicaps
- Information needs to be put together for park, locals, tourism stakeholders >> create & collect stories on places
- Put facilities together at hot spots
- Close or don't promote sensitive areas
- Ensure a system / platform that stakeholders get the same information as visitors >> to avoid promotion of sensitive areas
- Email information or newsletter to stakeholders + "friends of…" and give reasons "Why"
- All measures need to be included in the park management plan
- Flexibility to change action plan & adaptation to the needs

Visitor restriction

- Secure / adequate control
- Prevention of wrong doing
- Lobbying for more staff through NGOs etc.
- Establish volunteer control
- Create benefits for locals
- Improvement of information and visitor guidance
- Complicate accessibility