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**Parks, 36 Kingfisher Court, Hambridge Road, Newbury, RG14 5SJ, UK**

**Fax: [+ 44] (0)1635 550230**

**E-mail: [parks@naturebureau.co.uk](mailto:parks@naturebureau.co.uk)**

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*Cover: Auyuittuq National Park, Canada.*  
Photo: Stephen McCool.

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## Editorial

JULIANNA PRISKIN AND STEPHEN F. MCCOOL



### The visitor experience: an essential component of protected area stewardship

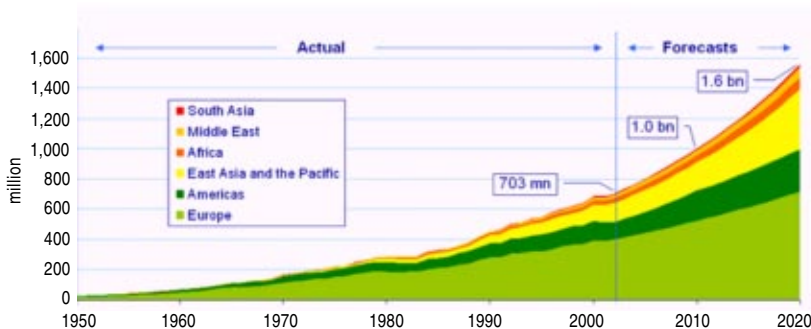
It has long been accepted that tourism can be a useful and effective tool for conservation and management of protected areas. If well-managed, tourism may provide the financial and political support needed to ensure the sustainability of the values preserved in protected areas. Tourism may also lead to a greater understanding of those values, which in turn can lead to more areas being protected. The projected growth in international travel suggests that the viability of tourism as a conservation tool will increase. The World Tourism Organisation projects a dramatic increase in international travel to the year 2020 (see Figure 1). While not all that increase will result in visits to protected areas, a significant growth is likely to occur. In meeting these needs, protected area managers must pay correspondingly increasing attention to the type and quality of visitor experience offered.

The feasibility of tourism as a conservation tool itself is based on an understanding of the tourism products visitors seek, the appropriateness of these for a specific area, and the capacity to provide high quality experience opportunities. Such understanding is useful to protected area managers, who are often faced with the taxing, and somewhat competing, tasks of ecosystem conservation and facilitation of high-quality visitor experiences (Roggenbuck, 2000; Lime *et al.*, 2004). This situation is particularly challenging, given the general complexity of protected area stewardship, and the operationalisation of experience-based management in a national park.

A visitor experience is 'a complex interaction between people and their internal states, the activity they are undertaking, and the social and natural environment in which they find themselves' (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 1998 p.115). A park experience could include learning, discovery, social dimensions, adventure and physical challenge, among others. These experiences can be measured qualitatively and quantitatively as suggested by a variety of studies (e.g., Patterson *et al.*, 1998; Glaspell and Puttkammer, 2001; Ryan 2000).

As experiences are inherently unique to individuals, this renders experience-based park management highly complex. However, at a global level there are similarities between individual experiences; the understanding of the dimensions is useful to facilitate appropriate experiences in protected areas, as well as in conserving the values within them. Managers are not always equipped with the resources to deal with all dimensions of visitor experiences, nor with the deep,

**Figure 1.** Global evolution of tourism trends. Source: UNWTO.



psychological aspects of them. It is important to ascertain how experiences are influenced by the visitor's background and by the social, biophysical and managerial conditions of a park (Watson *et al.*, 1991; Cole, 2004; Lamelin and Smale, 2006). Thus, it is useful to identify the factors that have the most significant influence, in order to facilitate high quality memorable experiences, and protect the ecological integrity of a park.

The purpose of this issue of PARKS is to provide protected area managers with a greater understanding of what is involved in providing opportunities for visitor experiences and to provide examples of how different organisations have done this. This issue of PARKS is designed to increase our understanding of how protected area managers can, and are, managing protected areas for quality visitor experiences. In the first article, Steve McCool provides an overview of the notion of visitor experiences – what they are and how managers can influence experience quality. This is followed by Janet Cochran's discussion of market segmentation – there is no such thing as an average visitor – and how managers can take advantage of particular segments. In the next article, Ed Jager and associates from Parks Canada Agency describe how that agency has made "memorable experiences" a major policy initiative in its protected areas, thus applying concepts and principles from social science research. Monitoring of experiences is an important component of management, as detailed by Robyn Bushell and Tony Griffin. In their article, they describe the benefits and challenges of monitoring as experienced in Australia. The PANParks programme of certification employed in Europe includes a visitor experience element. This programme is described by Zoltan Kun and Mylène van der Donk in their article. Visitors also expect quality opportunities in marine park settings, and Andrew Skeat and his colleagues provide a brief description of how the Great Barrier Marine Park Authority manages for these experiences. Rounding out this special issue is Giulia Carbone's research on tour operators and how they envision the importance of visitor experience quality to the private sector as well as to protected areas.

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**Julianna Priskin**, Researcher at the Chair in Tourism Transat, Associate Lecturer, Department of Urban and Tourism Studies, University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada H3C 3P8. Tel: +1 514 987 3000 extension 6670. Fax: +1 514 987 3797.

**Stephen F. McCool**, Department of Society and Conservation, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 49804 USA. Tel: 406-544-7915. E-mail: Steve.mccool@cfc.umt.edu

# Managing for visitor experiences in protected areas: promising opportunities and fundamental challenges

STEPHEN F. McCOOL

Rapidly increasing international and domestic travel provides both opportunities and challenges for managers of the globe's over 100,000 protected areas. Tourism can be a force for conservation, but underlying a successful tourism strategy is the provision of opportunities for high quality visitor experiences. Providing these opportunities requires an understanding of how visitors construct experiences, provision of appropriate supporting facilities and management programmes, protection of key natural and cultural heritage values, co-operation with the private sector and key monitoring activities. There are several challenges as well, including linking setting attributes with experiences, understanding the interests of managers, visitors, tour operators and communities, and mapping and measuring what experiences visitors desire.

**THE CONTINUING AND DRAMATIC INCREASE** in both international and domestic travel poses significant opportunities for managers of the globe's over 100,000 protected areas. Many of these areas hold promise and opportunity for visitors to learn about, appreciate and enjoy the natural and cultural heritage preserved within them. Enjoyment of these areas, broadly conceived, serves as the underpinning for a growing nature- culture-based tourism industry. And with tourism providing the prospect for revenues for management of the area and economic development of adjacent communities, there is great interest among conservation organisations, communities and activists to take advantage of this interest.

But if protected areas are to be the foundation for a vibrant nature-based tourism industry, their managers are then confronted with the challenge of providing diverse, sustainable opportunities for high quality, rewarding visitor and recreation opportunities. Such opportunities simply do not happen. They are deliberately constructed with careful attention to the capabilities of the area, the heritage values protected within it, the conservation objectives established for it, the capacity of local business and communities to implement tourism and the expectations held by potential visitors. This challenge comes within the context of changing paradigms concerning the roles of public protected area agencies and private tour operators and firms.

Of particular significance is the growing use of private-public partnerships, arrangements between tour operators and guides and managers of publicly administered protected areas. In a world of growing competitiveness, and of increasing and diversifying demands and expectations for these areas, understanding the character of visitor experiences and thoughtful partnerships is as essential to good management as is understanding the biodiversity and biophysical processes occurring within the area. In this paper, I will review what it means to manage for visitor experiences, identify some relevant research and briefly examine several of the major challenges confronting protected area managers in this domain.

## **Some background in the science of visitor experience management**

An experience may be defined in a number of different ways, but it appears most likely to be a social-psychological phenomenon, influenced by expectations visitors carry with them, the norms and values of their peers, and the attributes of the protected areas encountered during a visit. The experience is what visitors are seeking when choosing to visit a particular destination, be it swimming on a subtropical beach, an adventurous float down a tropical river, the personal



challenge of hiking in the arctic, or the emotions attached to viewing an historical monument. A focus on visitor experiences helps managers get beyond a superficial level emphasis on administering activities, such as camping, wildlife viewing, photography, hiking, walking, and so on.

The fundamental premise of contemporary visitor management is that quality experiences are best assured by providing a range or diversity of setting opportunities. A **setting** is the combination of attributes of a real place that gives it recreational value (Clark and Stankey 1979). Settings are comprised of three types of attributes: (1) biophysical, which is defined as the amount of change visible in the natural environment; (2) managerial, the presence and type of rules and regulations proscribing visitor behaviour, and the visibility or presence of management personnel, including enforcement, and (3) social, which includes the type, amount, frequency and location of encounters with other visitors. Type of access (highway, dirt track) is also sometimes used to describe the character of the setting. Finally, specific characteristics of setting, such as its natural or cultural heritage, provide the inherent value that attracts visitors.

An important contribution to the literature of recreation management is the idea that there are differing 'levels' of demand. The **recreation demand hierarchy** (Driver and Brown 1978) was developed to describe these levels and their linkages. Figure 1 shows this hierarchy. The demand hierarchy is so named because it states that demand occurs at four levels, based on the complexity, visibility and understandability of the specific level. At the top are demands for recreation activities – this is the *form* of recreation that we observe at various protected area settings, it is the behaviour that individuals practice and display, such as their participation in camping, wildlife viewing, swimming, rafting and so on. At the next level are demands for the recreation settings described above. Settings are the places where the top level demands occur, and an argument can be made that demands for activities are better stated as demands to participate in specific activities within a particular setting, such as backpacking in a remote, uncongested wilderness. Settings are the places that managers manage, where the biophysical impacts occur, and are comprised of the attributes sought by visitors.

At the third level, demands for recreation experiences are expressed. This means that people engage in certain recreation activities in particular settings in order to have satisfactory experiences. In essence, visitors select particular setting attributes, put them together in their head, and then construct an experience containing such dimensions as adventure, challenge, solitude, stress release, companionship, appreciating nature, freedom, spirituality and escape. In any given recreational engagement, perhaps only a few of these dimensions are sought or experienced. Different visitors in the same setting may be seeking very different experiential dimensions. For example, on a game-viewing drive in a southern Africa national park, some visitors may be seeking challenge, appreciating nature, and adventure, while others may be looking for escape, freedom, and appreciating nature. And different settings may provide opportunities for similar experiential dimensions.

**Figure 1.** The Recreation Demand Hierarchy (adapted from Driver and Brown 1978). Demands for recreation occur at four levels, the most visible and most superficial being demand for activities (such as camping, hiking) and the most difficult, and deepest, being demand for the benefits derived from participation (such as increased family cohesiveness).



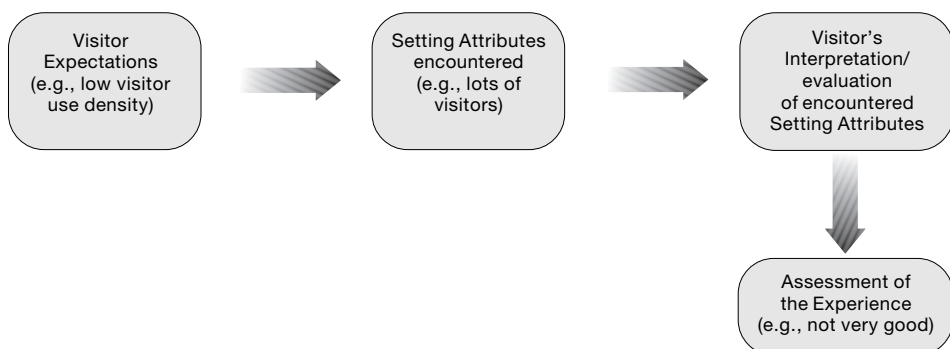
Helpful to understanding the notion of experience is the concept of **satisfaction**. Satisfaction may be defined in several ways, such as the realisation of expectations, the difference between a person's normative definitions of a preferred experience and what is realised or the attainment of that individual's defined quality experience. Thus, protected area managers often hold the goal of providing *satisfactory* visitor experiences. Unfortunately, measurement of satisfaction has been difficult and controversial in the recreation research literature and has raised a number of questions: What is appropriate to measure, satisfaction with the whole experience or satisfaction with individual setting attributes? How is satisfaction measured, on a single item scale, or more qualitatively? There is often a self-selection bias in studies of visitor satisfaction: visitors at a site select the site for its expected ability to provide certain experiences, and thus one would anticipate they would be satisfied.

At the fourth, and 'deepest' level of the demand hierarchy is the notion of **benefit**. Benefits are the 'improved' conditions experienced by individuals, small groups and society at large as a result of satisfactory recreational engagements. If individuals receive a satisfactory recreational experience, benefits will result. These benefits may involve reduced family divisiveness, greater worker productivity, increased personal incomes or reduced crime. Benefits from experiencing a high quality opportunity might also include additional support for a protected area, increased labour income in the local area or an accelerating interest in conservation.

In order to better understand how settings, visitors and experiences may interact, please refer to Figure 2. Visitors bring to a setting a set of expectations regarding the condition of the setting attributes. The figure illustrates the attribute of visitor use density. Thus, a visitor to a remote Namibian desert park may bring an expectation that few others will be encountered. Once at the site, the visitor may encounter more visitors than expected. Given the expectations developed prior to the visit, the visitor may then evaluate this condition as 'crowded', and if such expectations are a very important component of the overall experience, the visitor may come away from the visit unhappy and unsatisfied. This experience may lead to new expectations for a return visit, or may be communicated to others planning a similar visit. However, just because many people are present at a protected area does not mean that visitors will necessarily always feel the setting is crowded.

Naturally, the whole process is much more complex than this simple example: some people may have poorly formed expectations, or even no expectations. Once on the site, visitors may reform their expectations so the unanticipated conditions are not viewed so negatively (a process known as 'product shift'). Other visitors may find the conditions so unacceptable that they

**Figure 2.** Simplified Model of Visitor Experience Production Process. Experiences are constructed by visitors based on expectations, what they encounter on the site, how those attributes compare to their preferences and notions of acceptability. Such evaluations and assessments eventually feedback into construction of new expectations, and may influence other visitor expected experiences. The example provided is for a remote wilderness setting. In some settings, encountering lots of visitors may lead to a different evaluation and assessment.





*A lone hiker in Canada's Auyuittuq National Park enjoys a visitor experience characterised by solitude, adventure, challenge and interacting with nature. Photo: Stephen McCool.*

immediately go somewhere else (known as displacement). What is important, however, is that there are specific linkages among these different components. Managing for high quality visitor experiences must account for all elements, relationships and feedback loops in this process.

Finally, it is important to understand that the linkages between setting attributes and experiences are probabilistic not deterministic. All managers can do is create the opportunity for an experience: by careful, sensitive management of setting attributes, they can facilitate some experiential dimensions. For example, by providing interpretative displays and messages, managers facilitate a learning experience, but the presence of such programmes does not ensure that all visitors will learn. And, if managers are not careful, some attributes such as visitor use density, may hinder other experiential dimensions, such as solitude.

The above short tutorial suggests that protected area managers are confronted with a number of questions: What experiences do visitors seek? What setting attributes do visitors find acceptable and what is preferred? Which of these experiences is appropriate in a specific protected area? How do we manage protected areas to provide for these appropriate experiences? How do we decide on what is appropriate? Who gets to decide? What types of areas provide for what kinds of opportunities? How do we ensure that managing for experiences does not lead to unacceptable impacts on the area's natural and cultural heritage? How do we reconcile competing objectives and conflicting experiences? The challenge to sustain visitor experiences in protected areas encompasses these questions and many others.

A variety of research around the world has identified a number of dimensions of visitor experiences sought in a diversity of settings. For example, Kneeshaw and others (2003) identified several dimensions of experiences sought by visitors in Denali National Park in Alaska, including freedom from management restrictions, challenge of access, untrammelled wildlife, risk and uncertainty, and a "taste of the arctic". A similar study, reported by McCool and others (2007) of visitors to Canada's Auyuittuq National Park on Baffin Island found that visitors were seeking primarily freedom/serenity, challenge/adventure, naturalness, learning and appreciating nature, an arctic experience and spirituality. Driver and associates have also researched the dimensionality of expected experiences for thousands of visitors and recreationists in the US. Their research suggests that visitors seek a wide variety of experiences, including challenge/adventure, excitement, escape, stress release, solitude, family and friendship cohesiveness, freedom, learning about and appreciating nature and so on.

By using careful observation or sophisticated statistical analyses, managers can come to understand that their market can be segmented by how important various experiential dimensions



are to visitors. For example, one group of visitors to a site might expect high levels of solitude, opportunities for escape, and a high degree of naturalness, while another segment may expect, in the same protected area, family cohesiveness, viewing scenery, and challenge as the most significant dimensions of the experience, with the other dimensions of lower importance. As a result of this segmentation, managers can more appropriately design sites and programmes to facilitate experiences consistent with conservation objectives.

The results of this extensive research experience strongly indicate that: (1) experiences in protected areas are multi-dimensional; (2) setting attributes are often important in facilitating or hindering attainment of experiences, but this relationship is probabilistic rather than deterministic; (3) distinct trade-offs occur when making managerial choices between providing opportunities for experiences and protecting heritage values, although these trade-offs often may be unclear in the short run; (4) experiences are subjective and to some extent unpredictable, but may be identified and used in decision-making; and (5) monitoring of visitor experiences (in some way) is essential when cause-effect relationships (between setting attributes and experience dimensions) are unclear, but selecting necessary indicators for monitoring is essential to situation specific management.

### **Engaging challenges**

The state-of-the-art in visitor experience management certainly needs improving; research would help managers understand what it is that visitors are seeking; management frameworks, such as the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (Clark and Stankey 1979) or Tourism Opportunity Spectrum (Dawson 2001) or Limits of Acceptable Change (Stankey and others 1985; McCool 1994) help managers make decisions about what experience opportunities are appropriate where; the private sector, through guides and tour operators can facilitate visitors constructing these desired experiences; and implementation of monitoring protocols can help managers understand if their experience management goals are being achieved. Nevertheless, there are a number of challenges facing management of visitor experience opportunities in protected areas.

In this section, I review several of the significant challenges and emergent issues that confront the goal of managing for visitor experiences. Sustaining visitor experiences over the time scales necessary to build a business, to protect a park, to make available quality tourist opportunities or to assist a community requires vigorous engagement of business leaders, community activists, visitors and park managers. The ability to provide high quality opportunities over long time frames is fundamental to being competitive in the global arena that characterises 21st century tourism.

### ***Mapping and measuring visitor experiences***

At the heart of sustaining visitor experiences is a significant research task that involves understanding what outcomes tourists seek when visiting protected areas. In one sense, the technology for mapping and measuring visitor experiences is well advanced, but evolving, broadening the repertoire of methodologies available. In the US, a strong research tradition built upon the work of Driver, Brown, Knopf and associates (e.g., Driver, Tinsley and Manfredi 1991; Driver, Brown and Peterson 1991) has informed many a park and protected area manager of the setting attributes and experiences that tourists seek during a visit. This approach to identifying visitor experiences is based on the proposition that a satisfying experience is determined by the extent to which the actual outcomes sought compare to those experienced. This approach largely attempts to identify the specific experiential dimensions sought by visitors, thus being specific about what it is that visitors seek.

However, Borrie and Birtzell (2001) discuss several approaches to identifying the experiences visitors seek when entering a protected area. These include meaning-based approaches (where

scientists attempt to understand the role of wilderness or other protected areas within the larger context of the visitor's life), experience-sampling methods (where researchers, through the use of an electronic beeper or other means, ask study respondents to describe moods and other feelings about the area at specific points in time) and importance-performance analysis (which calls upon visitors to rate the importance of certain setting attributes to their experience and how well those attributes functioned during their visit). Each of these approaches has certain advantages and has varying utility for how a specific mountain setting would be managed.

### ***Linking site attributes to desired experiences***

Mapping the experiential dimensions that visitors expect to attain from a recreational engagement is important, but understanding how to manage settings so that they may achieve these outcomes is critical to sensitive stewardship. In terms of visitor experiences, all managers can do is provide the *opportunity* for visitors to achieve the experiences they seek; visitors create experiences by interacting with the attributes or conditions they encounter at a recreation site. Recreation sites contain many attributes, biophysical, social and managerial, only some of which may be relevant to particular experiences, others may be salient to all experiences. When recreationists visit a site they essentially 'pick and choose' the salient attributes and from those construct a recreational experience. Understanding the linkages between site attributes and experiences is essential at a site and regional level.

### ***Interests of managers, tour operators, visitors and communities***

Managers, visitors, communities and business leaders have somewhat different interests in sustaining visitor experiences, and as a result these interests may at times collide, at others reinforce each other. The challenges and issues emerging from the intersections of these interests with protected area mandates are usually complex, frequently contentious, and filled with uncertainty. Within a social and political environment that is increasingly turbulent and volatile, sustaining visitor experiences has become, if nothing else, a messy job. What this means is that the planning and decision-processes concerning provision of high quality visitor experiences will require collaborative, iterative efforts of important stakeholders. It will require recognition

*High-use densities, such as shown here in China's Mt. Lushan National Park, are not necessarily negative. Crowding is in the eye of the beholder and is influenced by the visitor's expectations. Photo: Stephen McCool.*



of the various trade-offs needed. And, it will require recognition that many decisions involved in managing for visitor experiences will be value judgments.

## Conclusions

Of course, tourism, like other economic development tools, is a two-edged sword – with the economic, learning and political benefits of tourism come potentially significant social and environmental costs, and these costs may be particularly deleterious in and near protected areas. With careful sensitive management attending to the notion of *sustainability*, these costs can be minimised. A major component of this effort must be consideration of the type and quality of visitor experiences to be offered. Research can provide the information about what visitors are seeking; managers determine what experience opportunities are appropriate; tour firms and operators help facilitate those experiences in many cases, and communities provide the broader destination and context in which those experiences occur. And, thus an integrated process will lead to higher quality experiences, resulting in greater visitor expenditures and more support for the protected areas that provide these opportunities.

Deciding what visitor experience opportunities to provide is fundamental to this process. Supporting facilities and public use management actions can then be designed to facilitate these opportunities as well as protect heritage values from unacceptable impacts. Developing indicators and a monitoring process is also essential to ensuring that desired experiences are being attained. While the science of identifying what visitors seek has strong conceptual foundations, the art of managing these opportunities is less well developed. One of the challenges for the future is for closer collaboration involving social scientists and protected area managers.

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**Stephen McCool** is Co-Chair of the WCPA Task Force on Tourism and Protected Areas, and a Professor in Wildland Recreation Management at the University of Montana's Department of Society and Conservation. He joined the faculty of the School of Forestry in 1977, after serving on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and Utah State University. He holds a PhD degree from the University of Minnesota. His research and applications focus primarily on management of protected areas for tourism and recreation and include notions of sustainability, public engagement and planning processes. Stephen McCool, Department of Society and Conservation, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 49804 USA. Tel: 406-544-7915. E-mail: Steve.mccool@cfc.umt.edu

# A typology of tourists to protected areas

JANET COCHRANE

National parks and other protected areas are an important part of the national and international heritage, but they are often under threat and are frequently under-resourced, especially in developing countries. One way to address this is by enhancing their tourism potential, which can help to improve their profile and ensure their contribution to national, provincial and local economies. Tourism to some national parks is substantial, but there is often inadequate differentiation between the perceptions and needs of different user-groups. Although a broad distinction is usually made between international and domestic visitors, no further refinement is generally made, even though visitors' perceptions, needs and profile vary enormously. Greater understanding of these characteristics should lead to improved market awareness and to more closely targeted provision of facilities. In turn, this should lead to enhanced visitor satisfaction and to a more sustainable tourism industry, and (perhaps) to an increased political will to devote resources to protecting the parks and to a better chance of survival for the natural and cultural heritage preserved within them. A typology of visitors to national parks is therefore proposed, with the aim of assisting managers and policy-makers involved in tourism and national parks to understand the needs of their different target groups and devise appropriate planning, management and marketing strategies.

**ALTHOUGH THE PRIMARY PURPOSE** of national parks and other protected areas is to protect natural and cultural values, a secondary purpose is often tourism, encompassing both economic development and tourists' motivations such as recreation, spiritual refreshment, landscape appreciation and learning. However, protected areas managers generally have little tourism expertise and park institutional structures are often ill-adapted to the needs of visitors and the realities of market forces. The result is that conflicts can arise over tourism policy, planning and management. These conflicts reflect a fundamental dichotomy over the purpose and function of national parks, in that the installations and processes of tourism normally have substantial impacts on the park's ecology and on resident people's culture.

Some government conservation authorities and NGOs are addressing this by entering into a dialogue with the tourism sector. As yet, however, there is a dearth of information about visitor motivation and needs. Early attempts to understand these were often made from within a narrow frame of reference and assumed that visitor behaviour relied on a shared, normative appreciation of core elements of wilderness such as its ecological integrity. Later studies recognise that some people's enjoyment depends on a substantial – rather than a minimal – human presence. As yet, there is no assessment of market segments which can act as a framework for understanding behaviour and needs across a range of park visitors in different cultural settings.

In many countries, the lack of an effective market segmentation forms a significant gap in knowledge about visitors to national parks. Often, the only distinction made is between 'international' and 'domestic' visitors, with no differentiation between the expectations and requirements of groups within these broad categories. Without a more thorough understanding of visitor motivation and behaviour, there is little hope of managing parks successfully and sustainably in terms of resource conservation, developmental goals for local residents, and a satisfying experience for visitors.

Market segmentation may be based on demographic criteria such as age, life-stage, or expectations, and on behavioural variables such as the type of facilities preferred and the frequency or style of travel (for example whether visitors travel independently or in a tour group). Other typologies or segmentations focus on socio-psychological factors such as attitudes, personality traits or benefits gained by tourists. Amongst these are Decrop (2006), who gives a useful summary of different typologies for tourism in general; Hvengaard (2002), who analysed several interactional and normative-cognitive typologies of international visitors to national

parks in Thailand; and Palacio and McCool (1997) who segmented the nature-based tourism market in Belize. Some typologies are helpful in interpreting visitor perceptions and behavioural choices, but not all can be applied as a management tool in different situations. This is partly because many typologies focus on Western tourists, while much less work has been conducted on Southern domestic tourism to national parks. Accordingly, a management-focused segmentation is now suggested. Insights into the behavioural patterns of visitors should help parks to be developed so that tourism can genuinely support biodiversity conservation. The segmentation is based on participant observation of visitor behaviour while leading tours in national parks (mostly in developing countries), on qualitative research during field consultancy in protected areas, and on further in-depth study and statistical analysis during doctoral and post-doctoral academic research.

Before presenting the typology and the segmentation on which it is based, some general points relating to tourist motivation and travel to natural areas will be outlined.

### **The experience of tourism in natural areas**

The central focus of tourism is a range of sensory and intellectual situations which combine to form the vacation experience. In addition to the tangible services and products which have evolved to provide the tourism infrastructure, of equal (or greater) importance are more subjective attributes of beauty, knowledge, companionship, fashionability, spiritual satisfaction, excitement, and the experiential dimension such as the type of ecosystems and scenery which provide the setting for visits to parks. These aspects assume such significance in mature markets that, as Curtin (2006) points out in her study of wildlife tourists, tour operators no longer sell 'places' but experiences.

In order to satisfy these experiential dimensions, tourism managers have to understand people's reasons for travelling. Initial motivations rest on perceived needs which are culturally, sociologically, and psychologically derived (Cooper *et al.*, 1993), although tourists themselves express their reasons for travelling in less abstract terms, with objectives being the desire for new experiences and adventures, to discover different cultures, enjoy nature, and relax. Tour operators are well aware that their customers are highly motivated by being in wilderness areas and viewing wildlife, and terms such as 'national park' and 'wilderness' are labels which

*Elite tourists require luxury lodges. Photo: Janet Cochrane.*





convince tourists that they can expect to encounter wildlife, and which evoke an image of a genuine, untouched nature.

The situation becomes more complicated when the needs of tourists from and within developing countries are considered, since the historico-philosophical processes that shaped attitudes to nature in the West have not necessarily occurred elsewhere. The outcome is that in some parts of the world a more anthropocentric view prevails, with nature appreciated most when it is providing personal benefit for humans, as Weaver (2002) and Sofield and Li (2003) have found in East Asia. In addition, markets change and diversify as people's needs evolve and as a wider spectrum of leisure opportunities becomes available due to political liberalisation or economic growth.

These differences are why it is not possible simply to design a single categorisation for international and domestic tourists, and a separate typology of tourists is presented here for each. An intentional limitation of the typology is that it is only intended to apply to natural areas, rather than to the many other forms of tourism, such as shopping or beach tourism.

### **A typology for international nature tourists**

For international tourists, seven principal user-groups of visitors to protected areas have been identified. These are: Elite, Special Interest, General Interest, Mass, Backpacker, Backpacker Plus, and Explorer tourists (Table 1).

The categorisation is not straightforward, as groups may exhibit contrasting characteristics yet similar preferences. Explorer tourists and Elite tourists alike shun crowds and the formal installations of high volume tourism, for example, although in all other respects they are very different. Explorers expect no concessions to their difference from local people, while the Elite group requires high-quality facilities. In fact, this group is so demanding that despite the luxury safari camps in some protected areas, some upmarket tour operators include few trips to natural areas because *"we have trouble in getting our clients away from luxury hotels, and the accommodation in national parks isn't up to the standard we need"*. Another tour operator, which sends clients to the tiger reserve of Ranthambore, in India, reported that *"we used to send very few people there, but then some luxury tented camp operators went in and now business is booming, as clients can sip their gin and tonic and watch the tigers and the sunset. We are at the top end of the market, and there has to be a synergy between wildlife and comfort"* (Tapper and Cochrane, 2005).

There are also similarities between Backpacker and Mass tourists (although Backpackers would profess the opposite). Both follow rather predictable patterns, seeking out destinations frequented by like-minded others. Like Mass tourists, Backpackers should actually be welcomed by host countries instead of ignored or even discouraged, as is often the case: their willingness to endure (and even enjoy) basic facilities makes them an important spearhead of economic growth in developing countries in demonstrating tourism potential to government officials and investors, and in offering informal 'training' to local people in entrepreneurship and service provision. Another important aspect of Backpackers is that they are extremely flexible in their travel decisions. Communications networks between Backpackers are well developed, with certain guide-books playing an important part in influencing decisions, and increasing use of e-mail and SMS messaging to communicate news of interesting destinations. Parks managers need to be aware of all this, and to find ways of appealing to and communicating with this group.

Backpackers are not a homogeneous group, which also has important implications for national parks. Most are people taking a year off between graduating from university and starting their career, but increasing numbers are older and wealthier, taking several months out of their career in order to travel or undertaking extensive independent journeys in early retirement. These people – the 'Backpacker Plus' category – have the confidence to make their own travel decisions, the resources to pay for occasional side-trips or more upmarket accommodation, and the flexibility to make spontaneous decisions about where to go and what to

**Table 1.** Typology of international tourists to national parks.

<b>Tourist type</b>	<b>Demographic and behavioural characteristics</b>	<b>Preferences for facilities and experiences</b>
<b>Elite</b>	Rich, perhaps sports or entertainment celebrity, CEO of major company, or royalty. Willing to pay large sums for exclusivity.	Need top-class facilities and services, e.g. luxury lodges / camps, rapid transport connections and good communications, good-quality wildlife and wilderness experiences.
<b>Special Interest</b>	Dedicated to a particular hobby, fairly adventurous, often wealthy, prepared to pay to indulge hobby and have others organise logistics. Travel independently or with a small group of like-minded others.	May have little interest in culture unless part of the tour focus or hobby. Require special facilities, e.g. fishing-boats, bird-guides, dive equipment. May have active involvement, e.g. research project. Accept discomfort and long travel where necessary to achieve aims.
<b>General Interest</b>	Often prefer security, company and convenience of group tour, although increasingly travel as individuals on tailor-made itinerary with a tour operator. Relatively wealthy, often active, perhaps busy professionals with limited time. Includes expatriates resident in developing countries.	Keen on nature/wildlife when not hard to see, and on easily-accessible cultural aspects. Need facilities and organised activities for 'soft' adventure and accessing park, e.g. easy hiking trails, whale-watching, low-grade white-water rafting. Dislike travelling long distances without points of interest. Need good amenities, although may accept basic conditions for short periods.
<b>Backpacker Plus</b>	Often experienced travellers and generally in a well-paid job or career; may have taken sabbatical to travel for longer periods.	Genuinely desire to learn about culture and nature, and require good information. Accept basic facilities, but prefer more upmarket accommodation when available; can pay for additional services to facilitate and intensify experiences.
<b>Backpacker</b>	Travel for as long as possible on limited budget, often taking a year off between school/university and starting work. May join organised project for all or part of the trip.	May perceive rigours of local transport, cheap accommodation, etc. as travel experience rather than understanding local culture. Enjoy trekking and scenery, but often cannot visit remote areas because of expense. Require low-cost facilities.
<b>Mass</b>	Often inexperienced at travelling, prefer to travel in large groups, may be wealthy. Includes cruise ship passengers and some safari tourists.	Like superficial aspects of local culture, enjoy natural scenery and wildlife if easy to see. Need good facilities, and will only travel far if in comfort.
<b>Explorer</b>	Individualistic, solitary, adventurous. May be relatively well-off but prefer not to spend much money.	Require no special facilities; reject purpose-built tourism facilities in favour of local ones.

do. Targeted by appropriate promotion about a new attraction, they will help visitor numbers build more quickly than waiting for tour operators to hear about it and build it into their itineraries.

Tour operators are critical intermediaries between parks and another core visitor type, the General Interest tourists. These overlap with the Backpacker Plus category in that both require reasonably good accommodation and interpretation facilities, but General Interest tourists tend to be older and with less time available for travelling or less enthusiasm for making their own arrangements, preferring to have travel details organised for them such as with a package tour. The role of outbound tour operators based in tourist-generating countries is therefore important, and it is essential for protected areas managers to create links with these either directly or through the international operators' local handling agents.

An important group for many parks are the Special Interest tourists, who include divers, bird- and wildlife-watchers, anglers, and people on research or volunteer projects. The essential element for these people is to indulge their hobby; a specialist birding tour operator commented that *"it's the interesting birds which determine whether we visit a place or not"*. Facilities are less crucial: *"basic*



*International tourists especially appreciate good-quality interpretation of park features.* Photo: Janet Cochrane.

*accommodation is OK, but it should be clean and comfortable*” (Tapper and Cochrane, 2005). Specialist tours are often more expensive than those purchased by General Interest tourists, while the Backpacker Plus group pay less overall because they tend to make their travel arrangements direct with local operators or with the park administration. Many Special Interest tourists are wealthy and particularly concerned about conservation relating to their hobby, and there is a strong chance that they will donate additional sums to support a protected area if appropriate channels are created (Barnes and Eagles, 2004; Font, Tapper and Cochrane, 2004).

The final category of international tourists is the Mass segment – hugely significant because of the numbers involved. Many Mass tourists are from neighbouring countries who spread gradually further afield in a ‘ripple’ movement as the market evolves: this is evident with tourism from China, where increasing prosperity and paid holiday entitlement has allowed people to travel first to nearby countries with a familiar culture, such as Macao and Singapore, and then to venture gradually further afield. Aware of this, many Asian and European countries are targeting the Chinese market, and the most accessible national parks may be included in their itineraries. In addition, cruise ships – one of the fastest growing tourism sectors – are floating carriers of the Mass segment. During shore excursions hundreds of visitors can descend simultaneously, and park facilities have to be sufficiently robust to withstand this influx whilst offering the tourists a satisfactory experience. Thus, scores of passengers are bussed from Kota Kinabalu, in the Malaysian state of Sabah, to the orang-utan rehabilitation centre at Sepilok, where the tourists expect to see semi-wild orang-utans. Clearly, any park successfully able to cater to these people without sacrificing its biodiversity values should capture substantial financial benefits, either accruing directly to the park through entry fees or to the surrounding community through goods and services purchased.

### **A typology for domestic nature tourists**

The largest tourism challenge facing many parks managers, especially in Asia and Latin America, is managing the huge flows of domestic tourists who vastly outnumber international tourists. As discussed by Weaver (2002) and Lück (2002), many Asian parks experience the phenomenon of ‘mass ecotourism’, with families and large groups arriving at weekends and public holidays to enjoy the views and respite from polluted cities; visitor numbers easily reach millions per year at sites such as the Great Wall or the Summer Palace in China, for example.

Although a contested concept, ‘mass ecotourism’ cannot simply be ignored, and park managers need to find strategies to mitigate its impacts. The little detailed information available on domestic tourism to national parks indicates that it is rather different to international tourism, and a separate typology using different labels – Economy, Economy Plus, Mass Budget, Family, Incentive and Pilgrimage – has therefore been devised (Table 2).

As with international tourism, there has been both an explosion and diversification of tourism over the last 25 years, with smaller groups of family and friends now arriving alongside larger groups. Many domestic tourists, however, make little distinction between national parks and other forms of leisure-orientated attractions (as noted in Indonesia by Gunawan, 1996), which creates obvious conflicts with the conservation mandate of national parks. Studies in Asia have found that while Western visitors to parks seek authentic wilderness experiences and active engagement with nature, domestic tourists – almost always city-dwellers – prefer more standard ‘leisure’ amenities, enjoying nature more passively or simply as a pleasant place for an outing with friends and family (Backhaus, 2001; Cochrane, 2006).

The four categories of domestic tourist likely to visit the most accessible areas of parks are the Economy, Mass Budget, Family and Incentive groups, one of whose observed and expressed characteristics is tolerance of high densities of people, although there are differences between them. The Economy group consists of large numbers of young people, mainly students, who enjoy activities such as camping and mountain-hiking. The Mass Budget category, consisting of large groups travelling by chartered bus, is very common in Asia, although it is now balanced

**Table 2.** *Typology of domestic tourists to national parks.*

<b>Tourist type</b>	<b>Demographic and behavioural characteristics</b>	<b>Preferences for facilities and experiences</b>
<b>Economy</b>	Often high school or university students, travelling in large groups by public transport or motorbike.	Need campsites or hostels, cheap eateries and robust facilities such as erosion-tolerant mountain trails. Enjoy natural surroundings, with active sports such as mountain-climbing or ‘tubing’ often preferred to a more knowledge-seeking engagement with nature.
<b>Aspirational</b>	Young professionals, better-off students, active and adventurous. Generally travel in small groups of like-minded friends, and will avoid more intensively used sites.	Require good campsites or other inexpensive accommodation. Enjoy natural surroundings, increasingly willing to engage with nature from a biocentric stance. Often enjoy nature-based activities such as bird-watching, cycling, or rafting.
<b>Mass Budget</b>	Large family, neighbourhood or work-related groups. Travel generally by public or chartered transport, mostly for day-trips. Tolerant of high densities of people.	Enjoy fresh air, natural surroundings, and the company of others. Occasionally need cheap guesthouses for overnight stays, as well as facilities such as picnic and relaxation areas, souvenir shops, playgrounds.
<b>Family</b>	Nuclear (or slightly extended) families with private transport, often exploring more widely afield because of availability of better transport and other facilities.	Enjoy natural surroundings but unlikely to walk far; need similar facilities to Mass Budget tourists but with a greater range, i.e. better quality accommodation and restaurants and more activities, such as pony-rides and scuba-diving.
<b>Incentive</b>	Small or medium-sized work-related groups on company incentive or team-building programmes.	Need mid-range accommodation and facilities, perhaps with challenging activities such as problem-solving, ‘outward bound’ games.
<b>Pilgrimage</b>	Participants are from all walks of life, and may stay for a few hours to several weeks.	Visit holy or sacred places (caves, mountain tops, shrines) for spiritual refreshment or guidance, or to pray for a specific gift or blessing. A range of accommodation types is needed.

with other categories as prosperity grows and aspirations evolve. In particular, with increasing private car ownership, nuclear or slightly extended families (the 'Family' category) are now frequently encountered, some exploring their own country for the first time. Alongside these, it is not unusual for companies to send groups of employees to natural areas to engage in team-building activities such as problem-solving exercises; this is the 'Incentive' category.

The interests of the emerging Family group are largely recreational and relaxational, while the Incentive groups may have a serious purpose but will also engage in recreational activities. Both categories are composed of people with higher levels of disposable income, and since the percentage of middle-income people in most Asian and some African countries is increasing, this group will become increasingly important for national parks, and protected areas managers will have to plan accordingly.

A more discerning form of nature-based tourism is also occurring, consisting of people travelling with just a few friends and exploring less well-known parts of national parks on mountain-bikes or on foot, or bird- or wildlife-watching. There is increasing interest in different forms of organised adventure tourism such as white-water river floating, scuba-diving, trekking and wildlife watching. This category has been named the Aspirational group, whose members generally have more sophisticated tastes and are wealthier than Economy and Mass Budget groups. The political implications of this development for national parks can only be beneficial, in that they may form a lobby group inclined to support protection of parks; the management implications are that they will increasingly require specialist facilities.

An interesting group rarely considered by park managers is formed by Pilgrimage tourists, who visit protected areas for spiritual purposes such as to pray or make offerings at sacred sites. Belief in the spirit-world is still strong in many parts of Asia, for example, and underpins a wariness towards wilderness in general – especially mountains and forests – because of the power of the spirits residing there.<sup>1</sup> Certain specific natural features such as caves, ancient trees, lakes or mountain peaks retain particular spiritual significance. Many sites relate to ancient, animistic beliefs, while others reflect mainstream religions. Pilgrimages to places such as this, e.g. Adam's Peak and Kataragama in Sri Lanka, both of which are in protected areas, are a well-established form of spiritual life in many countries; there are important implications for parks managers as pilgrims sometimes trek across the parks to reach their goal, and require food and accommodation.

## Conclusions

All over the world, people are achieving their leisure-time objectives in increasingly diverse ways. Particular trends are for more frequent vacations, more long-haul travel, 'value for time' as well as value for money, and more authentic or 'back to nature' experiences – all of which affect demand for tourism to protected areas. Hitherto, the needs of tourists in many national parks have been catered for by spontaneous market provision, but this can challenge biodiversity conservation and become problematic for park managers, trained in a biocentric paradigm and without tourism expertise.

A cornerstone in addressing these challenges and in making appropriate arrangements for tourists is to understand visitors' motives and requirements. Motivation for travel is now analysed in increasingly sophisticated ways, and several motives will usually apply to any given trip. Park policy-makers and planners need to have a clear idea of how these motivations affect visitor behaviour. They need to understand which type (or types) of visitor they are catering to so that specific needs can be addressed, and to avoid creating conflicts between different visitor types. For instance, the needs of large groups visiting the parks for family-orientated, recreational

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1. For instance, the continuing significance of local belief in Mt. Semeru (an active volcano and the highest mountain in Java, Indonesia) as the seat of the gods was demonstrated during the author's doctoral fieldwork in 1996. A resident of a village on Semeru's slopes reported that when Javanese shadow-puppetry – which recounts the actions of the gods, amongst other things – was introduced to the village, the gods were angry because the performances were too close to their home, and showed their displeasure by causing a major eruption.



purposes may adversely affect the requirements of smaller groups seeking a more authentic, knowledge-based and inspirational experience.

Of course, in some cases the choices will be pre-determined: inaccessible parks requiring a long trek or an expensive helicopter ride can only aim for fit, adventurous or wealthy people, while accessible parks located close to major urban centres are likely to receive large influxes of visitors at weekends. In many cases parks will appeal to a diverse range of tourists, but understanding the different categories will help managers ease visitor flows, maximise revenue, and enhance visitor satisfaction by ensuring a spatial or temporal spread between different types. For example, parks which are popular at weekends with Mass or Economy groups could easily appeal to Special Interest or Aspirational groups at quieter times during the week.

Changes in motivation throughout people's lives mean that any assessment of individual fit with a category can only be a 'snapshot' view; most individuals will belong to different categories at different life-stages – or even during a single vacation. So, today's Economy tourist will move into the Family or Aspirational categories as he or she gains a family and progresses through a career, while this year's gauche young Backpacker may return in a few years' time as a high-spending General Interest tourist, and a few years after that as an even higher-spending Elite tourist. (This is one reason why scruffy Backpackers should be well treated – they are more likely to return and spend lots of money in the future if their early memories are good ones.) A Backpacker Plus visitor, meanwhile, may be prepared to 'rough it' for a few days while visiting remote parks, but at a later stage of the trip may relax in an expensive hotel.

It is clear that underpinning any attempt at developing a park's tourism potential must be a greater appreciation of tourists' characteristics. It is hoped that the typology presented in this paper will go some way towards achieving this in providing protected areas personnel with an easily-understood tool which will help plan for the inevitable increase in tourism to natural areas over the next couple of decades. By fostering a clearer understanding of tourism and tourists, this typology can contribute to the sustainable management of the natural and cultural values protected by national parks.

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**Janet Cochrane**, PhD, is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for Responsible Tourism. She has been involved in tourism, conservation and development in Asia since 1979. Before joining Leeds Metropolitan University in 2004, she worked as a tour leader, nature tourism consultant, a writer, as well as for the BBC World Service. She has lectured on tourism and environmental policy at the University of Humber and the Open University. Her research interests focus on tourism's contribution to biodiversity conservation, tourism in Asia, and rural tourism. Janet Cochrane, International Centre for Responsible Tourism, Leeds Metropolitan University, Calverley Street, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK. E-mail: J.Cochrane@leedsmet.ac.uk

# Managing for visitor experiences in Canada's national heritage places

ED JAGER, CAROL SHEEDY, FRANCES GERTSCH, TED PHILLIPS AND GREG DANCHUK

With increased urbanisation, an aging population and growing immigration, Canada is undergoing significant demographic changes. As a result, the lifestyles and values of Canadians are changing, as are their attitudes towards travel and leisure. Parks Canada is faced with the challenge of remaining relevant to and representative of Canadians in this dynamic context. Memorable visitor experiences are a key medium through which Parks Canada can be relevant to Canadians and nurture their interest and support. Offering opportunities for quality visitor experiences and being representative of and relevant to Canadians, requires a continual focus on people and their experiences. Building on quality social science and a solid understanding of visitors in a changing social context, Parks Canada needs to look comprehensively at the entire visitor experience and work to ensure it is facilitating experiences that will be relevant to Canadians. This work must recognise that the visitor experience is a shared outcome, involving the visitor, Parks Canada and its partners, and that each visitor brings his or her personal perspective to the experience. All this work must be done in a continually evolving fashion that integrates the protection, education and visitor experience elements of the mandate.

**WITH INCREASED URBANISATION**, an aging population and growing immigration, Canada is undergoing significant demographic changes. As a result, the lifestyles and values of Canadians are changing, as are their attitudes towards travel and leisure. Parks Canada is faced with the challenge of remaining relevant to and representative of Canadians in this dynamic context (Parks Canada 2004a). Memorable visitor experiences are a key medium through which Parks Canada can be relevant to Canadians and nurture their interest and support.

Offering opportunities for quality memorable visitor experiences and being representative of and relevant to Canadians, requires a continual focus on people and visitors' experiences. The changing social context in which it operates means that Parks Canada must maintain its understanding of the needs and expectations of Canadians. Building on quality social science and a solid understanding of visitors, Parks Canada needs to look comprehensively at the entire visitor experience and work to ensure it is facilitating experiences that will be relevant to Canadians. This work must recognise that the visitor experience is a shared outcome, involving the visitor, Parks Canada and its partners. In particular, it is important to understand that each visitor brings his or her personal perspective to the experience. And all this work must be done in a continually evolving fashion that integrates the protection, education and visitor experience elements of the mandate.

Following an explanation of the context for the visitor experience concept in Parks Canada, this paper will discuss Canada's changing social context, will present how Parks Canada understands the concept of visitor experience and will describe what the Agency is doing to ensure visitors have opportunities for memorable experiences in the country's national heritage places.

## The context for Parks Canada's visitor experience concept

*"On behalf of the people of Canada, we protect and present nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage and foster public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations."*

Parks Canada Mandate (Parks Canada 2002)

Parks Canada's mandate is fundamental to the work of the Agency and is the source of its three core objectives: conserving heritage resources (Protection); fostering public understanding and appreciation (Education); and fostering enjoyment (Visitor Experience). These three core elements of the mandate permeate the Agency's policies and many other documents (e.g. *Canada National*

*Parks Act*, annual Corporate Plan, individual park or historic site management plans, etc.) and are the basis for the organisation's management framework.

Parks Canada is developing a new perspective, one that differs from the dual mandate of preservation versus human use that has traditionally been associated with protected area management. However, this shift is not merely semantic, adding a word so the dual mandate becomes a triple mandate. Rather the shift is one of approach. Instead of viewing the issue as a dichotomy of people versus parks, a cohesive management approach integrates the three elements. From here the Agency can achieve its expressed objective of ensuring that Parks Canada programmes are representative of and relevant to Canadians (Parks Canada 2004a).

### **A changing social context**

Parks Canada wants Canadians to see themselves, their stories and their experiences reflected in their national parks, national historic sites and national marine conservation areas and help all Canadians develop a sense of attachment to these special places. To achieve this objective Canadians must have opportunities for memorable visitor experiences. But for these experiences to be relevant to Canadians, Parks Canada must adapt to a changing social context.

Parks Canada will need to consider four key trends as it works to remain relevant to and representative of Canadians. First, the Canadian population is aging and has more time, resources and desire to travel (Statistics Canada 2003b; Foot and Stoffman 2000). The challenge for Parks Canada will be to evaluate the opportunities currently available in national parks and national historic sites in light of Canadian and other travellers' evolving interests. They are likely to be more interested in soft adventure and better accommodations than extreme sports and rustic camping.

Second, Canada is increasingly urbanised: almost half of Canadians now live in the four areas centred near and around Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Calgary/Edmonton, and future growth is expected to be concentrated in these areas (Statistics Canada 2003a and 2003b). This trend poses a challenge for Parks Canada as urbanisation increases the distance – both physical

*Visitors at Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site of Canada gain understanding of their cultural heritage.*  
Photo: Parks Canada/Ken Maer Studios 2006.



and psychological – between Canadians and their natural heritage. Urbanisation does not necessarily pose the same challenge for national historic sites, because many are located in or near major urban centres; however they lack the profile of national parks.

Third, the Canadian mosaic is becoming increasingly complex as a result of immigration (Statistics Canada 2003a). At the same time, new Canadians are significantly under-represented in visits to national parks and national historic sites (Environics International 2002). Recent immigrants tend to settle in urban areas; have limited available leisure time and income; and hold differing cultural perspectives regarding natural and cultural heritage (Chartier 2004). With an increasing proportion of population being new Canadians, Parks Canada must better understand and respond to their needs if it hopes to be increasingly representative and relevant.

Fourth, a variety of societal factors are changing the tourism industry. Travellers want more unique, authentic, interactive and diverse experiences. This trend is linked to the idea of the experience economy: the shift in the source of economic value from commodities to goods to services to experiences is seen in the evolution of the tourism sector (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Linked to this shift has been the decline in large, organised group travel over the past several years (Canadian Tourism Commission 2002). Travellers are divided into more distinct market segments that need to be better understood (e.g. needs, interests, expectations), specifically identified and targeted with specialised products, promotions and communications (Arsenault and Gale 2004). At the same time there is increased competition for potential visitors' time and attention. Travellers have more choice, are better informed and want a bigger role in choosing and creating their travel experiences. The rapid advance in technology has changed the way these places are visited (e.g. specialised equipment is allowing visitors to do new recreational activities). Time pressures are resulting in changes in the way people visit national heritage places (e.g. the traditional two-week trip is being replaced by several extended weekend trips; more travellers are combining business and pleasure to extend business trips into mini-vacations). Parks Canada is now being challenged to respond to these changes in the way Canadians want to discover their national heritage places.

The potentially negative impacts of these trends can already be seen in recent visitation statistics to Canada's national parks and national historic sites. From 2001 to 2005 visitation to national parks dropped by 3% while visitation to national historic sites decreased by almost 10% (Parks Canada 2006). It is important to recognise that these downward visitation trends occurred at the same time as the overall Canadian population grew by almost 4% (Statistics Canada 2003b) and at a time when visiting historical and cultural attractions is one of the fastest-growing niche tourism markets (Statistics Canada 2004).

The question for Parks Canada, as it strives to be more representative of and relevant to Canadians, is how to integrate the core elements of the organisation's mandate into decisions that allow Canadians to see themselves in these special places. Relevance results from meaningful and enjoyable experiences that provide visitors opportunities to learn and grow. The Agency's role is to set the stage for the visitor to create personal experiences and memories, not impose a rigid offer (Sheedy 2006). These experiences create personal connections to the cultural and natural areas in which they occur. They help visitors understand, and build support for, the need to preserve the ecological and commemorative integrity of these special places. A failure in any area means these places run the risk of becoming less relevant to Canadians.

### **What does Parks Canada mean by visitor experience?**

The visitor experience concept has grown out of a desire for increased relevance to Canadians at a time of significant social change. Thinking back to the three core mandate elements and looking at the past decade, the protection and education elements of the mandate are well expressed in corporate documents and the Agency's orientation; however, the visitor's experience has received significantly less attention. Resource reductions in the early 1990s left social science



*Visitors on the Cabot Trail, Cape Breton Highlands National Park of Canada enjoying an activity-oriented experience.*  
Photo: Parks Canada/Pierre St-Jacques 1996.

and visitor related functions with little national level technical or professional support and limited local capacity. Decisions fell to the local level and meant that approaches were inconsistent across the Agency and often lacked resources. Faced with the societal changes noted above, the Agency renewed its focus on the visitor and their experience to build the support of Canadians for their national heritage places.

Parks Canada's renewed focus on the visitor experience starts with the visitor. Agency decision-making must, therefore, be based on solid knowledge of visitor needs and expectations. The Agency has increased its social science research capacity in an attempt to understand both current and potential visitors. This information can be used to make decisions that better reflect a changing Canadian society, creating more opportunities for experiences that are relevant to Canadians. This does not imply that the Agency will simply offer visitors whatever they desire, but it means visitors will be a key part of the equation when decisions are made.

Understanding and responding to the diversity of visitors' needs and expectations is a challenge and will call on the creative energy of Agency staff and their partners. Each person arriving at a park or site brings with them their unique story and their own set of expectations. For one visitor, a drive along the Cabot Trail may be a seminal event in their lives; one that they will never forget. For a different visitor, the Trail may only serve as the means to an end, as he embarks on a weekend backpacking trip. His experience is focused on the backcountry. As the visitor experience concept evolves and becomes part of the Agency's culture, considering this huge variety in visitor's needs and expectations will be one of the key challenges. This leads to a key part of Parks Canada's thinking around visitor experience: the experience is a shared outcome between the visitor, the Agency and its partners. The Agency is not solely in control of the experience and cannot ensure that the visitor will have the experience the Agency desires. It is quite possible that a visitor's experience may not be what is expected. Parks Canada is developing a comprehensive and flexible approach, so that all the elements contributing to the experience are considered and that a significant effort is made to personalise opportunities for experiences. The various stages of the experience will be consciously evaluated so that they maximise their potential to positively impact and personalise the visit. In doing this, the Agency's focus moves from offering quality services to the visitor to setting the stage for the visitor to create personal experiences and memories.

The Parks Canada approach will continue to be built around the three standard trip stages: pre-trip, during and post-trip. Pre-trip information starts the trip cycle; creating awareness, interest and expectations regarding a potential visit. When making the decision to visit, visitors



want to know what they can do and see, and what they should expect. They want a sense of the experience they might have. They also want answers to basic questions about subjects like the weather, accommodations, fees and directions. This information is also critical to ensuring visitors arrive prepared so they can have a safe and enjoyable visit.

The next component of the experience involves what the visitor encounters on-site. It starts with the basic facilities and services like the quality of roads, washroom facilities, trails, and day use areas, as well as the level of maintenance, cleanliness and the visitor's sense of security. These base services are related to the perception of value. When facilities and services are designed and maintained with the visitor in mind, they create the potential for a positive experience.

Another on-site component is the welcome or reception visitors receive when they interact directly with the park or site staff. It is important that the visitor is made to feel welcome; is able get answers to specific questions; receives personalised service; is able to participate in activities that respond to their interests. A positive reception and welcome supports a positive experience (Guerin and Lecoutourier 2006).

An important part of the on-site visit is the opportunity for discovery: the hike with friends to an incredible vista, the guided walk that opens your eyes to the story of the special place you are visiting; or the chance to dress-up in a period costume and step back in time. When they truly meet the visitor's needs on a personal level, guided programmes, special events, activities or interpretation can facilitate outstanding, memorable experiences.

Finally, the post-trip elements include opportunities to remember the experiences. This may include sharing the visit with friends and family, showing pictures, writing stories, even souvenirs. The most powerful souvenirs have a clear link with the experience. These memories can be enhanced by follow-up communications and will hopefully lead to a return visit.

Every element outlined above can contribute positively or negatively to a visitor's experience. The key consideration in this approach is the individual person as a potential visitor. Visitors are each unique and expect a menu of opportunities from which they can create the personal experience they are seeking. Parks Canada's role becomes one of catalyst and facilitator of the visitor's desired experience.

Parks Canada's efforts to facilitate outstanding, memorable visitor experiences require key contributions of staff from across the organisation and its partners. The work of maintenance and cleaning staff helps ensure visitors are not disappointed with the level of service they receive. The

*Discovery is often an important part of an experience – Pointe Pelee National Park. Photo: Parks Canada/Scott Kenney.*



work of resource conservation staff ensures the protection of the very reason visitors are coming to the park or site. In addition, these staff often know a park or site's best kept secrets and stories, and can be key facilitators and story tellers. Partners are involved in all stages of the experience: providing pre-trip information, base services such as accommodation, welcoming visitors and helping them discover these special places.

Parks Canada has received high marks in terms of quality of service for its programmes, facilities and staff. Compared to a number of federal government services, national parks continue to be rated among the top (Phase 5 Consulting Group Inc. 2005). All aspects of a visit to a national park or national historic site including staff courtesy, provision of service in visitors' language of choice, and overall visit surpass established satisfaction targets (Parks Canada 2004b). However, the Agency must move past considering satisfaction with services as the key measure. A visitor's sense of fulfilment and their connection with the place must be better-understood and used to measure success.

### **Making the visitor experience concept a reality**

Parks Canada has taken a number of concrete steps to advance the visitor experience concept. In October 2005, the Agency created the External Relations and Visitor Experience Directorate, which includes a Social Science and a Visitor Experience Branch. Parks Canada has initiated a number of strategies that will move the Agency towards an approach focused on setting the stage for the visitor to create personal experiences and memories. These initiatives will evolve overtime, as the Agency evaluates their effectiveness and as Agency's objectives evolve.

A key step towards operationalising the visitor experience concept is the Visitor Experience Assessment. First piloted in 2005, this exercise was undertaken at 15 national parks and national historic sites across Canada in 2006. The assessment looks at the current state of the experience offered, from the perspective of visitor, to help managers and staff work collaboratively to assess, understand and enhance the visitor experience. Staff assess a broad range of themes including: visitor research; pre-trip planning services; on-site reception; interpretation programmes; working with partners; management and business planning; staff training; organisation; infrastructure; performance measurement and visitor feedback. Based on social science information, areas where the performance of the park or site could be improved are identified and specific actions are developed. Once completed the assessment provides comprehensive guidance for the management of the park or site in areas related to the visitor experience. The themes and related questions will continue to evolve with thinking related to the visitor experience.

A number of other projects aimed at improving opportunities for memorable visitor experiences are in progress. These include: the development of a framework for the management of recreational activities; the integration of phone, internet and print trip planning information available to visitors; the development of service guidelines; the consistent and comprehensive inclusion of visitor experience considerations into infrastructure investment decisions; and the enhancement of the Agency's interpretive product.

Parks Canada is also developing a suite of performance indicators and associated measures related to understanding visitors, providing opportunities, delivering high quality services and connecting visitors to these special places. Specific measures are being developed and will be operationalised through the Agency's planning and reporting framework. Measurement to assess the impact of investments and the achievement of goals will be key to ongoing efforts to improve the facilitation of visitor experience opportunities.

The integration of the visitor experience concept into the organisation's management framework and the development of policies and guidance that consider the visitor, are important starting points to provide support and guidance to managers and their teams. In addition, comprehensive training for staff will be developed to professionalise the delivery of services, programmes and activities for the visitor and to address the broad spectrum of visitor experience related functions.

## Conclusion

Parks Canada has embraced the concept of the Visitor Experience as key to the success and sustainability of the national park, national historic site, and national marine conservation area treasures with which it is entrusted. Integrated with the protection and education elements of the mandate, the enhanced focus on the Visitor Experience is how the Agency hopes to ensure relevancy of the parks and sites to Canadians into the future.

To continue to be relevant to Canadians, Parks Canada must strive to take into consideration their needs and expectations in a rapidly changing social context. It must look comprehensively at the visitor experience, and work to ensure it is facilitating opportunities that are relevant to visitors. This work needs to recognise that the visitor experience is a shared outcome between the visitor, Parks Canada and its partners; and that each visitor brings his or her personal perspective to the experience. Accordingly, the visitor themselves and their needs, interests and expectations form the base of thinking for the 'visitor experience' perspective. Parks Canada will continue to provide the required products, services and infrastructure but this will be based on increased knowledge and appreciation of the visitor. Success will be achieved when Canadians see Canada's national parks, national historic sites and national marine conservation areas as special places they want to protect, learn about and experience. And the Agency will be fulfilling its roles of guardian, guide, storyteller and partner, as defined by the Parks Canada Charter.

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**Ed Jager** holds a Masters degree in International Affairs with a concentration in tourism development. He has worked with Parks Canada for almost 10 years in a variety of visitor services, communications and interpretation related roles. Ed Jager, Manager, Visitor Experience Products and Services, Visitor Experience Branch, 25 Eddy Street (25-6-O), Gatineau, Quebec K1A 0M5. Tel: 819-994-2600, Fax: 819-997-5974, E-mail: ed.jager@pc.gc.ca

**Carol Sheedy** is Director General, External Relations and Visitor Experience for Parks Canada. Carol graduated from the University of Ottawa in 1976 with a BA in art history and history. She pursued postgraduate studies at the University of Ottawa, obtaining a Master's degree in Canadian history in 1980.

**Frances Gertsch** has worked for Parks Canada for six years as a planner, policy analyst and now as the Head of Visitor Activities and Services at the national office. Frances has a Masters of Environmental Studies (Planning) from the University of Waterloo. She has lived, worked and played in wild spaces in Alberta, Ontario and Nunavut.

**Ted Phillips** has worked for Parks Canada for over 25 years in various capacities related to visitor experience. He is currently acting as Senior Advisor to the Director General of External Relations and Visitor Experience in Parks Canada's national office.

**Greg Danchuk** has worked extensively in areas related to visitor experience throughout his 18-year career with Parks Canada. With a background as a social science researcher, Greg has worked as a manager in the External Relations Branch of Parks Canada. Greg was instrumental in the creation Parks Canada's visitor experience concept and is currently the Senior Policy Advisor within the External Relations and Visitor Experience Directorate in Parks Canada's national office.

# Monitoring visitor experiences in protected areas

ROBYN BUSHELL AND TONY GRIFFIN

An important element of the planning and management of protected areas is the understanding of visitor experiences. Well managed, visitation can generate social, cultural, conservation and economic benefits. Without strategic planning, visitor-related activities can create a broad range of negative impacts. This article focuses on the nature of visitor experiences and the ways in which they can be most effectively monitored to better inform park management, resource allocation decisions and planning processes. It explores the many dimensions of visitor experience relating to the location, the season and the length of the visit and the visitor themselves, and the consequent need for clarity in monitoring – its purpose and objectives, what is being monitored and how results data will be utilised. The paper also discusses the importance of simple, reliable and meaningful indicators used in assessment. It draws on some recent research undertaken amongst Australian park agencies regarding the monitoring of visitor experiences.

**PROTECTED AREAS** are very important settings for a wide range of recreational activities that enhance individual health and wellbeing, provide opportunities for social interaction and generate economic benefits associated with on- and off-park visitor services and tourism activity (Manning, 1999:156; Pigram and Jenkins, 1999). Visitation to protected areas may also foster an appreciation of their natural and cultural heritage values, thereby enhancing conservation awareness and attitudes.

An important element of the planning and management of protected areas is that management be informed by monitoring and consequent understanding of visitor experiences. If well managed, visitation can generate social, cultural, conservation and economic benefits for the visitor, the protected area and the local community. Without careful and strategic planning,

*Bowali Visitor Centre. Kakadu National Park and World Heritage Area, providing visitor information and interpretative displays. Photo: Robyn Bushell.*



however, visitor-related activities can create a broad range of negative impacts resulting in damage, costs and lost opportunities (Bushell, 2003; Cessford and Muhar, 2003). Importantly, protected area managers must respond to and meet visitor expectations without compromising or neglecting the natural and cultural heritage resources, which represent the primary purpose of protecting the site in the first place. This balance is often highly contested and depends on individual values and varying interpretations of appropriate use and priority issues. Much has been written about the values and use of protected areas (see McNeely, 2006; Sheppard, 2006). This article, however, will focus on the nature of visitor experiences and the ways in which they can be most effectively monitored, drawing on recent research from Australia. Further, it will discuss how such monitoring can be used to better inform park management, resource allocation decisions and planning processes.

### **Why monitor visitor experiences?**

The visitor experience has many dimensions and varies according to attributes of the location, the season, the length of the visit, and the visitors themselves. The broad parameters of location affecting the visitor experience include: the type of protected area – such as being terrestrial or marine; vast or small; remote or urban; a wilderness area, a national park, a botanic garden, a state forest or recreation reserve among a range of state, community and private protected areas; the activities permitted; the infrastructure and facilities available to the visitor and the competing demands of different types of visitors. The season and temporal aspects of a visit will influence flora and fauna viewing and levels of personal comfort. Peak seasons – either relating to special features of the park or holiday periods – will affect levels of visitation as well as the experience received. Some sites are better able to cope with high visitor loads. The consequences of management decisions need to be monitored in order to determine their effectiveness. Different users have different concepts of the appropriate social conditions at a site.

The individual visitor experience is further shaped by a number of factors, such as whether visitors reside in the local area or not. This will influence their familiarity with and connection to the place, its facilities and management. An individual's purpose of visit will greatly influence expectations and how other visitors, services and facilities influence their experience. The purpose can be to undertake any of a number of very diverse activities, which include among others: seeking solitude or spiritual experiences; simple relaxation; sightseeing or scenic driving; being with family and friends for a picnic, camping experience or special celebration; enhancing physical fitness by walking, hiking or cycling; adventure pursuits such as orienteering, abseiling, white water rafting or mountain biking; sports such as horse-riding, skiing, water-based recreation – fishing, swimming, boating or diving; hobbies and professional pursuits such as writing, poetry, photography, painting; and educational visits for school groups, mature-aged or special interest groups.

The length of the visit, which may range from a short day trip to an extended stay, may also influence the visitor experience and expectations with respect to services and facilities to be provided. The nature of travel companions – commercial tour group, alone, with family, friends, school, community or interest group – will be influential as will the number and nature of other visitors simultaneously using a site for similar or very different purposes. The behaviour of other visitors may have great bearing on the level of enjoyment. A single person behaving inappropriately can destroy the experience of many other visitors. Perceptions of safety and risk, or of excessive control by park managers may also impact on the visitor experience. Different types and styles of infrastructure can be regarded as essential by one user and a de-valuing of a site by another, hence park managers need to understand how park developments may impact on the nature and quality of the experience offered.

Given all these influencing factors on the visitor experience, it is therefore important that any monitoring regime is clear about its purpose and objectives, what is being monitored and how

**Table 1.** Reasons for collecting data on visitor numbers and experiences.

Understanding visitor expectations
Understanding visitor motivations and purpose of visits
Understanding the effectiveness of management actions
Designing visitor facilities
Determining visitor satisfaction with their experience
Determining visitor satisfaction with specific park services and facilities
Performance reporting on visitor service provision
Identifying the key drivers of visitor satisfaction within the context of a specific site, activity and/or target market
Establishing and tracking visitor profiles – demographics, preferences, primary activity types, visitation patterns and trends in usage etc.
Monitoring regulation compliance
Correlating use levels to impact hot spots
Identifying useful indicator sites and processes for interim/routine data collection
Scheduling of staffing and maintenance
Determining the impact of interpretation materials and guided walks on appreciation and understanding of the conservation/heritage values of the site
Identifying any problems, such as safety from the perspective of the visitor, and minimising conflict between user types
Identifying sources of information used by different categories of visitor, both pre-trip and within the protected area
Identifying travel party characteristics – size, composition, transportation and accommodation used for different visitor segments
Identifying the social, economic and political significance of recreation use of protected areas

(Sources: Bushell, 2003; Cessford and Muhar, 2003; Darcy *et al.*, 2007; Eagles *et al.*, 2002; Lockwood *et al.*, 2006; Sheppard, 2006; Trigg, 2006.)

resulting data will be used in management. Monitoring can require considerable resources, including time and effort in design, data collection, analysis and application of findings. It also requires effort on behalf of the visitor, so it is important to all involved that the outputs are useful and strategically applied. The main purposes for collecting such data are summarised in Table 1 and the methods of collecting this information are summarised in Table 2. (See also Anderson, Lime and Wang, 1998; Cessford and Muhar, 2003; Eagles, McCool and Haynes, 2002; Hornback and Eagles, 1999).

As well as clarity of purpose and techniques used, monitoring approaches should consider the comparability of data over time and across different sites. To manage both appropriate social conditions and visitor impacts on the site it is important to not only monitor visitation patterns over time, but also spatial distribution (Cessford and Muhar, 2003) relating to usage and visitor flows within a site. More efficient processes for such monitoring include simulation modeling (Cole and Daniel, 2003). Global positioning system receivers may also be given to visitors to track their movements over space and time.

An important aspect of monitoring is the identification of simple, reliable and meaningful indicators that can be used to assess visitor experiences, and to assess the outcomes of managerial processes and decisions. These indicators need to be relevant to the specific multidimensional context in terms of the setting, the range of visitors and activities being monitored.

The more fragile the site, the more contested the values and range of attitudes and perceptions on appropriate use within a setting, and/or the more variable the range of users and uses – the greater the need for sensitive indicators to protect the site, the experiences and/or the goodwill between key stakeholders – site managers, visitors, locals, policy makers and other conservation concerned citizens (McCool *et al.*, 2005). The term sensitive refers to the recognition of the different values of various stakeholders, as well as to the measurement of different attributes of the visitor experience. Well-designed indicators can reduce the complexity and the cost of monitoring, as well as provide early warnings of changes to attributes identified as critical (McCool and Stankey, 2004).



**Table 2.** Summary of visitor monitoring techniques.

Technique	Application	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Counting visitors</b> – includes automated counters, entrance records (e.g., ticket sales) manual counts, visitor books, tour records and aerial photos	Traffic counters can be employed on most roads used by vehicles, aerial photographs are used for marine areas and difficult to access locations; trail counters of various types can be used to estimate use of specific trail areas	Provides simple measure of the distribution and extent of use of natural area; automated counters are one of the most reliable ways of estimating numbers	Most methods provide estimates only; automated counters may be expensive to purchase and some may have significant margins of error
<b>Questionnaires and personal interviews</b> – includes site-based, mail and/or telephone data collection	Best used where detailed information on visitors and their visit characteristics, preferences and expectations are required for planning and impact management	Questionnaires provide comprehensive information on visitors, their activities and expectations; they are widely used, making results comparable with those obtained elsewhere	Can be expensive to design, administer and analyse
<b>Observing visitors</b> – used to count numbers and observe behaviour	Best used where information on numbers and behaviour is unavailable via other means	Useful for counting numbers when other means are not available; observing behaviour can be correlated with other techniques, especially self-reporting by visitors	Only counts of numbers and some characteristics (e.g., sex, method of travel) are appropriate; observing behaviour is expensive and training of observer is essential
<b>Focus groups and other interactive techniques</b> – users brought together to provide data, often on more than one occasion	Using task forces particularly for large, complex natural areas with multiple stakeholders	Efficient means of accessing a range of ideas at one time (focus group) or seeking determination and agreement over time on indicators and standards (task force)	Extremely time-consuming to organise and administer; data maybe difficult to analyse if consensus is not reached, not necessarily a representative sample

## Monitoring visitor experiences – Australian practices

Recently there has been much activity and interest amongst Australian agencies in the monitoring of visitor experiences in national parks. The situation is made quite complex, however, by the structure surrounding the administration of national parks at the federal and state level, and the consequent number of agencies responsible for their management. There are a total of eleven major agencies, with some level of collaboration between states and the Commonwealth for World Heritage sites, and some sites co-managed with Traditional Owners. In general, each agency has tended to develop its own approach to monitoring visitor experiences. In some cases it has been quite systematic and in other cases rather *ad hoc*, and often with a variety of practices being employed within the same agency. The purposes of the monitoring activity also vary from agency to agency (Griffin and Vacaflores, 2004; Darcy, Griffin, Craig, Moore, and Crilley, 2007).

Generally, monitoring practices in Australian national and marine parks have focused on the following key aspects:

- visitor satisfaction, both overall and with specific park services, facilities and attributes;
- the importance of various park services, facilities and attributes in influencing the visitor's quality of experience;
- expectations of visitors with respect to park services and facilities;
- main reasons or motivations for visits;
- overall patterns and levels of national park visitation within the community;

- demographic profiling of visitors, to determine what types of people are using national parks; and
- reasons for infrequent or non-visitation of parks amongst some sections of the community.

The most common practice has been the measurement of overall satisfaction, primarily because this is viewed as a key performance indicator by most parks agencies which collect such data as part of their corporate performance reporting. A number of agencies also measure satisfaction with specific services, facilities and attributes, which provides more detailed information to assist park planning and management decision-making. The parks services of Western Australia, Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory, for example, incorporate questions about satisfaction with various park attributes in their regular visitor surveys. In some cases, there are parallel sets of questions asking visitors to rate the importance of these attributes, which then enables priority setting based on the combined results of the satisfaction and importance ratings; a low satisfaction rating of a highly important attribute would suggest a high priority for corrective action. Satisfaction serves as a measure of the current performance of the attribute from the visitors' perspective. Some agencies, such as the Queensland Park Service, conduct similar importance-performance assessments of selected parks on a less regular basis. A slightly different approach to addressing visitor satisfaction has been adopted by Parks Victoria, which conducts regular community surveys of the state population in order to ascertain the expectations of visitors with respect to service and facility provision in a range of different park types. In this latter case, the approach has been motivated by the adoption of a 'levels of service' approach to park classification, which then guides the quantity and quality of services provided in the different types of parks. A number of other Australian parks agencies are moving towards this model.

*Alice Springs Desert Parks interpretative display to assist visitors to appreciate the flora and fauna of the desert.*  
Photo: Robyn Bushell.



Some recent initiatives with respect to visitor experience monitoring have included developing standardised survey instruments and protocols, which have then been delivered to prospective users within the agencies through user manuals or intranet websites (e.g. Horneman, Beeton and Hockings, 2002; Griffin and Archer, 2005). The adoption of these standard methods has, however, been only partially achieved (Darcy, *et al.*, 2007). An innovative practice in Tasmania has been the development of ‘visitor experience statements’, which provide a detailed narrative description of the visitor experience at a particular park site from pre-trip decision-making through to post-trip recollection. The intention of these statements, then, is to provide guidance as to how visitors’ expectations can be met at each stage of the experience. Thus far they have been developed in only a small number of popular iconic sites. A possible shortcoming of this approach is that the statements are informed by workshops with key interest groups rather than by engaging the broader visiting public. They do, however, represent an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the visitor experience than is generally afforded by survey approaches.

Parks Australia has recognised a number of deficiencies in its visitor monitoring, with quite separate procedures at Uluru-Kata Tjuta, Kakadu and Booderee National Parks. To date, these have primarily focused on regularly measuring visitor numbers with limited focus on other types of visitor information. The last comprehensive visitor surveys were conducted several years ago and several years apart. The recently imposed removal of park entrance fees at Kakadu provided impetus to reappraise the approach. Parks Australia is now seeking to introduce a standardised approach to visitor surveying and reporting. It is proposed that results would be analysed and compared annually across the three parks and with other national and international visitor and destination surveys conducted by Tourism Australia and other bodies (Trigg, 2006).

Overall, while there has been much activity in Australian parks agencies, there is considerable scope for improvement in current practices, which has been recognised in a number of recent reviews (Archer, Griffin and Hayes, 2001; Open Mind Research Group, 2002; Griffin and Vacaflores, 2004; Wardell and Moore, 2004; Darcy, *et al.*, 2007). In particular, there is a need to develop approaches to visitor monitoring so that it is integrated with and contributes to strategic planning and management decisions within the national park estate. A major constraint on such monitoring has been the high cost of conducting such exercises and the limited resources that

Uluru National Park and World Heritage Area. Local traditional owner-conducted tours – ‘Anangu Tours’ – provide visitors with insights from indigenous guides. Photo: Robyn Bushell.



agencies have to commit to this purpose. Consequently most agencies have had to compromise on the quantity and quality of the data that are collected. Tasmania, for example, took the pragmatic decision to only conduct regular visitor surveys in a selected set of eight major parks. Thus, while these few parks have a fairly sound foundation for planning and management decisions, the majority of the state's parks must rely on informal observations and anecdotal advice from field staff. An endemic problem for Australian protected area agencies is the lack of consistent requirements for integrating visitor experience monitoring into statutory park planning processes, which has meant that plans are often poorly informed about such matters as visitor numbers, experiences and expectations. Hence visitor facilities and services may be provided where they are not required or expected. Park agencies need to recognise the value of visitor data in producing better, often more efficient decisions about park management and resource allocation, with the resultant savings more than compensating for the costs of monitoring.

### **Management implications**

Visitor satisfaction and experience data can be used systematically to inform park planning and management. More often than not park management plans worldwide are prepared without any hard data on visitor satisfaction, expectations, actual or desired activities and experiences or any plans for monitoring that data to help the agency better understand if it is achieving its visitor management goals. Some agencies have been making efforts to improve this situation by developing visitor data systems that integrate with other management information systems (Sowman and Pearce, 2000), such as those relating to asset, risk and financial management, although most are yet to achieve anything like full integration. The need to improve visitor data and better integrate it with management information and planning systems has been acknowledged in a current study involving all Australian parks agencies, the aim of which is to improve current practices and develop a more consistent national approach to these matters (Darcy, *et al.*, 2007).

Visitor monitoring needs to be consistent and systematic in its design and collection (Lockwood, Worboys and Kothari, 2006). Site managers need adaptive management skills to balance the ecological, social, cultural, financial and entrepreneurial demands of contemporary protected area usage (Sheppard, 2006). As a fundamental input they also require a good understanding of the different types of visitors, their expectations in terms of services, facilities and the experiences they seek (Gilligan and Allen, 2004). Routine monitoring of such things as visitor characteristics, expectations, satisfaction and experiences can contribute to this understanding. Management decisions can then be based on tangible information not rough judgment. Ideally, this information should be:

- collected in a consistent way over time;
- comparable with other sites and service providers so that benchmarking is possible;
- easily and efficiently collected;
- readily and conveniently analysed so that the data are current and reliable, with clear implications for planning and management; and
- physically and intellectually accessible to all parks agency staff whose management roles could be enhanced by this knowledge about visitors.

Globally there is a need to integrate this data with the UN List of Protected Areas (Sheppard, 2006).

The monitoring of visitor experiences needs to be set against specific management and performance indicators and objectives. The findings should be integrated with other strategic site planning information (Cessford and Muhar, 2003; Darcy *et al.*, 2007). Ideally the data should be recorded, reported and used systematically for such purposes as developing more responsive visitor impact management systems, modifying visitor behaviour, more efficiently providing appropriate levels of park services and facilities, and better informing the marketing of protected areas to

visitors. These visitor data, if collected by appropriately designed methods, can also assist in the design of more strategic visitor education activities and interpretation. The latter can take on different modes of delivery, reinforcing protected area values, and resonating with visitor values and interests. This is essential if such programmes are to be effective and act as a hook to transmit conservation messages to increasing numbers of visitors who are not conservation minded (Bushell and McCool, 2006).

Monitoring has historically focused on the physical and biological aspects of protected areas, and the systematic collection of visitor data has generally been overlooked. However, it is now recognised that without this information many decisions must be based on the perceptions of managers about the users which alone is unreliable (Archer, *et al.*, 2001; Arnberger, Brandenburg and Muhar, 2002; Trigg, 2006; Wardell and Moore, 2004), or on the values and attitudes of the managers themselves. As more and more people are attracted to protected areas for increasingly diverse purposes and experiences, the challenge of achieving satisfying visitor experiences within the conservation mandates and regulations of a particular site also increases. Meeting that challenge effectively requires a better understanding of the complexity of visitor needs and expectations and how these change over time (Manning, 1999). As highlighted at the 2003 World Parks Congress (Sheppard, 2006), regular monitoring of visitor experiences and careful interpretation of the resulting data must consequently become a standard part of a protected area manager's toolkit.

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**Robyn Bushell** is Co-leader of the Task Force on Tourism and Protected Areas, WCPA. She is on the Board of Management of Booderee National Park, Jervis Bay Territory, Australia; and the Regional Advisory Committee Blue Mountains National Park, NSW, Australia. She is actively involved in research and policy making with a range of national and international bodies (IUCN, UNESCO, and the World Health Organisation) related to tourism planning, heritage conservation, visitor management and education and community development. Robyn Bushell, School of Social Sciences and Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, Australia. Tel: +61 2 4736 0113. Fax: +61 2 4736 0150. E-mail: r.bushell@uws.edu.au.

**Tony Griffin** is Senior Lecturer at the School of Leisure, Sport and Tourism University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. Tony is a past NSW Network Co-ordinator for the Sustainable Tourism Co-operative Research Centre, and has worked on a number of research projects dealing with tourism in national parks and nature-based tourism, environmental accreditation of tourism operators and tourism planning. He is currently involved in an Australian-wide study of visitor monitoring in national parks. Tel: +61 2 9514 5103. Fax: +61 2 9514 5195. E-mail: tony.griffin@uts.edu.au



# Providing wilderness experience opportunities in Europe's certified PAN parks

ZOLTÁN KUN AND MYLÈNE VAN DER DONK

A few, but hopefully growing number of people, value Europe's natural heritage as much as its cultural heritage. Wilderness however was somewhat missing from the image of Europe – until recently. The vision of wilderness is a concept that reaches deep into the heart and emotions of most people. It is well known throughout the globe, but most Europeans do not know, that they can still find exceptional remnants of wilderness in their own continent. These places are the PAN Parks, where people can uniquely experience vast amounts of nature in its purest form, offering opportunities for relaxation, active leisure or nature enjoyment. Experiences in European wilderness areas can be life changing experiences.

**IT WAS ALMOST 10 YEARS AGO** that the first steps were taken to realise a marriage between conservation and the tourism industry in the most important wilderness areas of Europe. This initiative, implemented by the PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks Foundation (PPF), awards wilderness areas that meet the highest standards of management for conservation and sustainable human use with the PAN Parks quality seal. It can be considered as a gold standard for well-managed protected areas. This programme views tourism as an opportunity for nature conservation rather than as a threat. It is used as a means to give economic value to wilderness areas and to create support for conservation. By creating unique and high quality opportunities for wilderness-based recreation, this marriage has proven to be successful, as it results in benefits for nature, for communities in and around the protected area and in unique experience opportunities for visitors.

PAN Parks believes that: "To see primeval forests or mountains where wolf, lynx, or brown bear still roam freely you do not need to travel to very distant places – yet. It is enough to visit one of the certified PAN Parks in Europe" ([www.panparks.org](http://www.panparks.org)). The PAN Parks concept has been inspired by the American experience, where Americans love their parks and are willing to protect them. Unknown makes unloved. If you ask an average European to mention a national park you will probably hear such names as Yosemite or Yellowstone (in the US) or Kruger (in RSA). If you ask specifically for the name of a European park, one might probably be able to mention only one which is close to home.

To build up knowledge and understanding of wilderness issue in Europe means bringing more tourists to less visited wilderness parks or restructuring visitors flows in wilderness parks that are under high tourism pressure. PAN Parks stimulates such tourism to Europe's wilderness. Wilderness areas then have economic value which result in more political and social support at the local, national and international levels. PAN Parks also works with local businesses in rural areas and by doing so creates support for conservation and commitment to sustainable tourism development in the region.

## What experience can one expect in a PAN Park?

The PAN Parks wilderness experience varies from park to park as the experiences are dependent on the natural elements of the different European regions. Nine PAN Parks currently certified are dispersed throughout Europe from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean and the Caucasus (Figure 1). They provide different opportunities for recreation and tourism. All of them offer unique wilderness destinations with vast untrammelled land where humans are just temporary visitors.

Some destinations, such as Majella National Park in Italy, have received international visitors for many years and some, such as Retezat National Park in Romania, are still developing facilities, services and products. Among the visitors to PAN Parks are pioneers of undiscovered Europe as well as excursionists from well-established destinations. But whichever PAN Park is visited, they all have several qualities and management aspects in common.

### **Wilderness experiences in a pristine environment**

One of the aspects that distinguish certified PAN Parks from other protected areas is the wilderness concept. Wilderness represents the most intact and undisturbed expanse of Europe's remaining natural landscapes. Visiting a certified PAN Park core zone guarantees visitors will not meet hunters, flocks of domestic animals grazing in forest or alpine meadows, or be annoyed by noisy chain saws and other forest machines.

The wilderness threshold is also used as a unique selling proposition in the marketing of the destination and as a tool to create opportunities for experiences linked to it such as 'The Polish Wild East' in which people are challenged to push back personal borders to face adventure, or 'Bear Tracking in the Wilderness' which is an exciting, sometimes thrilling excursion in which people learn about wildlife and respect for the natural environment.

### **Diversity of experience**

The range of experiences that are offered in PAN Parks goes beyond the wilderness experience. PAN Park provides quality labels not only to certified parks but also to the wider region in the vicinity of a PAN Park. The link between nature and cultural elements, traditional and rural ways of life offers exciting, relaxing, creative and memorable experiences in every region. This is in addition to typical outdoor activities such as dog sledding, or rafting in the Arctic Circle in Oulanka National Park of Finland; ice climbing on the Njupeskar, Sweden's highest waterfall located in Fulufjället National Park; survival among the high peaks of Retezat National Park of



**Figure 1.** Certified PAN Parks.

**Table 1.** Size of wilderness area in certified PAN Parks. Certified wilderness is one of the most significant achievements of the PAN Parks Core Purpose. This table shows a short summary of this achievement.

Name of the area	Country	Total area (ha)	Wilderness area (ha)
Bieszczady National Park	Poland	29,200	18,425
Central Balkan National Park	Bulgaria	71,669	21,019
Fulufjället National Park	Sweden	38,483	23,048
Majella National Park	Italy	74,095	16,200
Oulanka National Park	Finland	27,500	10,000
Paanajärvi National Park	Russia	104,473	100,000
Retezat National Park	Romania	38,138	14,215
Rila National Park	Bulgaria	81,046	16,350
Borjomi National Park	Georgia	76,000	17,948
<b>Total wilderness certified in Europe</b>		<b>540,604</b>	<b>237,205</b>

Romania; or bear tracking in the forests of Bieszczady National Park of Poland. A major component of the visitor experience portfolio is a wide range of tourist products that link to the local culture, way of life, menu and attractions in the vicinity of a certified PAN Park. These demonstrate that nature-based tourism has a lot to offer for young and old, for active and relaxing holidays, and for leisure and incentive trips.

What can one actually experience in a PAN Park? There are a wide range of options, which include the following:

- *Relaxation*: Visitors can relax in a high-quality bungalow – a PAN Parks accommodation – overlooking the beautiful scenery of the Fulufjället National Park in Sweden. During the day visitors can use the services provided by local partners, go to the sauna and enjoy local cuisine.
- *Adventure*: There is no better place to challenge visitors than Oulanka National Park. Visitors can go rafting or canoeing on the Oulu river, or take the Karhunkieros ('Large Bear ring' track), an 80 km-long wilderness adventure.
- *Incentive travels*: the corporate sector increasingly wants to demonstrate its social responsibility with concrete field projects. PAN Parks Foundation offers an opportunity for team building or hands-on work in certified PAN Parks. Among other examples, Canon Europe implemented a hands-on camp for its employees in the Majella National Park of Italy.
- *Family and group holidays*: PAN Parks Foundation partners with tour operators specialised in nature-based travels to offer all-inclusive tourism packages for groups and families. The Dutch tour operator SNP Natuur Reizen organises trips to Rila National Park in Bulgaria, which also benefits the local economy.

### ***Experiencing local cultures***

PAN Parks encourages the use of local, traditional and cultural elements of the tourist destination. When organising activities and providing information to tour operators, PAN Parks preferably works with local businesses that are committed to sustainable development. These businesses work with the park administration and the community in implementing sustainable tourism development strategies. Therefore, PAN Parks products are offered by local people providing opportunities for interaction between visitors and hosts.

### ***A good feeling***

The criteria that parks have to fulfil before they can use the PAN Parks logo guarantee that the park possesses valuable ecosystems, protects them properly and co-operates with local entrepreneurs and communities to develop tourism in a sustainable way. This assures each visitor of a certified PAN Parks that the impacts on the environment caused by the visit are controlled and that his or her visit contributes to conservation and regional development.

The experiences of the visitor to PAN Parks destinations are varied. However the tourists that went on organised trips with tour operators evaluated their visit very positively. Descriptions such as '*fascinating, excellent, well organised, a recommendation, quality equipment, good services*' etc. are given on evaluation forms or at tour operator forums. Language barriers exist in some of the destinations but that is part of the experience visitors encounter as pioneers in some of the wilderness areas of Europe. Training of local businesses is therefore an important task in these areas.

### ***Principles and criteria as management tools***

The fundamental objective of PAN Parks Foundation is to ensure the long-term survival of pristine nature while encouraging local communities to flourish and to increase knowledge of and pride in Europe's nature. To provide visitor experiences based on pristine nature is the way in which support for conservation and local communities is created. The tools that are used to realise these objectives also contribute to the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

through: (1) the verification scheme that evaluates and improves the effectiveness of protected areas management; (2) the development of methods to measure the costs and benefits of protected areas from a social and economic point of view; and (3) the provision of communication tools to improve the capacity and skills of protected area managers in terms of communication.

Based on the PAN Parks principles and criteria and the verification reports, park managers are encouraged to increase the management effectiveness of their protected areas and to plan, provide and maintain high quality recreation opportunities inside the park. Five principles make up the PAN Parks verification scheme (see Table 2), three of which deal with visitor experiences: Visitor management (principle 3), Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (Principle 4), and Partnerships (Principle 5). We will briefly discuss each of these three.

### **Visitor management – Principle 3**

This principle requires that a park have and actively implement a visitor management plan. The visitor management plan deals with subjects such as impact management and monitoring systems, the type of setting and experiences to be offered (the kinds of activities, facilities and services present) for different target groups, interpretation, information, education and communication materials.

Some of the parks must redefine important elements of their existing plans to meet the standards required by the PAN Parks Foundation. In Bieszczady National Park of Poland, for example, the planned visitor infrastructure was in conflict with conservation objectives. As a result, the park – in consultation with local stakeholders – revised the plan and reached consensus on the following changes:

- Parking places will be relocated outside the Park, decreasing the disturbance of traffic on the environment and improving the parking facility for visitors.
- Small-scale ski lifts should be located outside the park with the aim of maintaining the activities inside the park as nature-based and low-impact as possible.
- The planned new border crossing, which will likely increase the traffic between Poland and Ukraine, will be placed outside the Park so as to not cause extra pressure and disturbance on the park.
- New tracks for cross country skiing and snow shoeing are designed in order to improve the visitors' range of recreational opportunities in the winter season.

**Table 2.** PAN Parks Foundation's principles and criteria.

**Principle 1: Rich Natural Heritage**

PAN Parks are large protected areas, representative of Europe's natural heritage and protect international important wildlife and ecosystems.

**Principle 2: Natural Management**

Design and management of the PAN Park aims to maintain and, if necessary, restore the area's natural ecological processes and biodiversity.

**Principle 3: Visitor Management**

Visitor management safeguards the natural values of the PAN Park and aims to provide visitors with a high-quality experience based on the appreciation of nature.

**Principle 4: Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy**

The Protected Area Authority and its relevant partners in the PAN Parks region aim at achieving a synergy between conservation of natural values and sustainable tourism by developing and jointly implementing a Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy.

**Principle 5: Partnerships**

PAN Parks' tourism business partners are legal enterprises that are committed to the goals of certified PAN Parks and the PAN Parks Foundation, and actively co-operate with the Local PAN Parks Group to implement the PAN Park region's Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy effectively.



Recreationists enjoy a wilderness experience offered in Paanajärvi National Park, Russia. Photo: Paanajärvi National Park.

Innumerable small achievements like these have been made to improve the consistency and implementation of visitor management and conservation objectives in the different parks. These have resulted in improved wilderness experiences and better conservation inside the national park.

#### ***Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (STDS) – Principle 4***

The STDS, the fourth principle, provides a framework through which a symbiosis can be achieved between nature conservation and nature-based tourism. It aims to increase both the quality of tourism products and the quality of the visitor experience as well as the sustainable use of natural resources on which the tourism products and facilities are based.

The strategy is written and implemented by the local PAN Parks group. This group is composed of park officials, local authorities, entrepreneurs, land owners, residents and other relevant stakeholders. This group defines, among others, a vision for the region and work proactively together to implement the assigned tasks. The key aspects of success for the implementation of the STDS include: the presence of decision makers in the group, reaching consensus, strong leadership and openness toward new initiatives (also called the ‘pioneer attitude of members’).

The STDS as an element of the PAN Parks verification goes beyond the job description of most park managers. The managers of Rila National Park in Bulgaria, similarly to management in other countries, are in principle not supposed to be active outside the park boundaries. Unfortunately, developments and activities that occur just outside the park boundaries often cause threats to the park itself. Co-operation on creating economic incentives based on well preserved nature is key to gaining support and commitment from the region.

The STDS process results in improved communication between the different stakeholders and creates a strong voice against undesired developments such as ski resorts or dam constructions inside the national park boundary or sometimes even outside when these are not in line with the vision for regional development as defined by the local stakeholders. Co-operation between the different stakeholders results in more diversified tourism products, informal quality control and a sense of place. Tourists do not visit one site, as a spot on the map, but experience a destination

which provides them a sense of place and time. Co-operation, quality and nature based activities in the pristine nature are success factors to provide the wilderness experience.

### **Partnerships – Principle 5**

The fifth principle ensures that the vision of PAN Parks, a marriage between conservation and tourism, is being put to practise. PAN Parks initiates partnerships with local companies and organisations and with (inter)national businesses. A precondition for partnerships is that companies are committed to the goals of both the park and the PAN Parks Foundation and that they actively co-operate with other partners to implement the STDS. As a result of the partnership, PAN Parks labelled tourism products, services and experiences offered to the visitors are sustainable. The more partners throughout the tourism chain co-operate, the more sustainable the product and experiences are. This may not be directly noticed by the tourists but it is a tool to distinguish this product offer or experience from others. It provides a good feeling for the tourists and is a way for businesses to contribute to conservation and development of (mostly) undeveloped areas.

### **Conclusion**

Five years after the initial PAN Parks certification, this approach has shown it works well. It has resulted in improved management of tourism in the parks and in their region; stimulated the visitor-oriented approach towards new developments and encouraged co-operation between different stakeholders resulting in new opportunities for recreation; motivated local partners to permanent improved quality of products, services and experiences; and enhanced the sustainability of the park system.

The attitude of the local stakeholders towards tourism development and sustainability is essential for creating attractive destinations. Therefore, PAN Parks has developed a methodology to gain insight into who the stakeholders are, how they are involved in (tourism) developments in and around the protected area, and how they perceive the dimensions of sustainability. This

*Providing visitor experiences based on pristine nature is one way in which support for conservation and local communities is created. Photo: Pascal Languillon.*





research showed that overall, the people living in and around Retezat National Park in Romania are positive towards tourism which is still in an 'infant stage' (Van Hal, 2006). The young people in the region perceive tourism as a new source of income whereas the elder people have a more sceptic attitude towards foreigners in their region. This mentality may affect the experience of the tourist in a negative way. These insights teach us how to support the destinations in the development. Research done in the Central Balkan National Park in Bulgaria shows that 70% of the local population agree that PAN Parks status increases the value of the tourist experience, 55.6% feel that the quality of life for the local population has increased thanks to PAN Parks, and 80% are convinced that PAN Parks contributes to the protection of nature (Mateev, 2007).

During the first years of involvement in the PAN Parks programme, participating protected areas have worked hard on creating good enabling conditions for tourism development. Results include:

- More than €200,000 invested in field projects to develop better tourism infrastructure in the certified PAN Parks.
- The Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy proved to be a useful technique to include the protected areas in a wider landscape and to stimulate co-operation between the different stakeholders.
- The local stakeholders, including protected area managers and entrepreneurs, have a better understanding of the needs of visitors and the rationale for working together.
- Revenue generating mechanisms have been created and successfully applied which increase the funding available for nature conservation activities through tourism-related activities.
- Each protected area has a sample travel itinerary, which provides the optimum opportunity for high quality wilderness experiences.

As a result of these efforts, tourism products, services and experiences improved or sometimes were newly created. PAN Parks provides assistance and consultation by sharing knowledge and experience. Becoming a certified PAN Park is a voluntary choice; the application and verification processes require a lot of time and energy. However, the parks that meet the criteria say that it is a very useful and meaningful experience, which at the end makes their work easier because all efforts point in the same direction.

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**Zoltán Kun** has a Masters of Science in Landscape Architecture and has worked with WWF Hungary as co-ordinator of the Gemenc Foodplain restoration project since 1996. He joined the PAN Parks Initiative in August 1997 as Conservation Manager until his appointment as Executive Director in March 2002. Zoltán Kun, Executive Director, PAN Parks Foundation, 9002 Győr, PF 264, Hungary. Tel: +3696433925. Fax: +3696523665. E-mail: zkun@panparks.org.

**Mylène van der Donk** holds a Master of Science degree in Leisure and Environment and is currently Marketing Assistant at PAN Parks. Mylène van der Donk, Tourism Development, PAN Parks Foundation, PF 264, 9002 Győr, Hungary. Tel: +358405123484. Fax: +3696523665. E-mail: mdonk@panparks.org.

# Managing tourism visitor experiences in marine settings: the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

ANDREW SKEAT, LISHA MULQUEENY, HILARY SKEAT AND CHRIS BRIGGS

The Great Barrier Reef, the largest coral reef system on the globe, is managed not only to preserve its unique and diverse biodiversity but also for a variety of high quality marine oriented tourism opportunities. Quality visitor experiences are ensured through a programme consisting of four components: (1) a healthy ecosystem, (2) a range of visitor opportunities, (3) quality customer service, and (4) good information. These programme components are achieved through the programmes of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Authority and with partnerships between the Authority and the tourism industry. Recognising tourism operators who have achieved high standards of care and service with longer term operating permits is one way the Authority encourages higher quality opportunities.

**THE GREAT BARRIER REEF** is a remarkable place. It is the largest coral reef system in the world, it has tremendous biological diversity and stunning landscapes, it is protected by a sound management regime and it underpins a five billion dollar tourism industry.

Stretching from Bundaberg to Cape York on the east coast of Queensland, Australia, the Reef comprises about 2,900 individual coral reefs and over 900 islands. This vast natural area is protected by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (Figure 1) which has a total area of 345,400 km<sup>2</sup>. It was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is managed by the Australian Government in partnership with the Queensland Government. The Australian Government's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) has specific responsibility for managing this unique ecosystem. The goal of the Authority is protection, wise use, understanding and enjoyment of the Great Barrier Reef in perpetuity through the care and development of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

## Tourism on the reef

From its fledgling beginnings in the 1890s with pleasure cruises to inshore islands, organised tourism in the Great Barrier Reef has grown and diversified. Most recently, new vessel technologies have fuelled innovation in the experiences offered and greater choice in reef destinations. Today, tourism and recreation is overwhelmingly the dominant human use of the Marine Park, with the Reef being the centre of an industry that made direct and indirect contributions of Australian \$5.1 billion in 2004–05 (Access Economics, 2005).

There are now more than 1.9 million tourism visits (GBRMPA, 2007a) and an estimated 4.9 million recreational visits (Norris *et al.*, in press) to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park each year. The number of tourism visitors has climbed only gradually over the last decade (Figure 2), providing an opportunity to consolidate management and forge valuable partnership arrangements.

## Visitor opportunities

Visitor opportunities are varied, all based on experiencing the Great Barrier Reef and getting close to nature:

- *Day vessel-based operations* carry most visitors to the Marine Park.
- *Floating pontoons* offer visitors easy access to the reef plus a range of facilities (Figure 3).
- *Extended vessel charters* may stay on the reef for up to several weeks.
- *Bareboat charter* where sailing and motor vessels are hired without crew.
- *Cruise ships* with visits usually part of a more extensive itinerary.



Figure 1. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

- *Aircraft-based operations* offer sightseeing and reef visits from light planes, float planes and helicopters.
- *Island and coastal resorts* located on coral cays and continental islands. The many resorts on the adjacent coast have varying levels of focus on the Reef.

### How do we ensure a quality visitor experience?

The keys to ensuring a quality visitor experience on the Great Barrier Reef are a healthy ecosystem, a range of tourism opportunities (including appropriate facilities), quality customer service and good information. The GBRMPA works in a strong and active partnership with the marine tourism industry and other key players to ensure that, collectively, these outcomes can be achieved.

### A healthy reef

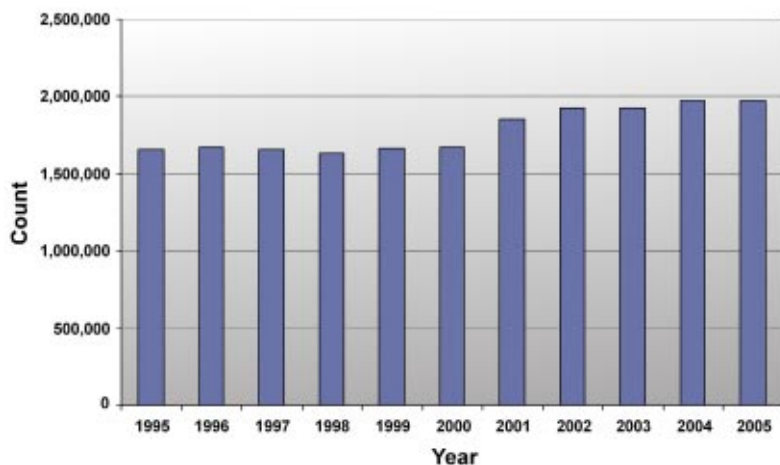
The bulk of the Authority’s resources are directed at protecting the health the Great Barrier Reef. Significant programmes are underway to improve the water quality of the Great Barrier Reef and ensure sustainable fishing. The GBRMPA has also rezoned the entire Marine Park to increase protection of each of its bioregions (Figure 3). Now, 33% of the Marine Park is protected by zones where fishing and collecting is not allowed, thus better protecting the ecosystem and maximising its resilience.

Recognising the fundamental link between a healthy Reef and healthy tourism, the tourism industry is a major partner in many programmes and is a strong public supporter of the GBRMPA’s protection initiatives. There are comprehensive statutory requirements aimed at ensuring sustainable tourism operations in the Marine Park, including impact assessment and permit conditions, plus a set of voluntary Responsible Reef Practices (GBRMPA, 2007b). A number of tourism operators also voluntarily monitor the sites they visit and report observations on reef health, coral bleaching and water quality.

### A range of tourism opportunities

Planning at three levels helps to protect the environment, provide for a range of visitor opportunities and avoid conflicting use. This planning is informed by social and environmental research and, most importantly, by extensive public consultation, especially in establishing appropriate visitor settings.

**Figure 2.** Tourism visitors to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (1995–2005).



On the broadest scale, the Zoning Plan (Figure 3) establishes what activities are allowed in specific areas and provides areas for tourism that are free from potentially conflicting uses such as large scale fishing. For example, all fishing is prohibited in the Marine National Park Zone (green column, Figure 3) whereas tourism activities are allowed with a permit in all but the Preservation Zone.

More detailed management plans are in place for high use areas of the Marine Park and are aimed at addressing key conservation issues, controlling tourism growth and avoiding conflicting

**Figure 3.** Example of zoning in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Activity	General Use Zone	Managed Protection Zone	Conservation Park Zone	Buffer Zone	Scientific Research Zone	Marine National Park Zone	Preservation Zone
Aquaculture	Permit	Permit	Permit*	X	X	X	X
Bait netting	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	X
Boating, diving, photography	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
Crabbing (trapping)	✓	✓	X	X	X	X	X
Harvest fishing for aquarium fish, coral and beachworm	Permit	Permit	Permit*	X	X	X	X
Harvest fishing for sea cucumber, trochus, tropical rock lobster	Permit	Permit	X	X	X	X	X
Limited collecting	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	X
Limited spearfishing (scorokel only)	✓	✓	X	X	X	X	X
Line fishing	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	X
Netting (other than bait netting)	✓	✓	X	X	X	X	X
Research (other than limited impact research)	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit
Shipping (other than in a designated shipping area)	✓	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	X
Tourism programme	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	X
Traditional use of marine resources	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
Trawling	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X
Trotling	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X

**PLEASE NOTE:** This guide provides an introduction to Zoning in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Relevant Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Zoning Plans should be consulted for confirmation of use or entry requirements.  
 \* Additional restrictions / conditions apply.

**ACCESS TO ALL ZONES IS PERMITTED IN AN EMERGENCY.**

uses. They are the primary tool for ensuring a range of visitor opportunities, principally through a network of 'settings', based on the number of people in a party, the size of vessel and the activities that can be undertaken. At the finest scale, site management arrangements for individual bays, reefs or islands also play a key role in ensuring a range of opportunities by setting out use arrangements and protecting local environments. Management devices include moorings, no anchoring areas and limits on the number of particular types of operations.

Providing appropriate facilities is another important component of ensuring a range of tourism opportunities. A key feature of

the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is that the major offshore tourism facilities are privately owned and operated. Some 12 pontoons have been installed and are visited daily by vessels carrying up to 400 passengers. Activities include snorkelling, diving, guided tours and overnight accommodation. Private infrastructure is actively provided for in the planning and management regime with clear guidelines on construction and location.

Moorings also play an important role in providing easy access for visitors to the Reef as well as ensuring a high quality reef for them to enjoy. Tourism operators have installed over 600 moorings throughout the Marine Park and there are more than 120 public moorings in key visitor areas.

### Quality customer service

Fundamental to a quality visitor experience is a high standard of customer service. Although this is mainly the province of individual operators and tourism associations, the GBRMPA plays a role in supporting the achievement of high standards in customer service.

Firstly, the GBRMPA and industry have jointly developed Responsible Reef Practices on service standards that encourage operations to be well presented and client-focused and emphasise the importance of responsible marketing (GBRMPA, 2007b). Secondly, the industry certification scheme that is recognised by the GBRMPA (the ECO Certification Programme operated by Ecotourism Australia) places a strong emphasis on customer

service with standards addressing aspects such as service standards, complaints management and cancellations.

### **Quality information**

The majority of visitors to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park are focused on experiencing the coral reef and learning about its fascinating creatures. In providing this experience and knowledge, the tourism industry is helping the GBRMPA meet its World Heritage obligation to present the Marine Park to the world. The GBRMPA strongly supports the industry in this important role. Initiatives include distributing specific information about what makes the Marine Park special, providing information about best practice interpretation and fostering a communication and training network between the GBRMPA and tourism crew.

The GBRMPA also provides the industry with comprehensive information about the Marine Park and its managements arrangements through a dedicated website (GBRMPA, 2007b), complemented by training workshops tailored specifically for operators and their crew.

### **Partnering with the tourism industry**

Through the recognition of common goals, a strong partnership has developed between the GBRMPA and the tourism industry. This partnership provides far greater opportunities for effective protected area management than initiatives that are simply imposed through regulation. In addition, tourism's contribution can go far beyond simply benefiting regional economies.

The GBRMPA and the tourism industry continually foster the success of this partnership, especially through:

- *dedicated communication* with GBRMPA liaison officers regularly travelling the length of the Great Barrier Reef to discuss opportunities and issues;
- *a formal advisory committee* comprising experts from all areas of marine tourism, other government agencies and the GBRMPA that helps shape the future direction of tourism management; and
- *community-based advisory committees* in each major centre that include tourism operators.

We have now witnessed many successes from this partnership approach. A good example is the *High Standard Tourism Programme* that encourages, recognises and showcases tourism operators who are independently certified as achieving high standards. Rewards include a significantly longer Marine Parks permit, public recognition and showcasing on the GBRMPA website and at trade shows. This programme has strongly contributed to a positive relationship with tourism operators because the GBRMPA is offering tangible outcomes of direct benefit to operators. Ultimately, it also benefits Marine Park visitors with over one-third now visiting the Reef on a certified high standard operation (GBRMPA, unpub.).

The tourism industry has expressed strong satisfaction with the partnership. The Queensland Tourism Industry Council considers that 'the relationship between GBRMPA and the tourism industry has developed into a remarkable partnership of engagement, mutual commitment and co-operation'. The Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators considers that 'a new strong and vibrant partnership has developed which has surpassed everyone's expectations' (GBRMPA, unpub.).

### **What do visitors think?**

In recognition of the importance of visitor satisfaction, the GBRMPA has made it a Key Performance Indicator for management of the Marine Park. In a recent survey, 80% of respondents were satisfied or extremely satisfied with their most recent trip (Colmar Brunton, unpub.). These high levels of satisfaction have been maintained for a number of years and are a reflection of the quality of both the Reef and the visitor experience offered.





A high-speed catamaran and a tourism pontoon in the Great Barrier Reef. Photo: Tourism Queensland.

## Conclusion and challenges ahead

By investing in an open and productive relationship with the tourism industry based on common goals and mutual understanding, the quality of visitor experiences in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park have been improved. The industry is more sustainable, more efficient and more attractive to potential clients while at the same time the Marine Park is better protected and better presented. The biggest challenge to maintaining the visitor experience is keeping the Great Barrier Reef healthy in the face of mounting pressures such as coastal development, fishing, declines in water quality and climate change.

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**Andrew Skeat, Lisha Mulqueeny, Hilary Skeat and Chris Briggs**, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, 2–68 Flinders Street, PO Box 1379, TOWNSVILLE QLD 4810. Tel: +07 4750 0804. Fax: +07 4721 3445, E-mail: [a.skeat@gbrmpa.gov.au](mailto:a.skeat@gbrmpa.gov.au).

**Andrew Skeat** is an Executive Director with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. His areas of responsibility include Water Quality and Coastal Development, Tourism, Science, and Education. He is also responsible for development of a Climate Change Action Plan for the Great Barrier Reef. A current key task is managing the interaction between the Authority and the Reef tourism industry. A new approach has been forged based on partnerships and co-operation, with recognition of industry contribution to management and reward for high standard operators. Andrew has more than 25 years experience developing conservation policy, managing protected areas, and as a biologist. He holds a Bachelor of Environmental Science and a Masters in Applied Science.

**Lisha Mulqueeny**, As Director of Tourism and Recreation for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Lisha Mulqueeny is responsible for working directly with the tourism industry to guide the direction of tourism and recreation management within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and World Heritage Area. She is currently a member of the GBRMPA's Tourism and Recreation Reef Advisory Committee and is a Board Director of Ecotourism Australia. Before joining the GBRMPA, Lisha held senior roles in leading Australian tourism organisations and has worked as a consultant in natural resource management and corporate strategy in Canada and Australia. Lisha holds an MBA (Exec), a degree in law and is a solicitor of the Supreme Court of NSW.

**Hilary Skeat** is a Manager in the Tourism and Recreation Group of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority responsible for a range of innovative projects aimed at improving the management of tourism and recreation on the Great Barrier Reef, particularly encouraging and rewarding the achievement of best practice. Hilary has worked in a wide range of Australian Government policy development areas, focusing on natural resource management. She holds a Bachelor of Environmental Science.

**Chris Briggs** is the Manager Industry Engagement for the Tourism and Recreation Group within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Chris works directly with the tourism industry and facilitates negotiation and consultation with stakeholders and clients regarding management issues and direction. Chris has worked within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park for 18 years both as member of the tourism industry and the last seven years as a protected area manager.

# Problems and solutions to visitor congestion at Yellow Mountain National Park, China

RUI YANG AND YOUBO ZHUANG

Almost all of the popular Chinese national parks hold serious congestion problems, especially during the peak seasons. If visitor congestion cannot be well managed, it is very difficult to provide opportunities for relatively high quality visitor experiences in those national parks. This paper, using Yellow Mountain National Park as an example, illustrates visitor congestion conditions at Yellow Mountain National Park and how the visitor congestion impacts the visitor experience. The congestion is attributable mainly to the great imbalance in the time and space distribution of the visitors to the Park. The paper also identifies the ideal visitor distribution needed to provide a high quality visitor experience. Finally, this paper suggests the ways of reducing impacts to visitor experience opportunities in the Park, including both fundamental management measures and special peak day control measures.

**“THE HIGH LEVELS OF GROWTH** in nature-based tourism in mountain landscapes continue to challenge land managers to sustain the experiences that parks and other protected areas were established to provide” (McCool, 2002). This opinion is quite true for almost all of the popular Chinese national parks, especially during the peak seasons when those parks meet serious congestion problems. If visitor congestion is not well managed, it is very hard to provide a relatively high quality visitor experience in those Chinese national parks. This paper, taking Yellow Mountain National Park as an example, illustrates how visitor congestion impacts the visitor experience, and then suggests ways of reducing negative impacts in the national park.

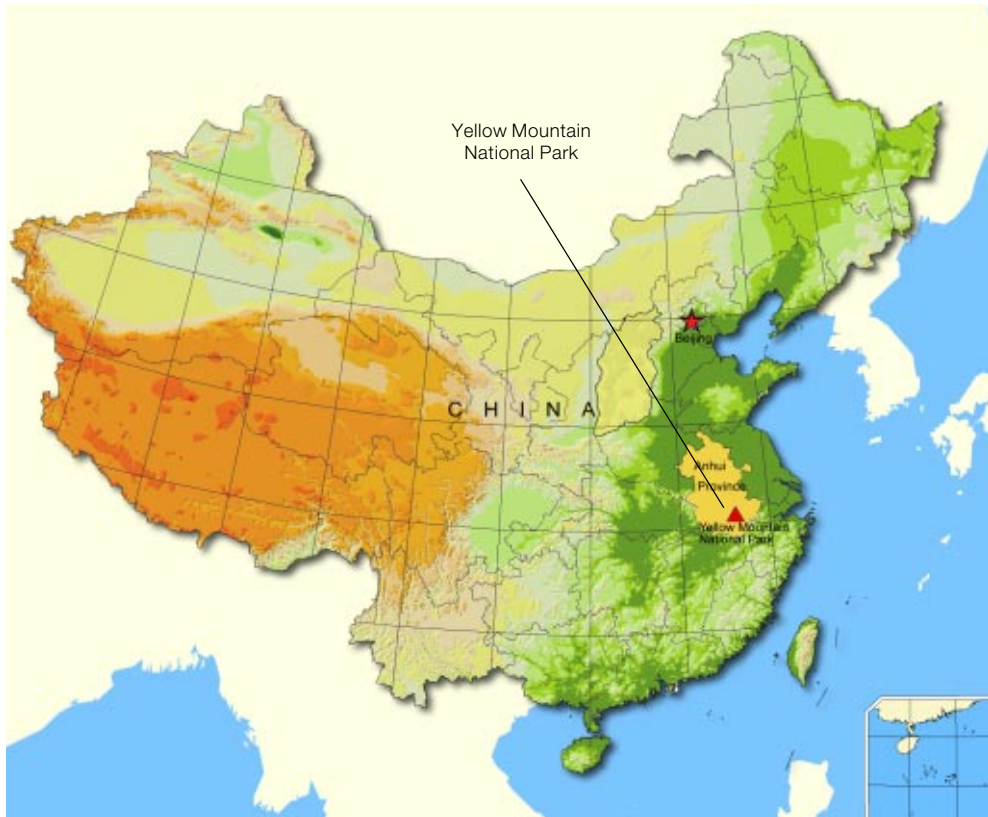
## Visitor congestion conditions of Yellow Mountain National Park

Yellow Mountain National Park is located in the southern part of Anhui Province, with a total area of 160 km<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1). In 1982, Yellow Mountain became one of the first batch of national parks designated in China. In 1990, it was inscribed on the List of World Heritage as a Cultural Site under Criterion II, which states its importance as the original model for Yellow Mountain Painting Genre, one of the most important Chinese traditional painting genres (Figure 2) and a Natural Site for its compliance with Criteria III (natural beauty) and IV (natural habitat).

With the sustained growth in the Chinese tourism industry, visitation to the Yellow Mountain National Park has been on the rise. In 1979, 104,000 visitors travelled to Yellow Mountain while this figure jumped to 1.34 million in 2001. In consideration of the historical and present trends in tourism, it is estimated that Yellow Mountain will witness a continued rise in the annual number of visitors in the coming 20 years and reach 2.8 million or so by 2025 (Tsinghua University, 2004).

According to calculations, current capacity<sup>1</sup> of the Yellow Mountain National Park is around 12,000 person times/day, or a total of 2.5 million visitors in annual terms. At present, an average of 3,700 visitors travel to the Yellow Mountain each day, or 1.5 million annually, both within the limit of the current capacity. However, there are already serious problems with visitor congestion at Yellow Mountain, mainly due to great imbalances in the time and space distribution of visitors to the park. Congestion occurs only at certain points at certain times.

<sup>1</sup> Capacity here refers to biological, facility, and space capacities. Currently, China controls visitor numbers based on capacity calculations. An innovative framework, The Limits of Acceptable Change (Stankey and others 1985), has been introduced by some farsighted experts. It shifts visitor control from digital calculation to identifying appropriate environmental and resource conditions. However, it takes time for this theory to be put in actual use, for relevant data and surveillance systems be established and perfected, for benchmarks and criteria to be identified and improved, and for managers to be trained.



**Figure 1.** Location of Yellow Mountain National Park. (Source: Institute of Resource Protection and Tourism, Tsinghua University, 2004).

In terms of time, the imbalanced distribution of visitors to the park manifests itself in the vastly different monthly, daily and hourly visitation. The number of visitors differs greatly from month to month: historical statistics show that the number of people who visit the park during the seven months from April to October accounts for 89% of the yearly total and 58% of the visitors choose to visit the park in May, July, August and October. There are also great differences in the number of visitors on different days of the week. On average, there are very few visitors from Monday to Thursday (although the level of visitation is roughly equal day-to-day in this period); however, there is a sharp increase in visitation in the Friday to Sunday period, when 48.7% of the visitors enter the park. The peak normally comes on Saturday with 19.1% of the weekly total visitation. During special holidays (such as the Labour Day Holidays in 2000), daily visits to the park exceed 30,000 visitors.

Hourly visit imbalance refers to the difference in the number of visitors in different time periods of the day. According to information given by the Park staff, there is congestion at Shixin Peak (Figure 3) from 8–11am; at such points as Paiyun Pavilion, Flying Over Rock and Peak of Brilliance after noon; at Yixiantian Peak and Aoyu Peak between 3–4 pm; at Guest-greeting Pine between 9–10am and between 3–4pm.

In terms of space, the imbalanced distribution of visitors to the Park is exhibited in the different number of visitors at different scenic spots and using different entrances. The Park is divided into six zones. According to 2001 statistics, 100% visitors travelled to the Beihai Zone while only 1% to Diaojiao and 10% to Songgu; the figures for the other three (Wenquan, Yuping and Yungu) Zones fall in between. As 100% visitors travelled to Beihai Zone, a 5,000 m<sup>2</sup> area,

visitor congestion at this place is unavoidable. With regard to the two entrances to the Park, the southern entrance greets 90% of visitors each day while the northern one, only 10%. Because so many visitors enter the park through the southern entrance, there is a resulting high concentration at major scenic spots, pedestrian walks, cable cars, other service facilities. Visitors at the southern entrance have to wait for their turn to get on the cable car for 2–3 hours during the busy season and 4–5 hours during the May or October national holidays.

Visitor congestion at a given time and at given points may have negative impacts on the natural environment. For instance, within 1.5–3 metres on both sides of the pedestrian walks, vegetation is trampled, leading to such problems as soil exposure, soil compaction and soil erosion. Congestion also has enormous negative impacts on visitor experience. For instance, crowding makes it difficult for visitors to conduct such basic tourist activities as sightseeing and photo-taking, and prolonged waiting to view the scenery and sites affects visitor interest.

### **Ideal visitor distribution**

The ideal visitor distribution necessary to provide a high quality experience must be identified before visitor congestion problems can be addressed. In the case of Yellow Mountain National Park, ideal visitor distribution is defined in two ways, spatially and temporally. In spatial terms, the total number of visitors in the park shall not exceed the overall visitor capacity and this shall be the case for individual zones of the park, including those spots or road sections prone to congestion. In terms of time, the yearly number of visitors shall not exceed the yearly visitor capacity while the daily number of visitors shall not exceed the daily visitor capacity, including individual daily time periods. Any measures adopted to solve the visitor congestion problem

have to adhere to the above-mentioned visitor distribution.

**Figure 2.** *Yellow Mountain Painting.* (Source: Wang Caibai; <http://www.arts2021.com/arts2021/a2021/ggsx/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=1059>).



### **Solutions to visitor congestion**

There are a number of solutions to visitor congestion problems. Numerical control can be a solution to visitor congestion but is not necessarily a good approach in terms of the social functions of the national park, its business operation or economic development in neighbouring areas. A more equal time and space distribution of visitation would not only solve the problem of visitor congestion, but also meet the travelling needs of many visitors without leading to inappropriate impacts on the Park.

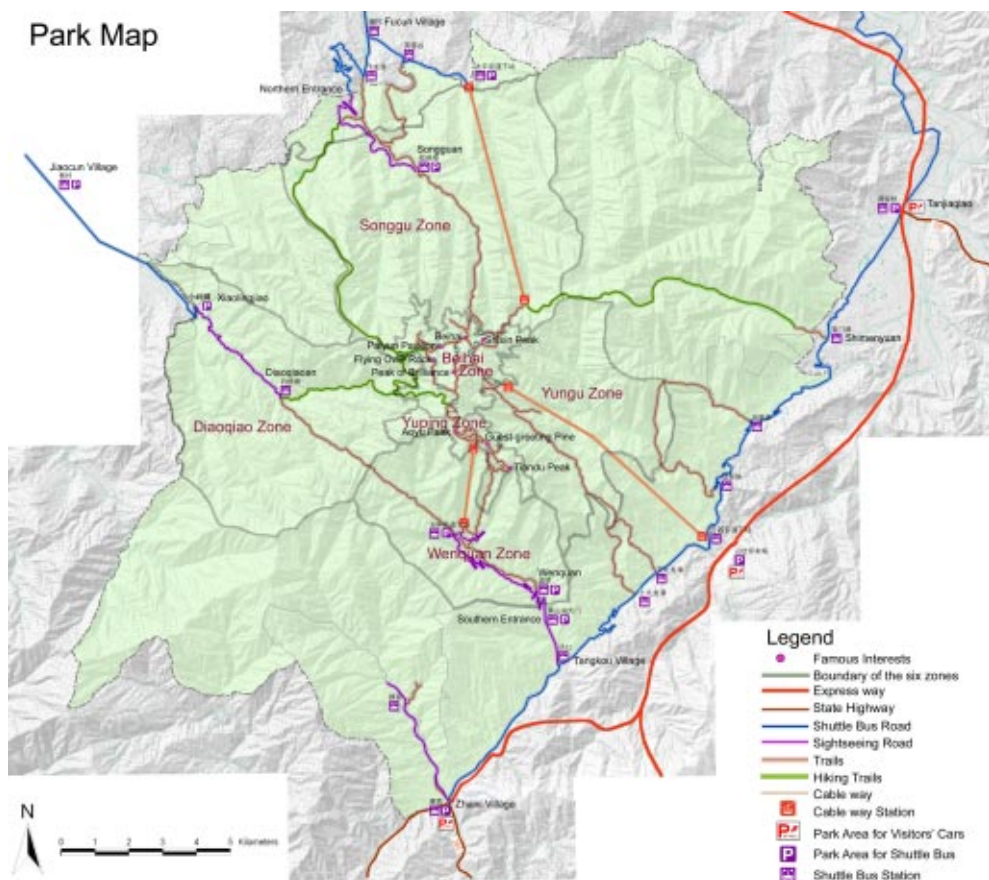
For a more even time and space distribution of visitation, measures such as public information and instruction, education and interpretation, discounts and promotions to encourage visitation to the Park during the November through March (slack season) period can be implemented. This would lead to fewer visitors during the peak seasons of May, July, August and October. To be more specific, such measures may include:



partnerships with travel agencies and tour companies in the publicity and route preparation, which would help visitors to choose visiting times other than the peak days; reliance on public media for educating visitors to exercise reason in the choice of visiting date and time; discounts for non-peak day park and cable car tickets as well as accommodation costs. Through education and publicity efforts, such measures implemented before visitors' arrival at the national park may help visitors stagger their travel time to reduce congestion.

For a more even spatial distribution of visitors, measures will be adopted to increase the visit rates of the less visited Diaoqiao'an, Wenquan and Yuping Zones, to prolong visitor stay (from 1.5 days to 2.5 days) in a bid to reduce the number of visitors to the Beihai Zone (currently saturated) every day. To be more specific, the less visited places can be improved by rehabilitating polluted and degraded landscapes and increasing their appeal to the visitors; visitors shall be encouraged and instructed to visit the less visited places through publicity and information, education and interpretation, and through discounts fees and other services. For instance, 90% of the visitors now enter the park from the southern entrance, leading to the present visitor congestion at some spots. If measures are taken to improve transportation and accessibility to the Parks northern entrance – by improving road conditions, opening a special tourist route, or giving park or tram ticket discounts – then visitors may choose to enter the park through this entrance.

**Figure 3.** Map of Yellow Mountain National Park. (Source: Institute of Resource Protection and Tourism, Tsinghua University, 2004).



The above fundamental management measures may reduce peak time visits while increasing slack time visits, thus balancing the distribution of the visitors and relieving visitor congestion problems. However, the above measures resort mainly to public guidance, or ‘persuasion’, no compulsory measures are involved. Furthermore, public information takes time to sink in, and so cannot be used to solve the immediate problems of congestion. Therefore, it is necessary to implement strict control measures during peak times using fundamental management measures so that visitor congestion may be reduced.

The Peak-day special control measures involve only offering designated products (entrances, exits, entry time, route, accommodation and travelling mode) in packages during peak days (see Table 1 for an example). This kind of visitor congestion management is something like managing travellers on flights between airports. The main point is to provide relatively high visitor experiences by partly restricting visitor randomness during peak seasons. Visitors can only choose from the given options. To be more specific, Peak-day packages consist of only nine options in four categories. To implement these options, a set of principles were developed to ensure high quality visitor experiences. These include distributing visitor use without sacrificing the visitors’ need to have a full picture of the Park; visitors will be allowed into the Park in groups of less than 30 people at a minimum interval of five minutes under the guidance of the park police; visitors’ sojourn at each spot will be controlled to avoid extended stays causing congestion. For instance, the maximum stay at the Yuping spot shall not exceed 30 minutes and at Beihai, 40 minutes.

As there may be overlapping of these tour products at certain sections, the different options may have an impact on that of another, that is, when there is increase in the visitor capacity of one option, there will be decrease in the visitor capacity of another related option. In actual practice, as visitors make dynamic choices, there is the need to establish a surveillance system to monitor and manage the time and space distribution of visitors. Monitors shall be used to automatically detect and record changes in visitor numbers and directions at the entrances and exits of Yellow Mountain National Park, as well as at some scenic spots and pedestrian walks prone to congestion. With the help of simulation and prediction models of the time and spatial distribution of visitors, park managers may control the entire visitor distribution and inform visitors in advance of remaining capacity and available options.

**Table 1.** Tour Product Sample. (Source: Institute of Resource Protection and Tourism, Tsinghua University, 2004).

Tour Product No. A11	Description
Entrance	Xiaoyaoxi entrance
Exit	Huangbitan entrance
Departure	8.00 am–9.00 am
Route	Yuping Tram–Yuping Tower–Lotus Peak–Aoyu Cave–Tianhai–Peak of Brilliance–Flying Over Rock–Paiyun Pavilion–Xihai–Beihai–Coolness Terrace–Shixin Peak–Shisun–Vat–Taiping Tram
Specification	Travelling to classic spots at the front and rear part of the Yellow Mountain centred around Beihai and Yuping Not climbing Lotus Peak, or Tiandu Peak, or travelling to Shixin Peak
Cable car	Uphill Yuping Tram Downhill Taiping Tram
Lunch	Tianhai
Accommodation	Gantang Town, Tanjiaqiao
Difficulty	Very difficult, fit for strong pedestrians



## Conclusion

Though both the current yearly and daily numbers of visitors do not exceed the corresponding visitor capacity, there are very serious visitor congestion problems at the Yellow Mountain National Park, attributable mainly to the great imbalance in the time and space distribution of the visitors to the Park. Congestion occurs at given points of time and space, and results in significant negative impacts to visitor experiences. For solutions to these visitor congestion problems, both fundamental management measures and special peak day control measures must be implemented. The fundamental management measures, such as giving directions to the visitors, to balance the time and space distribution by cutting down peak time visits while increasing slack time visits, aim to solve the visitor congestion problem before visitors arrive at the national park. Peak-day special control measures indicate that only designated tour products will be offered as options so that there may be restricted distribution of visitors in time and space and less visitor congestion. Fundamental management changes tend to solve the problems on the long-run while Peak-day control measures provide immediate solutions to the problems. Only if the two types of measures are combined can there be fundamental and effective solution to the visitor congestion problems and an increase in the quality of visitor experiences.

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**Rui Yang**, Professor, Dept. of Landscape Architecture (School of Architecture); Institute of Resource Protection and Tourism, Urban Planning and Design Institute, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China. E-mail: yrui@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn.

**Youbo Zhuang**, PhD candidate, Institute of Resource Protection and Tourism, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China. E-mail: zhuangyb03@mails.tsinghua.edu.cn.

# Perspectives of the tourism industry on the elements affecting visitor satisfaction in protected areas

GIULIA CARBONE

The growing tourist interest in nature-based experiences is affecting all segments of the tourism market, and provides both opportunities – for tour operators and managers – and additional challenges in the effort to provide opportunities for quality experiences. Recognising that the increasing demand for protected areas in tourism packages could represent an important source of positive economic development and conservation opportunities for protected areas all over the world, a number of tourism companies have been approached and have provided their views on the drivers of visitation to protected areas, visitor expectations and visitor satisfaction. The companies approached concurred that a satisfactory experience depends on opportunities to view the features within a protected area, such as wildlife, vegetation, and landscapes. They also highlighted that visiting a protected area is an information-intensive activity, and that a general problem occurring in many protected areas is the lack of professional communication and interpretation. Greater co-operation between tour operators and protected area agencies could be the answer for effectively responding to these challenges, recognising that enhancing the quality of experiences would lead to a number of benefits to visitors and to the areas themselves.

**UNDERSTANDING THE EXPECTATIONS** of visitors to protected areas is a crucial step in developing and implementing an effective visitors' management plan. It is however a very difficult one. Even those visitors on an organised tour, who are generally invited to complete an end-of-trip survey, rarely provide sufficient detailed information about their expectations. They often do so only if something has gone terribly wrong, but, in general, when the experience has been positive, there is very little feedback. There is an increasing demand for protected areas in tourism packages, which could represent an important source of positive economic development and conservation opportunities for protected areas all over the world.<sup>1</sup> Recognising this new reality and in order to have a better understanding of what people expect from a visit to a protected area, a number of tourism-related companies were approached. The goal was to gather their views about the expectations of the growing number protected area visitors, and on how to effectively manage these.

No longer the exclusive destination for well-traveled, high-end visitors or independent backpackers, protected areas have made their way into the travel products of many mainstream tour operators. These new products offer a variety of opportunities, from daily excursions that complement conventional travel packages to traditional holiday resorts, to specialised multiple day tours of remote regions. As a result, the profile of protected area visitors has changed considerably – and it is no longer safe to assume a 'one-size-fits-all' profile of visitors. This growing diversification of niche markets provides opportunities for tour operators and managers. However, it also presents additional challenges both for protected area managers and tour operators in their efforts to provide a quality experience.

## Why do more and more people want to visit protected areas?

The increasing interest in visiting protected areas is in part due to the fact that they seem to offer some level of guarantee of viewing a flagship representation of what the wider destination area

<sup>1</sup> The author appreciates the willingness of the following firms and individuals in sharing their views of visitor experiences from a tour operator's perspective: FreeWay Brazil (tour operator, Brazil) – Mr Edgar Werblowsky; Hapag-Lloyd Kreuzfahrten (cruise line operator, Germany) – Ms Baerbel Kraemer and Mr David Fletcher; Lonely Planet (travel guide) – Mr Tom Hall; REWE Touristik (tour operator, Germany) – Mr Andreas Mueseler and Ms Sabine Hahn; Rough Guides (travel guide) – Mr Richard Trillo; I Viaggi del Ventaglio (tour and resort operator, Italy) – Ms Ellen Bermann.



*Private operators often provide tourists with opportunities for new and unusual experiences, such as visiting Antarctica. Photo: Hapag-Lloyd Kreuzfahrten.*

is famous for (a destination can vary from being a specific site to an entire region). The attraction of a protected area can also range between the landscape levels and that of specific animals or plants (e.g. polar bears in the Arctic; the Big Five in Africa). Average clients increasingly come from urban areas and show a greater appreciation for what is different, such as the opportunity to experience the integrity of nature that is found in many protected areas. The main expectation of tour operator clients in a protected area is to 'see' something special, either a landscape feature or a particular and often rare animal or plant. Furthermore, the term 'protected' in the visitors' imagination triggers images of the chance to experience something 'unique', such as an environment or landscape that may be disappearing.

The tourism industry has responded to this increased demand by including visits to protected areas in their tours or complementary offers. In many markets, tour companies even develop their competitive advantage by including 'exclusive' protected areas, those usually out of reach for mainstream travelers because of their remoteness, lack of infrastructure or limitations on public access. For example, Hapag-Lloyd, a cruise company offering trips to remote destinations, was recently the first company ever to get permission to enter in the Arolhos Archipelago in Brazil.

Travel guides, such as Lonely Planet, often feature a specific protected area if there is a 'buzz' about it and if the wider area is also getting some travel attention. In making this decision, the guide editors take into consideration the potential negative effects of listing the area in the guide on its conservation objectives. The information provided in a travel guide includes practical tips, specific guidelines and anything else that could excite the visitor. This information is often influential in developing the visitor's expectations about the character of their on-site experience.

### **What are the factors that have the greatest influence on visitor experience?**

A satisfactory experience will frequently depend on opportunities to view the features within a protected area, such as wildlife, vegetation, landscapes. But, infrastructure is also important. For example, visitors expect clear paths and viewing platforms to facilitate viewing experiences. The experienced level of uniqueness, which is a function of the congestion level and authenticity is also an important variable. In the recent National Geographic travelers' survey of World Heritage Sites (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable/>), areas such as the

Belize Barrier Reef and Ecuador Galapagos Islands scored in the worst-rated category, primarily because of decreasing environmental quality and sky-rocketing increases in visitor numbers. Safety and security are also significant factors: the availability and quality of basic services, such as toilets and waste collection facilities can decrease visitor satisfaction if absent. Access to food, lodging and gift shops, and the absence of nuisances, such as unregulated vendors, also play important roles.

The above are elements that are often on the check-list of the tour operators when they consider adding a protected area to an itinerary. While the opportunities to experience nature – from wildlife to landscapes – are important, professional operators must ensure that all health and safety conditions are present at the site before including it into a travel package.

For visitors to protected areas, the possibility of engaging in sport activities, or the lack of these, does not have a major influence on the level of satisfaction. Visitors to protected areas seem to accept fairly well the limitations on which activities can be practised – and which cannot – in a protected area. Thus, user regulations, as long as clearly explained and effectively implemented, do not tend to negatively affect the satisfaction of the visit.

### **What are the most common factors that negatively affect visitor experience?**

Visiting a protected area is an information-intensive activity. A general problem that occurs in many protected areas is the lack of professional communication and interpretation. Local guides often lack knowledge about the specific area. Frequently their language skills need strengthening, as well as their ability to convey scientific messages in a simple and interesting way that matches the educational and interest level of the visitors. Furthermore, although visitors generally have

*Some visitor experiences involve spirituality. Here visitors to the Lokobe Nature Reserve, Madagascar, view a sacred tree. Photo: I Viaggi del Ventaglio.*





sufficient understanding of conservation to appreciate the link between the protection measures in place and the quality of their experience (i.e. viewing opportunities and the good condition of natural landscapes), rarely is management information – such as the name of the park agency, the goals for the protected area – shared. Strengthening the information on key management practices, such as designating migration routes, zonation, and culling, would also add to the experience and strengthen the ties between the park and its stakeholders.

To respond to the existing limits in information, and to maximise the enjoyment of the experience of their clients, many operators today enlist professional naturalist guides and rely less on the guides available from the protected areas themselves. This applies both to companies operating in the high-end and the high volume holiday markets. However, when the information is of good quality, companies do use materials developed by local organisations and agencies if this suits the language requirements, such as in the case of Hapag-Lloyd in the Bering Sea, where the material developed by the WWF Arctic programme is used.

Possibly, the largest challenge related to the visitor experience in protected areas is linked to the management of expectations. Visitors to protected areas have expectations about what they will see and the level of infrastructures, such as the trails and information facilities, that often have no link to reality. Visitors tend to develop the same expectations about the quality of services available, particularly in relation to education and viewing opportunities no matter which protected area they visit, from a national park in the USA to a small protected area in a mountain region in Asia. In the visitors' imagination a 'protected area' is one type of recreation product.

To conclude, in exploring the opportunities for enhancing the quality of visitor experiences, it is crucial to assess the financial costs and benefits that this decision will entail. This requires

*Professionally trained guides help visitors understand natural heritage values in many protected areas, such as the Parque Nacional del Este, Dominican Republic. Photo: Giulia Carbone.*



addressing a number of questions: What are the benefits of a positive visitor experience? What types of experiences are appropriate in a specific protected area? What infrastructure, programs and services are needed to facilitate these experiences? What technical skills are required of the protected area agency and of the tour operator to manage tourism? What is the nature of the market? Is improving visitor experience financially viable?

## **Conclusion**

Developing greater cooperation between tour operators and protected area agencies to increase the quality of experiences can lead to a number of benefits to visitors and to the areas themselves. Apart from an increased awareness of the value of conservation, which could eventually influence general behaviour at home and create a larger support for conservation, additional benefits could also be felt locally. Protected areas that have triggered positive and enriching experiences have a good chance of being successful in raising funds from satisfied visitors. Many tourism companies have started to play an active role in financially supporting the conservation work of protected areas. Mechanisms include: the organisation of traditional cash donations or technical skill sharing opportunities by the travel group; auctions (common on cruise ships); corporate donations of a share of the revenue generated from the visit; or the possibility of joining local NGOs directly involved in conservation work in the area.

However, it is crucial for individual protected areas to attend to the quality of experiences and effectively manage visitor satisfaction. This can only be improved if the gap between expectations and the reality of the experience (which is linked to the effectiveness of the management) is narrowed. This can be achieved by simultaneously improving infrastructure and information opportunities in protected areas, achieving the conservation goals, and by ensuring that local guides, who will have a direct contact with the visitors, understand and know how to manage high expectations.

Finally, although excursions to protected areas – in particular those sold as complementary offers by all-inclusive resorts – are becoming more and more popular, these are always in competition with other type of excursions (even with all-day shopping excursions). Thus, the same marketing rules that apply to any tourist excursion also apply to protected areas visitation. If protected areas want to attract visitors, they need to become knowledgeable about marketing, and be competitive both from a product as well as a communication perspective. They will need to adopt more visitor-friendly communication techniques that can reach out to a wider audience, with clear messages about the specific protected areas features.

A way forward is to form close relationships with professional tourism companies that regularly include protected areas in their excursion packages. Tour operators and travel guides can play an important role in ensuring that the visitors' level of expectations is realistic. They can also support protected area managers with market information on the profile of today's protected areas visitors. A partnership between protected area managers and the private sector could greatly enhance the potential benefits of investing in making protected areas the best tourism experience of all.

**Giulia Carbone** is Programme Officer at IUCN's Business and Biodiversity Programme. Her work focuses in particular on the tourism, agriculture and cement sectors. Previously (1997–2005), Giulia worked for the UN Environment Programme where she was the co-ordinator of UNEP's tourism work and in particular she led the Tour Operators Initiative. Giulia has an MSc from the London School of Economics in Marine Policy (1993), a Masters in Environmentally Engineering from Turin Polytechnic (1991), a BA in Economics from the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA (1990), and latterly a Laurea in Geography from the Università di Genova, Italy (1997). Giulia Carbone, IUCN – The World Conservation Union, 28 rue Mauverney, Gland 1196, Switzerland. Tel: + 41 22 999 0227. E-mail: giulia.carbone@iucn.org.



# Résumés

## Gestion des expériences vécues par les visiteurs dans les aires protégées : des opportunités prometteuses et des défis fondamentaux

STEPHEN F. McCOOL

En croissance rapide, les voyages à l'étranger et dans le pays sont pour les gestionnaires de plus de 100 000 aires protégées de la planète à la fois sources d'opportunités et de défis. Le tourisme peut être une force pour la conservation, mais une stratégie touristique réussie sous-entend la nécessité de proposer aux visiteurs des opportunités d'expériences de haute qualité. Fournir ces opportunités exige une compréhension de la façon dont les visiteurs construisent leurs expériences, la mise en place d'infrastructures d'appui et de programmes de gestion appropriés, la protection des valeurs essentielles du patrimoine naturel et culturel, la coopération avec le secteur privé, ainsi que des activités essentielles de surveillance. Ceci pose également plusieurs défis, notamment faire le lien entre les attributs du cadre et les expériences, comprendre les intérêts des gestionnaires, des visiteurs, des organisateurs de circuits touristiques et des communautés locales, et cartographier et mesurer les expériences que les visiteurs désirent vivre.

## Une typologie des touristes visitant les aires protégées

JANET COCHRANE

Les parcs nationaux et autres aires protégées sont une part importante du patrimoine national et international, mais sont souvent menacés et connaissent fréquemment un manque de ressources, en particulier dans les pays en développement. Une manière d'aborder ce problème consiste à améliorer leur potentiel touristique, ce qui peut participer à améliorer leur profil et à assurer leur contribution aux économies nationales, régionales et locales. Le tourisme à destination de certains parcs nationaux est substantiel, mais la différenciation entre les perceptions et les besoins des différents groupes d'utilisateurs est souvent inadéquate. Bien que l'on fasse habituellement une large distinction entre les visiteurs étrangers et nationaux, aucun autre affinement n'est en général réalisé, bien que les perceptions, les besoins et le profil des visiteurs varient énormément. Une plus grande compréhension de ces caractéristiques devrait conduire à une meilleure appréhension du marché et à une mise à disposition plus étroitement ciblée d'infrastructures. À son tour, ceci devrait aboutir à une satisfaction plus marquée des visiteurs, à une industrie du tourisme plus durable et, peut-être, à une volonté politique accrue de consacrer des ressources à la protection des parcs et à une meilleure chance de survie du patrimoine naturel et culturel que ces derniers préservent. Une typologie des visiteurs des parcs nationaux est par conséquent proposée, dans le but d'aider les gestionnaires et les décideurs impliqués dans le tourisme et la gestion des parcs à comprendre les besoins de leurs différents groupes cibles et à imaginer une planification, une gestion et des stratégies marketing adaptées.

## Prise en compte des expériences des visiteurs dans des sites du patrimoine national du Canada

ED JAGER, CAROL SHEEDY, FRANCES GERTSCH, TED PHILLIPS ET GREG DANCHUK

Avec une urbanisation accrue, une population vieillissante et une immigration croissante, le Canada subit actuellement des changements démographiques importants. De ce fait, les modes de vie et les valeurs des Canadiens changent, tout comme leurs attitudes vis-à-vis des voyages et des loisirs. L'agence Parcs Canada est confrontée au défi de rester représentative des Canadiens et de continuer à leur correspondre dans ce contexte dynamique. Des expériences mémorables pour les visiteurs sont un moyen essentiel pour permettre à Parcs Canada de rester en lien avec les Canadiens et d'entretenir leur intérêt et leur soutien. Offrir aux visiteurs des opportunités d'expériences mémorables et de qualité et être représentatif des Canadiens et pertinent vis-à-vis d'eux exige de se pencher de façon continue sur la population et sur les expériences des visiteurs. S'appuyant sur des sciences sociales de qualité et sur une solide compréhension des visiteurs dans un contexte social en mutation, Parcs Canada doit s'intéresser de manière exhaustive à l'expérience visiteur dans son ensemble et doit faire en sorte de faciliter des expériences correspondant aux Canadiens. Ce travail doit reconnaître que l'expérience visiteur est un résultat partagé, impliquant le visiteur, Parcs Canada et ses partenaires, et que chaque visiteur apporte sa perspective personnelle à l'expérience. Et tout ce travail doit se faire dans une constante évolution, en intégrant les éléments de la mission que sont la protection, l'éducation et l'expérience visiteur.

## Suivi des expériences vécues par les visiteurs dans les aires protégées

ROBYN BUSHHELL ET TONY GRIFFIN

Un élément important de la planification et de la gestion des aires protégées est la compréhension des expériences vécues par les visiteurs. Bien gérées, ces visites peuvent engendrer des bénéfices sociaux, culturels, économiques et de conservation. Sans planification stratégique, les activités en lien avec les visiteurs peuvent créer une large gamme d'impacts négatifs. Cet article fait le point sur la nature des expériences vécues par les visiteurs et les façons dont on peut les écouter le plus efficacement de façon à mieux informer la gestion des parcs, les décisions d'allocation des ressources et les processus de planification. Il explore les nombreuses dimensions de l'expérience visiteur par rapport au lieu, à la saison et à la durée de la visite et par rapport aux visiteurs eux-mêmes et au besoin de clarté dans le suivi qui en résulte – son but et ses objectifs, ce que l'on surveille et la façon dont les résultats seront exploités. L'article discute également de l'importance de l'emploi d'indicateurs simples, fiables et significatifs dans l'évaluation. Il s'appuie sur quelques travaux de recherche récents entrepris parmi les agences australiennes de gestion des parcs en ce qui concerne le suivi des expériences vécues par les visiteurs.

## Procurer des opportunités d'aller à la rencontre de la nature sauvage dans les parcs PAN certifiés d'Europe

ZOLTÁN KUN ET MYLÈNE VAN DER DONK

Un petit nombre de personnes, croissant espérons-le, accorde autant de valeur au patrimoine naturel de l'Europe qu'à son patrimoine culturel. Jusque récemment, la nature sauvage était cependant quelque peu absente de l'image of Europe. La vision de la nature sauvage est un concept qui touche profondément le cœur et les émotions de la plupart des gens. Ces espaces sont bien connus à travers le monde, mais la plupart des européens ne savent pas qu'ils peuvent encore trouver des vestiges exceptionnels de la nature sauvage sur leur propre continent. Ces sont les parcs PAN (*Protected Area Network*, réseau d'aires protégées), où chacun et chacune peut aller de manière unique à la rencontre d'immenses étendues de nature sous sa forme la plus pure, offrant des opportunités de détente, de loisir actif ou de plaisir de profiter de la nature. Les expériences vécues dans ces étendues sauvages européennes peuvent être des expériences qui changent la vie.

## Gérer les expériences vécues par les touristes dans un cadre marin : le Parc Marin de la Grande Barrière de Corail

ANDREW SKEAT, LISHA MULQUEENY, HILARY SKEAT ET CHRIS BRIGGS

La Grande Barrière de Corail, le plus grand système de récif corallien de la planète, est géré non seulement dans l'optique de préserver sa biodiversité riche et unique, mais aussi pour toute une variété d'opportunités touristiques à vocation marine de haute qualité. Les visiteurs y vivent des expériences de qualité grâce à un programme articulé autour de quatre composantes : (1) un écosystème en bonne santé, (2) tout un éventail de possibilités offertes aux visiteurs, (3) un service à la clientèle de qualité et (4) une bonne information. Ces composantes sont mises en œuvre par le biais des programmes de l'Autorité Marine de la Grande Barrière de Corail et grâce à des partenariats noués entre l'Autorité et l'industrie du tourisme. Reconnaître par des permis d'exploitation à plus long terme les organisateurs d'activités touristiques qui sont parvenus à des normes élevées d'attention et de service est l'une des manières dont l'Autorité encourage les opportunités de qualité supérieure.

## Problèmes et solutions à l'afflux de visiteurs du Parc National de la Montagne Jaune, en Chine

RUI YANG ET YOUBO ZHUANG

Presque tous les parcs nationaux populaires de Chine connaissent de sérieux problèmes d'engorgement, en particulier pendant les pics saisonniers. Si l'on ne parvient pas à bien gérer l'afflux des visiteurs, il est très difficile de leur proposer des opportunités d'expériences de qualité relativement élevée dans ces parcs nationaux. Cet article, en prenant le Parc National de la Montagne Jaune comme exemple, illustre les conditions d'afflux de visiteurs dans ce parc et la façon dont cet engorgement a un impact sur l'expérience vécue par les visiteurs. L'engorgement est principalement attribuable au grand déséquilibre en termes de répartition dans le temps et dans l'espace des visiteurs du parc. L'article identifie également la répartition idéale des visiteurs nécessaire pour leur procurer une expérience de haute qualité. Enfin, il suggère des manières

de réduire les impacts sur les opportunités d'expériences pour les visiteurs du parc, notamment à la fois des mesures fondamentales de gestion et des mesures particulières de régulation des journées de pointe.

## **Perspectives de l'industrie du tourisme sur les éléments affectant la satisfaction des visiteurs dans les aires protégées**

GIULIA CARBONE

L'intérêt croissant des touristes pour les expériences tournées vers la nature affecte tous les segments du marché du tourisme et fournit à la fois des opportunités – pour les tour-opérateurs et les gestionnaires – et des défis supplémentaires dans leurs efforts pour procurer des opportunités d'expériences de qualité. Reconnaisant que la demande accrue d'aires protégées dans les formules touristiques pourrait représenter une source importante de développement économique positif et d'opportunités de conservation pour les aires protégées dans le monde entier, un certain nombre de compagnies touristiques ont été consultées et ont donné leur point de vue sur ce que sont les motivations à visiter des aires protégées, les attentes des visiteurs et ce qui a le plus d'impact sur la satisfaction de ces derniers. Les compagnies consultées s'accordent à dire qu'une expérience satisfaisante dépend des opportunités d'observer les aspects remarquables d'une aire protégée, tels que la faune sauvage, la végétation et les paysages. Elles ont aussi mis en avant le fait que visiter une aire protégée constituait une activité intense en matière d'informations reçues et que le manque de communication et d'interprétation professionnelle était un problème général rencontré dans de nombreuses aires protégées. Une plus grande coopération entre les organisateurs de circuits touristiques et les agences en charge des aires protégées pourrait être la solution pour relever efficacement ces défis, en reconnaissant qu'améliorer la qualité des expériences conduirait à un certain nombre de bénéfices pour les visiteurs et pour ces aires elles-mêmes.

# Resúmenes

## La gestión de las experiencias de los visitantes en las áreas protegidas: oportunidades prometedoras y desafíos fundamentales

STEPHEN F. McCOOL

El rápido incremento de los viajes nacionales e internacionales crean tanto oportunidades como desafíos para los directores de las más de 100 000 áreas protegidas de todo el mundo. El turismo puede ser una fuerza a favor de la conservación; sin embargo, una estrategia turística satisfactoria tiene que basarse en la creación de oportunidades que contribuyan a una experiencia de alta calidad para el visitante. La creación de estas oportunidades exige el conocimiento de la forma en que los visitantes construyen estas experiencias, la creación de instalaciones de apoyo y los programas de gestión adecuados, la protección de los valores fundamentales del patrimonio natural y cultural, la colaboración con el sector privado y las actividades clave de supervisión. También se dan varios desafíos: la creación del vínculo entre los atributos del entorno y las experiencias, la comprensión del interés de los directivos, los visitantes, los operadores turísticos y las comunidades, así como la identificación y el análisis de las experiencias que los visitantes desean.

## Tipología de los turistas que visitan las áreas protegidas

JANET COCHRANE

Los parques nacionales y otras áreas protegidas son parte importante del patrimonio nacional e internacional, pero con frecuencia se encuentran amenazados y generalmente no disponen de los recursos necesarios, particularmente en los países en vías de desarrollo. Una de las formas de hacer frente a esta situación es el aumento de su potencial turístico, que puede coadyuvar a la mejora de su perfil y a la contribución de las economías nacionales, provinciales y locales. El turismo en algunos parques nacionales es considerable, pero con frecuencia se hace una diferenciación inadecuada entre las percepciones y las necesidades de los diferentes grupos de usuarios. Aunque usualmente se distingue entre visitantes nacionales e internacionales, por regla general estos grupos no se subdividen más detalladamente, aun cuando los perfiles, las percepciones y las necesidades de los visitantes varían considerablemente. Una comprensión cabal de estas características debe conducir a una mejor percepción del mercado y a la creación de instalaciones para satisfacer los intereses del cliente. A su vez, esto debe contribuir a una mejor satisfacción del visitante y a una industria turística más sostenible, y (quizás) a un aumento en la voluntad política para destinar recursos a la protección de los parques y crear mejores condiciones para la supervivencia del patrimonio natural y cultural que éstos conservan. Por tanto, se propone una tipología de los visitantes de los parques nacionales con el objetivo de ayudar a los directores y a los gestores de políticas relacionadas con el turismo y los parques nacionales a comprender las necesidades de los diferentes grupos objetivo, para que así puedan diseñar estrategias adecuadas de planificación, gestión y mercadeo.

## Gestión de las experiencias de los visitantes en las áreas patrimonio nacional de Canadá

ED JAGER, CAROL SHEEDY, FRANCES GERTSCH, TED PHILLIPS Y GREG DANCHUK

Canadá está experimentando cambios demográficos significativos en medio del aumento de la urbanización, una población envejecida y una creciente inmigración. Como resultado, los estilos de vida y los valores de los canadienses están cambiando, así como sus modos de pensar sobre los viajes y el tiempo libre. Parks Canada se enfrenta al desafío de continuar siendo de interés sin perder su representatividad ante los canadienses en este contexto dinámico. Las experiencias memorables de los visitantes son uno de los medios clave con que cuenta Parks Canada para continuar en la preferencia de los canadienses y cultivar así el interés y el apoyo de éstos. Para poder ofrecer una experiencia memorable, representativa y relevante para los canadienses, se debe prestar una atención continua a las personas y las experiencias de los visitantes. Tomando como base las ciencias sociales y un sólido conocimiento de los visitantes en un contexto social cambiante, Parks Canada necesita abordar de manera exhaustiva la experiencia de los visitantes en su totalidad y trabajar para garantizar que se faciliten experiencias de interés para los canadienses. Este trabajo debe reconocer que la experiencia del visitante es un resultado compartido en el que participan el visitante, Parks Canada y sus asociados, y que cada visitante contribuye a esta experiencia con su perspectiva personal. Todo este esfuerzo debe realizarse de forma continua e integrar la protección, la educación y la experiencia del visitante como objetivos.

## **Supervisión de las experiencias de los visitantes en las áreas protegidas**

ROBYN BUSHELL Y TONY GRIFFIN

El conocimiento de las experiencias de los visitantes es un elemento importante para la planificación y gestión de las áreas protegidas. Las visitas bien administradas pueden generar beneficios sociales, culturales, económicos y de conservación. Sin una planificación estratégica, las actividades relacionadas con las visitas pueden crear numerosos impactos negativos. Este artículo se centra en la naturaleza de las experiencias de los visitantes y las formas en que éstas se pueden supervisar de una manera más eficaz para mantener mejor informados a los directivos del parque y contribuir así al proceso de toma de decisiones en la asignación de los recursos y los procesos de planificación. Explora las diversas dimensiones de las experiencias de los visitantes relacionadas con la ubicación, la temporada, la duración de la visita y los propios visitantes, así como la consiguiente necesidad de una supervisión más clara, su propósito y objetivos, qué se supervisa y cómo se utilizarán los datos de los resultados. Este trabajo también aborda la importancia de utilizar indicadores sencillos, fiables y significativos para la evaluación. Se toman en cuenta las investigaciones realizadas recientemente por agencias australianas de administración de parques sobre la supervisión de las experiencias de los visitantes.

## **La creación de oportunidades para disfrutar de las áreas silvestres en los parques europeos con la certificación PAN**

ZOLTÁN KUN Y MYLÈNE VAN DER DONK

Un número pequeño (pero se espera que creciente) de personas valora el patrimonio natural europeo tanto como el cultural. Las áreas silvestres parecía un tanto perdida de la imagen de Europa hasta hace poco. La visión de las áreas silvestres es un concepto que llega al corazón y las emociones de la mayoría de las personas. Esto es bien conocido en todo el mundo, pero la mayoría de los europeos desconocen que todavía pueden encontrar reliquias excepcionales de las áreas silvestres en su propio continente. Estos lugares son los denominados parques PAN, donde las personas pueden disfrutar de una enorme riqueza natural en su forma más pura, con oportunidades para el relajamiento, la recreación o el disfrute de la naturaleza. Disfrutar de experiencias en estos entornos naturales europeos puede cambiar una vida.

## **La gestión de las experiencias de los visitantes en el entorno marino: El Parque de la Gran Barrera Coralina**

ANDREW SKEAT, LISHA MULQUEENY, HILARY SKEAT Y CHRIS BRIGGS

La Gran Barrera Coralina, la mayor barrera coralina del mundo, se administra no sólo para conservar su biodiversidad única y diversa, sino también para crear una variedad de oportunidades turísticas marinas de alta calidad. Se garantiza una experiencia de calidad para los visitantes a través de un programa integrado por cuatro componentes: (1) un ecosistema saludable, (2) variedad de oportunidades para los visitantes, (3) calidad en el servicio al cliente y (4) buena información. Estos componentes se logran a través del programa de la Autoridad de la Gran Barrera Coralina y a través de la colaboración entre esta Autoridad y la industria turística. Una de las formas de estimular la calidad que tiene esta Autoridad es el otorgamiento de permisos de operación por más tiempo a aquellos operadores turísticos que mantienen unos niveles elevados de cuidado y servicios.

## **Problemas y soluciones relacionadas con la congestión de visitantes en el parque nacional Montaña Amarilla en China**

RUI YANG Y YOUBO ZHUANG

Casi la mayoría de los parques nacionales más populares en China presentan serios problemas de congestión, particularmente en las temporadas altas. Si no se hace frente a la congestión de visitantes de manera adecuada, resulta difícil ofrecer una experiencia de calidad relativamente alta para los visitantes en estos parques nacionales. Este trabajo, mediante el ejemplo del parque nacional Montaña Amarilla, ilustra las condiciones de congestión en dicho parque y cómo esta situación repercute en la experiencia de los visitantes. La causa de la congestión se debe fundamentalmente al gran desequilibrio que existe en la distribución del espacio y el tiempo para los visitantes del parque. También se identifica la distribución ideal de visitantes para proporcionar una experiencia de alta calidad. Finalmente, en este trabajo se sugieren formas de reducir el impacto sobre las experiencias de los visitantes y se incluyen tanto medidas administrativas fundamentales como medidas especiales de control para los días de máxima afluencia de visitantes.

## **Perspectivas de la industria turística sobre los elementos que influyen en la satisfacción de los visitantes a las áreas protegidas**

GIULIA CARBONE

El creciente interés de los turistas por el disfrute de los entornos naturales está afectando a todos los segmentos del mercado turístico, y ofrece tanto oportunidades para los operadores turísticos y gerentes como desafíos adicionales en un esfuerzo por crear oportunidades para el disfrute de experiencias de calidad. A partir del reconocimiento de que un aumento en la demanda de paquetes turísticos que incluyen visitas a áreas protegidas podría representar una fuente importante de desarrollo económico positivo y oportunidades para la conservación de las áreas protegidas en todo el mundo, se han analizado un grupo de compañías turísticas y se han tomado en cuenta sus puntos de vista sobre las causas de las visitas a las áreas protegidas, cuáles son las expectativas de los visitantes y qué influye en la satisfacción de los mismos. Las compañías a las que nos acercamos coincidieron en que una experiencia satisfactoria depende de las oportunidades que tengan los turistas de ver lo que atesora el área protegida, es decir, la fauna y la flora natural, la vegetación y los paisajes. También mencionaron que la visita a un área protegida es una actividad que implica un gran volumen de información y generalmente uno de los problemas que presentan estas áreas es la falta de comunicación e interpretación profesionales. Una mayor colaboración entre los operadores turísticos y las agencias encargadas de las áreas protegidas puede ser la respuesta para enfrentar estos desafíos de manera eficaz, teniendo en cuenta que el mejoramiento de la calidad de las experiencias conduciría a la creación de beneficios tanto para los visitantes como para las áreas.



## **IUCN – The World Conservation Union**

Founded in 1948, The World Conservation Union brings together over 80 States, more than 100 government agencies, 800-plus non-governmental organisations and some 10,000 scientists in a unique world partnership spread across some 180 countries.

As a Union, IUCN seeks to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable.

The World Conservation Union builds on the strengths of its members, networks and partners to enhance their capacity and to support global alliances to safeguard natural resources at local, regional and global levels.

*IUCN, Rue Mauverney 28, CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland*

*Tel: ++ 41 22 999 0001, fax: ++ 41 22 999 0002,*

*e-mail: <mail@hq.iucn.org>*

## **World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA)**

WCPA is the largest worldwide network of protected area managers and specialists. It comprises over 1,300 members in 140 countries. WCPA is one of the six voluntary Commissions of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and is serviced by the Protected Areas Programme at the IUCN Headquarters in Gland, Switzerland. WCPA can be contacted at the IUCN address above.

**The WCPA mission is to promote the establishment and effective management of a worldwide network of terrestrial and marine protected areas.**

## **IUCN – Union Mondiale pour la Nature**

Fondée en 1948, l'Union Mondiale pour la Nature rassemble plus de 80 États, 100 organismes publics, 800 organisations non-gouvernementales et 10,000 scientifiques au sein d'une alliance mondiale unique dans 180 pays.

L'IUCN, en tant qu'Union, a pour mission d'influer sur les sociétés du monde entier, de les encourager et de les aider pour qu'elles conservent l'intégrité et la diversité de la nature et veillent à ce que toute utilisation des ressources naturelles soit équitable et écologiquement durable.

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