

Trend Report: Visitor Management Policies in Protected Areas and National Parks

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this report is to examine visitor management techniques, their use throughout history and their impact to date. The impact of visitor management techniques specifically on protected areas and national parks will be examined through the overview of case studies looking at Australia, The Great Barrier Reef, and Antarctica. The studies show that techniques like planning, provision of facilities, site hardening, and education were all effective management techniques in reducing visitor impacts. These findings are important in reinforcing management efforts currently and providing a starting point for management in the future to tackle the problems of environmental sustainability and visitor satisfaction.

Keywords: *visitor management, national parks, Antarctica*

INTRODUCTION

Visitor management techniques can vary in their approach, size, and implementation, but typically they have the overarching goal of sustainable development and education. More often visitor management in national parks and protected areas is seen as a way of sustainable development to counter the overuse of natural resources by the growing number of tourists. This paper will describe the trend of visitor management in national parks and protected areas globally, provide a history of how the trend developed and discuss current and future impacts.

BODY

Description of Trend

The necessity for visitor management has come out of an industry that continues to grow each year and the growing concern for the environment by consumers worldwide. Visitor management can be defined as “an administrative action oriented towards maintaining the quality of park resources and visitor experiences” (Candrea & Ispas, 2009, p. 134). One way of

describing visitor management techniques is to classify them as either 'hard' or 'soft' depending on the program a protected area is choosing to implement (Mason, 2008; Mason, 2005). Hard management techniques are actually creating rules and regulations to physically manage the resource, while soft techniques are promoting education and learning in hopes of modifying the visitor's behaviour (Mason, 2008; Mason, 2005). Management is usually seen as necessary in national parks and protected areas in order to ensure that the park can be used and enjoyed by everyone currently as well as in the future (Eagles & McCool, 2002; Marion & Reid, 2009; Mason, 2005; Candrea & Ispas, 2009). There are many threads to the goals of implementing visitor management, but many have a few key focuses like environmental goals, and visitor satisfaction goals (Shackley, 1998; Marion & Reid, 2009; Eagles & McCool, 2002). The overall goal of visitor management is ensure that people can enjoy the resource without detracting from other people's enjoyment, and not destruct the land in which the tourism is taking place (Shackley, 1998; Marion, & Reid, 2009).

Three main ways of managing visitors as suggested by Mason, (2008) are: controlling the number of visitors; adapting the resource to handle the number of visitors; or changing the tourist's behaviour. To control the number of visitors many articles point to calculating an areas carrying capacity and then creating a limit on the number of people allowed there in a day/period or creating limitations on the type of use (Mason, 2008; Marion & Reid, 2009; Candrea & Ispas, 2009). Site management like hardening trails, allowing re growth in areas, or building fences are examples of techniques to adapt the resource to be able to handle the number of visitors using the park (Mason, 2008; Marion & Reid, 2009; Candrea & Ispas, 2009). As Marion and Reid (2009) point out though, by doing this and altering the landscape it could reduce the satisfaction of visitors to the park since it takes away from the natural feeling tourists may be looking for when

participating in this type of activity. Lastly, the use of ‘soft’ techniques like education programs that teach tourists of the impact of their activities, boards that have rules of conduct, and providing lots of information to tourists can change the behaviour of the visitor, managing the effects they have on the environment (Mason, 2008; Marion & Reid, 2009; Candrea & Ispas, 2009). There is a wide range of visitor management methods available for national parks and protected areas, some of these include:

- Differential pricing
- Trip scheduling
- Length of stay limits
- Visitor qualifications (Eagles, 2002)

Overall, the trend of management of natural parks and protected areas is an increasing concern with the physical terrain and keeping it in its natural condition, the needs of environmental sustainability, and the needs of the visitor (Ryan, 2005). This trend is a direct result of an increase in recent years in moving towards sustaining the natural environment as well as ensuring visitors get the experience that they are expecting.

Historic Perspective

In the 1980’s and 1990’s a lot of research emerged showing the effects that mass tourism has on the environment in which it takes place, which lead a lot of visitor management techniques to develop from the truth that visitors will inevitably damage the resource (Marion & Reid, 2009). The sole focus of visitor management became to minimize the negative impacts that tourists have on the environment (Marion & Reid, 2009; Shackley, 1998; Mason, 2005). The first framework that visitor management evolved in was a resource-based concept of carrying

capacity (Eagles, 2001). Slowly throughout the 1990's and early 2000's when other considerations became important, many approaches to visitor management in national parks were suggested as ways to mitigate the effects of tourists on the natural environment while still maintaining their satisfaction (Mason, 2005; Eagles, 2001). The English Tourist Board in 1991 produced a report which discussed various ways of visitor management including some discussed above e.g. changing the tourist's behaviour by making them more aware of their impact (Mason, 2005). In 1993, The Ecotourism Society produced guidelines that were meant to help tourists when visiting natural areas, and in 1999 The World Tourism Organization produced a global code of ethics in an attempt to minimize the effects of tourism on the environment (Marion & Reid 2009). Taking into account that there has been an increase in tourism numbers in the past decade, as well as a trend towards tourists demanding remote locations, this means there has been increasing pressure on areas throughout the earth including natural parks and protected areas (Mason, 2005).

Protected areas are established in hopes of preserving a natural resource and to continue to realize economic gains from it in the future (Mason, 2005). Governments around the world are realizing the necessity for protecting land and there have been increases in the number of protected areas and national parks in the past decade (Mason, 2005). In the twentieth century, weighing the demands of competing uses for land and conserving the environment has been a major challenge, which plays into the increase in management plans for these areas (Mason, 2005). In the beginning of the 1990's there was approximately 5% of the earth with protected status, and by 2008 it is estimated that it is between 11 and 12.9%; sadly there is little marine protection throughout the world, with only around one percent estimated to have protected status (Soutullo, 2010). The increase in protected areas and national parks reflects the increasing need

for visitor management in these areas, to manage demand and supply and potentially create an opportunity for sustainable tourism.

Impacts to Date

As seen through many case studies in the articles researched, visitor management techniques have been very successful. In a case study of two national parks in Australia, specific visitor management techniques were evaluated in order to measure their effectiveness (Moore & Walker, 2008). It was found through surveys that currently, site management can be deemed as effective in one of the national parks, Kalbarri, because methods like provision of facilities, planning location of roads, and site hardening were used and successfully minimized visitor impacts (Moore & Walker, 2008). In the other national park studied, these methods were not widely used and therefore there was no significant impact (Moore & Walker, 2008). The results of this study show the impact that visitor management techniques can have in balancing both the goals of visitor satisfaction and environmental conservation. One visitor management technique used was site hardening in order to reduce visitor impacts and it was shown to be almost 100% effective in the Kalbarri National park, same with providing facilities in order to concentrate visitors at the site (Moore & Walker, 2008). Both hard and soft techniques were used and all were shown to have some effectiveness in the national parks (Moore & Walker, 2008).

It was also found in this study that techniques that affect the visitor's behaviour, like education and provision of information, successfully increased understanding and awareness but did not necessarily change actual behaviour (Moore & Walker, 2008). This could be impacted by a variety of factors, like number of times visiting the site, as first time visitors (could apply to many tourists) are not as conscious of the impact they leave on areas (Moore & Walker, 2008).

In support of the finding that education increased the awareness of the visitor but did not actually change the long term behaviour, Marion & Reid, (2009) found that depending on a wide variety of factors associated with delivering the message, visitors may not take the knowledge they learn and apply it to their actions. Factors that increase the effectiveness of educational signs as a visitor management technique are messages that provide a reason for the proposed behaviour, messages that have moral appeal, and messages that provide the cause and effect relationship of the destructive behaviour (Marion & Reid, 2009).

In a study conducted by Mason (2005) about the polar regions of the world and visitor management techniques, Antarctica was studied; results showed the effectiveness of education through interpretation and self regulation. Antarctica uses interpretation to educate visitors and hopefully transform their behaviour through the process, and self regulation to put the responsibility on visitors, since it would be impossible to monitor the entire area (Mason, 2005). Easter Island also seems to be an example of education working as a method for visitor management, as tourism numbers increased between the years 1987-1997, but graffiti on the island's tourism resources decreased (Mason, 2008).

It has been shown that visitor satisfaction is one of the goals of visitor management, which was examined in relation to visitor management techniques at the Great Barrier Reef, Australia (Coghlan, 2012). The biggest visitor concern was water quality around the reef and it was seen that management improving water quality did have a positive impact on visitor satisfaction (Coghlan, 2012). Interpretive activities which had positive impacts with regards to Antarctica, showed mixed results in this study leading one to believe that interpretation as a visitor management technique may not be the most suitable for this location (Coghlan, 2012). This example showcases that some visitor management methods work in some areas while others

work better in others, and that some visitor management techniques can have a direct impact on visitor satisfaction.

As shown by these examples of various protected areas around the world, visitor management has had a wide impact on many different locations. From land to water, the increase in protected areas needed an increase in visitor management as well, and there are many cases where methods have been successful in conserving the resource while not detracting from the visitor's experience. It also shows the difficult job that visitor managers have because there are so many factors to take into account and various needs to balance throughout the process.

Future Evolution and Impacts

In the future it will become increasingly important to evaluate the actual impact that visitor management policies are having when looking at the bigger picture. If sustainable tourism is to adopt visitor management techniques as a method to achieve its goal, the wider impact of these techniques should be researched. In future years there will be less growth in the number of parks and the world will move to a stage of park management instead, with visitor management programs being the key to achieving many goals (Eagles, 2001). While in the past the concept of preserving the environment was based on notions like the carrying capacity of the area, in the future it will be based on biodiversity conservation and ecological integrity (Eagles, 2001). An inclination within the visitor management trend is to start considering visitors to a park not only visitors but actually part owners, which would help in changing public behaviours and impacts during their stay (Eagles, 2001). National parks and protected areas will have to become more sophisticated in dealing with all the problems that the current global marketplace offers, and gaining support from the public and becoming more self sufficient financially are two ways to do

so (Eagles, 2001). It will be important in the future to think and plan in terms of long term goals (like sustainability) while still maintaining short term goals (like profitability) in order to keep stakeholders happy (Candrea & Ispas, 2009).

In the future, there will be more research done on the effectiveness of certain visitor management programs over others. Currently it is more common to see one time evaluations which directly involve the staff working at the protected area, the problem being the marketplace is not static and plans require constant monitoring in order to improve effectiveness (Hockings & Stolton, 2000). General guidelines for evaluating management methods include:

- Look at a range of factors and all the factors that go into a management system
- Measures that are used to indicate good or poor performance should relate to all the goals of the national parks e.g. social, economic and environmental goals
- It should allow the manager to prioritize goals, like conservation being the primary one followed by visitor satisfaction
- Evaluations should be based on scientific data and show change over time (Hockings & Stolton, 2000).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, visitor management in protected areas and parks has become increasingly important in a world where international tourism is flourishing, the amount of land protected is growing, as is tourists demand for remote, unique destinations. Visitor management used to be focused on carrying capacity and minimizing the environmental effects of tourism, but evolved to adopt many different approaches in order to achieve the goal of environmental stewardship and visitor satisfaction. As seen in national parks in Australia and Antarctica, there is sufficient

research showing the effectiveness of visitor management techniques. In the future the trend will evolve to become even more important in the park tourism industry and have more sophisticated approaches in order to tackle complex goals.

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