A Call for a Broad Spatial Understanding of Outdoor Recreation Use

Paper submitted to the 2008 MMV Conference

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July 2008
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Understanding outdoor recreation use has long been acknowledged as fundamental to decision making for a range of recreation providers. As European life in the post Soviet era changed due to rising incomes, increases in free time, technology developments, and EU expansion and centralization, the ethos of the outdoors has also changed. Participation in the outdoors is now not only linked to enjoyable experiences but also to a country’s health, economy, environment, and overall quality of life. As a result, not only have many EU countries become more interdependent, the recreation flows across countries are starting to become as important as flows within a country. To the potential recreation user, activity choice is increasingly viewed as Europe wide rather than country specific.

The goal of this paper is to suggest a need for better and broader understanding of outdoor recreation use at various spatial levels. Suggestions will be provided to a number of timely issues related to operationalizing data collection efforts at multiple levels such as consistent definitions, required baseline information, articulation of user needs, identification of data usage, effective and efficient data collection methods, and integration into existing data collection efforts.

Outdoor recreation is often considered to be a public good and highly valued by citizens. This valuation continues to rise as users receive a higher consumer surplus due to the perception that the benefits of outdoor recreation greatly outweigh the exchange costs. One of the limiting factors that has prevented outdoor recreation, and conversely tourism, from being a major economic force in many regions is the lack of primary research-based data on recreation demand. Without demand data, recreation planning decisions would be based on speculation and anecdotal accounts. The use of valid and reliable recreation data in decision making is fundamental to a healthy and functional economy. It is economically and politically naive for any agency or recreation provider to fail to understand the need for quality recreation demand data. Decisions about outdoor recreation’s future are made based upon available information. Those regions with weak or incomplete information risk being undervalued when policy, planning and management decisions are made. Many of the decisions surrounding recreation are directly related to planning and marketing, and they are dependent upon understanding their users. The volume, flow, scale, and impact from recreation are understood through these data. The more comprehensive and precise the data, the better the understanding of recreation needs and where the industry is heading.

To better understand the scope of outdoor recreation in a pan Europe context, many agencies and organizations have attempted to collect data at various spatial levels and for a multitude of uses. Unfortunately though, partisan politics and self-interests, among other reasons, have made much of the research conducted tentative. While many sites and management units have spent considerable effort in collecting visitor data, most studies are limited to a small geographic area, are not compatible with studies in other areas and do not lend themselves to trend analysis. What has resulted from the general lack of defensible recreation participation data is that some of the basic questions related to who, what, when and where outdoor recreation takes place is only supported by anecdotal evidence. This is not to imply that past efforts at understanding outdoor recreation have been not been valuable but only to suggest that the EU still has a long way to go to fully understand outdoor recreation at all levels. Macro level understanding of recreation
participation nationwide has provided a good picture of how many specific country’s citizens recreates - - attention is now turning to understand the diversity of how specific groups view the great outdoors at the other various planning levels.

**Outdoor Recreation Use at Various Spatial Levels**

Data requirements at three primary spatial levels have been conceptualized based on geopolitical constructs and information usage (Table 1). While these are broad interpretations of a complex system of data usage, it presents the observation that recreation planning operates at many levels and their data requirements are unique. The first level is at the continent (e.g. EU level). This level would also address defined regions such as the Nordic and Baltic states. At the second level would be country specific understanding of outdoor recreation. In addition, this level would also include subregions of a country such as the mountain region in Sweden. At the third level would be the municipalities in the subregions. This level would also have site-specific information for designated areas of national significance (e.g. National Parks) or urban proximate areas near municipalities. As Table 1 also shows, the principal use of demand data varies depending on the spatial level. At the Pan EU and Country, this information is primarily used for policy development. At their corresponding sublevel, a main use is for funding allocations. At the site level, the main uses are for product development and marketing. The frequency of use of recreation data also differs based on the spatial level. As the level increases to a broader geographic area, the frequency of use declines. Individual sites need accurate data quite frequently, often many times each year, while at the higher levels, policy development use often only occurs once every several years.

Table 1. Data Requirements at Multiple Spatial Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spatial Level</th>
<th>Demand function</th>
<th>Frequency of use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1: Pan EU</td>
<td>Policy development</td>
<td>Long term: 5-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1A: Regions</td>
<td>EU funding allocation</td>
<td>Med Long term: 3-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2: Country</td>
<td>Policy development</td>
<td>Med Long term: 3-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A: Subregions</td>
<td>Country funding allocation</td>
<td>Medium term: 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3: Municipality</td>
<td>Subregion funding allocations</td>
<td>Medium Short term: 1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A: Sites</td>
<td>Product development and marketing</td>
<td>Short: 1 year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Current use in each level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spatial Level</th>
<th>How well addressed: scale 1-5, 5 = very well</th>
<th>Formal Policy: scale 1-5</th>
<th>Formal Data Collection Processes: scale 1-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Level 1: Pan EU | 1 | 1 | 1
Level 1A: Regions | 2 | 1 | 1
Level 2: Country | 4 | 3 | 4
Level 2A: Subregions | 3 | 2 | 3
Level 3: Municipality | 2 | 2 | 2
Level 3A: Sites | 1 | 1 | 1

- US case example (only enough room for brief description)
- Integrated approach to address deficiencies
- Suggestions for future monitoring
  - Consistent definitions
  - Required baseline information
  - User needs
  - Identification of data usage
  - Effective and efficient data collection methods
  - Integration into existing data collection efforts
- Discussion/conclusions

While there is some recreation demand data available for the region at the site level, much of it is not scientifically defendable due to problems related to research design. Issues related to inadequate sample size, information recall, over-generalizability, and response bias make much of these data tentative. Unfortunately, tourism providers are forced to use these data simply because there are no other data sources available. Even data collected by government ministries may have severe limitations for use in decision making at this level.