



Starting to enjoy nature in Mediterranean mountains: Crowding perception and satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to identify the profile and motivations of users of public facilities in Sierra de las Nieves, a protected area ('natural park') in the Spanish Mediterranean mountains, and their influence on perceptions of crowding and satisfaction. A self-reported questionnaire, including socio-demographic questions and a scale measuring perception of crowding, type of motivation, frequency of visits, and satisfaction, was administered to 345 visitors. Four profiles of visitors were identified: social, sport, learning, and nature visitors. Results showed that sport and nature visitors perceived more crowding than learning visitors. Type of motivation, and the interactions, age \times type of motivation and employment-status \times type of motivation, explained a significant amount of variance of perceived crowding. Interaction analysis showed that both age and employment status moderated the relationship between type of motivation and perception of crowding. We suggest implications for park planning and management.

1. Introduction

Physical and recreational activities in Protected Natural Areas (PNA) have become increasingly popular since the 1990s, as new forms of leisure preferences evolve (Farias, 2011; Marques, Reis, & Menezes, 2010; Rodríguez, 2009; Secretaría General de Turismo, 2014). This changing pattern reflects a situation similar to that already experienced in the sociological context of Anglo-Saxon countries (De Breejen, 2007; Hadwen, Arthington, Boon, Taylor, & Fellows, 2011; Saepórsdóttir, 2010), where the protection of natural spaces and the practice of recreational activities in such spaces date back to the 1950s and 60s. By contrast, in Mediterranean societies, the urbanisation process has been very recent, as has the expansion of PNA (in Spain, following the adoption of Act 4/1989, of 27 March, on the Conservation of Natural Areas and Wildlife). Accordingly, recreational practices in natural spaces are still at an embryonic stage of development, although visitor numbers are growing. In addition, recreational activities in PNA are usually concentrated on a small number of trails and areas. As a result of this growth and visitors' concentration, park managers must reconcile satisfying user demand with the conservation of spaces whose outstanding beauty and importance are matched by their fragility (Garrigós, Narangajavana, & Palacios, 2004).

Pioneering studies in this respect, conducted in the Anglo-Saxon

context, highlighted two concepts in particular, users' motivation and the social carrying capacity of the area, as valuable tools for managing the recreational use of PNA (Driver & Brown, 1978; McCool & Petersen, 1982; Wagar, 1964). Differences in users' motivations were introduced as a factor underlying their perceptions of crowding (Driver & Brown, 1978; McCool & Petersen, 1982). Knowledge of users' motivations is fundamental to our study goals, as this factor is the basis for understanding the demand for recreational facilities and, at the same time, a valuable tool for developing effective management measures (Arnegger, Woltering, & Job, 2010; Farias, 2011; Saepórsdóttir, 2010) and for estimating social carrying capacity based on perceptions of crowding.

Perception of crowding in PNA is a topical and relevant subject both for the planning and management of recreational use in PNA and the implementation of strategies that reduce social conflicts. Good management of these spaces can reduce the perception of crowding among those visitors who perceive more saturation and, thus, improve their recreational experience (McCool & Lime, 2001). Studies in the United States indicate that 40% of visitors to a natural park have conflicts with this issue and, in European studies, 10–64% of the young visitors perceive crowding (Arnberger & Mann, 2008). The majority of the studies on crowding perception have been developed in the United States and Canada (Arnberger & Mann, 2008; Graefe, Vaske, & Kuss, 1984; Pereira

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da Silva, 2002). In fact, a review by Arnberger and Mann (2008) indicates that, between the years 1980–2008, only 16 studies on crowding perception have been developed in European forest areas and most of them focussed on the areas of Central and Northern Europe. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have yet explored the perception of crowding in a natural park of the Mediterranean area. Also according to data, and as far as we know, only three recreational profiles of visitors have been identified: Rural, sport, and nature tourists (Secretaría General de Turismo, 2014). The lack of definition of recreational users in natural spaces in Mediterranean mountain areas might contribute to generating a whole series of problems of management and planning of recreational use therein, as well as for the realisation and development of the “nature tourism segment” by the Secretaría General de Turismo (2014). Finally, as far as we know, no previous studies have examined the influence of these users' motivations on perception of crowding and overall satisfaction.

The study of motivations of visitors and its relation to satisfaction and perceptions of crowding in the Mediterranean area would help in providing insights for managing the natural parks in this area in a sustainable way and to, ultimately, increase visitors' satisfaction.

1.1. Motivation and perception of crowding as components of social carrying capacity

Spain's parks are behind those in the USA and other European countries with respect to number of visitors (Fernández & Santos, 2010). In 2006, the PNA in Spain, as a whole, received over 36 million visitors (Farias, 2011). However, the distribution of this figure among the different natural parks reveals considerable variations in visitor numbers (Eroski Consumer, 2012). Thus, 60% of these parks receive fewer than 50,000 visitors a year, and 33% receive 10,000–50,000 visitors. A similar distribution is found throughout Andalusia [according to the Report of Activities and Results, published by the Spanish Environment Ministry (Ministerio del Medio Ambiente, 2009)], where 50% of the natural parks have fewer than 20,000 visits per year, 25% between 20,000 and 50,000, and only 25% have over 50,000 visitors; of these latter, 21% receive between 100,000 and 300,000 visits annually.

In order to measure perceptions of crowding, a procedure based on the use of surveys and on assessing the ‘Number of encounters among users’ (i.e., the ‘Encounter rules’ method) is commonly used, whereby user experience is expressed in terms of the number, type, and location of encounters with other people on the trail and how these events affect the users' perceptions of quality in the trail activity (Patterson & Hammitt, 1990; Shelby & Heberlein, 1986; Tarrant, Cordell, & Kibler, 1997).

The number of encounters is not the only variable that affects crowding perception. As stated by experts, there are two components involved in the evaluation of crowding (Gibson et al., 2014; Shelby, Vaske, & Donnelly, 1996): the descriptive component, which includes the physical characteristics of the environment and objective observations of encounters with people; and the evaluative component, based on norms (i.e. a set of shared attitudes and preferences toward social, environmental or management aspects of the recreational experience; Shelby & Heberlein, 1986). In this way, crowding differs from other concepts like density; a descriptive term referring to the number of people per unit area that can be determined objectively by counting the number of persons and measuring the space they occupy (Vaske & Donnelly, 2002). Crowding, instead, is an evaluative term, as it involves a value judgment that the number of people the individual encounters is too many (Shelby, Vaske, & Heberlein, 1989). Actually, the term perceived crowding is frequently used to highlight the evaluative and subjective nature of the concept. Crowding is also considered a normative variable because, in all cultures, there is a number of people for each place, time, and situation that is considered adequate (PAOT: people at one time) (Gibson et al., 2014; Shelby et al., 1996). Previous studies of crowding indicate that there is an inverse relation between

PAOT and acceptability (Graefe & Vaske, 1987) and a direct relation between PAOT and negative affect, tension, nervousness, and anxiety (Steg, van den Berg, & De Groot, 2012). In contrast to these findings, there is also evidence that crowding attracts attention (Kirchgeßner & Sewall, 2015). Specifically, these authors found that new visitors approached a crowd rather than avoiding it and their duration watching a difficult-to-observe animal was increased when other visitors were also investing their time to do so. These contrasting findings could be due to the different social scenarios where these studies took place: The first ones (Graefe & Vaske, 1987; Steg et al., 2012) were carried out in the context of an outdoor recreational activity, while the last one (Kirchgeßner & Sewall, 2015) was carried out in a zoo, where animals are exhibited in specific locations. New visitors in the zoo might have been cued by group behaviour to animal locations, while there is not a specific object or animal that is difficult to observe in a hiking park such that attention could have been previously cued.

There are several theories that explain the perception of crowding (Gramman, 1982; Lee & Graefe, 2003; Schreyer & Roggenbuck, 1978) according to evaluative and descriptive components.

- a) ‘Expectancy theory’ (expectancy as a temporary belief that an act will be followed by a determined result). This theory is based on the evaluative component of crowding and explains the weak relationship between crowding perception and actual encounter level. The theory states that people usually participate in recreational activities waiting for a reward (emotional, social status, loneliness, etc.). These expectations depend on individual, socio-economic, and circumstantial factors, such as personality characteristics, the degree of conversation with others, situational variables, and the value and type of previous experiences. In the case that the anticipated reward is solitude and privacy, and that this expectancy is frustrated (e.g. when the visitor encounters more people than expected), the visitor may experience an increased level of loss of control, perceived lack of space, invasion of personal space, or unwanted interference, even though the actual number of encounters is not high. In this line, several studies (Andereck & Becker, 1993; Ditton, Fedler, & Graefe, 1983; Shelby, Heberlein, Vaske, & Alfano, 1983) have found that encountering more people than expected induced visitors to feel more crowded, while seeing fewer or the same number of expected visitors caused significantly lower crowding perceptions, supporting the concept that crowding is more related to user's expectations than to actual level of density.
- b) ‘Stimulus overload’. This theory is based on both descriptive and evaluative components of crowding. It is derived from the analysis of social psychology in urban areas of high stress and density (Gramman, 1982). According to this theory, an overload of stimuli may be negative because the individual is not able to cope with the high number and frequency of stimuli. Specifically, individuals feel crowded when there are excessive unwanted and uncontrolled interactions and unusual or unsuitable social contacts (Andereck & Becker, 1993) and strategies to handle this overly stimulating state do not work (Gramman, 1982). This model is useful to explain crowding perception in high density conditions.
- c) ‘Social interference’. This theory is based on the evaluative component. Crowding can be perceived when levels of density interfere in the activities of the visitor or their objectives in a particular environment. Density interferes with the individual's ability to control the situation and achieve their goals (Gramman, 1982). The theory assumes that the behaviour of visitors in recreational settings is mostly motivated by the desire (conscious or not) to seek solitude, release stress, or engage in social interaction. Thus, the perception of crowding may be due to the fact that these goals are not achieved.

Perceptions of crowding are, therefore, mostly evaluative and subjective judgments by individuals, and depend on widely varying social and/or psychological factors, including the type of user, the activity

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