

Canoeists vs. birds or canoeists vs. canoeists? How economic valuation can inform visitor management in a national park

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The management authority of the Mueritz National Park (Germany) is perceiving a growing conflict between the increasing number of canoeists and the nature protection targets. Our main research interest was to assess whether – and if so to what extent – there is a negative effect of the large number of canoeists not only on local wildlife (the canoes-vs.-birds dimension) but also on other visitors (the canoeists-vs.-canoeists dimension). In other words, we hypothesise that the increasing use of the national parks' waters by tourists produces both environmental costs and social congestion costs. From a methodological point of view, we presume that social congestions costs should be, in principle, quantifiable via the application of economic valuation tools. Consequently, we employed two economic valuation techniques based on an on-site interview survey: the Contingent Valuation Method (CVM) and a GIS-based application of the zonal travel cost method (ZTCM). Data gathering occurred in spring and summer 2003 (inter alia ca. 300 face-to-face interviews with canoeists). Time series data of the number of canoeists were supplied by the national park administration and supplemented by own counts.

On the occasion of the conference, we would like to present the main results of this research project: First, we will introduce – on a conceptual level – the problem of social congestion and overcrowding in protected areas from an economic perspective. Second, we show – on the basis of our data – how various socio-economic characteristics, attitudes of the visitors, and seasonal aspects affect the perception of overcrowding. Third, we will discuss how data from interview surveys and from monitoring visitor numbers can be combined in order to better analyse the relevance of overcrowding in economic terms. Fourth, we will use our data to discuss the acceptability of different management options (e.g. quotas, user charges) that are currently under consideration for the Mueritz National Park. Here, we are particularly interested in the potential impact on different user groups and the respective effects on economic welfare.

Our general result is that there is a strong need to manage overcrowding in protected areas not only for ecological reasons but for economic and social reasons in parallel. Clearly, canoeists in the Mueritz National Park affect both wild birds and other canoeists. The results provide direct help in the development of management guidelines for canoeing in the national park.