

Visitor Monitoring as a prerequisite of assessments in Natura 2000 sites

Ulrike Pröbstl

BOKU - University of Natural Resources and applied Life Sciences, Institute for landscape development, recreation- and conservation planning, Vienna, Austria
e-mail: ulrike.proebstl@boku.ac.at

Biodiversity is increasingly recognized as an invaluable element of the European heritage. Across Europe, the Natura 2000 ecological network has been established under by the `habitats` directive¹ and the `bird` directive² to further this goal. This network has the task to provide a strong protection for Europe's most valuable wildlife areas. If development plans or projects threaten to deteriorate this network or its favourable conservation status, a special assessment is required (see Art.6 of the Habitat directive).

Therefore even small projects which are frequently undertaken to enhance recreation opportunities should be subjected to such an assessment if a deterioration or disturbance of habitats of community interest could occur.

This paper focuses on such a situation, and will elaborate on how research about recreational users contributed to this special assessment in a NATURA 2000 area in close proximity to an urban centre. More specifically, I will investigate the effects of a proposed pedestrian bridge across a river into a wetland with a few trails. This NATURA 2000 site area is close to the city of Fürstenfeldbruck in the southern part of Upper Bavaria.

It became obvious early during the process that an evaluation of the proposed construction of the bridge needed to go beyond the mandatory requirements of the assessment by answering following questions:

- 1) To determine the current visitor / user volume;
- 2) To estimate the volume of future users after project completion; and
- 3) To determine the effects of the future user volume and patterns on the potentially affected flora and fauna.

Only after the current volume of visitors was established with a sound monitoring method, and future changes of the user volume after project completion was estimated based on interviews with users, was it possible to answer the crucial question of ecological affects associated with the new project.

Our experience shows that visitor monitoring and visitor surveys collect essential background information for assessments concerning possible impacts on NATURA 2000 sites. In the absence of such data it would be impossible to determine the potential effects of changes to the recreational infrastructure and its associated uses on protected areas. Therefore, any curriculum for protected areas planning that strives to accommodate the legal context of the European Community also needs to include recreation research techniques.

¹ the European Council Directive 92/43/EEC of May 21, 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora ("Habitats-Directive")

² the European Council Directive 79/409/EEC of April 2, 1979 on the conservation of wild birds ("Bird-Directive")