

USES, VIEWS AND VALUES OF FORESTS IN TODAY'S FRENCH SOCIETY: HOW NATURE IS TO BE CONSUMED AND YET... BE NATURAL

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Abstract

Structural and sociocultural changes in French society have deeply remodelled the context in which everyday life activities such as forest recreation are to be practiced. While forest managers in urban areas still fear a rising number of visitors, recent findings point out to the opposite trend. Classic socio-demographic determinants of frequentation, age, gender, family situation, income and diploma, are confirmed. Living near to a forest determines higher frequentation. Current frequentation of forests is also statistically correlated to frequentation during childhood. Sociability in all its forms (familial network, friends, associative connections) is a hard contextual variable to explain visits frequency as well as the nature of the activities in forest. It characterises particularly women's uses of forests. Middle class practices tend to generalise, while 'picnicking and idleness' are not a specific trend of the working-class as it used to be in the sixties (Kalaora 1993, Baillon 1980).

From recreational "nature" to "wilderness"

Forests are very popular 'natural' spaces as in France they are easily accessible: 75% of the population lives at less than ½ hour "distance" from a forest open to the public. In this context, growing competition between leisure activities combined with the growing of the middle class and cultural individualism contributes to make forest recreation a choice among other for free time. But values associated to forests become more specific. These changes result in increasing existence value associated to forests, whatever the effective uses of it. Its value as a legacy for the next generations appears spontaneously to all.

Cultural trends may have practical consequences for managers. They could favour, for instance, immaterial and symbolical aspects of forest planning for the public, rather than heavy material ones.

Our presentation is a result of crossed analyses of sociologists and R&D practitioners of the ONF (French Forestry Office). It combines a series of quantitative and qualitative research field findings from 2004 to 2007. The quantitative survey consisted of face-to-face interviews, carried on a sample of 1000 individuals aged 15 and more, representative of the general French population. The research operations in the qualitative phase (5 focus groups, 62 individual interviews in three regions) were designed on the basis of the quantitative findings. Beyond an overview of these investigations, our presentation focuses on findings concerning women and youth, whose values, opinions and practices proved to be significantly different from other's categories.

Key words

Forest recreation, uses of natural spaces, urban lifestyles, wilderness, existence value

Key references

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