

Hidden message: National Parks – practice and perception



The tension between conservation and public enjoyment is key to the tourism strategy behind any area of natural beauty. Many visitors crave scenic splendour and little else; many others consider a range of amenities and facilities important components of the mix. Identifying the optimum balance is crucial to success and survival – not least in the case of Britain's National Parks.

Of these, Exmoor is better known than many of its counterparts, yet the fact is that this public “awareness” does not necessarily translate into visitor numbers. Research by the University of Exeter's Centre for Sport, Leisure and Tourism, in partnership with the Exmoor National Park Authority, aims to enhance understanding of what Exmoor really means for visitors and potential visitors alike, so helping to inform future policy on the marketing and presentation of one of the country's most dramatic landscapes.



Overview

Few would dispute the fame of Exmoor. It is a landscape that has repeatedly been immortalised in literature, on canvas and on film. It has inspired the likes of Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge, the latter of whom wrote two of his most celebrated works, *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*, during walking tours of the area. From Tarka the Otter to the Exmoor Ponies to the ever-elusive Exmoor Beast, its wildlife has been widely celebrated. It boasts several Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and for almost 20 years it has been a designated Environmentally Sensitive Area.

And yet even promotional literature has occasionally referred to Exmoor as England's least-visited National Park. Why? Is this a genuine selling point, an underlining of long-standing notions of a remote and “enchanted” region, or does it represent a self-fulfilling and perhaps even self-defeating prophecy?

There are several understandable reasons for Exmoor's relatively low number of visitors – it is one of the smallest National Parks and, unlike many of its counterparts, is distant from large urban centres and the motorway network – but less obvious explanations demand careful consideration. Research by the University of Exeter is seeking to inform the debate regarding how the present situation has been arrived at, whether it should be changed and, if so, how the necessary transformation might be best achieved. A key aim of the project is to investigate tourists' perceptions of Exmoor. Motivations, expectations and activities are determined by cultural meanings and ideas about place, which are themselves reproduced in textual and visual material. It is hoped that exploring the images, narratives and discourses that have been used to depict Exmoor – and how these have influenced the thoughts of visitors and would-be visitors – could deliver a powerful insight into how Exmoor might be most effectively portrayed as a tourist destination in the years ahead.

KEY FACTS

- Opinion polls suggest awareness of Exmoor as a National Park is high, yet visitor numbers remain relatively low.
- Perceptions of Exmoor are still heavily influenced by notions dating back hundreds of years, including the idea of the “Grand Tour”, the literature of the Romantic movement and the flight from industrialisation.
- Finding a balance between respecting these enduring notions and attracting more visitors is crucial to determining the park's future.
- Research by the University of Exeter aims to help identify this equilibrium by investigating modern-day tourists' perceptions of Exmoor and so guiding marketing strategy.
- This should help realise the park's aim to increase visitor numbers by 25% without damaging the character of the landscape.

www.exeter.ac.uk/slt/ourresearch

Hidden message: National Parks – practice and perception (cont.)



Comments and implications

“What tourist places ‘are’ is defined by what people do there, and this is often shaped by visitors’ expectations as dictated by written text and the spoken word,” says PhD researcher and ESRC CASE studentship award holder Tim Wilkinson.

“The way we engage with these landscapes reproduces activities and ideas that have long histories. For instance, the idea of ‘sightseeing’ developed during the 17th century; the English Romantics of the 18th century expanded the appeal of ‘wild’ and ‘sublime’ settings; and in the 19th century it was the National Parks movement that demanded access to open spaces as industrialisation produced polluted and crowded urban conditions.

It’s in light of this history – hundreds of years of paintings, poems, newspapers, guidebooks – that National Parks have come to be viewed as exemplars of the English countryside, which is often thought of as idyllic, pastoral, rustic, peaceful. For its part, Exmoor has come to be seen – and even promoted – as ‘hidden’, ‘secret’, ‘mystical’, ‘unspoilt’, even ‘enchanted’.

But how do you advertise something that’s ‘hidden’? That’s really a question that goes to the heart of the matter. In other words, how do we address current and potential visitors to Exmoor within the existing narrative models? How do we preserve people’s experiences of the landscape while increasing the number of visitors?”

The research, which will continue until late 2013, will first aim to capture the dominant representations of Exmoor both among visitors and among non-visitors. Through discussion

groups and participant observation, it will then explore how these are reflected in the ways people engage with the park.

“The fundamental organisational tension within any National Park Authority is in the friction between the two main purposes of conservation and public engagement,” says Wilkinson.

“With Exmoor these are tensions within representations of the area as hidden but accessible, as a time-gone-by, a part of the modern world or as regal but for everyone.”

Ultimately, Exmoor is a “brand” that benefits from the ability of the National Park Authority (NPA) and the tourist industry’s work to “package” landscapes, activities and meanings into a product. The research aims to inform that ability – potentially for any National Park.

“The NPA estimates Exmoor can attract 25% more visitors without damaging the character of the landscape,” says Wilkinson. *“By considering how various narratives are received, we aim to help reach that target by informing marketing strategy to increase engagement with certain groups of tourists.”*

“This study should have a real impact on how we develop our approach,” says Dan James, Exmoor National Park Authority’s Sustainable Economy Officer. *“The findings will contribute to our conceptualisation of the visitor market, which is closely related to how we promote Exmoor as a tourist destination.”*

“How do you advertise something that’s ‘hidden’? That’s really a question that goes to the heart of the matter.”

Tim Wilkinson
ESRC Researcher

“The findings will contribute to our conceptualisation of the visitor market, which is closely related to how we promote Exmoor as a tourist destination.”

Dan James
Sustainable Economy Officer,
Exmoor National Park Authority

Further Information:

Tim Wilkinson Email: tjw208@exeter.ac.uk

Web: www.exeter.ac.uk/slt/ourresearch

www.exeter.ac.uk/slt/ourresearch