

Analysing visitor perceptions of the Peak District National Park through ethnicity

The issues

In order for the Peak District National Park (PDNP) to serve the needs of UK citizens in the future it must attract an increasingly varied public whilst conserving both its natural and cultural heritage. However, recent evidence shows that a disproportionately low number of visitors are of an ethnic or visible minority when compared with the British population as a whole (Davies and Flitcroft, 2005).

Social exclusion in the British countryside has received increasing recognition (Agyeman and Spooner, 1997) and barriers to black and minority ethnic (BME) group participation have been identified. One such barrier is the perceptions that BME groups have of the countryside (BEN, 2005). Some have been identified (Table 1), but there is a lack of empirical research into BME group perceptions of the PDNP.

Table 1: Seven Key Barriers to Rural Access and Participation (Morris, 2003)

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Inability to shape strategies for the delivery of rural services2. Lack of interpretive information3. Lack of appropriate activities4. Lack of awareness5. Lack of confidence and negative perceptions of the environment6. Negative feelings associated with previous experience of the countryside7. Financial costs incurred/lack of time |
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There is a need to assess whether negative perceptions of the PDNP are due to informed choice or rather a lack of information, and therefore social exclusion. This study aimed to identify the perceptions that Sheffield's BME communities hold of the PDNP, assess the success of current measures aimed at diversifying participation, and to suggest potential future management plans based on the findings.

Methods

The study employed a multi-method approach, including social surveys, discussion groups and interviews, in order to increase reliability and validity of results. Sheffield was chosen as a case study

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due to its proximity to the PDNP and as it is home to the largest percentage of regular visitors (Davies and Flitcroft, 2005).

The social survey compared perceptions and awareness levels between BME communities that have been targeted by organisations aiming to increase participation (Group 1) and those that have not (Group 2). Diverse sample groups were sought but these were limited to those who were willing to participate. Group 1 (G1) was made up of respondents from Sheffield's Yemeni Community Association (YCA) and a variety of other BME community groups that have worked with the Sheffield Black and Ethnic Environment Network (SHEBEEN). Group 2 (G2) respondents were from the Black Community Agency for Regeneration and Development (BlackCARD) and the Sheffield and District Afro-Caribbean Community Association (SADACCA).

One hundred and fifty surveys were posted to each group to assure significant and representative findings. The questions included a variety of demographic issues, enquiries into recreational activities, and experiences and knowledge of the PDNP and its facilities. Following this, using picture sets, the respondents were asked to rate their feelings towards four different environments – the countryside, botanical gardens, city centre and shopping centre – in terms of beauty, safety, isolation and solitude.

In order to triangulate the data from the surveys discussion groups were carried out with a representative community from both G1 and G2. These were the YCA and the Somali Community Association (SCA) respectively. The groups were facilitated by the researcher and involved discussion of the questions raised by the social survey. The picture sets were put in order of preference regarding the same issues. A participatory mapping exercise was used to highlight perceptions of current facilities and to provide a base for discussion of ideals in the PDNP.

Due to a low response rate to the social surveys a number of interviews were carried out with individuals knowledgeable in the topic at hand. The first interviewee was Dr Mark Reed, an expert in participatory processes and a lecturer at the University of Leeds. The other three, all employed by the Peak District National Park Authority, were; Heather Hunt, a freelance environmental trainer employed as an education visits leader; Rachael Kerr, works in education services and is also sub-contracted to Moors for the Future (MFTF); and Shirley Allen-Jackson, who also works for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). The interviewees were asked questions regarding their experiences of BME perceptions of the countryside, why they exist and how negative ones might be altered.

Key findings

The perceptions uncovered by this research fall into three main categories:

1. Access

- G2 participants travel out of the city for recreational purposes significantly less frequently than G1 participants.
- 65% of G1 had visited the PDNP compared to 25% of G2
- G2 rated the moors as their worst perceived environment due to its isolation.
- Members of both groups stated lack of time as a reason for not visiting the PDNP.
- Interviewees stated that perceptions of poor access are well-founded.

2. Facilities and information

- 60% of G1 participants felt the PDNP offered the facilities they would like it to while 70% of G2 didn't feel aware of what was on offer in the first place.
- G1 participants held more positive perceptions of Park facilities than G2.
- Countryside is sometimes associated with a poorer quality of life by older BME communities but younger individuals see it as an escape from urban stresses.
- Refugees and asylum seekers tend to hold more positive perceptions than other BME groups, possibly because their community groups are more organised and funded.
- Suggestions for improved facilities commonly revolved around playgrounds for children and family activity centres.
- Natural beauty and tranquillity were the most commonly cited positive perceptions of the PDNP. Both G1 and G2 participants felt that facilities must emphasise this.

3. Discrimination

- Fears of discrimination include language and clothing differences.
- Some interviewees reported witnessing bigoted statements and racist attitudes.
- The PDNP is commonly viewed as a 'white middle class domain' and survey respondents perceived themselves as less welcome in the countryside than any of the other environments presented to them.
- A lack of black faces in publicity reinforces the feeling of being unwelcome.
- BME communities feel omitted from the history of the British countryside and therefore a lacking involvement in its heritage and future.

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The comparison of G1 and G2 data, along with the comments of interviewees, were used to assess levels of success of current measures in improving BME perceptions of the countryside.

1. Signs of success

- Those that have benefited from the attention of current measures (G1) held more positive perceptions of the countryside in general.
- G1 participants visit the PDNP significantly more frequently than G2 participants.
- Visiting the countryside was a top recreational activity for G1 whereas G2 survey respondents did not highlight this activity once.
- Some G2 respondents held positive perceptions due to information they had received from family and friends.
- Organised events, such as walking groups, proved to be popular and effective.

2. Indications of shortcomings

- The differences in awareness levels and perceptions between G1 and G2 participants highlight the limited reach of current measures. Further to this no one at the SCA had heard of SHEBEEN or BEN.
- Many respondents remain unaware of what the Park offers them, particularly in G2.
- Some respondents commented that current information is not only limited but also displayed poorly and in the wrong places.
- Alternative publicity for BME groups and a lack of black faces in general literature increase perceptions of discrimination. This is reinforced through exclusion from rural management and countryside heritage.

It is important to recognise that not all individuals perceive the countryside as a recreational facility. This does not however mean that they lack knowledge and respect for it. Non-participation cannot therefore be assumed as a sign of management failures.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this research highlight a number of areas where new or extended measures could be taken to change negative perceptions of the PDNP including:

- Increasing the provision of frequent and affordable transport with associated information (this might include passes or cheap day returns from the city centre)

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- Increasing organised group visits for BME communities (including increased diversity of activities, perhaps targeting those favoured by non-participants such as creative arts and reading)
- Increasing awareness of the facilities and activities available in the Park (whilst considering children's park facilities where appropriate)
- Diversification of advertising media including local radio and stronger personal links between the Park authorities and BME community groups
- Encouraging those that visit and enjoy the Park to share their pleasure with those in the community through discussion and presentation
- Re-thinking of publication and literature aimed at increasing BME participation

Negative perceptions of the PDNP generally regard a lack of awareness of access, information and facilities. Further negative perceptions regarded discrimination against BME communities, particularly within information and from the white majority visitor. Such perceptions were more common amongst those not targeted by current measures to increase BME group participation, suggesting that although the reach is limited, there has been some success with these measures. There is a clear affinity with the countryside amongst many BME communities suggesting that further measures are vital in order to expel social exclusion from the PDNP. The study has exposed an unfulfilled desire to participate and highlighted potential new or extended measures for the future. Despite numerable limitations it is possible to apply these findings to the wider scale of UK rural management, where the consideration of an increasingly multi-cultural population's perceptions will be ever more necessary into the future.