

Estimating visitor and visit numbers to woodlands

This project set out to identify and review the methods and tools that are used by forest managers and practitioners to estimate visitor and visit numbers to woodlands. This builds on guidance on visitor monitoring produced by the Forestry Commission. The work was undertaken in 2010 and outlines the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches for managers and staff. The report provides some examples of studies that sought to estimate visitor and visit numbers, alongside other relevant data. Staff able to make informed choices should select methods based on their knowledge of a given site and the type of visitors.



Background

The United Kingdom government and the devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland have each developed forest strategies and these identify increases in woodland use as principal aims, thereby establishing increases in visit and visitor numbers as key measures of performance. Policy makers often need accurate estimates of numbers so that they can highlight how many people use and enjoy woodlands and can show where potential future investment might be needed. Knowing visitor and visit numbers is important for woodland managers as predicting times of heavy use can inform appropriate levels of staff and resource deployment. Following recent changes in equality and diversity legislation, there is an increasing drive not just to obtain estimates of visit and visitor numbers, but also to analyse the social make-up of those numbers.

Objectives

The objectives of the work were to:

- Identify the range of methods and tools that have been used to estimate visitor and visit numbers.
- Outline the advantages and disadvantages of the different methods.
- Provide examples of approaches taken to estimate and monitor numbers.

Methods

Literature and web searches were undertaken to identify:

- Existing methods and tools used to estimate visitor and visit numbers to woodlands, including surveys, operational data gathered at specific sites, manual observations, and vehicle and people counters.
- Guidance on the use of the various methods and tools.
- Existing research to illustrate how some of the methods and tools have been selected and used.

Findings

It is important to highlight the distinction between visitor, visit, and total visit numbers. Visitor numbers focus on how many individuals visit a woodland over a given time period, whilst visit numbers is used in this study to mean how frequently they visit e.g. everyday, every week etc. The total number of visits is a combination of visitor numbers and the frequency of visits within a given time period. Surveys, observation and counters can be used to estimate these numbers. Surveys can be undertaken at specific woodland sites with site users. It is important to choose an appropriate sampling strategy. For site surveys for example decisions will need to be made about where in the forest to collect data, at what times of day and on which days of the week. Surveys can also be undertaken at a population level, nationally, regionally or within site 'catchments' (the area within a given distance of a particular site). Population and catchment surveys will include people who use woodlands as well as those who do not. As such, they can be important in gaining an understanding of the barriers that prevent people from accessing woodlands. There are a range of counters available, such as electronic and mechanical counting devices. Manual counting methods can also be applied by site staff or contractors. Most modern electronic devices have an integrated data collection unit that saves and sorts the data. These data collectors can be programmed with start times and measurement intervals spanning periods relevant to a specific site e.g. days, hours or minutes. Data can often be read from the counter or transferred to a computer. New sites, or those where significant developments have recently taken place may need more frequent monitoring than older, more stable sites where change is more gradual.

Recommendations

This research highlights the fact that there is no perfect method for measuring visitor and visit numbers – all methods can only provide estimates. We draw attention to some of the difficulties and challenges of estimating visitor and visit numbers and suggest that:

- Visitor monitoring should form part of a wider strategy to understand how people use, engage with, and benefit from a given site.
- The selection of methods should involve operational staff and site managers who can make informed choices based on their knowledge of a given site, its visitors and the local context.
- The importance of having clear objectives and of knowing how any data that are collected can be used to support delivery against national, regional or local aims and objectives.
- Links to appropriate resources (e.g. toolkits, example questionnaires and sampling strategies) can aid practitioners and forest managers in making decisions about what is useful for their area or site and what resources they may need to estimate numbers.

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Funding/Support

This work was funded by the Forestry Commission. Advice was received from the Forestry Commission's Economics and Statistics Group.

Reports and Publications

O'Brien, L. and Morris, J. 2010. Estimating visitor and visit numbers to woodlands

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-8CZJBE>