



Direct observation

Direct observation is a means of gaining information on the ways that people use the forest or woodland. This may simply be watching what people are doing in a certain part of the forest or woodland location. In general, the observer should be noting events, processes and relationships that are important to some aspect of the forest or woodland's use. It is a simple technique, but may provide useful additional data to that gathered by other means.

Direct observation is appropriate in the following conditions:

- **When you want direct information.**
For example: using a visitor facility to experience it as a customer.
- **When you are trying to understand an on-going behaviour, process, unfolding situation or event.**
For example: observing visitors' movements on arrival at a visitor centre.
- **When there is physical evidence, products or outcomes that can be readily seen.**
For example: tracks and litter made by visitors indicating types and extent of woodland use and abuse (horse prints, cycle tracks, erosion).
- **When written or other data collection procedures seem inappropriate.**
For example: observing participants dynamics, questions raised and level of participation in a planning meeting.

To be useful observations need to be recorded and this can be done through one or more of the following means:

- **Observation guides:** printed forms that provide space for recording observations.
- **Recording sheets or checklists:** printed forms to record observations as in a YES/NO option or on a rating scale to indicate extent or quality of something.
- **Field notes:** recording observations in a narrative, descriptive style as you notice or hear something or import.
- **Pictures:** photographs and videotapes.

Resources and requirements

Skills

- Observer(s) need the ability to select relevant and important factors in relation to different forest or woodland user groups.
- 'Seeing' and 'listening' are key skills to observation.

Level of engagement

INFORMING:

CONSULTING: ★

INVOLVING:

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- Direct observation is easy to carry out.
- It provides the opportunity to document activities, behaviour and physical aspects without having to depend on peoples' willingness and ability to respond to questions.
- It is a useful technique for gathering information on the various uses (including conflicting uses) of an area.
- Minimal advanced preparations are needed.
- The technique works well in places where forests or woodlands are actively used by the public.

Weaknesses

- The technique is not useful in distributing information or creating interaction.
- It can be a rather limited information source, and should be used in connection with other techniques of information gathering.
- The ethics and morality of covert observation must always be considered.

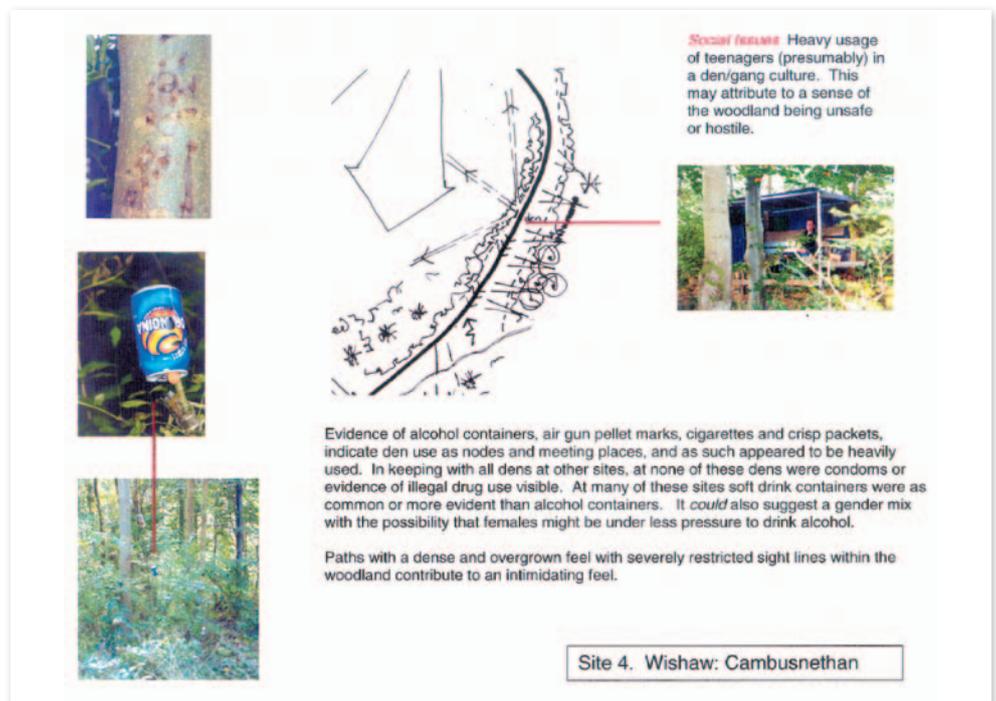
Time

- The amount of time required depends, among other factors, on the size of the forest or woodland area and the intensities of the different types of use. Valuable information can be reached in a relatively short time.

Useful sources of information

Books

- Collecting Evaluation Data: Direct Observation. E. Taylor-Powell and S. Steele. Co-operative extension publication. The University of Wisconsin. www1.uwex.edu



An example of field observation notes on public use of a woodland near Wishaw (Open space, Edinburgh College of Art).

This toolbox is designed to assist Forestry Commission staff when they are considering which tools they could use to involve the public in the forest and woodland planning process. For more information please visit the website at: www.forestry.gov.uk/toolbox