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# The Zen of driving a motorcycle through a national park: Reconciling group-oriented with practice-oriented research approaches (working paper)

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## Abstract

Hikers in the Swiss National Park often complain about noise from motorcycles. The park management consequently seeks to mitigate conflicts that are imminent between hikers and motor-bikers. Management-oriented research in protected areas often focuses on specific groups of tourists. The identification of such actor groups and their behaviour is used to improve the supply of goods and services, to minimize negative impacts and conflicts, and to create satisfying experiences. While this actor- or group-oriented approach seems to be useful for many issues, it has the disadvantage of nailing down individual tourists to (allegedly) behaving according to certain group-specific characteristics (i.e. "motorcyclists create noise"). In contrast, practice-oriented approaches rather focus on certain tourist or park visitor practices. This allows for a more flexible approach taking into account that people act differently in different contexts and not (always) according to a pre-defined group's profile. Moreover, issues such as noise created by the practice of motorcycling are pinpointed to the practice and not to the characteristics of a person or group. Consequently, solutions to conflicts can be sought with reflecting on practices rather than on specific visitor groups. Using examples of our own (group- *and* practice-oriented) research in PAs the paper discusses advantages and limitations of both approaches and explores ways how they can be fruitfully combined.



## Keywords

Tourist groups, practice, protected area, Switzerland, Malaysia


## Introduction

Many protected areas (PAs) are tourist attractions or situated in an area that is attractive for tourists. They offer a variety of activities and can be visited for shorter or longer visits. Tourists can both be a blessing and a curse for the management of PAs. With their spending they provide means for protection and contribute to regional development and as (satisfied) visitors they serve as multipliers of the idea of nature conservation and sustainable development etc. But they also have negative impacts on PAs' and their environment's ecosystems and with increasing numbers they also cause grievances among themselves (i.e. by crowding). Hence, for park managements it is interesting and important to know whether and how tourist behaviour varies. Therefore, management-oriented research in PAs often focuses on specific groups of tourists. Knowing how and why specific groups behave like they do helps to improve services and to avoid unwanted effects caused by tourists (i.e. ARNBERGER et al. 2010; KIM 2013). Visitor groups to PAs are identified by their social background such as civil status, gender, age (e.g. for golden agers see TRACHSEL & BACKHAUS 2011), nationality (i.e. PRENTICE 2004; BACKHAUS 2005) by their activities (i.e. hikers (e.g. FARÍAS TORBIDONI 2011), bikers (e.g. HEER et al. 2003), motorcyclists (e.g. JAUSS 2012; JAUSS & BACKHAUS under review), or by their attitude (i.e. LOHAS, Lifestyle of health and sustainability; e.g. LUTHE et al. 2012), hedonists, recreational generalists (e.g. RYAN & STERLING 2001) etc. To each of these groups distinct attributes are assigned (i.e. demands, needs, motivation, impact, spending behaviour) that consequently can be dealt with. This group-oriented approach has its advantages. It compartmentalizes and focuses issues on few causal factors that can be handled individually and with great precision. Subsequently problems can be mitigated and services will be provided accordingly. However, this approach has the disadvantage of nailing down individuals to behaving according to the group they have been assigned to. It is therefore rather rigid and not very context-sensitive.

In contrast practice-oriented approaches (i.e. SCHATZKI 2002) rather focus on certain practices that occur in relation to contexts such as a PA. Practices and performances furthermore include bodily movements as well as emotions (CROUCH 2004). This allows for a more flexible approach taking into account that practices may differ between contexts and that they do not (always) occur according to a pre-defined group's profile. Moreover, issues such as noise created by the practice of motorcycling are pinpointed to the practice and not to the characteristics of a person or group. Consequently, solutions to conflicts can be sought with reflecting on certain practices (i.e. "cruising vs. racing" or "hiking vs. biking"), rather than on specific visitor groups. Consequently, mitigation processes rather focus on changing practices than on changing people.

Drawing on examples of our research in PAs of Switzerland and Malaysia the paper discusses advantages and limitations of both the group-oriented and the practice-oriented approaches and explores settings in which they can be fruitfully combined.

## Group-orientation vs. practice-orientation

The classification of people into groups is a common aspect of every-day life. People compartmentalise their social environment into entities that can be handled easier. Individuals who share certain attributes are – often unconsciously – put together in more or less clearly defined groups. In tourism, groups are often formed according to gender, age, activity, lifestyle or habitus. Assuming that the individuals sharing such attributes also share their behaviour (which consequently is distinctly different from members of other groups), it also makes sense to draw on such every-day experiences of grouping when doing research in tourism. Moreover, if a PA's management wants to ascertain which visitors like what and what not, who is a potential threat to the environment, and who a multiplier of green ideas, it needs to make groups. Groups can be formed *ex ante* based on theoretical assumptions or as a result of an empirical study (i.e. observation, survey). For a PA's management it is good to know whether a specific group is large or not and whether its needs or impacts are a challenge, threat or easily met.

While being useful, this approach has its limits when it comes to address the individual and his/her behaviour and what sense he/she makes of what he/she does (CROUCH 2004). Indeed it is important to know what sense people make of their and others' doings and sayings, if problematic or unwanted developments shall be changed for the better. For this, knowledge about practices can be helpful. According to SCHATZKI (2002) practices can be conceived as an organized nexus of actions, they comprise occasional, rare, and novel doings or sayings. "Participating in a practice is operating in an arena where certain actions and ends are prescribed, correct, or acceptable on certain occasions" (ibid). A person who is practising "hiking through a PA" refers to social customs such as wearing a certain type of boots and clothes, carrying a knapsack (and a Swiss Army knife), reading a map or signs indicating a path. The person, moreover, moves in certain measured pace and more or less clear direction and takes in his/her surroundings in a way that is different from going to work. And hiking is embedded in a context that involves certain types of landscapes and physical infrastructure (i.e. paths, signs, bridges), and an affinity to tourism or leisure. The practice of hiking is also intelligible by others as such if they have learned about its meaning. It is not fixed and allows for a variety of forms and interpretations and still is recognized as hiking. The same doing (or saying) can be part of several practices. Hence, besides hiking, walking through a PA can also be part of the practice of bird watching, exercising in order to lose weight, recreation, taking pictures etc. A practice can be at the same time multifaceted and highly complex and easily intelligible as something distinctive what people do. A practice can be identified and described by observing people. However, the sense people make of it, can best be accessed by talking to them.

If certain practices are in conflict with each other, this of course also involves individuals. However, not certain characteristics of a person are responsible for a conflict in the first place but the practices and the way they are performed and perceived. I do not want to say that practices are independent from the people who are performing them, but people's attributes are not in a causal relation to practices. Consequently, if problems arise from certain practices it is not the characteristics of people that have to be addressed but the practices themselves, the meaning that is connected to them, the sense they make for people who are engaged in them, and alternative practices with less impact.

In the following chapters a few examples shall illustrate the uses of and differences between both approaches to tourism research.

<u>1 Adventure and picnics in Malaysian national parks</u>

Malaysia protects 5% of its surface area and advertises it as nature destination for tourism (BACKHAUS 2005). A former slogan of Tourism Malaysia goes "Malaysia nature*a*lly". The national parks are mostly accessible for tourism and also have infrastructure to accommodate visitors. The majority of them is covered by tropical rainforest. While tropical rainforests have been attractive for Western tourists for a while – they are regarded as exotic, teeming with wildlife and moreover they are deemed as threatened. In Malaysia, however, their attractiveness for domestic tourists is relatively new. For one thing not long ago farmers had to wrest agricultural land from forests in which animals lurked that either destroyed crops or were dangerous to people. Moreover, rainforests also were (and are) regarded a source for valuable timber that can be exploited and sold. Only since recently a growing urban middle class gets sensitised to environmental questions and regards nature conservation as important. Consequently, this group starts to regard Malaysian national parks as a part of their heritage, which they also like to visit. One of the questions in my research on the political ecology of Malaysian national parks (cf. BACKHAUS 2008) was whether there is a difference between overseas and domestic tourists. Hence, the focus was on groups (the group of the overseas or Western tourists was subsequently divided into individual and group tourists; Malaysians almost all are group tourists, at least they were at that time). The experts from the realms of tourism and nature conservation that have been interviewed made this distinction as well. The results show that there is indeed a difference. Western tourists rather want to silently contemplate landmarks, birds or the forest itself, while domestic visitors tend to seek fun, action, and good group experiences. The former complain about crowding, not seeing animals, and inadequate accommodation, the latter about too few attractions such as river rafting or fishing spots (fishing is allowed in most Malaysian national parks) and places to have a picnic or barbeque. The Westerners basically seek adventures in a foreign and exotic context, the Malaysians a pleasant group activity. The PAs have been established for the protection of nature and often tourism came only into existence when accommodation used for researchers was converted to host tourists and when accessibility was improved. Therefore, most PAs do not have the infrastructure for leisurely group activities.

In this case it made sense to concentrate on a group approach in order to identify basic needs of Western and domestic tourists that obviously differ. A consequence of these results could be that park managements (as some already do) resort to treat foreign visitors differently from domestic visitors, which is in most cases useful and productive. However, the demands of individuals that are grouped here can change. For instance there is a growing number of Malaysians who become members of NGOs or societies concerned with nature (i.e. bird watchers, insect aficionados) and subsequently have different needs. Therefore, it is useful to concentrate on practices such as bird watching, barbecueing, or hiking in order to mitigate problems and to better manage visitors and their needs in the future.

2 The Zen of driving a motorcycle through a national park

Motorcyclists driving through or near PAs are often perceived negatively by park visitors and the park management. Their pastime is regarded as a threat to the environment. Hence, they are seen as people who unnecessarily pollute the air, make noise and jeopardize other people by reckless driving. Visitors to the Swiss National Park complain most about noise caused by motorcycles; that is if they have anything to complain (LOZZA 2009). The Ofenpassstrasse that cuts through the park is an important connection to Italy. Moreover, motorcyclists (but also bicyclists) regard it as a fine curvy road in a stunning landscape that leads to other passes such as the Stilfserjoch or the Umbrail. In our study on motorcyclists' perception of the Swiss National Park and their own practices of driving through it (JAUSS & BACKHAUS, under review), we focused on this denigrated group. It is a fact that engine noise from larger motorcycles is perceived as being louder than a car's (which it objectively – measured in decibels db(A) – is only above 100 km/h) because of its frequency pattern. Moreover, lower frequencies carry further (especially in mountainous areas), and lastly motorcycle engines emit more of these lower frequencies because they cannot be muffled as well as a car engine (HEUTSCHI 2010).

The results of our study show that motorcyclists are a heterogeneous group with different notions about driving and nature conservation. Most of the older motorcyclists relish the ride through the pine-scented valley, enjoy the measuredly released power of their vehicles, the precise shifting of gears and their engine's subtle drone. Hence the mountain pass road is a perfect site to perform what motorcycling is all about. Most of them ride sturdy touring motorcycles, fewer large cruisers or racing machines. Almost all claim to adhere to traffic laws but at the same time concede to speed outside inhabited areas "when it is safe". Many have already visited the national park before. However, they did at that time not use their motorcycles to access the park, they came by car or by public transport. Hence, it became clear that motorcyclists are not a group with clearly drawn characteristics and a distinct lifestyle. Practicing motorcycling can be part of an individual's lifestyle but it rarely is a lifestyle in itself.

We could establish that motorcycling at the specific site of a mountain pass leading through the Swiss National Park is a practice with different characteristics (i.e. cruising, racing, alone, in groups, with low or high engine rounds etc.). This practice is embedded in contexts that reach further than the driving, such as traffic controls (people with inadequate or bored-up mufflers are fined), driving schools, technical aspects of motorcycles, or being regarded as a nuisance by people who do not use a motorcycle. Mitigation processes aiming at reducing noise and speed of motorcyclists better address aspects of these practices and their context that could or should be changed than on criticising a certain lifestyle and the group that is identified with it.

## Conclusion

Both the group approach and the practice approach have their advantages. With focusing on groups distinct characteristics of individuals who are visiting PAs can be established or put in relation to the specific context of conservation areas. Moreover, distinguishing groups makes it easier to directly address individuals as they can easily be identified by their characteristics. A danger of this approach may be that it is not very flexible and reproduces clichés (i.e. the difference between Western and Malaysian tourists or between motorcyclists and hikers) that consequently are cemented. The group approach seeks closure whereas the practice approach is more open to subtle changes in how practices are enacted. A combination of both approaches can make sense and the sequence can go in both directions. Approaching first a topic by defining groups narrows down the range of potential stakeholders and allows for focusing on the (grouped) people's issues, needs, and problems. Subsequently, a focus on certain practices makes it possible to see what is actually done, how so and what sense it makes to people. The other way round, first establishing practices and then distinguishing between groups that are involved in these practices can yield interesting results too. In doing so one needs to be careful not to establish causal relationships between a group member's characteristics and certain practices. Research agendas that can combine these two approaches can (in my opinion) result in interesting outcomes.

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