Digital Data and Outdoor Recreation: research, tools and applications

Welcome

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https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/orrg/

Good morning - wonderful to see so many of you here today. My name is Lynn Crowe and I am Professor of Environmental Management here at Sheffield Hallam. I believe we have around 70 delegates signed up today. And so many old friends. Several of you will know that Sheffield Hallam University used to manage the old Countryside Recreation Network - and we remain committed supporters of its work. So it's great to see the Outdoor Recreation Network still flourishing. Its main aims - to share good practice and disseminate research findings right across the sector - remain as important as ever - perhaps even more important in these challenging times?

I'm also delighted that we could help the ORN host this event today. Several of us at Sheffield Hallam recently established the Outdoor Recreation Research Group - really to formalise the various working relationships we've had for many years across faculties and across different disciplines. We bring together economists, social scientists, ecologists, engineers and behavioural change and tourism experts - all with a focus on encouraging more people to play outdoors more often – and the important economic, environmental and social issues underpinning that.

The ORN have asked me to officially open the event - and also to help edit the journal which will follow after today. Given the focus of today's seminar, this will make some of my ex-students chuckle somewhat - as they know very well the level of engagement I personally have with digital technology of any sort. But perhaps that actually helps - if I can embrace new uses of IT and digital data - then I promise you, anyone can.

We are all aware of the huge growth in the use of technology - particularly in younger age groups.
OFCOM 2015 data suggests that….

66% of adults own a Smartphone in UK
90% of 16-24 age group own a smartphone
50% of 55-64 age group own a smartphone
Smartphone average daily usage: adults 126 mins including 65 mins internet use

(OFCOM Communications Market Report - http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/communications-market-reports/cmr15/

So technology is an integral part of people's (particularly young people's) lives. We now talk about `technology engrained lifestyles`. People expect to have access to technology in all environments - and being 'connected' and being able to share experiences are important aspects of modern life.
Perhaps even more importantly - young people really do not separate online and offline activities (as anyone who has ever sat down to dinner with teenagers will be aware).

The use of technology to enter, engage and experience the outdoors is now common place.

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| Technology engrained lifestyles

- Over 70% of outdoors participants source their information from the internet.

- Outdoor participants aged 18-24 years use technology to engage in outdoor recreation the most. 43% of these participants use Smart phones, accessing a wide range of information: e.g. maps/directions; opening times; ticket prices; places to eat; reviews.

- Older people's access to and use of the internet is increasing (but is currently still likely to be dominated by practical activities rather than social ones).

- Google is usually the first port of call for either very general searches or to find very specific types of activity, holiday or location.

- Engagement in specialist publications have limited reach, the National Trust magazine has the largest readership at 8% of all participants. 67% don't read any specialist publications.

(Commercial Consumer Data Source, 2014)

These Technology engrained lifestyles are seen in some of these facts from the Commercial Consumer Data Source(2014):

• Over 70% of outdoors participants source information on their sport/activity from the internet.
• Outdoor participants aged 18-24 years use technology to engage in outdoor recreation the most. 43% of these participants use Smart phones, accessing a wide range of information: maps/directions; opening times; ticket prices; places to eat; reviews/recommendations.
• Older people's access to and use of the internet is increasing, but is currently still likely to be dominated by practical activities rather than social ones.
• Google is usually the first port of call for either very general searches or to find very specific type of activity, holiday or location.
• Engagement in specialist publications have limited reach, the National Trust magazine has the largest readership at 8% of all participants. 67% don't read any specialist publications.
(Commercial Consumer Data Source, 2014, cited in OIA & Sport England, 2015).

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Is this a problem?

- Many of us find this alarming - we align the apparently growing disengagement of young people from the natural environment with their increasing use of technology.

- Stephen Moss (Natural Childhood, 2012) comments on `children's electronic addictions`:

- On average, Britain's children watch around 2½ hours of TV every day. Despite the rival attractions of the internet, this is up by 12% since 2007.

- British children are also spending more than 20 hours a week online, mostly on social networking sites.

- Is the growth of virtual, as opposed to reality-based, play having a profound effect on children's lives; the extinction of experience'. (Pyle, 2003, Louv, 2008).

So we know this is happening - and there is little we can do to influence any of these trends. But many of us (and it might be a generational thing of course) find this alarming of course - we align the apparently growing disengagement of young people from the natural environment with their increasing use of technology and `screen time`.

Stephen Moss in his 2012 report on Natural Childhood, commissioned by the National Trust, commented on `children's electronic addictions`:

On average, Britain's children watch more than 17 hours of television a week: that's almost two-and-a-half hours per day, every single day of the year. Despite the rival attractions of the Internet, this is up by 12% since 2007.7.

British children are also spending more than 20 hours a week online, mostly on social networking sites.

The growth of virtual, as opposed to reality-based, play is, many researcher believe, having a profound effect on children's lives; indeed, it has been called 'the extinction of experience'. (Pyle, 2003). I'm sure many of you will have read Richard Louv's "Last Child in the Woods" with increasing dismay and alarm.

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Or is the growth of technology in our lives an opportunity rather than a problem?

- Enabling greater access to outdoor activities and experiences?

- Enhancing visitor and user experience - not just through interpretation and information provision - but also through self generated monitoring and perhaps a deeper level of engagement.

- Allowing providers to find out more about our target markets - who they are and what they are doing.

- Allowing providers to find out more about how users are engaging in their chosen outdoor activities and their potential impacts, to aid improved management.

Sharing good practice and the latest research in all these areas.

But what if the use of digital technology is not a problem - but rather an opportunity? And what if those of us with more of a `traditional` (I'm trying to avoid the use of the word `old`) view of technology are missing the added value which the use of technology can bring?

It's probably no surprise that many of the early users of this technology have come from the adventure sports, such as mountain biking. I think that might tell us something about the demographics of that recreation sector. And also from within the interpretation field - where the most innovative designers have always embraced modern, creative solutions to enhancing visitor experiences.

So today, we can share the application of these modern technologies - and we will be focusing on the following....

- Enabling greater access to outdoor activities and experiences - breaking down barriers;
- enhancing the visitor and user experience - not just through interpretation and information provision, but also through self-motivation and
- allowing providers to find out who our users are and what they are doing - how they are engaging in their chosen outdoor activities and potential impacts, to aid future management and enhance those experiences.

The OIA and Sport England's "Getting Active Outdoors" report suggests that the outdoor industry is steeped in tradition and nostalgia, and that many ordinary people have misguided pre-conceptions of an industry based on ascents of Everest at one of the spectrum, and their own residential school trips as a teenager; with very little in between.

Technology and marketing have brought access to adventures that used to happen 'over the hills and far away' into our own sitting rooms. Increased leisure time, increasingly accessible travel, and the internet have brought access to the Outdoors closer and quicker than ever before.
Hence, alongside the traditional provision, the modern view of the outdoor sector is very different to the traditional stereotypes, e.g. Sheffield - the outdoor city - activities this last weekend
Technology and marketing have brought access to adventures that used to happen 'over the hills and far away' into our own sitting rooms.

Just to show we are all embracing new technology today - if you feel like sharing your thoughts via social media do tweet - @ORN_official.

Some challenges and some questions

- Is the use of mobile information and communications technology, the next great leap forward in encouraging more people to participate in responsible outdoor recreation?

- How we can ensure the use of this technology adds real value - rather than technology for technology's sake.

- For those who do wish to use their smartphones for outdoor recreation, what are the ingredients that make for a compelling user experience, and a useful set of Apps? And what are the barriers?

- Is there a danger of being trapped in a virtual world, and forgetting that we went out for a walk or ride in the real world? Should we be keeping our eyes on the trail ahead and the landscape around us, rather than on the screen of our smartphones?

Finally - I have some questions and challenges which I will personally be seeking out across the day's presentations -

- Is the use of mobile Information and communications technology, the next great leap forward in encouraging more people to participate in responsible outdoor recreation?
- How can we ensure the use of this technology adds real value?
- For those who might be tempted to use their smartphones for outdoor recreation, what are the ingredients that would make for a compelling user experience, and a useful set of Apps? And what would put people off using such technology?
- Or should we all be keeping our eyes on the trail ahead and the landscape around us, rather than on the screen of our smartphones? Is there a danger of being trapped in a virtual world, and forgetting that we went out for a walk or ride in the real world?

The answers to these questions can help not just IT enthusiasts, App designers and their potential customers, but tourism, land management, and conservation organisations too.

References

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