The importance of user’s perception for beach management

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ABSTRACT


Many beach typologies exist. In this paper, beaches are differentiated into four main classes: urban, semi-urban, rural and remote. One hundred and forty beach user surveys were carried out in Portugal and 142 in Wales for the four different beach types; respectively four in SW Portugal (Vasco da Gama, São Torpes, Grande de Porto Covo and Ilha do Pessegueiro) and four (Coney beach, Newton, Southern Down, and Llangennith) in South Wales, UK during June and September 2007. For all eight beaches, results suggested that beach users give particular importance to three aspects: litter (97% in Portugal, 74% in Wales), water quality (95% in Portugal and 60% in Wales) and safety (81% in Portugal and 59% in Wales). On remote beaches, users considered the scenic aspect to be most important whilst in urban beaches, facilities and car parking aspects were deemed to be the prime factors, suggesting that correct and effective beach management planning should always take cognisance of beach typology.

ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS: Beach Perception, Beach Aspects, Beach Management

INTRODUCTION

Beaches are important recreational and leisure areas, attracting an increasingly larger number of users worldwide. Their importance as an economic driver is highly significant for many countries. According to PIQUERAS (2005), a mere 0.001% of the beach area generates more than 10% of the Spanish GDP, every year. The entities responsible for managing these areas are therefore urged to further raise their commitment towards quality seaside tourism, by promoting the specific beach features in light of their users’ current and future requirements, a goal that cannot be fully met without understanding the users’ preferences and expectations.

Portugal and Wales, UK, provide outstanding conditions for tourism, largely due to their extensive coastlines. Yet, the realities of both countries are substantially different. In Portugal, beaches are mostly valued for the role they play in seaside tourism related activities while in Wales, where the development of that particular type of tourism is strongly restrained by the climate, natural features, such as the surrounding scenery, tend to be more highly valued.

Presently, the beach evaluation process entails construction of models designed to estimate a certain quality level, although they are not necessarily based on many aspects considered by the users. The following are examples of some of the best known models: Costa Rica’s Rating System, 1989 (CAGLIABA and RENNE, 2005); Williams et al., (WILLIAMS et al. 1993); Leatherman’s Beach Rating Scheme (LEATHERMAN, 1996) and the Bathing Area Registration and Evaluation – BARE (MICALLEF and WILLIAMS, 2004). All of them show that the same five aspects are considered by users to be very important aspects in a beach: Safety, Water Quality, Facilities, Scenery and Litter (MICALLEF and WILLIAMS 2004). An assertion this paper will also attempt to confirm.

Another commonly used beach evaluation strategy is the granting of awards, such as the European Blue Flag, the Gold Quality Awards, the Accessible Beach classification, the Healthy Beaches Campaign and the Seaside Award. These tend to be more significantly perceived by the general public. However, most of them take into account only a limited number of predefined criteria when evaluating the quality level of a given beach (VAZ, 2008).

Based on these assumptions, a research project was launched with the aim of acquiring information about the aspects considered important by the beach users, having the users’ perception as a reference.

For that purpose, the project included eight beaches (four Portuguese and four Welsh beaches – Figures 1 and 2) of different typologies and with different user profiles. An additional goal was set to characterise the user profile of each particular beach, regarding the gender, age and origin of typical users.

METHODS

In order to determine the beach typology, an experimental model was applied that evaluates beaches according to their level of artificialization.

The model was created based on the typologies defined in the POOC - Planos de Ordenamento da Orla Costeira de Portugal [Portuguese Coastal Zone Management Plan] (VAZ 2008) and in the BARE model, and comprises seven basic factors: surrounding
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Each of seven factors was given a score between one and four, ranging from urban and most modified (1), to remote and least modified (4). The beaches were scored and weighed, and the following typologies were defined (VAZ, 2008):

- Urban beaches have a markedly urban landscape, located next to major urban constructions, adjacent to marinas and/or fishing ports. These beaches are generally visited by a high number of users during the entire bathing season, are provided with a full range of beach equipments, and present heavy traffic due to intense use.
- Semi-urban beaches are located in urban areas or in their surroundings, with a large number of users during the bathing season. A full range of beach equipments is available, and car parking is suitable to the average number of users;
- Rural beaches, includes those set in a rural environment, where the nearest urban centre is small, usually a small town or a village. Natural features generally outnumber manmade elements. These beaches offer organised unpaved car parking, have few access roadways and a limited range of beach equipments, including: bar, WC, beach chairs, parasols and lifeguards during the bathing season;
- Remote beaches are set on a natural environment, with scarcely any trace of human intervention in nearby areas and are almost always associated with a basic range of beach equipments, such as bar/restaurant, WC and lifeguard during the bathing season. Parking is limited and typical users’ value quietness and scenery over facilities and equipments.

Once beaches had been defined for their typology, users were then directly addressed. This was the method selected for collecting data and implied carrying out 282 user surveys (140 in Portugal and 142 in Wales), similarly distributed by the beaches.

The choice was made to use both open and closed questions, and the questionnaire proved to take longer than expected to complete. Nevertheless, in our opinion, this was by far the most suitable method and, at the same time, the one that could better reflect users’ perception about the aspects they valued most in a beach.

In Portugal, the study area defined was the Municipality of Sines, in the coastal region of Alentejo, where the following beaches were selected: Vasco da Gama, São Torpes, Grande (Porto Covo) and Ilha do Pessegueiro. In South Wales, the selected beaches were: Coney Beach, Newton, Southerndown and Llangennith (Figure 2):

- Vasco da Gama: residential beach, mostly visited by Sines inhabitants. It is located near a fishing port and a marina and is under the management of the Administration of the Port of Sines. A full range of beach equipment is available;
- São Torpes: at this beach, sea water is normally a higher than the normal temperature, due to the proximity of the S. Torpes Thermoelectric Power Plant;
- Grande (Porto Covo): beach at the small town of Porto Covo, intensively visited in summer by tourists spending their holidays at the location and nearby camping site;
- Ilha do Pessegueiro: beach of striking natural beauty, overlooking the small isle (Pessegueiro). It is situated away from any urban centre and has few beach equipment;
- Coney (Figure 1): urban beach with amusement park. Donkeys can be rented during low tide to carry children to and from the sea;
- Newton: beach next to Trecco Bay Caravan Park, essentially visited by Newton residents and caravanners. Lifeguard cover is available;
- Southerndown: beach located in a valley, with lifeguards; the sand is almost entirely submerged during high tide.
- Llangennith: beach of great scenic value, with an extensive beach area, usually visited by young people who are spending their holidays at the local camping site. It is also a prime choice site for surfboarding.

Table 1: Example of evaluation of the Facilities aspect (VAZ, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Full range of beach equipments with recreational use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Full range of beach equipments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Basic range of beach equipments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>No beach equipments available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Beach of São Torpes (Portugal) and Coney Beach (Wales)
RESULTS

This paper presents only some of the exploratory findings and further in depth work is to be developed.

Once results had been duly weighed and beaches assigned their respective categories, the following classification was established: the beaches of Vasco da Gama and Coney were classified as urban beaches; the beaches of São Torpes and Newton were classified as semi-urban beaches; the ones of Grande de Porto Covo and Southerdown were classified as rural beaches; and finally the ones of Ilha do Pessegueiro and Llangennith were categorised as remote beaches (Figure 3).

Regarding the questionnaires, aimed at obtaining an insight of what the users’ opinions were about the beaches, the large range of opinions expressed and the subjectivity underlying the countless aspects that can be addressed led us to focus on those deemed to be more important.

Based on the results of this project, which support previous studies, such aspects as Water Quality and Safety are taken as important, yet they are never considered as a reason to choose a certain beach, or as a preferred factor that may justify going or not going to a certain beach (NELSON, et al., 2000). Therefore, in order to evaluate this aspect, users were presented with a list of 10 aspects and asked to score them on a scale from 1 to 4 (Figure 4).
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The aspects evaluated as Very Important in a beach indicate that Portuguese users seem to have higher standards in comparison to Welsh users, probably resulting from the critical role played by tourism in Portugal, where good weather conditions allow for bathing during the summer months.

Format and Size are of little significance for beach users, when compared to the other presented factors. Nevertheless, size is one of the major aspects arising when Portuguese users are asked to justify their choice of preferred beach.

Figure 4 also shows the 3 aspects that may be considered as the most important ones in any beach: Cleanliness- Litter (97% in Portugal and 74% in Wales), Water Quality (95% in Portugal and 60% in Wales) and Safety (81% in Portugal and 59% in Wales).

However, some aspects are rated differently by the users of both countries, considering the beach typology: users of remote beaches tend to praise Scenery, as opposed to Safety, Facilities and Parking, all three aspects scoring modestly when assessed by users of the beaches of Ilha do Pessegueiro and Llangennith.

Scenery was the only aspect found to be more highly rated by Welsh users, underlining how important it is for beach users in Wales. Welsh users go to the beach mainly to enjoy nature, as, unlike Portugal, weather conditions in many instances restrain the development of seaside tourism.

Most pleasant aspect in the preferred beach

The choice for a certain beach is always dependent on factors that make people prefer that particular site to other similar places. The ideal beach, as pre-established by the vast majority of users, seems to involve the natural element, even in the case of urban beach users. When asked about the reasons behind their choice for a preferred beach, users in both countries and for any beach type mentioned Cleanliness and Quietness, respectively. In Portugal, however, Size was mentioned by 17%, while Quietness was pointed out by 14% of users.

Most unpleasant aspect in the least preferred beach

Generally, the least attractive beach is described as being small, with a large number of users, litter, insufficient facilities and unorganised parking. Still, a combination of all five aspects is unlikely to be found, neither in Portugal nor in Wales.

In any case, a single unpleasant aspect is sometimes enough to make a user select a certain beach as the least preferred one.

The beaches with larger user numbers seem to be ones considered by users as the least attractive. General disorder in the urban and semi-urban crowded beaches is the most mentioned aspect in Portugal (27%) and Wales (31%), and, surprisingly, the highest scores were to be found in the remote beaches of Ilha do Pessegueiro (36%) and Llangennith (39%). These numbers reduce to much lower scores in the urban beaches of Vasco da Gama (17%) and Coney (15%).

Apart from disorder, Cleanliness (in Wales) and Size (in Portugal) are the other two factors pointed out by users as the most unpleasant aspect in the least preferred beach. Size is closely related with the Quietness/Disorder aspects, as larger beaches are more likely to offer Quietness, and, consequently, less Disorder. As for Cleanliness, it is safe to say that beaches in Wales have greater problems than their Portuguese counterparts. The explanation may lie in the fact that Portugal beaches are a major asset in terms of tourism. Therefore, an active effort is put by the authorities in keeping beaches clean, to make them more attractive for tourists, at least during the bathing season (from 15th June to 15th September).

Having acquired an overview of what the users’ options were concerning beaches, this study also sought to determine the users’ perception regarding the beach where the survey was carried out.

Reason for choosing a beach

The choice for a beach is dependent on many factors. According to users’ answers, Proximity is the most outstanding aspect, with a substantial 42% in Wales, and 23% in Portugal. Complementary aspects are: Quietness, with significant values in Portugal (20%), in comparison to Wales (10%), although Welsh users tended to emphasise the Scenery factor (13%) as one of the most important reasons to choose a specific beach. However, in Portugal, and in the specific case of São Torpes, respondents justified their choice with the Water Temperature (46%), slightly higher than the average temperature in the area. Warmer sea water temperature is caused by the Sines Thermoelectric Power Plant, located in the vicinity, and turns the beach into a popular attraction.

Most pleasant aspect in the beach

Quietness was highlighted (26% in Portugal and 25% in Wales), with the highest scores expectedly arising for remote and rural beaches. Not any less important and equally highly scored in this type of beach, is the Scenery factor (23% in Portugal and 22% in Wales). As for urban and semi-urban beaches, besides Quietness, 23% of the users in Portuguese beaches valued Poor Waves, for children safety reasons, while 21% of the Welsh users pointed out Cleanliness as one of the most pleasant aspects in Coney and Newton. Some other aspects are just as outstanding, in light of the particular characteristics of some beaches. At São Torpes, 57% of the users mentioned Water Temperature as the most pleasant beach aspect, for the aforementioned reasons. At Coney, the most valued aspect was Sand (32%), understandably so, as no other sandy beaches can be found within a reasonable distance. At Southerndown beach, the most pleasant aspect was Scenery (23%), stressing how significant a factor this is in beaches with a lesser degree of artificialization.

Least pleasant aspect in the beach

As a rule, aspects identified by users as negative aspects are associated with specific beach characteristics: Water Temperature for Vasco da Gama (27%); Sand for São Torpes (30%); and Accessibility for Grande and Ilha do Pessegueiro (19%).
Cleanliness is just as important and is considered the most unpleasant aspect by 17% of the Portuguese users. In Wales, Cleanliness was mentioned by 29% of the users, which makes it a clearly more important factor than Facilities, Rocks, Dogs, etc.

**Characterisation of the user profile**

In Portugal, the questionnaire was answered by 46% of male individuals and 54% of female individuals, while in Wales, the male individuals accounted for 61% of interviewees and the female individuals for 39%. Some differences may also be found: for the beaches of São Torpes and Ilha do Pessegueiro, where female individuals were predominant (60%) and for the beaches of Coney (61%) and Llangennith (68%), respondents were mainly male individuals. In the latter case of Llangennith, the fact that it is a prime choice for surfboarding, a predominantly male sport, may account for the difference in figures.

Considering three age groups, <30, 31-50 and >51, and bearing in mind that respondents were chosen randomly, it was found that the most participative age group was between 31 and 50 years old (Portugal – 51%; Wales – 39%), and the hypothesis may be put forward that this might be the age group with a greater interest in seaside tourism.

Although values fluctuated slightly between the two countries, confirmation was attained that urban beaches attract more users older than 51, while remote beaches are mainly chosen by younger groups. The assertion is supported by data for the remote beach of Ilha do Pessegueiro (<30 – 54% and >51 – 9%) and the semi-urban beach of Newton (<30 – 12% and >51 – 53%).

In terms of where users come from (considering the beaches included in the project), it would appear that urban beaches are those with the smallest influence range, unlike remote beaches, where users are willing to travel longer distances to enjoy that specific beach.

For example, at the Portuguese case of Vasco da Gama: 34% of users come from Sines, while in Grande and Ilha do Pessegueiro, 43% of the users come from the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, and <3% from Sines.

In Wales, a found a similar situation was found, as the beaches of Coney and Newton were visited mainly by locals, while the beaches of Southerndown and particularly Llangennith showed a somehow significant influence range.

**CONCLUSION**

Findings showed beyond any doubt the enormous importance of adjusting beach management policies and strategies to include the users’ points of view.

Beaches cannot and should not be compared as a whole, but rather considered by their respective typologies. This notion is crucial in terms of beach management, as different strategies must be put in place, in line with the type of beach where the intervention is to be carried out (Figure 5).

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**LITERATURE CITED**


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