

Simply “Being There”: A Legitimate Point on the Geotourism and National Park Visitor Opportunity Spectrum

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Context of this paper

THE CONCEPT OF “GEOTOURISM” HAS ONLY EVOLVED OVER THE PAST DECADE OR SO. It has an increasingly strong focus on the geological science of landscape and rock features as well as an inherent and fundamental desire for visitors to understand and learn about what they are observing, for example through interpretation and guiding.

Many of the world’s protected areas, especially national parks, were originally established on the basis of their outstanding scenery and geological features. It is not surprising, therefore, that geotourism is also focused very much (though not exclusively) on and around such protected areas.

This paper was originally presented in April 2010 at the 2nd Global Geotourism Conference held at Mulu World Heritage Area, Malaysia. It was subsequently re-produced in the *Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association Journal* in September 2010 (Watson 2010b) after interest in the paper’s content was expressed by a number of attendees at the geotourism conference who also attended ACKMA’s 2010 annual meeting, which was likewise held at Mulu in the following week.

Although the opportunity spectrum approach used to be frequently applied by protected area planners and managers, it seems to be less well known nowadays, including by those involved in the development and promotion of tourism. On a broader level beyond geotourism per se, the paper therefore also reinforces the desirability of maintaining the option of minimal or no site interpretation for *any* visitors to national parks who, for various reasons, want simply to “be there.”

The paper is presented here in its original form for a “geotourism audience” but with some minor amendments including two additional references (Watson 1997; 2010b).

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Introduction

When asked why he was wanting to climb Mount Everest, George Leigh Mallory is reputed to have said, “Because it is there!” (*New York Times*, 19 August 1923). These words have since become immortalized in the mountaineering literature and further afield. Even those who have become legendary for their exploits at more modest altitudes, such as Alfred Wainwright, lover of hill walking in the English Lake District, embody a not dissimilar sentiment for high places. When asked which was his favorite mountain, he would reply, “The one I am on at the time” (cited in Griffin 1963: 118).

In neither case is there mention of geology or science, of achievement, adventure, or personal challenge, or of strong individual preference for one site above another—the main desire is simply “being there” in a naturally wild place, high in the landscape, and, in Wainwright’s case, preferably alone. Wainwright did, however, express a preference for the final resting place of his ashes, on the diminutive peak of Haystacks, but significantly, in an area that was looked down upon by a full circle of so many of his beloved higher Lakeland peaks (Wainwright 1966).

Within natural landscapes there are many places that are simply awe-inspiring in their own right. They include features such as spectacular waterfalls, lakes, active lava flows, wild and atmospheric coastal cliffs including deep zawns, gorges and canyons, mountain summits and narrow ridges, geysers and other thermal features, and even some desert landscapes. Many sites are naturally noisy and some have unique smells, often associated with volcanic activity, geothermal activity, or the sea. A range of human senses may be triggered—sight, sound, smell, and touch (when rock climbing for example). The reports written by early

Figure 1. Backpacker at Tiger Leaping Gorge, China. Photo courtesy of Julia Watson.



explorers and discoverers of places like Yosemite Valley, Yellowstone, and the Himalayan peaks bear testimony to the impacts that simply sitting and viewing the scenery made on them. Sometimes, timing and situation may combine to make “magic moments,” in what are generally considered to be less-spectacular landscapes in a global context:

We were facing east. After a short desultory conversation we fell still—not a word was spoken for an hour. We drove from our heads every thought of self and simply observed the scene detachedly, allowing it, and nothing else, to flow into us....

— *W.H Murray, on watching the sunrise from the final peak after a moonlit winter snow traverse of the Aonach–Eagach Ridge, Glencoe, Scotland, 1951*

Moments such as these are rarely, if ever, forgotten.

Similar awe-inspiring experiences also occur in the subterranean world of caves. This may be through their sheer size, sometimes accompanied by the sound of rushing water, or their incredible underworld atmosphere—places like the outstanding caves of Sarawak, the subterranean gorges of Skocjanske Jame in Slovenia, or the vast underground chambers of the Western Australian Nullarbor, which starkly contrast with the even more vast, largely featureless plain above. However, it is often the near-view array of spectacular speleothems, such as those typically found in highly active cave systems in the South West Region of Western Australia, that strongly triggers a visual response. Here the silence and darkness are combined with magical displays of crystals and flowstones, sometimes reflected in spectacular pools of clear still water.

The conscious preservation of silence may also be a very powerful adjunct to the appreciation of natural beauty in heavily visited outstanding landscapes and can be maximized through the use of quiet transportation systems, well-designed walking paths, and the encouragement of respectful and sensitive visitor behavior. Hamilton-Smith (1979) was particularly impressed by this management approach at the Plitvice Lakes in Croatia in the late 1970s.

Figure 2. Classic view from Sgurr na Stri (464m elevation) looking towards Loch Coruisk and the skyline ridge of the Black Cullin of Skye—one of the finest contemplative mountain views in Britain. Photo courtesy of the author.





Figure 3. A spectacular restricted-access cave chamber in southwestern Australia where speleologists must remove overalls, helmets, and boots before entering and keep strictly to narrow clear polythene pathways and defined sitting locations. Photo courtesy of Ross Anderson.

Around the world there are hundreds of thousands of people who strive to experience similar enjoyment of natural beauty and sense of place through simply “being there,” whether it is to escape the increasing pressures of today’s society, to delight in a feeling of freedom, or simply to soak up the wonders of nature and wild landscapes or to experience the spectacular subterranean world. Many of these visitors are also independent travelers, avoiding organized tours where possible and wishing to appreciate and learn from their experiences at their own pace and in their own time frame. If they seek interpretation or education then self-guiding will probably be preferred, or simply the ability to obtain pre- or post-visit information, but only if they wish. In the context of cave visitation, this concept has been described by Hamilton-Smith (2007) as “*self-timing*” rather than *self-guiding*.

On the other hand, there are of course many other people who seek to visit our wild places, but within a range of comfort zones or safety nets that may include provision of comfortable accommodation, the use of local guides, and reliance on “interpreters” to help them understand the evolution of the various landforms and landscapes that they are viewing.

However, the two broad groups of people discussed above should not be considered as distinct or separate entities, but rather as representing the opposite ends of a *range* of visitor aspirations with regard to the degree of “interpretive education” that they may wish to have provided or, on the other hand, that they may wish to completely avoid.

Furthermore, as individuals we may well opt for different types of experiences across this range at different times, in different locations, according to weather conditions or at different stages of our lives. It is a matter of preference based on opportunity and personal inclination at the time. Our challenge as managers and tourism providers should therefore be to cater for the range of interpretation preferences by allowing geotourists access to the choices that *they* prefer ... and not what we think they should automatically be given.

The recreation opportunity spectrum concept

At a broader outdoor recreation level, the importance of providing opportunities for visitors to exercise their personal choices has been developed through concepts such as the recreation opportunity spectrum (Stankey and Clarke 1979). The spectrum recognizes the legitimacy of a range of outdoor settings that may provide for a variety of recreation activities and experiences, from the remote, natural, and undeveloped end of the scale through to the heavily used, greatly modified, and highly developed end. In areas such as national parks or other protected areas, the opportunity spectrum is often used as a planning tool to help identify different areas or zones that are then deliberately managed to retain their naturalness or, conversely, to allow for development. The terminology used varies from agency to agency but generally speaking it will include facilities or recreation development zones, natural landscape zones, and wilderness zones.

Facilities or recreation development zones tend to be located around historical “honey-pots” where infrastructure has typically been in place for many decades. They are often very close to outstanding natural features that may have led to the park’s designation in the first place. They typically include everything from visitor accommodation, interpretation/visitor centers, shops, transportation hubs, and park management facilities such as ranger housing and workshops.

Natural landscape zones tend to occupy the bulk of the park, with provision of more limited and more basic infrastructure in natural settings.

Wilderness zones are usually located within the core areas of the park and are therefore “buffered” from outside influences. They generally have only minimal, if any, infrastructure provided. Visitor information in wilderness zones is also minimal and restricted to the provision of essential safety information only, or critical information required to help protect wilderness and biodiversity values. *Interpretation and “education” signage is deliberately excluded.* Hence, if an educative component is to be an *essential* prerequisite for a geotourism experience, then it would appear that geotourism cannot occur in such wilderness areas, even if they contain outstanding geological features or landscapes, whether above or below ground.

Sometimes the size, location, or historical development of parks may mean that it is not possible or appropriate to provide for the full range of zones and visitor opportunities within one protected area. In such cases it may be possible to recognize a “spectrum of parks” which, in a broader regional context, may collectively provide for the full range of opportunities. Such a concept has been applied through a regional management plan for the South Coast Region of Western Australia (Department of Conservation and Land Management 1992;

Figure 4. The coastal core area wilderness zone of Fitzgerald River National Park, Western Australia, viewed across the bay from Point Charles. Photo courtesy of the author.



Watson 1997). In that region the opportunities for wilderness are restricted to a few of the larger and more remote parks, such as the Stirling Range (about 16,000 ha) and Fitzgerald River national parks (about 330,000 ha), whereas well-developed roads and visitor facilities are only practical or are historically already present in other areas such as the much smaller Torndirrup National Park (about 4,000 ha) near Albany. As Albany is the major population centre of the region and the original first British settlement in Western Australia, Torndirrup National Park also has a very high recreational visitation from local residents as well as other park visitors, with just under half a million visits per annum in total. The same regional management plan also recognized a range of different levels of education and interpretation focus across the spectrum of parks.

Application to geotourism: The geotourism opportunity spectrum

There has already been some application of the recreation opportunity spectrum to tourism as distinct from natural area management. For example, Butler and Waldbrook (2003) discussed the concept, but focused mainly on how, after their initial discovery, natural tourism sites tend to evolve both socially and physically due to increasing visitor numbers and resultant site impacts. This has been practically demonstrated in the evolution of the American national parks system, where uncontrolled commercial development began to outstrip the very limited protective management capacity until strong formal legislation provided for protection so that the natural environment would remain “untrammelled” and the means were also provided to adequately staff parks throughout the system.

“Tourism” has been around for a very long time, from at least as early as the late 3rd century BC when the Romans are known to have visited the Parthenon at the Acropolis in Greece. In Europe, a new focus on tourism visits to natural places emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries as attention through “The Grand Tour” switched from the great architecture of previous generations more towards an interest in “natural architecture” as evidenced in caves, mountains, lakes, and other spectacular natural features. There was a new quest for understanding and a demand grew for scientific and geological interpretation of these outstanding landscapes and features, especially in the 19th century. However, 20th- and 21st-century

tourism has evolved to include a much broader interest in plants and animals and different social cultures, including art, music, language and, more recently, the gastronomic delights of food and drink.

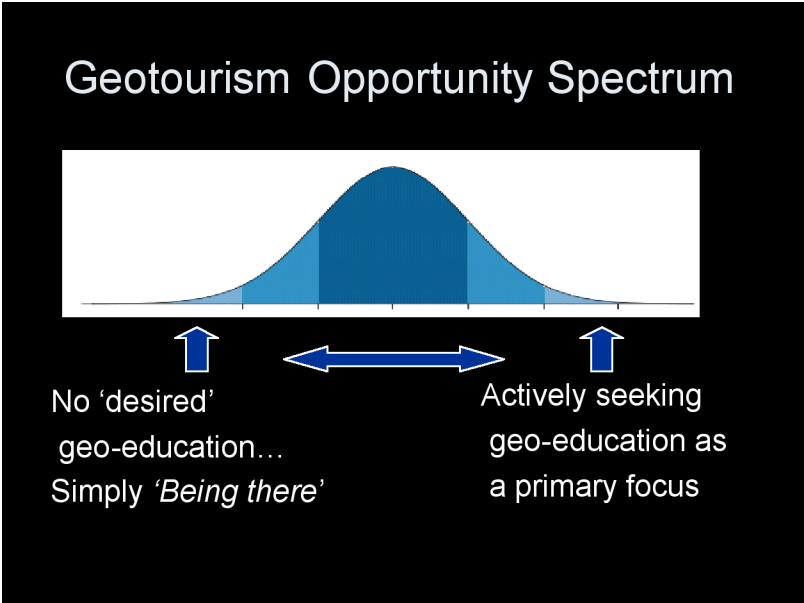
As noted above, the current concept of geotourism is very new and has a strong focus on geological science as well as a learning component:

Geotourism is a form of natural area tourism that specifically focuses on geology and landscape. It promotes tourism to geosites and the conservation of geo-diversity and an understanding of earth sciences through appreciation and learning. This is achieved through independent visits to geological features, use of geo-trails and view points, guided tours, geo-activities and patronage of geosite visitor centres (Newsome and Dowling 2010).

This may be fine for most people, however, as indicated in the earlier part of this paper, there are many visitors who may *not* wish to be “educated” about the geological science of the sites they are visiting, but simply want to “be there” and experience the setting in their own way and in their own time. In some cases, notably those of rock climbers and scramblers, who come into the most intimate contact with the rocks and geology, it is impractical and dangerous to be distracted by interpretation. They need to be fully focused on moving safely across cliff faces and other rocky terrain without falling off (Watson 2010a)!

However, by applying a geotourism opportunity spectrum approach to the educative component of geotourism we can accommodate freedom of choice for all visitors and allow not only for an intense focus on geological interpretation and understanding at one end of the spectrum but also a minimalist preference at the other end. This should deliver a “win-win” outcome by extending the embrace of geotourism across the full range of visitor preferences.

Figure 5. Geotourism opportunity spectrum.



Closing comments

What is “education” anyway? It seems that educators themselves are unable to arrive at a universally acceptable definition. Suffice it to say that most standard dictionaries will include at least one definition of education as being “an enlightening experience”; for example: “His visit to India was an education” (Reader’s Digest 1988). According to the American educator David Gardner: “We learn simply by the exposure of living. Much that passes for education is not education at all but ritual. The fact is that we are being educated when we know it least.” Or Albert Einstein: “The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education.”

In this context, the awe-inspiring views, magical moments, and other experiences referred to earlier in this paper are one form of “meaningful education” and hence “simply being there” can indeed be regarded as a legitimate stand-alone component within geotourism.

Having begun this dissertation on the mountain tops, let us give the final few words to John Muir, the Scottish-born American naturalist, author, and early advocate of the preservation of wilderness:

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.

— John Muir (1901)

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