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Monitoring Recreation Across European Nature Areas: A Geo-database of Visitor Counts, a Review of Literature and a Call for a Visitor Counting Reporting Standard

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Abstract:

Nature recreation and tourism is a substantial ecosystem service of Europe's countryside that has a substantial economic value and contributes considerably to income and employment of local communities. Highlighting the recreational value and economic contribution of nature areas can be used as a strong argument for the funding of protected and recreational areas. The total number of recreational visits of a nature area has been recognised as a major determinant of its economic recreational value and its contribution to local economies. This paper presents an international geo-database on recreational visitor numbers to non-urban ecosystems, containing 1,267 observations at 518 separate case study areas throughout Europe. The monitored sites are described by their centroid coordinates and shape files displaying the exact extension of the sites. Therefore, the database illustrates the spatial distribution of visitor counting throughout Europe and can be used for secondary research, such as for validation of spatially explicit recreational ecosystem service models and for identifying relevant drivers of recreational ecosystem services. To develop the database, we review visitor monitoring literature throughout Europe and give an overview of such activities with special attention to visitor counting. We identify one major shortcoming in available literature, which relates to the presentation, study area definition and methodological reporting of conducted visitor counting studies. Insufficient reporting hampers the identification of the study area, the comparability of different studies and the evaluation of the studies' quality. Based on our findings, we propose a standardised reporting template for visitor counting studies and advanced data sharing for recreational visitor data. Researchers and institutions are invited to report on their visitor counting studies via our web interface at rris.biopama.org/visitor-reporting to contribute to a global visitor database that will be shared via the ESP Visualisation tool (<http://esp-mapping.net>).

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1. Introduction

Recreation is a major ecosystem service provided by non-urban ecosystems that is of substantial economic importance. All across Europe, national parks are estimated to receive more than 2 billion recreational visits per year, which accounts for an economic recreational value of about € 14.5 billion (Schägner *et al.* 2016a). Globally, protected areas are considered to provide an economic recreational value of \$US 250 billion annually through receiving 8 billion recreational visitors, who spend \$US 600 billion within the destination country (Balmford *et al.* 2015a). The economic value of nature recreation and its contribution to local economies can be used as a major argument for funding nature conservation and recreational facilities (Eagles 2014).

The number of visits is the most important indicator of the economic value of recreational ecosystem services (Bateman *et al.* 2006b; Jones *et al.* 2003). Therefore, generating accurate and fine-resolution estimates of total annual recreational visits is of major importance in order to highlight the relevance and economic value of different ecosystems and landscape features for recreation as well as for the improvement of an efficient management of environmental capital. However, no aggregated data on visitor numbers to various nature areas exist on the international level. Eagles (2014) names visitor use and economic impact monitoring as two of the ten most important research priorities for recreational nature areas. By supplying site-specific visitor estimates, the importance and value of different ecosystems at different locations can be identified. As a result, resources can be allocated more efficiently and recreation sites can be defended against competing use. Site specific visitor estimates also have crucial relevance for designing the supply of recreational facilities, the protection of nature against overuse, avoiding visitor crowding and for the evaluation of site management strategies (Hadwen *et al.* 2007). Highlighting the importance of protected areas and ecosystems for recreational services has multiple effects on local and national policies in many different countries (Sievänen *et al.* 2008) and it is also required by the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020 (Maes *et al.* 2013) and the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Strategic Plan (CBD 2010).

Nevertheless, within outdoor recreation research, studies focusing on the economic valuation of recreation are far more common than studies on estimating accurate visitor numbers, even though the number of visits is the most important indicator for the economic value of recreational ecosystem services. Furthermore, visitor numbers vary far more across recreational sites than the value per visit (Jones *et al.* 2003; Bateman *et al.* 2006). Several studies on the recreational value of nature undertake extensive valuation exercises, but are based on relatively poor visitor estimates. Several papers review studies on the economic valuation of recreation by conducting meta-analysis in order to identify the determinants of the studies' results (Bateman and Jones 2007; Rosenberger and Loomis 2000; Shresta *et al.* 2007; Zandersen and Tol 2009) or they present databases on the vast amount of studies, their results and methodologies used (McComb *et al.* 2006). For studies estimating the total recreational visitor numbers of certain sites, such information is relatively rare and less professionally organised. Bateman *et al.* (2006b) describe this disparity with "*The Tale of Horse and Rabbit Stew*", in which the cook spends most of his time preparing the rabbit for his king, even though it is the horse that makes the stew delicious. Schägner *et al.* (2016a) find that the spatial standard deviations of recreational visitor numbers are about 360 times larger than those of the economic value per visit. Cole (2006) states that visitor monitoring is "*lost in the gulf between science and management*". In recent years, the importance of accurate visitor estimates has become more and more recognised within the scientific community. The Tourism and Protected Areas Specialist (TAPAS) Group¹, a joint initiative by

¹ For more information, see <http://www.iucn.org/protected-areas/world-commission-protected-areas/wcpa/what-we-do/tourism-tapas>.

the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and its World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), is currently acquiring funding for developing a global database on visitor numbers to IUCN Category II Protected Areas (national parks) (Spenceley 2016). A single conference session is dedicated to ["Visitors count! - Count visitation! Tourism in protected areas ..."](#) at IUCN World Conservation Congress 2016 (Engels 2016).

The importance of nature-based recreation is recognised by the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020. The physical and monetary mapping and assessment of ecosystem services including cultural services such as nature-based recreation is an essential part of this strategy under Action 5. Maes *et al.* (2016) describe an indicator framework that can be used to ensure that coherent assessment approaches are used throughout the European Union. The number of visitors is retained as the most important indicator to quantify nature-based recreation but they observe that no harmonised, spatially-explicit data for this indicator are available at EU level.

Data on long-term trends in recreational use for various sites is critical for the economic valuation of different recreational sites, in order to identify determinants of recreational use and to evaluate the effects of various management strategies. It is crucial to make the acquired data available to the international research community, such as by other data sharing tools in other disciplines (DEIMS 2015; Drakou *et al.* 2015; JRC 2015).

So far, only some publications review visitor monitoring studies. For example, Kajala *et al.* (2006) review trends of visitor monitoring in Scandinavian and Baltic countries. They highlight the importance of standardised approaches and methodologies across countries. In the follow-up report, Kajala *et al.* (2007) propose some standards for monitoring visitors in the Nordic and Baltic countries, but with a more general focus. Whereas Hornback and Eagles (1999) propose visitor monitoring standards for protected areas in an international context and focus more on the results of the conducted studies than on detailed reporting, Sievänen *et al.* (2008) and Sievänen *et al.* (2009) review recreational monitoring programs across Europe as well as recreational supply indicators, but with a focus on forests only. They also propose a harmonisation of visitor monitoring and counting programs.

We instead promote the application of a variety of approaches and methodologies in recreational visitor monitoring and counting in order to let the methods evolve and develop, but call for detailed and standardised reporting of results and applied methodologies. A wide variety of methods can be used to estimate the number of recreational visits including the evaluation of trail use, samples of personal counting, and automated remote controlled counting devices. Counting samples can be scaled up over time and space by different means of accounting for counting times, days, season and weather as well as counting locations. The emerging use of GPS tracking and social media may allow for new and more efficient ways of estimating visitor numbers for recreational sites (Brandenburg *et al.* 2008; Wood *et al.* 2013b). Each visitor counting method may have its specific advantages and disadvantages and the methodological choice may have a strong and systematic effect on the estimated visitor numbers and on the accuracy of the estimate. By comprehensive reporting of the methodological choice, statistical regression analysis by means of meta-analysis can identify these effects and thereby help to improve visitor counting methods and give insights into the drivers of recreational use. Thereby, detailed reporting allows comparing results of different methods, but also for visitor monitoring and counting methods to evolve and progress. A harmonisation of visitor monitoring and counting approaches would increase the comparability of different studies even more, but may require the application of methods that do not fit the site-specific circumstances and the purpose of the study. In addition, it may hamper methodological developments and innovations in visitor monitoring and counting. Quality and reporting standards for primary data collection have been repeatedly proposed in other disciplines in order to ease statistical assessments such as in environmental economic valuation (Eigenbrod *et al.* 2010a; Johnston and Rosenberger 2010; Loomis

and Rosenberger 2006; Rosenberger and Phipps 2007; Rosenthal and DiMatteo 2001; Stanley *et al.* 2013) or species distribution sampling (EU BON and GBIF 2015; Walls *et al.* 2014).

Based on a broad review of visitor monitoring studies with special focus on visitor counting, we propose that recreational visitor counting should (1) receive far more attention in scientific literature and funding schemes and (2) apply a more scientific and professional approach towards presentation of the gathered results and knowledge as well as reporting of the used methodologies. Multiple visitor counting studies are characterised by rudimentary reporting that does neither allow identifying the study area without local knowledge nor the study's quality. Officially published visitor numbers that are based on rough guesses may overstate real numbers by up to 26 fold (Job *et al.* 2014; Mehnen 2005; Ruschkowski 2010).

Within this paper we contribute to the field of visitor monitoring and counting by: (1) presenting a harmonised, spatially-explicit geo-database at EU level containing 1,267 total annual visitor observations at 518 separate nature areas including their exact locations and extension, (2) giving a review on visitor monitoring activities throughout Europe with a specific focus on visitor counting, (3) proposing a methodological reporting standard template for visitor counting studies based on the findings of our literature review (see appendix of this chapter) and (4) inviting the community to submit their visitor counting data via an web interface to contribute to a global database at rris.biopama.org/visitor-reporting.

The visitor number database allows for identifying visitor counting studies across Europe and can be used to estimate the importance of different drivers of recreational use. Thereby it may help to design and manage attractive recreational areas. The review provides insights into the trends of visitor monitoring across Europe and gives guidance on future prospects in visitor monitoring and counting practice. The reporting standards may support the quality and transparency of future visitor counting studies by allowing for assessments of the quality of single visitor estimates and for drawing conclusions on future visitor counting practice. It may also support the use of study results for secondary research, such as reviewing methodological evolvments and to allow for conducting meta-analysis as done in other disciplines such as in recreational economic valuation (Rosenthal and DiMatteo 2001; Zandersen and Tol 2009).

This paper is organised as follows: Section 2 gives a brief description on why and how the data was collected. Section 3.1 gives some summary statistics on the database. Then, in section 3.2, we describe general trends in visitor counting across Europe, and in section 3.3 we identify shortcomings in recent methodological reporting in visitor monitoring and counting studies. Therefore, we propose a reporting standard for visitor counting studies. Section 4 discusses our main findings before we conclude in the final section.

2. Methodology and Data

The aim of the study was to build up a database of total annual recreational visitor numbers of non-urban ecosystems all across Europe, in order to highlight the importance and value of different ecosystems for nature recreation. The database serves as a basis for statistical regression analysis of the drivers of recreational use and the effects of different methodologies in order to identify what ecosystem characteristics and landscape features attract and deter recreational visitors. The modelling results are published in Schägner *et al.* (2016a) and Schägner *et al.* (2016b). Therefore, we collected recreational visitor estimates that relates to a clearly defined nature area within Europe and that represent the number of visitors for an entire year and also appear to be a reliable estimate. To collect data we conducted a vast review of visitor monitoring literature. Visitor monitoring consists of a variety of survey and counting exercises that are implemented in order to obtain systematic information about

recreational visitors. Total annual visitor estimates are often produced as part of a visitor monitoring study (Kajala *et al.* 2007). To search for visitor data we consulted online search tools, using general search engines, such as Google scholar, web of science, science direct and Scopus. Furthermore, we contacted relevant stakeholders from governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as researchers and managers of national park administrations across Europe. Finally, relevant conference proceedings were scanned, particularly the International Conferences on Management and Monitoring Visitors in Recreational Areas (MMV). The primary search for data was conducted in English, searching for data published within international scientific publications. However, a large amount of data is published in grey literature, which is solely published in national languages. Therefore, we also conducted an extensive online search for data in German and more rudimentary searches in Italian, Spanish, French and Portuguese, the languages accessible to the authors of this study. All total annual visitor estimates were entered into an ArcGIS geo-database and combined with referenced bibliographic information, all available methodological information and a GIS-shape file that indicates the exact location and extension of the case study area. We obtained shape files for each case study area by extracting them from an existing database on protected areas (EEA 2013; IUCN and UNEP 2015), by contacting study authors or stake-holders or by manually drawing them from map images presented in the publication or on the internet. For further analysis, all area covered by water (either inland or ocean water) was erased from the shape files in order to derive shapes of the terrestrial area only. This was done in order to derive comparable estimates of visitors per hectare. Some case study areas, such as a lake or a marine protected area, consist of more than 90% of water cover and since visitors spend most of their time on land, water covered areas would be a distortion. The database allows extracting site-specific information of the different case study areas by using available GIS data, such as ecosystem characteristics, socio-demographic and climate data, without consulting single publications, stake-holders or collecting data on-site. While hunting for visitor data, we reviewed relevant visitor monitoring studies and activities in different European countries.

3. Results

3.1 A Geo-database of Visitor Counts

In total we found 1,267 total annual visitor observations of about 518 separate case study areas all across Europe, which estimate a total of about 400 million visits a year. By far, the most case study areas are located in the UK (170), but also in Italy (57) and the relatively small countries Denmark (57) and the Netherlands (50) show a large amount of case study areas. Surprisingly, only very few estimates for the large countries Germany (13) and France (5) were found. For the following EU countries we could not obtain any observation: Portugal, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Greece, and Iceland and the small countries Luxembourg, Cypress and Malta, even though visitor monitoring activities take place in most countries.

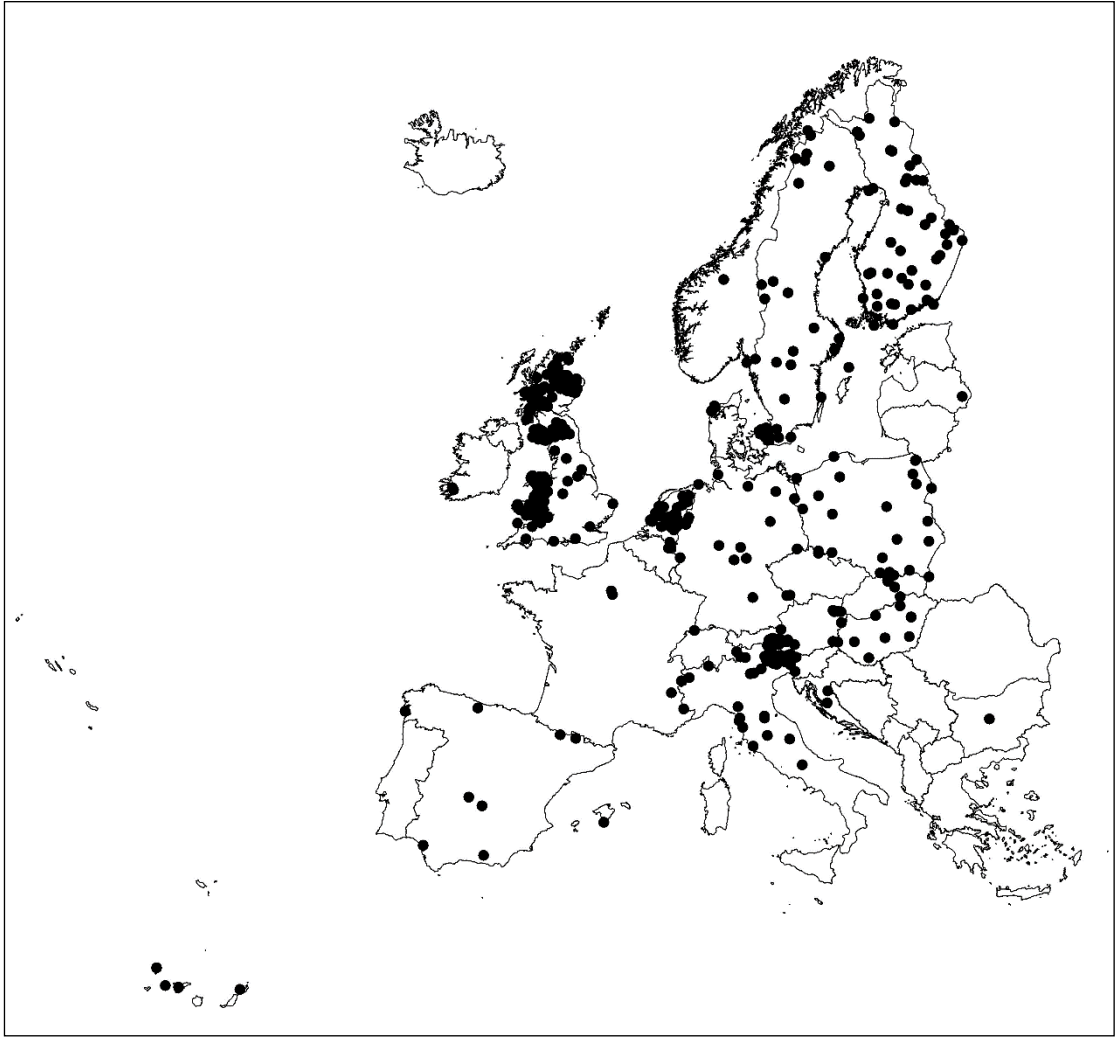


Figure 1: Location of total annual visitor observations across Europe.

About 40% of all the observations represent visitor estimates of national parks or parts of national parks. Another 15% of case study areas are other types of protected areas². We found a considerable amount of monitored sites not being protected at all only in four countries; 140 in the UK, 41 in Denmark, 27 in the Netherlands and 17 in Italy.

On average, each case study area receives about 760,000 visits a year. However, annual visits differ widely with regard to visitation rates per km² and the case study area size. The overall average of the case study areas size is about 194 km² big (excluding water cover), but ranges from only 1 hectare up to almost 9,000 km². Country averages range from 13 km² and 20 km² in Denmark and the Netherlands up to 2,200 km² in France. The average annual visits per terrestrial km² are about 4,163, but differ widely. It ranges from three visits per km² in large remote sites to up to 15.7 million in small visitor hot spot areas. There are stark differences between countries. For the Netherlands, the average is 36,600 visitors per km² and for Finland only 213. Detailed statistical analysis of drivers explaining the differing visitation rates can be found in Schägner *et al.* (2016a) and Schägner *et al.* (2016b). Summary statistics on the gathered data are presented in Table 1. The entire database is presented in the SOM.

We were not able to obtain information on the methodology of the visitor counting studies for most of the case study areas in our database due to incomplete methodological reporting. As a result, it is impossible to apply a statistical assessment of the impacts of different visitor counting methodologies on the total annual visitor estimates. Some studies and databases list visitor numbers from multiple sites within tables without giving any reference to how this data was collected and how total annual visitor estimates are obtained. In many cases the information might be available in a language not accessible to the authors (BR 2008; BR 2012; GOBT 2007; GOBT 2009; GOBT 2010). A positive example of detailed visitor counting methodology reporting are the visitor monitoring studies of the UK Forestry Commission (TNS and FCS 2006b; TNS and FCS 2006a; TNS and FCS 2008; TNS and FCW 2005). On request, we could obtain detailed information including shapes of the study areas, precise counting locations, counting length and used devices as well as methodologies used to upscale the counted visits to the entire area and year. Many studies on single sites do have a different focus than finding total annual visitor estimates such as economic valuation of recreation (Cullinan *et al.* 2008a), evaluating the effect of crowding (Arnberger and Brandenburg 2007; Kalisch 2012) or the effects of dog walking (Jaarsma and Kooij 2010), but do include a total annual visitor estimate as a by-product. Other studies do collect all data required, but do not come up with a total annual visitor estimate, due to a different study focus (Andersen *et al.* 2014; Fredman *et al.* 2009).

² We classified each site as a protected area, if at least 50% of its area is classified as protected. For estimating the share of the total area classified as protected we used the intersect tool of ArcGIS 10.2, the World Database of Protected Areas and the Common Database of Designated Areas (EEA 2013; IUCN and UNEP 2015).

Table 1: Summary of the database of annual visitor counts to sampled nature areas.

Country	Observations	National parks	Other protected areas	Share national parks	Share protected areas	Total visitors of sampled sites	Mean visitors per observation	Mean visitors per km ²
Austria	30	28	0	93%	0%	8,021,604	267,387	1,370
Belgium	2	0	1	0%	50%	136,835	68,418	289
Bulgaria	1	1	0	100%	0%	15,000	15,000	21
Croatia	2	2	0	100%	0%	1,056,726	528,363	2,674
Czech Republic	3	3	0	100%	0%	7,460,771	2,486,924	5,648
Denmark	57	5	11	9%	19%	16,097,268	282,408	22,257
Finland	46	39	6	85%	13%	2,337,254	50,810	213
France	5	3	0	60%	0%	30,566,216	6,113,243	2,750
Germany	13	12	1	92%	8%	28,001,142	2,153,934	3,269
Hungary	11	11	0	100%	0%	6,110,000	555,455	1,310
Ireland	2	1	0	50%	0%	78,504	39,252	672
Italy	55	11	28	20%	51%	22,493,267	408,968	1,769
Latvia	1	1	0	100%	0%	55,667	55,667	93
Netherlands	50	7	16	14%	32%	53,666,782	1,073,336	36,609
Norway	1	1	0	100%	0%	30,000	30,000	19
Poland	24	24	0	100%	0%	13,296,300	554,013	3,983
Slovakia	2	2	0	100%	0%	4,900,000	2,450,000	3,758
Slovenia	1	1	0	100%	0%	2,000,000	2,000,000	2,386
Spain	14	14	0	100%	0%	9,321,895	665,850	2,742
Sweden	27	26	1	96%	4%	2,256,369	83,569	369
Switzerland	1	1	0	100%	0%	165,000	165,000	1,001
UK	170	16	14	9%	8%	184,132,506	1,083,132	7,638
sum	518	209	78			392,200,000	800,000	
mean				40%	15%			3,899

3.2 Visitor monitoring and Counting Activities in Europe

The number of total annual visitor observations reported in this study represent an indicator of the visitor counting and monitoring activities in different European countries. For collecting the data, we reviewed visitor monitoring literature broadly, but with a special focus on studies estimating total

annual visitor numbers. The results of this review are presented in the following section. However, we do not claim that the review is exhaustive and fully representative for visitor counting and monitoring in Europe for several reasons. First, we encountered difficulties as a lot of the primarily grey literature is published in national languages and is not accessible to the authors. Second, publication policies of visitor monitoring programs differ across countries and institutions. Asking stakeholders to supply data was characterised by varying success. Policies and helpfulness in supplying data differed across institutions and individuals and sometimes it was just a matter of luck to contact the right person at the right time, willing to help and having access the desired data. Finally, the primary purpose of this study was to construct a database on visitor counts and therefore we did not search and analyse visitor monitoring studies in depth that do not provide the desired data.

The visitor monitoring and counting activities differs not only in scope but also in focus across European countries. In many countries household surveys on the recreational activities are conducted. Such surveys offer valuable information, such as the number of trips, destinations, activities and recreational needs and attitudes, but are only rarely used for estimating site specific total visitor numbers. Often they allow for conclusions on the relative recreational use of different ecosystem types and/or regions, but not to estimate total numbers for a specific location. On-site surveys are also a common visitor monitoring practice, sometimes combined with visitor counting. However, in many cases such studies are not used to estimate total annual visitors, although the required information is collected. Some studies estimate visitor numbers only for some periods (peak days and seasons) or locations, but do not up-scale them to the entire area and year. A number of studies publish total annual visitor estimates for some sites, but because of incomplete reporting, the sites cannot be identified since either the extension or the locations of the sites are not distinct.

Applied methods for estimating total annual visitor numbers to recreational areas are manifold (see Table 2) and have diversified in recent years. Whereas most studies conduct on-site visitor counting to estimate total visitor numbers, some studies use on- and off-site surveys to estimate total visitor numbers. The application of survey data for recreational destination choice modelling has been applied several times in recent year (Sen *et al.* 2011a; Termansen *et al.* 2008; UK NEA 2011b). In the past, personal on-site counting, ticket sales or simple expert judgment based on indirect methods such as trail use etc. were most common, but new technical developments increase the options of visitor counting and estimation. Nowadays, automated remote controlled counting devices are widely used and offer great opportunities for extensive counting at relatively low costs. The application of drones, aerial images and high resolution satellite images are used to monitor species such as whales (Fretwell *et al.* 2014), elephants (McMahon *et al.* 2014) and penguins (Fretwell *et al.* 2012) as well as human crowds (Coghlan 2012). It may also be used for large scale visitor counting in recreational areas. Since the start of the digital and new media age, the vast amount of “*big data*” may open visitor estimation options that are currently hardly exploited and still to be explored. Mobile phone traffic and Wi-Fi tracking may be used to track visitors and their movements on sites, as what is done to estimate traffic jams (Stenovc 2015). On social media platforms, users share a vast amount of data that can also be used to estimate their recreational behaviour (Wood *et al.* 2013b). Search engine queries reveal the interest in certain locations. Online map surveys allow the researchers to generate surveys on recreational behaviour with increased spatial resolution at lower costs (Maptionnaire 2016). Smart phone app such as geocaching or sports activity trackers record movement patterns and the activity of recreational visitors (SDI4Apps 2016; Vitek 2012).

In the **UK**, where we found the most observations, but also in the **Netherlands, Italy and Denmark**, total annual visitor estimates of recreational areas are used as an indicator for the recreational importance and economic value of different recreational sites. This indicates a long term and widely accepted importance of expressing the value of recreational areas in economic terms that are often

used to promote their conservation and compete for public funding. Also, many recreational valuation studies were found for these countries. In the **UK**, visitor monitoring is widely applied, not only for national parks and sites of recreational areas, but also for the general countryside (Cope *et al.* 2000; TNS and FCS 2006b). The Forestry Commission and as well *Natural England* provide a number of visitor monitoring studies, some publish only total annual visits, but others include general surveys on visitor needs, perception and behaviour (FC 2015; Kajala *et al.* 2007; NE 2014). Many of these studies focus on forest recreation. Visitor numbers are based on on-site counting (TNS and FCS 2006b; TNS and FCS 2006a; TNS and FCS 2008; TNS and FCW 2005) or on up-scaling of survey results (Jones *et al.* 2003; Morris and Doick 2009). Some data could be extracted from secondary studies, mainly environmental economic valuation studies (Bateman *et al.* 1998; Hill and Courtney 2006; Jones *et al.* 2003). Governmental databases present visitor numbers to a variety of visitor sites including indoor attractions such as museums and amusement parks, but also country parks and nature reserves. However, due to incomplete reporting, the quality of these estimates could not be assessed and in many cases it was difficult to define exact case study areas (VE 2014; VS 2013; VW 2014).

Most reports in **Denmark and the Netherlands** are published in national languages only and thus, we had difficulties in evaluating the visitor monitoring activities in detail. Multiple visitor estimates do show that they are vibrant. For Denmark we found indications of many total annual visitor estimates of mainly forest sites, resulting from a large scale of survey based methods and car traffic counts, some dating back to the 1970s (Jensen 1992; 2003; Jensen & Guldager 2005; Kajala *et al.* 2006; Koch 1978; 1980; 1984; Sievänen *et al.* 2008; de Vries & Veer 2007). However, we did succeed in accessing only some of these numbers. For the Netherlands, some publications list total visitor numbers for a variety of different sites (GOBT 2010; Goossen *et al.* 2011), but there is no information on the methodology and on the spatial location of the sites reported, making it a difficult task to include them in the geo-database. In addition, we found some isolated visitor estimates in separate visitor monitoring studies (Hein *et al.* 2006; Jaarsma and Kooij 2010; Ligtenberg *et al.* 2008; Nunes *et al.* 2005).

Although most of the **Southern European** countries show less experience with visitor monitoring and counting, many visitor estimates were found for sites in **Italy**, some of them in combination with a monetary valuation study (Tempesta 2010), but most focusing solely on visitor numbers as a value indicator of different sites (Sanesi *et al.* 2008; Tempesta *et al.* 2002). Nevertheless, the methodological reporting was limited in most publications except Lehar *et al.* (2004). In particular, the study area definitions are deficient in many cases and consequently, it was not possible to locate part of the case study areas.

The countries **Sweden and Finland** show strong activity in visitor monitoring, but seem to have a slightly different focus. Studies are mainly concerned with on-site visitor managing and the quality of the recreational experiences, and less on highlighting the recreational economic value and importance, by publishing total visitor numbers. General population surveys resulting in outdoor recreation demand inventories are applied widely, but do not offer site-specific numbers (Kajala *et al.* 2006; Kajala *et al.* 2007; Sievänen *et al.* 2008; Sievänen 2012). We were able to obtain visitor numbers based on on-site counting for all national parks and some other official recreational sites. Most of these estimates are based on institutionalised visitor monitoring programs including long time series of visitor counting. Metsähallitus, a Finnish state-owned enterprise, runs electronic counters continuously in national parks and recreational areas. Summary reports in English and study area maps are available online, but no detailed methodological reporting is included (Metsähallitus 2015). Swedish visitor numbers including basic information on the methodology, such as counting devices etc. were obtained on request via email (Nasstrom 2012). Further visitor estimates for urban forests and other sites are indicated in literature, but it was not possible to obtain them (Ankre and Fredman 2012a; Fredman *et al.* 2012).

Alternatively for **Norway**, it was possible to obtain only a single visitor estimate for one site. Even though visitor monitoring is not as widespread as in the other Scandinavian countries, more visitor estimates exist from on-site counting (Andersen *et al.* 2012; Andersen *et al.* 2014). More than 13 national recreation surveys were conducted in Norway, which might also include site-specific numbers (Aasetre 2008; Kajala *et al.* 2006).

In **Germany**, intensive visitor counting programs have evolved only in recent years. The recreational value of nature areas has been approached less in a quantitative manner by research and policy documents than in other countries (Mann 2007). Even though some economic valuation studies on recreation exist (Elsasser and Meyerhoff 2007), we could obtain visitor numbers only for national parks provided by studies that are mainly supervised by Hubert Job from the University of Würzburg (Job *et al.* 2003; 2005; 2010; Job and Stein 2010). Müritznational park is the only area for which we found time-series of total visitors (NPA 2010). Nevertheless, in 2011 the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation initiated a socioeconomic monitoring program, which resulted in visitor monitoring and counting activities in several protected areas.

In **France and Spain** the situations are similar. We obtained visitor numbers of national parks and some single additional sites only, but without reference to the applied methodologies. Nevertheless, visitor estimates have existed for all Spanish national parks for several years. Only very few publications on visitor monitoring and recreational valuation are published in English and language barriers made it difficult to derive further information on the visitor monitoring activities. We found some studies on the economic valuation of recreation, indicating that further visitor numbers exist in France, but could not obtain them (Bonnieux and Rainelli 2003; Scherrer 2003).

In **Austria and Switzerland** some isolated studies were found that provided visitor numbers to most national parks and some other sites. Studies result from individual initiatives of researchers and site managers. We could not identify an institutional setting for collecting such data across sites. In Austria, the team of Arne Arnberger from BOKU University is active in visitor monitoring, but focuses more on aspects such as evaluating device accuracy (Arnberger *et al.* 2005), crowding effects (Arnberger and Brandenburg 2007) or visitor structures (Arnberger and Brandenburg 2002), than on the recreational value of various recreation sites.

Language barriers particularly hindered the search for visitor numbers in eastern and southeastern Europe. Nevertheless, also thanks to the helpfulness of stakeholders, we could obtain visitor numbers and spatial information for all national parks in **Poland and Hungary**. An evaluation of general visitor monitoring activities in Eastern Europe beyond these activities was only possible in parts. We found some isolated studies offering visitor estimates for single sites in **Slovakia** (Taczanowska 2004) and in the **Czech Republic** (Cihar *et al.* 2008a; Cihar *et al.* 2008b). For the **Baltic countries**, only one estimate was discovered in **Latvia**, although some publications indicate growing activities in visitor monitoring (Kajala *et al.* 2006; Livina 2014). We obtained some visitor numbers from an extensive visitor counting in **Estonian** forest- and national parks, but they were not yet scaled up to an annual basis (Karoles & Maran 2014; Roose & Sepp 2012; Vitek 2012).

In addition, we obtained some visitor estimates from isolated studies also for **Croatia** (Lukač 2002; Pettenella 2008), **Slovenia** (Erhartic *et al.* 2012), **Belgium** (Doidi *et al.* 2012; Gilissen and Van Den Bosch 2013), **Iceland** (Ólafsson 2012) and **Ireland**. Several of the Irish visitor estimates are part of economic valuation studies (Cronin *et al.* 2000; Cullinan *et al.* 2008a; Hynes and Hanley 2006). Even though some visitor monitoring take place, we could not obtain any total annual visitor estimate for a specific case study area in **Portugal** (de Oliveira and Mendes 2014; Mendes *et al.* 2012), in **Greece** (Xanthopoulou 2007) and in **Cyprus** (Kakouris 2007).

3.3 Proposed Reporting Standard for Visitor Counting

Surprisingly, visitor monitoring studies and in particular visitor counting are typically characterised by relatively rudimentary reporting on the applied methodologies and study areas. In many publications not even the case study area is sufficiently defined, although this information is crucial because recreational behaviour has a highly spatial dimension. The size of the study area is fundamental for defining the average visitors per hectare, which is the most important indicator to assess the recreational value of different landscapes and to compare different recreational sites. Geo-locating the case study area — by some centroid coordinates, or better by displaying clear borders of the site — is essential for assessing any characteristics of the site not reported in the study itself. Even if the study estimates visitor numbers of a national park, the definition of the case study area is not always as clear as someone may expect. National parks may consist of zones of different protection levels and its borders may change over time. For many studies, study area identification is impossible without contacting the authors. If the monitored site cannot be identified, then what is the use of the estimated visitor numbers? Researchers may want to use the data for future research, acquire further information on the site, compare it to other sites and may display it on larger scale GIS maps. For identifying ecosystem characteristics and landscape features that attract recreational visitors, accurate, spatially explicit and fine-resolution visitor estimates are required.

The methodologies used to estimate total recreational visitors are manifold and may have a substantial effect on the accuracy of the result and may introduce a systematic bias. Even though some publications call for standardised visitor monitoring programs (Kajala *et al.* 2006; Kajala *et al.* 2007), the used methodologies will never be the same across all studies. Detailed reporting standards allow for comparing different studies by controlling for the effects of different methodologies. Statistical analysis in terms of meta-analysis (a common procedure in many other disciplines) is a helpful tool to identify effects of different methods on study results as well as the effects of different ecosystem characteristics. Thereby, intra-area comparison can be done even though non-standardised approaches are used, and drivers of recreational use can be identified. In addition, methods for estimating total visitors numbers can evolve and new ways of recreational use estimation can develop. New data sources such as GPS tracking, remote sensing and social media data, may allow for new methods of visitor number estimation.

We therefore propose a reporting standard for recreational visitor counting studies in a language accessible to the international research community (Table 1). All the methodological aspects that may have an impact on the final visitor estimates should be reported. A spreadsheet template for visitor counting reporting can be found in the appendix of this chapter. This could be used as a minimum requirement for peer reviewed publications that contain visitor counting. The spreadsheet template contains a “*must have reporting standard*” sheet, which is considered to be the absolute minimum methodological and spatial reporting on visitor counting studies, a “*should have reporting standard*” sheet, which we strongly recommend in order to allow statistical analysis of different methodological variables and a “*nice to have reporting standard*” sheet, which contains more detailed reporting options on the spatial distribution of visitors and visitor counting within the study area. The template is flexible as it allows users to add new variables and questions in order to fit it to specific user needs and to be extended to more general visitor monitoring studies.

Table 2: Proposed reporting standard for visitor counting studies.

Methodology	Description
Study area	<p>A clear definition of the study area including information on the size and location, preferably by a GIS shape file, otherwise by a map illustration in combination with reference coordinates;</p> <p>Further information on the type of ecosystem and the availability of recreational facilities such as trail length, activities offered, visitor centres, etc.</p>
Year	Declaration of data collection periods and the year that are correlated with the final visitor estimates.
Counting methods	<p>Clear description of the counting methods used (on-site vs. off-site methods):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- On-site: direct vs. indirect methods; direct counting: personally, interviews, automated counting via turnstiles, photoelectric counters, pressure sensitive devices or video counters etc.; validation of automated counter against false counts; Indirect methods: analysis of car parks, trace use, garbage, ticket sales or deterioration of certain facilities; self-registration via guest books and boxes at summits or huts etc.; use of related statistic such as overnight stays in hotels etc.- Off-site: catchment population interviews via post, telephone or personally, expert judgment. <p>Detailed description of visitor counting methods can be found in (Cessford and Muhar 2003; Muhar and Arnberger 2002).</p>
Number of counts / interviews	The number of interviews taken and / or of counts made in order to estimate the total visitor numbers for the study area; the refusal rate of interviews and the targeted survey population
Type of visitors counted	The type of visitors, if only a certain type of visitors is assessed, such as defined by the type of activities (anglers, hikers or boaters), mode of transport or length of stay (day trip vs. overnight)
Spatial and temporal counting resolution	The counting resolution including information on the number and length of counting, number of counting samples and number of counting locations; the time of counting (day time, week days, months, seasons); the type of counting locations (entrance point, central hub, peripheral location etc.); coordinates of counting locations; selection of counting locations and temporal counting samples (random, systematic)
Up-scaling methodology	Methodology used to scale-up counting samples to entire area and entire year (temporal: all-year counting, visitor interview information, expert guessing, temporal trends, accounting for weather etc.; spatial: comprehensive all entrance points counting, statistical modelling, trend analysis, visitor interview information, expert guessing)

In collaboration with the TAPAS Group, IUCN and the WCPA, the visitor counting reporting template has also been translated into a web interface that allows users to report their visitor counting studies online and obtain a filled spread sheet. The web interface is meant to automate visitor data collection

and to construct a global visitor database that will be shared via <http://esp-mapping.net>. Please visit the site and encourage everybody to share their data at <http://rris.biopama.org/visitor-reporting>.

4. Discussion

Detailed reporting of the visitor counting methodology is of great importance for two reasons. First, it enables readers to distinguish sound studies from rudimentary ones. Some visitor numbers circulating in the web may result from an unverified guess only, whereas others are based on long-term intensive visitor counting and monitoring programs and therefore are far more reliable. Visitor data quality has been given little consideration in secondary research (Hill and Courtney 2006), partly because the lack of given information makes it difficult to judge the quality of the visitor estimates. Empirical findings in Schägner *et al.* (2016a) indicate that rough guesses have the tendency of over-estimating visitor numbers. Managers and stakeholders may tend to exaggerate the recreational importance of their sites, as for example, in the case of Harz national park in Germany. Initial visitor numbers circulated by the national park administration amounted to about 45 million visitors a year (Mehnen 2005; Ruschkowski 2010), but this estimate was reduced later, first to 10 million (Lehar *et al.* 2004), then to about 4 million ('Nationalpark Harz' 2015), and finally, after a solid visitor monitoring to 1.7 million (Job *et al.* 2014). The counting method and the spatial and temporal counting resolution may be a good indicator of the uncertainties involved with visitor estimates. Visitor counting programs that are based on a few and short counting periods at a few counting locations across a large study area, require more assumptions to be made in order to generate the total visitor estimate. These assumptions should be made transparent. Presently, relatively cheap visitor counting devices are available allowing for remote access and thus comprehensive visitor counting within recreational areas is on a rise. Reporting on the used methodology becomes therefore even more important in order to distinguish reliable results from the vast amount of unverified numbers published on the web.

Second, methodological reporting allows for conducting meta-analysis of multiple visitor counting studies and thereby estimates how different recreational sites characteristics and counting methods may affect estimated visitors. This may help to improve visitor counting methods and give insights into the drivers of recreational use. Meta-analysis of multiple studies is common in various disciplines to synthesise research findings and identify patterns among study results, the effects of methodological choices and the effects of study object characteristics that may be observed by analysing multiple studies. It has a long history, mainly in epidemiology (Deeks *et al.* 2001) and clinical trials (DerSimonian and Laird 1986), but also in environment economic valuation (Rosenthal and DiMatteo 2001) psychology (Lipsey and Wilson 2000) or ecology (Claudet *et al.* 2008). Quality and methodological reporting standards are prerequisite for a successful application.

The collection of high quality, standardized and spatially explicit statistics of the number of visitors is also relevant for recreational service mapping and spatial modelling, which is one major input for natural capital accounting. Real world observation of recreational use is required to calibrate and validate geo-statistical models for ecosystem service mapping (Schägner *et al.* 2013). The EU 7th Environment Action Programme (EAP) and the EU Biodiversity Strategy include objectives to develop natural capital accounting (NCA) in the EU, with a focus on ecosystems and their services. In 2015, the European Commission has launched a dedicated initiative called INCA (Integrated system of Natural Capital and ecosystem services Accounting). The data collected in this study and our call for a reporting standard constitute a first valuable input to developing accounts which track the recreational use of nature in the EU over time (EKC 2015).

Ideally, for a spatial ecosystem service model calibration, study sites of primary data collection would be randomly selected, as done for example in ecology for estimating species distributions (Keirle 2002). Random sampling is of great importance to obtain unbiased estimators in regression analysis.

Nevertheless, the visitor data presented in this paper is strongly biased towards sites being prone of receiving high recreational visitor numbers, such as national parks or other protected areas. However, the aim of many visitor counting exercises as well as of spatial recreational service modelling is to highlight the recreational value or importance of certain ecosystems as compared to others. Therefore, it is not only important to know how many people visit a specific national park or recreational area, but also how few people visit an ordinary landscape. We therefore encourage the collection of visitor data for the general countryside and not only for specific recreational areas.

Finally, data sharing offers great benefits to science in general by allowing researchers to access multiple data sets at low costs and to combine them into valuable findings. Information technologies, metadata tools and repositories offer great opportunities for data sharing and many online data sharing tools have evolved (Drakou *et al.* 2015; JRC 2015). The Digital Observatory for Protected Areas (DOPA, <http://dopa.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>), for example, provides a set of web services and applications that can be used primarily to assess, monitor, report and possibly forecast the state of and the pressure on protected areas at multiple scales (Dubois *et al.* 2013; 2015). The data, indicators, maps and tools provided by the DOPA can be used to support spatial planning, resource allocation, protected area development and management as well as national and international reporting by a number of end-users including policy makers, funding agencies, protected area agencies and managers, researchers and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Although currently following a top-down approach that provides local data derived from global data sets, it is the objective of the forthcoming Open DOPA to capture information from the ground by allowing end-users to submit local information on the presence of key species, threats and pressures, projects, infrastructure and recreational visitors. Sharing visitor numbers through our web interface at rris.biopama.org/visitor-reporting presents a first contribution to the Open DOPA and will allow researchers to easily access, visualise and further analyse such data to better understand recreational patterns and stimulate the exchange of ideas and knowledge.

5. Conclusion

We reviewed visitor monitoring activities across Europe with a special focus on visitor counting and composed a geo-database on annual recreational visitor numbers to non-urban ecosystems across Europe, including 1,267 observations of 518 separate case study areas. The database gives insights into visitor monitoring and counting activities and recreation trends across Europe and it highlights the importance of recreation as an ecosystem service of non-urban ecosystems. Based on the review, we identify shortcomings and fields of improvements for future visitor monitoring and counting activities. In particular, we find that the presentation of results and methodologies is relatively unsatisfactory compared to other disciplines. Therefore, we propose a general reporting standard template for visitor counting studies with a special focus on: (1) case study area definition, (2) methodology documentation and (3) data sharing. It is meant to increase visitor monitoring professionalism and its scientific perception, and to facilitate the use of data for further research as well as the exchange of knowledge.

Visitor monitoring has moved on from sole visitor counts towards a manifold research topic, focusing on a variety of aspects such as visitor experiences, needs, attitudes and perceptions as well as activities, movement patterns, crowding effects, conflicts and wildlife disturbance (Aoki *et al.* 2014; Loomis 2000). However, it is necessary to note that simple visitor numbers are still a crucial piece of information and missing accurate visitor estimates are still a major obstacle in site management and secondary research (Booth 2006; Eagles 2014; Hill and Courtney 2006; Loomis 2000). Information on total recreational use is essential for assessing the value and importance of different nature areas for recreation and for identifying the determining factors of different sites' recreational values, but also

for estimating visitors' impacts on resources, recreational facility management, budget allocation, for assessing the economic contribution of tourism and finally to defend recreational areas against competing uses. Advancements in automated visitor counting technologies, but also new data sources such as GPS tracking, drones, high resolution satellite imagery, social media data, mobile phone traffic and smart phone apps may allow for more accurate and precise visitor estimates at lower costs.

By sharing data across the scientific community via online data sharing tools, the data provides a valuable asset for secondary research activities. The importance of reliable, comparable and accessible recreational visitor statistics has been recognised within the scientific community (Engels 2016; Spenceley 2016). Therefore, we aim at facilitating the reporting on visitor counting studies as well as the sharing of visitor data by providing a new web interface that allows users to insert their data. Please visit and promote our web interface and contribute to a global database on recreational visitor numbers in protected and nature areas at: rris.biopama.org/visitor-reporting.

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Appendix

Table A3.1: Database of annual visitor counts to sampled nature areas

Site Name	km ²	1985	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	mean	Reference		
Austria																																
Donaube Floodplain NP Forest (Lobbau)	24																														600,000	(Arnberger 2006)
Lower Austria Donaube Floodplain NP	69																400,000														400,000	(Arnberger & Brandenburg 2007)
Nationalpark Hohe Tauern	1,751																		1,750,000												1,750,000	(Lehar et al. 2004)
Nationalpark Hohe Tauern, Kärnten	299																		165,180												165,180	(Lehar et al. 2004)
Nationalpark Hohe Tauern, Kärnten2	314															102,200															102,200	(Wiederwald et al. 2000)
Nationalpark Hohe Tauern, Salzburg	805																		917,488												917,488	(Lehar et al. 2004; Wiederwald et al. 2000)
Nationalpark Hohe Tauern, Tirol	611																		446,720												446,720	(Lehar et al. 2004)
Naturpark Raab	147																						30,796								30,796	(Weixlbaumer et al. 2007)
Nockberge	171															320,000															320,000	(Wiederwald et al. 2000)
NP Hohe Tauern, Kärnten, Ankogelgruppe	144																		109,130												109,130	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Kärnten, Mölltal	169																		56,050												56,050	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Felbertal	6																		39,180												39,180	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Fuschertal	91																		23,020												23,020	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Gasteinertal	95																		87,790												87,790	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Grodärfal	44																		93,260												93,260	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Habachtal	43																		19,110												19,110	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Hollersbachtal	63																		30,360												30,360	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Kaprunertal	28																		133,120												133,120	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Obersulzbachtal	114																		29,080												29,080	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Salzburg, Stubachtal	25																		44,070												44,070	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Tirol, Debanttal	42																		50,850												50,850	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Tirol, Defreggental	148																		50,190												50,190	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Tirol, Kalsertal	116																		91,170												91,170	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Tirol, Matrei Umgebung	90																		25,200												25,200	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Tirol, Tauernthal	60																		44,350												44,350	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP Hohe Tauern, Tirol, Virgental	127																		93,790												93,790	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP HT Salzburg, Zillertaler Alpen, Wilde Gerlos	131																		458,620												458,620	(Lehar et al. 2004)
NP HT, Salzburg, Rauris-Seidwinkeltal	126																		170,580												170,580	(Lehar et al. 2004)

Slovenia																																														
Triglav	838																						2,000,000	(Wiederwald et al. 2000)																						
Spain																																														
Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici	139																							(INE 2012)																						
Archipiélago de Cabrera	100																							(INE 2012)																						
Caballeros	409																							(INE 2012)																						
Caldera de Taburiente	44																							(INE 2012)																						
Doñana	554																							(INE 2012)																						
Garajonay	38																							(INE 2012)																						
Islas Atlánticas de Galicia	11																							(INE 2012)																						
Monfragüe	184																							(INE 2012)																						
Ordesa y Monte Perdido	157																							(INE 2012)																						
Picos de Europa	641																							(INE 2012)																						
Sierra Nevada	863																							(INE 2012)																						
Tablas de Daimiel	19																							(INE 2012)																						
Teide	190																							(INE 2012)																						
Timanfaya	52																							(INE 2012)																						
Sweden																																														
Abisko	77																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Ångsö	0.83																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Blå Jungfrun	0.70																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Dalby söderskog	0.36																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Djurö	3																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Färnebofjärden	70																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Fulufjället National Park	408																							(Nasstrom 2012; Taylor 2004; Fredman et al. 2007)																						
Garphyttan	1																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Gotska Sandön	45																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Hamra	14																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Haparanda Skärgård	7																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Kosterhavet	8																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Muddus	511																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						
Pieljekaise	155																							(Nasstrom 2012)																						

