VISITOR INFORMATION AND WAYFINDING NEEDS

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WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Marcus Sangster
Forestry Commission
(CHAIR)

The research that underpins the presentations at this CRN seminar has its roots in feedback that the Forestry Commission had from visitor surveys in 2001. Visitors reported difficulty in finding their way to our sites. When we looked into this we found that there was scope for improving not only the way that we signposted the routes to our sites, but also the directions and information that we provide for our visitors once they have arrived.

We therefore asked OPENspace in Edinburgh to help us to develop a simple approach that would help our staff see their recreation facilities and signs through the eyes of their visitors.

Time and again surveys show that good information is the number one concern of visitors to the countryside, often making the difference between an enjoyable or a frustrating day out. Too much information seems to be as unhelpful as too little. It is the sequence and structure of information that makes it successful.

The approach that OPENspace have developed applies to all visitor sites; it is not specific to forests. We are grateful to the Peak District National Park who helped in the development of the method and collaborated in its field-testing.

Signs are expensive to install and they require a lot of maintenance. OPENspace's simple approach can be used to reduce the costs of excessive information on a site, something that often arises over time as each new facility is given its own separate signs. So the methodology is a useful tool to ensure that signs are not only effective, but also efficient and cost effective.

The Forestry Commission is pleased to make the method available to anyone who wants to use it. I hope that recreation managers and visitors equally will benefit from the research.

Countryside Recreation Network Seminar

VISITOR INFORMATION AND WAYFINDING NEEDS

OPENspace RESEARCH CENTRE AND COUNTRYSIDE VISITOR NEEDS

Professor Catharine Ward Thompson
OPENspace

OPENspace, the research centre for inclusive access to outdoor environments, is based in Landscape Architecture at Edinburgh College of Art and the School of the Built Environment at Heriot-Watt University. OPENspace is developing leading-edge research in the fields of: disability and social inclusion; health and restorative environments; and tourism. The research undertaken by OPENspace includes access for disabled people, for ethnic minorities, for children and their carers, for older people and for other traditionally disadvantaged groups.

A recent scoping study undertaken for the Countryside Agency's Diversity Review revealed the need for more rigorous research to explore effectiveness of projects to increase access to and enjoyment of the countryside. Through its Wider Welcome programme, the Countryside Agency is addressing the commitments of The Rural White Paper, 'Our countryside: the future' (November 2000), to encourage more people with disabilities, more people from ethnic minorities, more people from the inner cities, and more young people to visit the countryside and participate in country activities. OPENspace's research found that many people currently experience real or perceived barriers to access and this highlighted the importance of effective engagement with target groups of users and their needs (Countryside Agency 2004). The project described below, undertaken on behalf of the Forestry Commission, is an example of research which takes the user's perspective as its starting point and explores the needs of visitors to the countryside and the problems that potential visitors may encounter.

The 'wayfinding' project was stimulated by the results of Forestry Commission visitor surveys which showed that there was a wide variation in visitors' ratings for road signs at different Forestry Commission sites, ranging from 38% to 100% satisfaction depending on the site. It was recognized that this might conceal a broader problem in relation to accessing countryside facilities, and that road signs and wayfinding in general needed to be reviewed. A research project was commissioned to explore the following:
What are the problems associated specifically with forest and countryside wayfinding?
How well do existing wayfinding systems address these problems?
Can a tool be developed to assist designers and site managers in making investment in wayfinding infrastructure more effective?

In order to address these problems, the theoretical background to wayfinding issues was explored through the literature. Visitors to forest sites require information at various stages in the recreation journey, from the initial decision to visit a particular site to arriving at and achieving their recreational goal for that site. Wayfinding is concerned with '...the ability to identify one's location and arrive at destinations in the environment, both cognitively and behaviourally' (Prestopnik and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2000) or, put more simply 'spatial problem-solving' (Passini, 1992). This may involve a variety of search processes and sources of information, of which signs are a key component, often supplemented by leaflets, published maps, personal contacts and word of mouth. Wayfinding ability appears to differ between individuals depending on age, gender, sense of direction, familiarity with the environment and wayfinding strategy (Prestopnik and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2000; Lawton et al 1996). There is evidence that there are two, principal strategies for wayfinding: the first assumes an understanding of the spatial structure of the environment and key locations within it – a kind of mental map – where people rely on the spatial relationships between locations to navigate; the second is based on people's knowledge of places and the routes that connect them which are used to navigate. Users unfamiliar with an environment may start with one strategy and switch to another as they become familiar with a place. It appears that landmarks (Lynch, 1960) play a key role in wayfinding and help navigation of both familiar and unfamiliar territory.

Caves and Pickard (2001) have shown that, in spatially complex routes, signage may be essential, but this may frequently be accompanied by problems of visual clutter, where wayfinding signs become confused with other signs and become hard to pick out. They also observed that people differ in how they remember signs: some remember signs by colour, others by form and structure, numbers or symbols.

Phase One of the wayfinding project was a scoping study which highlighted wayfinding problems associated with the location, context and content of signs: are visitors finding their way easily to sites they want to visit; does the information provided to visitors enable them to use the site effectively once they arrive; and is the issue to do with signage or something more? A user-led approach was used to explore the issues on a range of forest recreation sites across Britain. Sites investigated were: Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, Glencoe Lochan, Cannock Chase and Hafren. Visitor behaviour was observed and visitors and site managers were interviewed as part of the research to investigate what the real problems are for visitors (Findlay, Southwell et al 2001).

A particular issue identified was the challenge of providing visitors with the right information at the right place. Visitors were confused by an apparent absence of signs at key junctions along the route, or else by signs which were present but obscured by a clutter of competing signs. Once on site, there was often further confusion, when visitors were presented with an overabundance of signs, many of which were unnecessary, and which visitors were unable to assimilate in time. Symbols and pictograms used on some signs were not always registered or comprehended by visitors. These problems meant that although information was available to visitors it was inappropriately located or in an inaccessible form. A signage model was developed to express the key elements of successful signage:

provision of the right information in the right location and addressing people's real needs.

Phase two of the wayfinding project built on this analysis, using further site-specific, case studies to develop a toolkit that could be used by site managers to problems and potential solutions. The sites used were: Afan Argoed, South Wales, Coed-y-Brenin, North Wales, Pages Wood, Essex, and Moors Valley, Dorset. The research demonstrated the importance of assessing wayfinding problems and visitor needs carefully, in order to make best use of resources and ensure that potential visitors are not unfairly excluded. Signage and other information provision represents a considerable investment in development and maintenance costs for countryside recreation sites. If wayfinding issues are not properly assessed before implementing site changes or new proposals, significant investment in resources may be wasted (Findlay and Southwell, 2003)

A key finding from the research is that role-playing the first time visitor's experience is essential to the approach. This reveals a range of practical responses to the environment which can help determine better strategies for visitor provision. Such an approach demonstrates how and where too many signs can be as much of a problem as too few, and thus where adding another sign may not help and, indeed, may contribute to confusion. Some signs are in the wrong place to be effective - the right information in the right location is the crucial factor, and the research demonstrates how important it is to get this right.

It appears that people need double reassurance to be confident of a direction - often a sign and another visual signal from the environment that confirms what is being sought. Double reassurance would seem to be vital to good wayfinding. Thus environmental legibility, not just signage legibility, is important, and a combination of the two may be particularly effective, e.g. a sign to the site entrance and a view of an "entrance-like" turnoff or a sign to the toilets and a view of a likely building.

Analysis of issues led to development of the VIEW toolkit for use by forest, woodland and countryside recreation site and park managers. It addresses visitor information and wayfinding needs and is applicable to sites which attract visitors from a nation-wide catchment area as well as sites which attract more regional or local use, such as community woodlands. It is designed to enable site managers to identify problems with existing provisions, such as road or footpath signs and information leaflets, but also to help managers predict and avoid problems with proposed new provisions. For example, expensive signs may be erected which contain confusing or unnecessary information, or opportunities to improve matters with little additional investment may be overlooked, e.g. moving an existing sign to a more effective location. Using the wayfinding toolkit should enable managers to identify what changes are needed, where to invest money and design effort, and where money can be saved.

Essentially the VIEW toolkit is one which assists designers and managers to see a site's problems through the eyes of first-time visitors. In allowing the user's perspective to drive the process of problem analysis and identification of solutions,

it embraces an inclusive approach and at the same time provides a practical way of determining priorities for effective investment.

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VISITOR INFORMATION AND WAYFINDING NEEDS

THE VIEW TOOLKIT - INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUES AND THE THREE SURVEY TOOLS

Dr Catherine Findlay and Dr Katherine Southwell
OPENspace

Introduction

Visitors to countryside recreation sites require information at various stages of the recreational journey, from the initial decision to visit a site, to arriving at and using a site. Information needs change according to what the visitor needs to know at each stage of the journey. The VIEW Toolkit comprises three survey tools, and four analysis tools. Most of the examples refer to visitors travelling by car, however the general principles of the survey and analysis tools relate equally to those arriving on foot, by cycle or on horse. The survey tools comprise an information survey, visitor survey and sign survey, which are used to screen for potential problem areas, which are then explored and assessed using the analysis tools.

Four main problems

Research at a number of Forestry Commission sites suggested four likely problem areas, each of which relates to a specific tool:

1. Pre-arrival information – particularly inconsistency of names and labels used to refer to the site, its facilities and directions to it (Tool 1 Informational Consistency).
2. Approach route - a lack of advance warning and reassurance at route junctions (Tool 2 Approach Route Connectivity).
3. Finding the site entrance. Visitors may miss the site entrance if an 'entrance-like' opening and advance warning sign are not clearly visible (Tool 3 Entrance Reassurance).
4. Arrival on site. Visitors may become confused, lost or frustrated once on site if the desired facility or location is not obvious on arrival (Tool 4 Arrival Legibility).

The information survey

The information survey is used to role play the first time visitor experience of looking for information about a site. A survey is made of the leaflets, books, magazines, road atlases and OS maps and relevant websites that a potential site visitor might come across when searching for information about a particular site or specific activity. It is also useful to role play the first time visitor experience by enquiring at local Tourist Information Offices. For example 'I would like to visit a forest, go for a walk with my family' etc. The information survey helps to build up a

picture of site names, activities, directions and visitor expectations and particularly feeds into Tool 1 – Informational Consistency.

The visitor survey

Visitor surveys and semi-structured interviews are commonly carried out at many sites and are a useful method of gaining visitor perspectives and site ratings. One key point about questionnaires is not to ask questions that can be answered with one word answers e.g. 'how easy was it to…?' instead of 'was it easy…?' Similarly visitors rarely admit to difficulties and would respond more favourably to 'Can you tell me about any difficult junctions?' rather than 'Did you have any problems…?' It is also interesting to observe visitor behaviour (what they actually did) in conjunction with questionnaire responses (what they said that they did). For example one visitor stated that there was no-one to ask for help, when she was observed walking into a shop but not speaking to anyone!

The key questions from the visitor survey were:
How do you refer to this site?
This question was useful for exploring issues to do with site identity and key activities. (Tool 1 – Informational Consistency).
Can you describe your approach route to the site, as if to a first time visitor?
It is useful to know the key approach routes to a site, as well as any landmarks, road numbers and place names cited in directions. This question was also useful to probe visitors about difficult road junctions or problems with road signs. (Tool 2 - Approach route connectivity).
How would you describe your experience of the site entrance?
Visitors are asked to describe their experience of finding and using the site entrance, particularly whether there was enough advance warning, if they saw the entrance in time and if they had enough time to react safely. (Tool 3 – Entrance Reassurance).
How easy was it to find the car park, toilets, where the key activities start etc?
Visitors are then 'talked' through their experience of arriving at the site from parking the car, finding site information, toilets and other arrival-related scenarios. Visitors are prompted for the information they used, signs and other cues used, and areas of difficulty. (Tool 4 – Arrival legibility).

The sign survey

The sign survey audits both on- and off-site signage systems and environmental cues, recording location, content and visibility at travelling speed. There are 3 steps:

Step 1. Identify the key approach routes to the sites.

The key approach routes are identified from the visitor survey, road atlas and OS map. A route map is then constructed by tracing the key roads in relation to the site and its boundaries. For example at Afan Argoed (SS 820950) three potential approach routes to the site were recorded:
Route 1. via Pontrhydyfen
Route 2. from J40 of the M4

Route 3 from Cymer and the Rhondda Valley.
At this particular site, most visitors used route 2, and so if resources are limited this would be the key approach to focus on.

Step 2. Identify and photograph the readable signs at driving speed.

This involves driving the key approach routes at driving speed and identifying all the signs that can be seen as you drive alone. Signs are photographed (at driving speed) by a passenger and plotted onto the route map. At this stage only readable and therefore useable signs are recorded.

Step 3. Audit all signs

The driver and passenger then drive the approach route again at a much slower speed, this time looking for every sign along the route, regardless of whether it is clearly visible or not at driving speed. The locations of all the signs are then plotted on the route map. By highlighting the signs that are visible at driving speed, comparisons can be made between actual and usable road and site signs. Where safe and appropriate to do so, each sign along the approach route is then photographed to show the sign in context (i.e. background) and also in detail to show signage content.

At this stage other site cues are also recorded which might be used by visitors, and which suggest that they are approaching the site. These may include :
human cues such as mountain bikers on trails
road signs for concealed entrances, cyclists, hazardous road bends
site signage visible from the road e.g. for walking or mountain bike trails
buildings visible from the road e.g. a visitor centre.
distinctive landmarks which might facilitate the visitor wayfinding process.

This process can also be used to survey non-vehicular approach routes to the site, such as those used by cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders. Again, the point is to compare actual signage with that visible at travelling speed, be it on foot, cycle, horse or car.

A similar process is also followed when auditing on-site signage and cues. All signs, environmental cues and evidence of ‘human traces’ are plotted onto a site plan. The researchers (or site personnel carrying out the data collection) then role play various arrival scenarios, for example, finding the visitor centre from the car park, and record the signs and cues which are actually used to arrive at the desired facility.

Screening for potential problems

The information, visitor and sign survey are used to screen for potential problems with wayfinding and visitor information provision. This enables site managers to highlight where problems are. The analysis tools are then used to identify the specific nature of each problem.

VISITOR INFORMATION AND WAYFINDING NEEDS

THE VIEW TOOLKIT - INTRODUCTION TO THE ANALYSIS TOOLS

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Introduction

The analysis tools of the VIEW Toolkit relate to the four potential problem areas in visitor wayfinding and information provision. These are: the site name, approach route, finding the site entrance and using the site. Four analysis tools are used to evaluate different aspects of the entire wayfinding experience:

Tool 1. Informational consistency - analyses consistency in the initial information sources, signs and environmental cues that refer to the site, its facilities and how to get there.
Tool 2. Approach route connectivity - analyses approach routes to the site, key junctions and problem areas, directional and reassurance signs.
Tool 3. Entrance reassurance - analyses the experience of finding the site entrance and classifies the main entrance types.
Tool 4. Arrival legibility - analyses site legibility on arrival in terms of visitor scenarios such as finding the car park, visitor centre or start of the walks etc.

Site managers can use all or relevant parts of the toolkit, to identify problems with wayfinding and visitor information provision at existing sites, as well as predict and avoid problems with proposed new provisions.

Tool no. 1. Informational consistency

The information, visitor and sign surveys generated data which suggested that the directions to site given in key sources of literature such as the Forestry Commission's own leaflets and websites, may contain inconsistencies. These generally occurred in one of two ways:

a) route descriptions to site may not always match with the signs, landmarks and place names that actually exist in the physical setting (and that were visible in the driving view). For example one leaflet for a site in Wales suggested that visitors would find a site 'situated on the A4107 – follow the signs from the M4, junction 40' . When following these instructions, as one visitor relayed, they did not help since in reality there are no signs to the site from the M4 (as implied in the instructions). However, 'Cimla' was a key landmark place that was signed and on the route to site, and yet no mention was made in the instructions.

b) a variety of different names were often used to refer to the same site, for example Glentress Forest is referred to as Tweed Valley Forest Park, Glentress Forest, the Hub, 7stanes and Osprey watch.

Inconsistencies in route information and site names can have a negative effect on the wayfinding experience and therefore tool no. 1 assesses for informational consistency.

Step 1. Preparation

The first step in the process is to draw on data collected through the information survey, visitor interviews and sign survey. Key references to site are elicited from the information in general circulation, pulling out the names used to refer to the site and the key route and place names used to direct visitors to site. These are placed on a page which is divided into three sections. From left to right each section is labelled: 'I: pre-arrival', 'II: approach route', and 'III: entrance'.

Having assembled all publicity/'pre-arrival' information gathered from the information survey, key images and written references that relate to the following are extracted:
- site name, key activities or features
- essential route-finding information

These are written out in the left-hand section (I: pre-arrival).

Drawing on data collected during the sign survey, the photos for each of the signs/cues recorded (those which were visible from the driver's view) are lined up at the top of the page across section II (approach route) and section III (entrance) in the sequence in which they occurred along the route all the way to the entrance. Leave space below in the bottom half of the page.

Step 2. Analysis

A technique which we have called an 'information sign-line' is then used to analyse the information. In the bottom half of
the base sheet, arrows are drawn to link up different 'lines' of information. When a new stream of information is introduced, e.g. a new reference to site, or a new signage system, this must branch off the original information line. It is necessary to indicate the sign type (e.g. FC, Highway) and colour (e.g. brown/green), and any symbols introduced.

Step 3. Rating

A simple rating system is used as follows, the ideal being to have a single un-branched line:

A 'line' with no/few branches rates 'high'
A 'line' with multiple branching rates 'low'.

Tool no. 2. Approach route connectivity

The next tool assesses key junctions along the route to the site. When visitors were asked where they thought signs were most needed along a route to the site, people could generally pinpoint the most problematic junctions e.g. 'at the M4 junction' or 'the Aberfoyle junction'. However, users could not generally pinpoint the specific reasons why a junction was problematic.

When role-playing the driving experience, it was sometimes found that signs were present when needed most, but lost in a clutter of other signs or obscured by tree growth and therefore not visible, or that a sign was visible but not providing the reassurance visitors needed. This resulted in poor 'connectivity' from one section of the route to the next in the overall wayfinding system.

A good indication of a site that performed well in terms of 'route connectivity', i.e. had good junction signage, was a site that the visitor survey question 'how would you describe the journey to site as if to a first time visitor' would generate the response 'just follow the signs'. Using these sites to examine what constitutes a 'good' junction, it was found that these are systems where a sign not only gives the directional information needed but that it is positioned such that the visitor can actually see the road it is pointing at: thus, the visitor seemed to need this 'double' reassurance. A junction known as 'Ashley Heath' roundabout – a key junction en route to Moors Valley - was used as an example of such a junction.

Directional and reassurance information
are identified as key factors that can affect a visitor's wayfinding experience and these are therefore used as criteria for assessment using tool 2.

Step 1. Preparation

The first step in the process is to identify key junctions to site and highlight which are problematic. A case study example was used to demonstrate a junction that constituted a 'bad' junction at Queen Elizabeth Forest Park (QEFP) in Scotland where visitors indicated a problem, e.g.

'You need a book to know where it is – the sign in Aberfoyle could be missed'.

Step 2. Analysis

Using the QEFP example, the junction was role-played by breaking down the turning sequence into a series of small steps – literally walking through or 'tracking' the junction, recording in detail all the directional and reassurance signs and cues at the junction, noting the information that is provided and that which is actually visible from the driving view. This example illustrated how when 'tracking' this junction, the critical sign needed was indeed there, but completely obscured in a clutter of other signs.

Step 3. Rating

A rating system 'measures' directional and reassurance separately as two aspects of wayfinding at key junctions and then puts the two together:

- directional information: this is rated as low (D-) or high (D+)
- reassurance information: the junction is rated low (R-) or high (R+)

The two are put together to give an overall rating such as:
D+/R+ (good directional signage which helps the user feel reassured of being on the right road)
D+/R- (good directional information but lack of reassurance either because of a lack of a sign, or because the sign does not make visual connection with the road the user is to take)
D-/R+ (lack of directional information before a junction but some reassurance after the turning)
D-/R- (indicating a complete lack of directional and visual reassurance).

Tool no. 3. Entrance reassurance

Even if it is easy to find the approach route, with signs well placed for route connectivity (i.e. providing good directional and reassurance of being on the right route), it may still be difficult to find the entrance. Four entrance types were suggested by visitor experiences:

a) "I had plenty of advance warning and time to react when I saw the entrance"
b) "I had plenty of advance warning but the entrance came up suddenly and I had no time to react."
c) "I had no advance warning but had time to react when I saw the entrance"
d) "I had no advance warning and no time to react - I went straight past turned around and came back".

In identifying what factor or set of factors make an entrance easy to find (and therefore a 'good' entrance experience), it was found that the best sites indicated advance warning of the site in combination with a clear view of the entrance. Crucially, visitors did not appear to react to entrance signs, until they could see the entrance itself and therefore the key criterion for assessing the safety/usability of the site entrance is visual reassurance. This affects
all users – whether they are actively seeking the site or are 'just passing by' - because it affects their ability to find entrance and turn off safely.

In contrast, a 'bad' entrance experience for the first time visitor presented a situation that tended to result in flying straight past the entrance. On analysis, this was found to be because the entrance sign appears at exactly the same moment as passing the entrance. In such instances by the time the visitor made a visual connection been sign and entrance, it was too late to brake.

Visual reassurance, that is seeing the actual entrance, not just an entrance sign – was found to be significant in the context of the whole wayfinding experience, and therefore tool no. 3 assesses for entrance reassurance.

Step 1. Preparation

The first step in the process is to identify the entrance experience a site presents to the first time visitor. From the visitor survey key approach routes and direction of travel to the site entrance can be identified and whether any problems were mentioned by visitors. From the sign survey the photos of the signs/cues on the approach to the site entrance should be selected – using only those that were visible in the driving view on approach. On the site plan of the entrance area all the signs/cues are plotted.

Step 2. Analysis

Firstly, point 'A' is identified: this is the point at which the driver first sees the site entrance and the entrance sign together. This point can only be plotted by role-playing the driving experience in order to know where the entrance/sign arrangement comes into view at the speed of travel of the road, within the landscape where lines of visibility are determined by a number of different factors such as vegetation and topography.

Next, the 'triangle of vision' is plotted between point 'A', the entrance sign and the entrance itself. This represents the driver's reaction time.

Step 3. Rating

A simple rating system is used which measures the 'triangle of vision' :

Acute angle (long, thin triangle) : high rating (a 'good' entrance)
Midway: medium rating
Obtuse angle (short, wide triangle) : low rating (a 'bad' entrance)

Tool no. 4. Arrival legibility

Immediately upon arrival, visitors need to know where key facilities such as the Visitor Centre, information point, toilets, start of walk etc. are located in relation to the arrival point.

An effective way of assessing the arrival experience was found by using scenarios to construct the analysis. These are illustrated using examples from a site in Wales, by examining the scenario "where do the walks start?"
and "where are the toilets?"

Step 1. Preparation.

The first step in the process is to identify an arrival point 'A' for each arrival scenario. This point varies depending on the nature of the tasks involved for each e.g. 'where do the walks start' begins at a point after the car has been parked, usually at or around the visitor centre or main information point. Each scenario is walked through, step by step, noting any signs or visual cues that help the visitor

to find the desired facility. These are plotted on a site plan together with the location of the desired facility.

Step 2. Analysis

On the site plan a line of the route taken from point 'A' to the desired facility, indicating whether the visitor has no, partial or full reassurance.

Step 3. Rating

A rating is given for each individual scenario as follows:
Mostly dotted lines – 'low' rating
Mostly dashed lines – 'medium' rating
Mostly solid lines – 'high' rating

Summary

Using the four analysis tools, the complete toolkit enables the Forest Manager to identify whether or not there is a problem and if it is related to i) sign content, ii) sign placement, iii) the entrance and/or iv) the immediate arrival experience. The four analysis tools, in conjunction with the three survey methods and desk analysis, and are designed to enable the Forest Managers to identify where a problem lies and what is the nature of that problem.

Possible design solutions

The survey and analysis tools of the VIEW Toolkit are designed to enable site managers to understand where visitor information and wayfinding problems lie, and what changes might make a difference. These might include: inserting a sign, highlighting the site entrance, checking the site directions, or considering a more obvious site layout. However it is important that the impact of these changes are revisited and evaluated.

Post Script

Afan Forest Park update: Forestry Commission Wales and Neath Port Talbot County Council commissioned consultants to write a "Marketing and Interpretation Plan" last year and as a result all Afan signage & branding is being reviewed and updated. Afan Forest Park is a designated "Tourism Growth Area" in Wales, which includes a funding package, and a joint Local Authority/Forestry Commission Project Officer has been appointed to deliver an Action Plan for Afan.

Coed y Brenin Forest Park update: A £1.7 million Objective 1 project has just kicked off to provide a better visitor experience for all in Coed y Brenin Forest Park. As well as building a new visitor centre this will result in new signage and interpretation throughout the Forest Park.

VISITOR INFORMATION AND WAYFINDING NEEDS

THE NATIONAL PARK PERSPECTIVE

Sean Prendergast
Chief Ranger
Peak District National Park

The Peak District National Park sits in the geographic centre of England surrounded on all sides by the vast conurbations of Greater Manchester, South and West Yorkshire and the Midlands. It has an estimated 22 million day visits per year, is within two hours drive of half of the population of England and has been estimated to have over 100 individual honey pot locations and attractions.

However although it covers over 550 square miles, less than 4% of the land area is actually owned by the National Park Authority.
The geographic, historic and socio-economic mixture of the Peak District has combined to give a wide variety of visitor sites and attractions. They range from the formal – Stately homes such as Chatsworth and Haddon Hall, to the informal – Upper Derwent Valley, Stanage climbing edges etc.

But such a wide range of attractions means inevitably that there are also a wide range of players – mangers, owners and proprietors. Each separate organisation has it's own corporate objectives; in house design teams 'ways of doing things'. Yet as far as the public are concerned, their individual experience – good or bad- and whether they recommend or denounce to friends will simply relate to their day out in 'The Peak District'.

To try and work towards a set of common aims (and not of course just for visitors) we have developed an extensive range of successful partnerships and have been able to overcome many problems. Even so we have recognised that there is a very real need for a clear comprehensive toolkit for visitor signing, which can be, used a benchmark by all service providers working within the Peak District National Park

To try and achieve this we have been involved in the piloting and development of the VIEW toolkit, working primarily in the Upper Derwent Valley, a popular site owned by Severn Trent Water, the National Trust and the Forestry Commission, close to Sheffield. As part of this we:

- Took an overview and full survey
- Looked at who users were/where from
- Took on board principles in toolkit

In summary our findings were:

- Being strategic can eliminate clash AND clutter
- Less can be more!
- Inconsistency in place names!!

Our overall opinion of VIEW toolkit is a positive one. It is by no means a panacea for the myriad of visitor management challenges that we face in the Peak District, but it is a useful too in encouraging greater consistency and uniformity of approach, which in turn increases visitor confidence and enhances the overall experience.

VISITOR INFORMATION AND WAYFINDING NEEDS

CONCLUSIONS

Marcus Sangster
Forestry Commission

Countryside recreation today is a mature activity. After years of growth the number of visitors to the countryside has levelled out. People either have less leisure time, which seems unlikely, or they are doing other things with their time.

There are good reasons to encourage people to enjoy the countryside. In addition to the well-understood benefits of physical activity the outdoors provides space for social activities and shared interests. Time spent in a natural setting can help relieve the stress of modern life and also reconnects people with nature.

To maintain the number of visitors to the countryside we need to compete with other destinations and activities. We can do this by making countryside visitors feel welcome, and their visits as easy and enjoyable as possible. In today's consumerist world quality service is expected as a matter of course. Good information is increasingly important, and the quality of onsite information is one of the key factors by which a site is judged by its users.

I hope that the approach we introduced to you in this seminar, developed by OPENspace and made available to you through CRN, will help you maintain visitor interest and activity in the countryside that you manage.

APPENDIX A

VISITOR INFORMATION AND WAYFINDING NEEDS

PROGRAMME

09.30 Registration and refreshments

10.00 Welcome and introductory address by Chair *(Marcus Sangster, Forestry Commission)*

10.10 OPENspace Research Centre and countryside visitor needs *(Professor Catharine Ward Thompson, OPENspace)*

10.40 The VIEW Toolkit – introduction to the issues and the three Survey tools *(Dr Catherine Findlay and Dr Katherine Southwell, OPENspace)*

11.10 Refreshments

11.30 The VIEW Toolkit – introduction to Analysis tools *(OPENspace)*

- what is the site called?
- how do I get there?
- where is the entrance?
- How can I find out what to do next?

12.15 The view from the National Parks *(Sean Prendergast, Chief Ranger, Peak District National Park)*

12.30 Lunch

13.15 Introduction to site visit tasks

13.30 Depart for site visit – trying out the Toolkit

15.00 Refreshments on site and compare findings

15.40 Return to Heriot-Watt Campus for final remarks

16.30 Close

Note: the seminar will involve a woodland site visit and practical on-site task, so wear appropriate clothing and footwear; we recommend you bring a digital camera if you have one.

APPENDIX B

BIOGRAPHIES OF SPEAKERS

Visitor Information and Wayfinding Needs Seminar
Heriot-Watt University, Riccarton, Edinburgh
14th July 2004

CHAIR

Marcus Sangster
Forestry Commission

Marcus Sangster's early career was in forest management in the Highlands and Lake District. After moving to manage the Commission's woods in the Midlands he played a part in setting up the community forests and the National Urban Forestry Unit, and developed an interest in designing and managing woodland to meet the needs of people in urban areas.

Today he works in the Forestry Commission in Edinburgh where he advises on the social aspects of sustainable forest management and is responsible for the Commission's social research programmes, covering recreation and landscape as well as more theoretical topics.

Professor Catharine Ward Thompson

Director

OPENspace

Catharine Ward Thompson is Research Professor in Landscape Architecture and Director of OPENspace, the research centre for inclusive access to outdoor environments at Edinburgh College of Art and Heriot-Watt University. She has practiced as a landscape architect in Vancouver, Canada, and in the UK. She worked on the Megget Reservoir Scheme in Scotland from 1977 to 1983 for W J Cairns and Partners: this project was overall winner in the 1987 BBC Design Awards. She was Head of the School of Landscape Architecture at Edinburgh College of Art from 1989 to 2000. She has directed research for the Forestry Commission on wayfinding and on local woodland use and social inclusion in Central Scotland, and for the Countryside Agency on increasing the diversity of access to the English countryside. She is currently working on an international project exploring teenagers' use of open space, comparing urban environments in Scotland and the USA, and leading a collaborative consortium on a £0.5million EPSRC-funded project – I'DGO, inclusive design for getting outdoors - which