

Are Geoparks webpages attractive to potential tourists?

Some results of an evaluation procedure

D. I. PEREIRA - insuad@dct.uminho.pt (Geology Centre of University of Porto / Earth Sciences Centre of University of Minho)

D. RAMOS - castroramos@hotmail.com (Geological Heritage and Geoconservation Master Course student, University of Minho)

W. MEDINA - waltermanuelm@hotmail.com (Geological Heritage and Geoconservation Master Course student, University of Minho)

ABSTRACT: This study evaluates the attractiveness and interest of the Geoparks webpages to potential tourists. The work is based on filling a table consisting of 67 criteria rated from 1 to 5. The criteria are arranged in groups of seven indicators. This study shows that most webpages do not appeal to those who seek information on Geoparks with the intent of selecting a tourist destination. Standing out as major problems are disorganisation and dispersion of information, as well as the absence of fundamental information for those seeking a tourist destination.

KEYWORDS: Geopark, webpage, tourism, assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the Web is the main source of information for potential tourists to carry out pre-visit searches with regard to possible destinations for a tourist visit. Assuming that potential tourists already know the concept of Geotourism, most of them use keywords associated with this concept when conducting this search within Web browser. Decision-making is strongly influenced by the information found there and by the satisfaction level of the potential tourist. The satisfaction level is conditioned by subjective criteria such as aesthetics of the webpage or the ease of Web browsing, but also by more objective criteria such as the existence of essential information about geodiversity, geological heritage, biodiversity, culture, hotels, tour programs, among others.

The act of randomly browsing webpages by the authors led to a perception of inconsistency, low attractiveness and lack of important information within many of the webpages. It was also noted that in some cases a great deal of important information for potential tourists is not clearly identified, and is easily confused with scientific and educational programs. If these shortcomings are confirmed, it is our hypothesis that this is likely to correlate with a leak in the amount of tourists visiting the geoparks.

This research aims to give an objective answer to the hypothesis put forward, and is developed under the Master Course on Geological Heritage and Geoconservation of the University of Minho. This evaluation and critical analysis also intends to contribute to the efficiency of the promotion strategy of Geoparks.

2. METODOLOGY AND RESULTS

This study evaluates the attractiveness and interest to potential tourists of the webpages provided by the 77 geoparks included in the Global Geoparks Network, in May 2011. Eleven webpages, however, were not found.

Simultaneously, the information for school or educational programs, as well as the information designed toward a specialised science-oriented audience was evaluated. The work is based on filling a table of criteria built after the research on fundamental principles considered in this type of study (Kotler *et al.*, 1999, Nunes, 2008) [1]. The table consists of 67 criteria rated from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). The criteria are arranged in groups of seven indicators, briefly described and evaluated below.

- i. ***Geopark identification:*** Two criteria assess the presence of the term Geopark in the Geopark official name and the homepage. On some pages, the term Geopark is not included in official designation and/or not clearly included on the homepage, an aspect that makes research and access to the webpage slower and more difficult.
- ii. ***Design and usability of the webpage:*** This is assessed according to ten criteria such as attractiveness, visual effects, originality, updated information, logical structure and readability. Three webpages achieved good results, but most of the webpages were assessed as between poor and medium.
- iii. ***Quality of general contents on the webpage:*** This is evaluated according to eleven criteria, with emphasis on the assessment of the languages available on the webpage, the existence of a definition of Geopark, description and aims of Geoparks and the quality and accuracy of maps with regard to locating the Geopark. One webpage achieved good results but many of the webpages were assessed as poor.
- iv. ***Quality of webpage access and communication:*** Ease of access to the webpage is evaluated by the ranking of Geopark websites in the browser search, and by the number of occurrences of the webpage in different languages, using keywords related to the name, tourism and geology. Links to other related pages are also evaluated, as well as the timeliness and quality of e-mail communications with the public. A wide variety of results were observed, but the largest countries generally received the best ratings. On the other hand, many Geopark webpages do not include the possibility of communicating via e-mail, and many others did not respond to questions asked via e-mail.
- v. ***Attractiveness and interest of the webpage for geotourists:*** The attractiveness to potential tourists is evaluated according to nine criteria related to the existence and quality of images, information on schedules, routes, guided tours, events, leisure activities and download information. Three criteria evaluate information related to services such as hotels, restaurants, rent-a-car, attractions and amenities and links to booking. Five webpages were rated as good; however, most webpages appear to give very little attention to such information.
- vi. ***Attractiveness and interest of the webpage for basic and secondary school activities:*** This is assessed according to seven criteria focused on the identification of specific educational content and programs. The research was concentrated on visit programmes, guided tours, long-life training for teachers, availability of transport and download information. Four webpages stand out as having quality information and educational programs available, but many of the Geoparks show no interest in this type of visitor.
- vii. ***Attractiveness and interest of the webpage for scientific public:*** This is assessed according to eight criteria relating to the scientific content of the webpages, usually intended for a specialised audience. Evaluated are partnerships with scientific institutions (e.g., universities),

suggested protocols, field trips and other scientific activities, and logistical support for research. Four webpages obtained a good to medium rating, but the average rating was poor.

3. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that Geoparks should invest more in the quality of information provided through their webpages. Most webpages do not appeal to those who seek to know the Geoparks with the intent of selecting a tourist destination. Standing out as major problems are disorganisation and dispersion of information, as well as the absence of fundamental information for those looking for a tourist destination.

In general, it is suggested that the webpages offer browsing in several languages, and that areas of information for tourists, teachers and specialised audience in the homepage be clearly identified.

Also proposed are the following: the availability of maps on various scales, along with location information and schedules of interpretation centres in an area of the website dedicated specifically to tourists; the ability for the visiting sites, along with their content and interest, to be precisely identified; and, the identification and establishment of easy links with regard to logistics, such as hotels or tour operators.

The detailed results of this study will soon be available.

Acknowledgments

First author would like to express his gratitude for the financial support given by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia to the Geology Centre of University of Porto, which partially supports this research.

References

- Kotler, P., Armstrong G. Saunders, J. & Wong, V. (1999) – Principles of Marketing. European Edition. Prentice Hall, New Jersey, EUA
- Nunes, Manuela Barreto (2008) - Critérios de análise e avaliação de Sítios Web (ppt). Apresentação feita na disciplina de Sistemas Virtuais de Bibliotecas. Braga, Universidade Católica - Faculdade de Filosofia.
- [1] http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/special_initiatives/wa_resources/wa_shared/tipsheets/5Ws_of_cyberspace.cfm