

From qualities of place to qualities of experience

A summary of research

by

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Further details

Please see: www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/tourism

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Summary of research

This research was completed as part of a collaborative project between University of Exeter and Exmoor National Park Authority. It was funded by Economics and Social Science Research Council and Exmoor National Park Authority. The research was completed over 3 years by a PhD candidate in Human Geography affiliated with the Centre for Sport, Leisure and Tourism Research.

This document summarises the outcomes of research into perceptions of Exmoor National Park. Views on Exmoor were collected through interviews, discussion groups, participation in activities and analysis of textual materials.

The project explored relations between people and place, aiming to support the sustainability of the Exmoor tourism industry by informing its marketing strategies. Tourism is an important part of the local economy on Exmoor. It is a primary source of income for approximately one third of Exmoor residents. As a National Park, Exmoor is a place where natural beauty and cultural heritage are conserved for the nation. An understanding of the relations between people and place also helps to maintain Exmoor as a site for public enjoyment.

1. My research

Over the last 3 years I have immersed myself in Exmoor in various ways. I have taken part in conservation projects; building dams, surveying dormice and building stone walls. I have capsized in a kayak on Wimbleball Lake. I managed half of the Exmoor Perambulation. I have explored Exmoor's heritage, walking through bogs on the way out to remote sites. I have recorded flora and learned to identify moorland plants. I have discussed Exmoor as a source of inspiration with local artists and created my own oil painting of Exmoor.

These lived experiences of Exmoor have been supported by rigorous analysis of adverts, television programmes, radio shows and websites in which Exmoor features. My work has been informed by an investigation into the history of National Parks and I have worked in the archive considering the government reports in which National Parks were first discussed and imagined.

2. Challenges to sustainability of Exmoor tourism

In an era of austerity and falling resources the 'just do it' mentality seems appealing; just do more marketing, just do more promotion, just do more research. However, action without thought can be inefficient or even misdirected. In the context of austerity, efficiency is even more important to ensure a sustainable and competitive Exmoor tourism industry.

There are a number of perceived challenges to Exmoor National Park's sustainability as a tourism destination and these are usually referred to as distance from urban conurbations, motorway and railway access and its relatively small area in comparison to other National Parks. These features have been considered as 'barriers' to potential visitors. However tourists do not necessarily make rational decisions. Practical reasons such as distance and access are never the only factors influencing people's decision to visit a place. Furthermore, rather than being merely 'barriers', these features of Exmoor are potentially part of Exmoor's appeal and are sometimes actively marketed. Distance is a vital part of 'getting away from it all'. Infrastructural conditions therefore support Exmoor's 'remoteness' and 'sense of wilderness'. Exmoor is a small National Park but this petite-ness forms part of its 'intimate charm'; it also means that different landscape types are easily accessible.

This research did not consider large-scale changes to Exmoor. Decisions about infrastructure and transports links are out of the hands of most individuals. This research was orientated towards understanding Exmoor as it appears in peoples' experiences.

3. Investing in Exmoor experiences

In short, the outcomes of this research encourage further developing the consideration of peoples' experiences of Exmoor. It recommends marketing the experiences of Exmoor as a place, rather than marketing Exmoor by itself. This means a shift in focus from special qualities of the National Park (those features which make Exmoor a unique natural environment worthy of protection) to qualities of people's experience (those unique experiences that can help to market Exmoor as a leading visitor destination).

To understand peoples' experiences of Exmoor this research aimed to see Exmoor from visitors' points of view. Previous research into Exmoor tourism has provided large-scale interpretations of current and potential visitors to Exmoor through questionnaire survey. Such work aggregates individual responses into general trends, providing insight into questions of content; 'what' is tourism in Exmoor National Park. My research has enquired into the form of Exmoor tourism. It responds to the unusual sounding question; 'why is tourism in Exmoor National Park?'. Focusing on 'why' has revealed patterns in peoples' experiences of Exmoor.

4. Who is this report for?

This document raises broad issues around tourism in protected landscapes. It is addressed to stakeholders who are, in various ways, involved in the marketing and management of Exmoor National Park. It provides messages for destination managers, local businesses and environmental organisations.

The research is situated in academic debates about the ways people view, represent and relate to countryside. Based on an understanding of the historical and cultural context for people's interaction with the landscape this research reflects on the diversity of people's engagements with Exmoor National Park.

5. Exmoor National Park as a tourist product

To think about Exmoor as a 'product' sounds rather impersonal, but it is a way of talking about Exmoor as something that is sold. Exmoor is a tourist product, marketed using descriptions of the place. For instance, a common marketing narrative for Exmoor National Park is that of 'hidden Exmoor'. This often describes Exmoor as a 'secret' place concealed from the modern world and masses of tourists. It invites people to discover Exmoor. However, it does so without disclosing what the Exmoor tourist product actually is. What is the Exmoor tourism product when it is not 'hidden'?

Exmoor National Park is defined via its 'special qualities'. These are qualities such as a sense of remoteness and wildness, natural beauty, tranquillity, a mosaic of habits, a rich historical landscape. It is widely recognised that Exmoor is not one thing, but has many faces. Multiple sides of Exmoor are reflected in marketing narratives which depict different versions of Exmoor. Five dominant versions of Exmoor in marketing literature are identified in section 5.1. These five versions are loosely based on the special qualities of the National Park. To supplement marketing using these versions of Exmoor, this research advocates marketing the experiences of Exmoor.

5.1. Versions of Exmoor

There is one Exmoor National Park but multiple 'Exmoors'. These are the dominant versions of Exmoor circulating in marketing.



One of

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Britain's **breathing** spaces

Hidden or secret Exmoor: a place hidden away from the modern world and urban situations, undiscovered, a place to explore

Tranquil Exmoor: Exmoor as remote, peaceful and undisturbed, a place to escape 'the madding crowd', away from the hustle and bustle of city life, 'one of Britain's breathing spaces' where people can relax, fresh air




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Unspoilt Exmoor: a place of pristine natural beauty away from the urban sprawl, picturesque villages, a place that inspires

Timeless Exmoor: a place full of history, where time stands still, a place to reflect on the past and to contemplate nature



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Wild Exmoor: roaring stags and 'wild' ponies, expanses of open moorland, remote areas, rare plants, away from civilisation

5.2. Who is Exmoor marketed to?

Having reviewed how the Exmoor tourism product is currently represented, it is worth considering who it is being marketed to. The received idea is that Exmoor is being marketed to 'visitors' and 'non-visitors' to Exmoor. Exmoor is marketed to visitors to try to get them to repeat a visit and to non- visitors, to try to get them to come for the first time.

Who are visitors and non- visitors to Exmoor? There is a difference between people's experiences of Exmoor and being defined as a 'visitor' in a survey. Most people do not think about themselves as visitors or non-visitors to a tourist destination. 'Visitor' and 'non-visitor' are externally constructed labels. They have their uses in tourism management, however to understand people's experiences of Exmoor, we also need to try and see things from their point of view.

This participant expresses their connection with land as more valuable than the superficiality of 'just visiting it'. Peoples' experiences of landscape are important. Being defined as a 'visitor' to Exmoor is secondary to peoples' experience of landscape.

If you're doing something active you're part of the land aren't you, rather just visiting it

5.3. What does the visitor want?

The *Exmoor Visitor Survey* suggests that Exmoor's landscape, tranquillity and heritage influenced visitors' decision to come to Exmoor. What does 'landscape', 'tranquillity' and 'heritage' really mean to visitors? How do visitors get to know these special qualities of Exmoor?

This research suggests that visitors know Exmoor special qualities through their experiences. Since survey research provides a large-scale perspective it tends to simplify the details and diversity of peoples' experiences. As a result the process of visitor engagement with Exmoor is simplified to; 'visitors like tranquillity', 'visitors like landscape', 'visitors like history'. Marketing 'tranquillity', 'landscape' and 'history' may be successful but it misses the richness of people's experiences of Exmoor.



6. Understanding peoples' experience of Exmoor

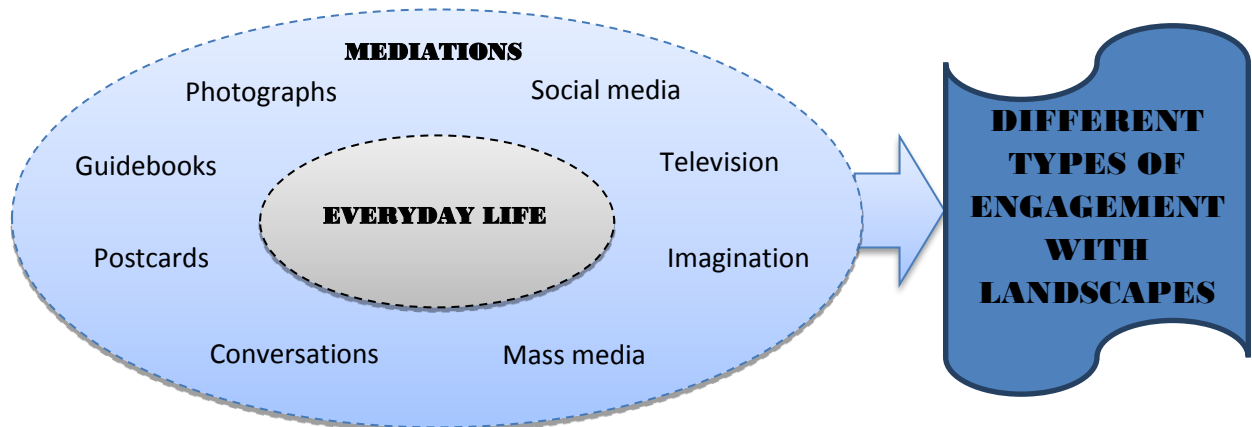
Special qualities of Exmoor are its 'product' but these qualities are part of experiences of place. For people to come into contact with the special qualities of Exmoor National Park they have to go through several phases. These phases are explored in this part of the report.

6.1. Mediation before a visit

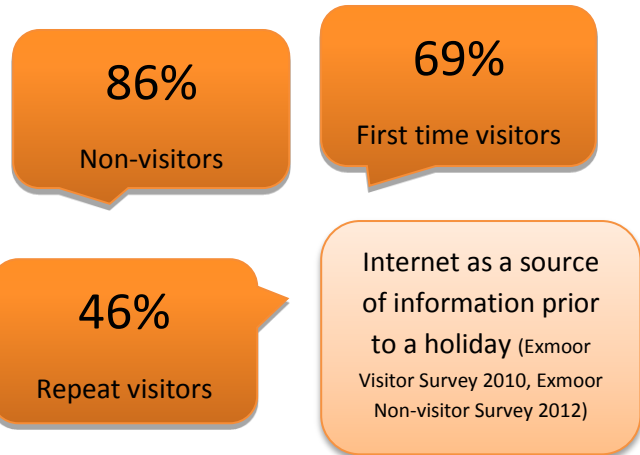
To understand the process of peoples' experiences of Exmoor, we need to see things from their point of view. To do this it is necessary to begin with peoples' everyday life.

Everyday life is shaped by various media; print media such as newspapers, broadcast media such as television and radio, social media such as Twitter and Facebook. These media are saturated with representations; images and stories in the form of adverts, photographs, news articles and comments. Representations are important in visitor thinking; survey data suggests that many people use the internet as a source of information prior to a holiday. This layer of mediation *before a visit* means that even before coming to Exmoor, people will have been presented with a number of images of it; they will have expectations about it.

Representations mediate people's perceptions of places, including Exmoor, but they are not the only things. Everyday conversations, memories and imagination also shaped people's view of places. All the processes of everyday life are shaped by history and cultural context.

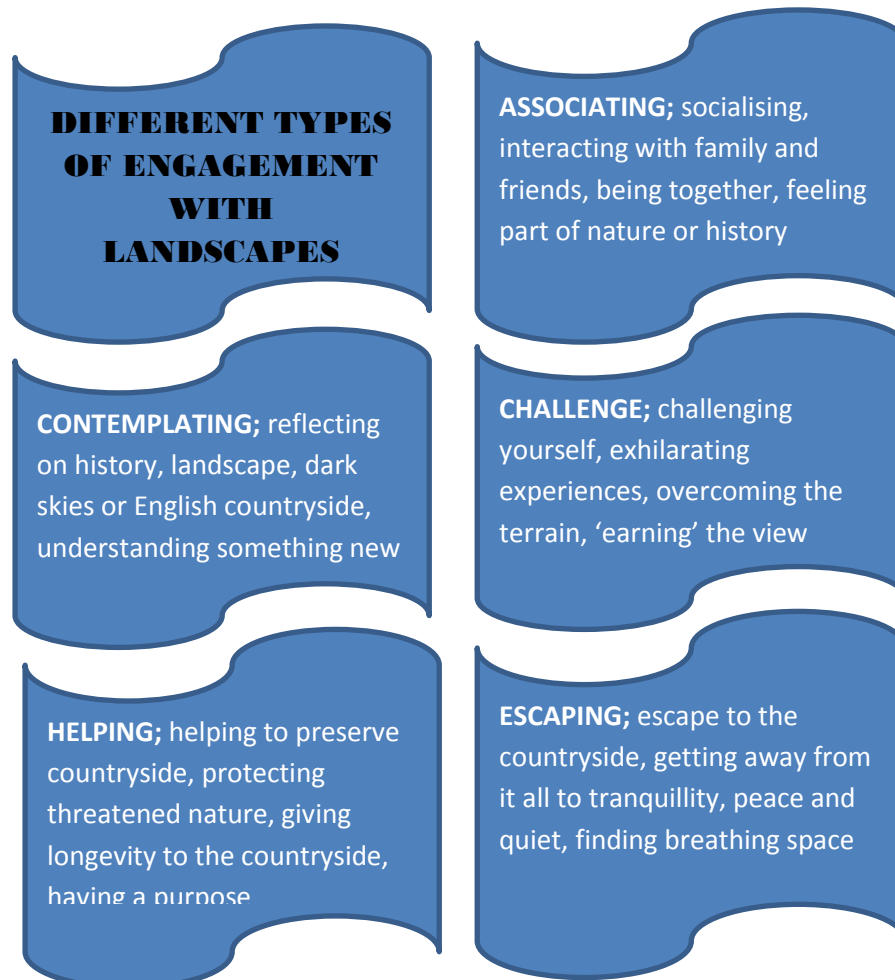


Mediations of everyday life lead people towards different types of engagement with landscapes. Types of engagement with landscapes are the different ways that people interact with the countryside. This is not exactly an activity, like cycling or walking, but rather a process in which people experience landscapes. For visitors, Exmoor's special qualities are not separate from these experiences.



6.2. Types of engagement

The types of engagement identified in this research are associating, contemplating, challenge, helping and escaping. These are all ways that people relate to landscape and enjoy countryside. They are connections between people and place.



To give you a better idea of what each type of engagement is, they are illustrated below with quotes from participants in the project.

6.2.1. Associating

A solitary person gazing at a beautiful landscape, contemplating nature is a common image of countryside. This image misses the value of associations between people. Connections between people are an important part of people's enjoyment of landscape. Togetherness, group relations, shared experiences and

It's being in a group...meeting people in the group, getting to know people

feelings of being part of something feature as part of many engagements with landscapes. Fostering associations between people could enhance people's enjoyment of landscape.

I think it's great just having a shared experience... especially if it's something a bit difficult

6.2.2. Challenge

Engaging with Exmoor's special qualities such as natural beauty and diverse landscape can come as part of a challenge. National Parks are often linked with relaxing holidays. It sounds silly but some people like to 'work' on holiday; this isn't real work, but it does involve concerted effort. For instance the idea of 'earning' the view emphasises the enjoyment of working for an experience of Exmoor.

You feel like you earn the view by walking

You enjoy it at the start but you go into it knowing that it's going to hurt quite a bit and when you look back on it you realise you enjoyed it

For some people difficult processes can add value to experiences. The second purpose of National Park Authorities' is to 'promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment...of National Parks by the Public'. This 'enjoyment' is not always pleasurable! Marketing an enjoyable Exmoor might mean advertising difficult experiences. Conquering the landscape, challenging oneself or earning the view may provide ways to stimulate engagements with Exmoor.

6.2.3. Contemplating

Contemplating Exmoor involves thoughts and imagination about nature and history. Contemplation can lead to new or deeper understandings. There is a willingness to imagine sites and engage with special qualities but this needs to be supported by information and maps.

We saw humps and bumps but we couldn't imagine it (an archaeological site), even though we tried...

Contemplation can be supported by information sources that enable people to connect to Exmoor's special qualities. Providing people with the materials to be able to imagine different aspects of Exmoor does not necessarily mean giving people 'the answer' to questions such as the one in the quote. Rather resources could help provoke a diverse range of responses and imagination so that people can elaborate their own understandings.

What would it have been like to have lived here (a remote shepherds cottage)?

6.2.4. Helping

As special countryside spaces National Parks are valued resources. This value comes from the rarity of the countryside but also from perceived threats that the landscape faces. Helping to protect this resource gives people a sense of connecting to the National Park, the English countryside and to 'nature' more generally.

It's a funny sort of thing, you feel protective of what naturally should be there and I want give it the longevity I feel it deserves

Feeling that there is a reason why you're doing what you're doing

Helping can be a purpose for activities, for instance in conservation. Knowing the reason why an activity is needed validates people's experiences.

6.2.5. Escaping

This might be a retreat, an ‘escape to nature’ or a breaking free from the routine of work. ‘Getting away from *it* all’, whatever *it* is: freedom from the modern world, the city, the working week, civilisation. Whether or not you can ever really ‘get away from civilisation on Exmoor’, the feeling ‘that the rest of the world doesn’t exist in your little area’ is important.

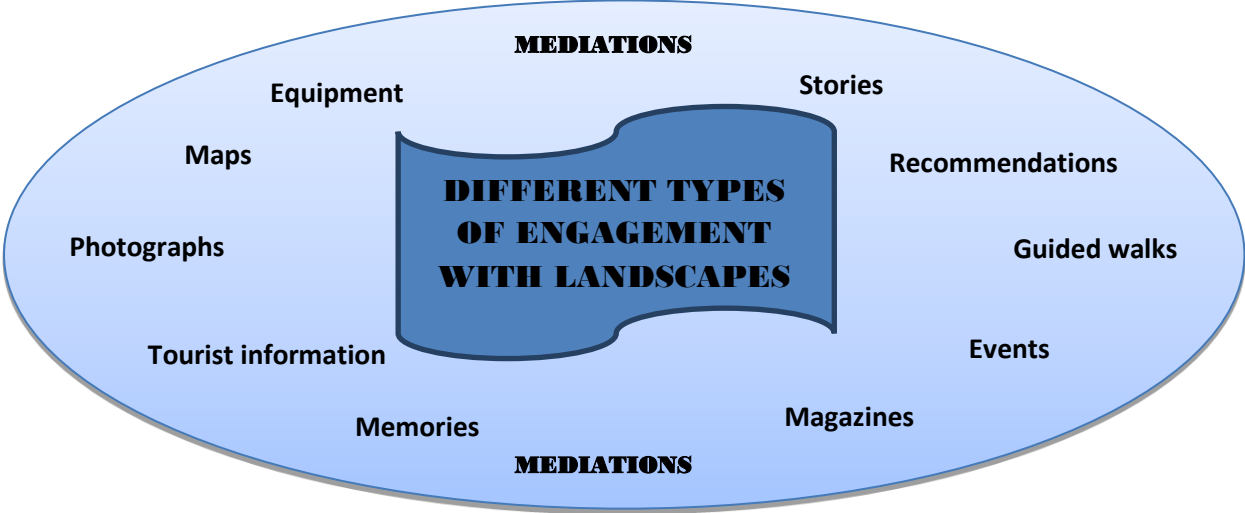
Being in a situation where you are away from civilisation...I mean you’ll never completely get away from civilisation on Exmoor but it’s just that feeling you may, that the rest of the world doesn’t exist in your little area

When you get back to the roads you are reminded of the world you came from, whereas when you’re out in the open you can forget about things like that and concentrate on the environment you’re in

Taking flight successfully involves forgetting the thing you have taken flight from. For instance, being ‘out in the open’ provides the opportunity to forget about ‘the world you came from’. This process of forgetting and disconnecting can be supported by information sources which draw people’s attention to the environment they are in.

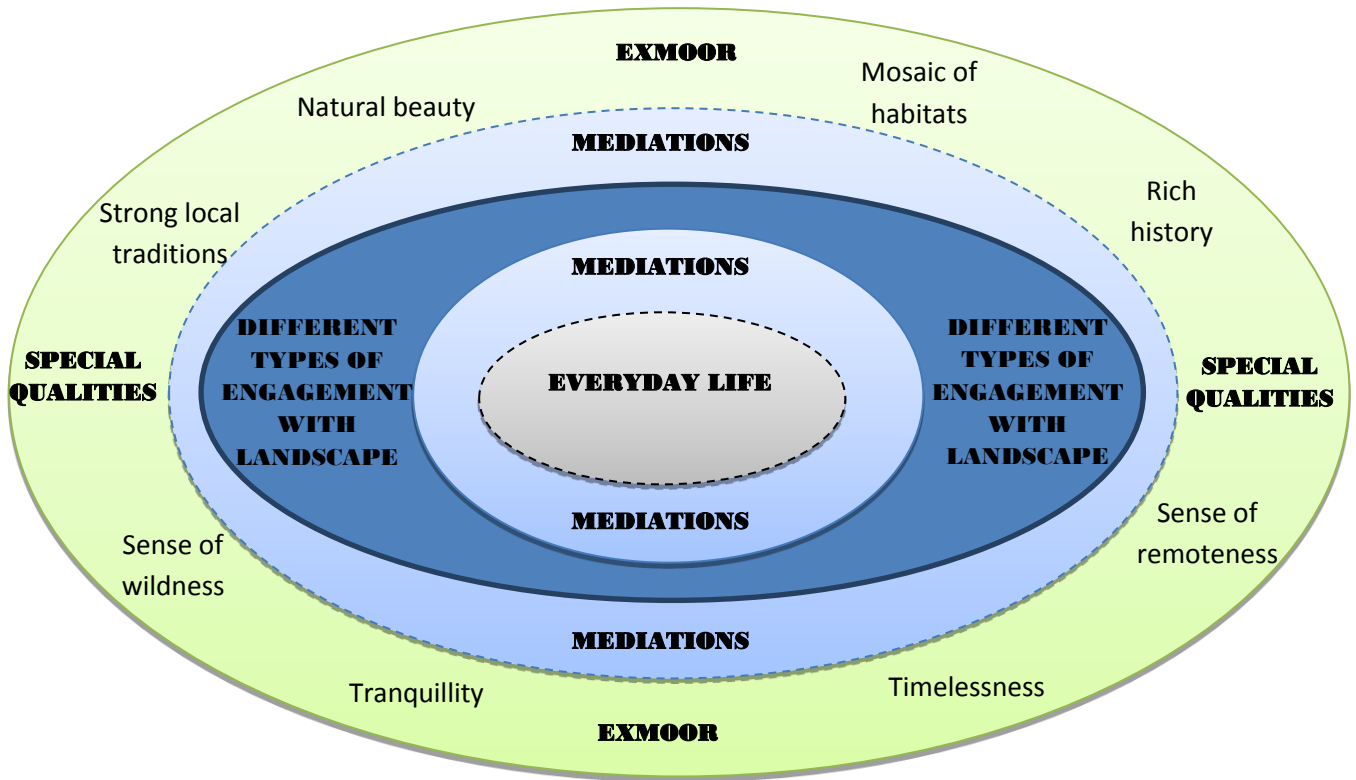
6.3. Mediation during a visit

Since we are trying to see Exmoor from the point of view of visitors, this model began with everyday life. Everyday life is mediated by representations. These representations shape the ways that people engage with landscape. The different types of engagement are themselves mediated. This second layer of mediation occurs *during a visit*. These mediations include guidebooks, equipment, events etc., tourist information, ‘what’s on’, recommendations and the equipment people have access to. These are materials people have access to during a visit to Exmoor; they shape peoples experiences.



6.4. Special qualities are part of experiences of Exmoor

Finally visitors access Exmoor's special qualities; wilderness, natural beauty and the historic landscape. Contact with the special qualities relies on two layers of mediation and the different types of engagement with landscape. From the visitor's point of view Exmoor's special qualities are part of their experience of landscape. This diagram looks rather complicated but it highlights that from the point of view of the visitor there are several phases to pass through before they come into contact with Exmoor's special qualities.



7. Tips for Stakeholders

7.1. Key message

This research finds that people experience Exmoor's special qualities through different types of engagement with the landscape (see Section 6). For this reason it is suggested that marketing special qualities of the National Park should be supplemented with marketing of experiences of Exmoor.

7.2. Destination managers

Exmoor's brand; 'dream, discover, explore' might be interpreted as expressing Exmoor's tourist offer; first the visitor is asked to 'dream', then 'discover' and finally 'explore'. *Before a visit* people come into contact with images and literature about Exmoor and 'dream' about what it is like. The 'dream' shapes what people subsequently 'discover' and 'explore' on Exmoor. Hence, the quality of the marketing and information that people receive about Exmoor before a visit is crucial.



The slogan begins with the command 'dream' but people cannot be ordered to dream; dreams happen of their own accord. Controlling the 'dream' cannot be the aim of marketing, but it can circulate messages that spark people's imagination. For marketing to do this, it needs to present the tourist product in ways that people can easily relate to. By taking a human point of view we can see the importance of peoples' experiences. Circulating marketing messages about the experiences that Exmoor has to offer is a means to spark potential visitors' imagination.

- Before a visit: destination marketers could focus on this phase by ensuring that people are aware of the experiences Exmoor has to offer
- Don't over simplify peoples' experiences; people don't just want to be 'visitors' but to have deeper connections to place, landscape and nature
- Some people want a relaxing holiday, but marketing challenging experiences might also appeal - not all enjoyment is pleasurable. The satisfaction of meeting a challenge can outweigh the discomfort and effort required to achieve it

7.3. Local businesses

In section 5.1 different versions of Exmoor were discussed. These were hidden, tranquil, unspoilt and wild Exmoor. If you have not already, identify which version(s) of Exmoor you usually use to promote your business. If you tend to use one version more than the others, you could consider whether it would appropriate to use other versions. Once you have identified which versions of Exmoor relate to your business consider what experiences of Exmoor your visitors might have. For instance if you advertise 'unspoilt Exmoor' you could think about advertising an experience associated with it; relaxing short walks with friends, sharing time 'away from it all'.

- Thinking through which versions of Exmoor you usually use to market your business might reveal scope to broaden your repertoire
- Market experiences of Exmoor that your visitors might be interested in
- During the visit: help people 'get away from it all' and forget everyday concerns by supporting their connections to landscape, heritage and nature. This might be achieved by ensuring they have access to information about Exmoor.

7.4. Environmental managers

Environmental managers are particularly concerned with special qualities of the National Park. The quality of the landscape is vital to National Park designation. While some environment work requires professionals, there is potential for visitors to help with this process. Whether people help through volunteering or simply by following the countryside code, recognition of this process of helping could foster connections between visitors and Exmoor's landscape. Special qualities are important, but from visitors' point of view, their experiences come first.

This document has highlighted three phases that people go through before coming into contact with Exmoor's special qualities. Usually environmental managers inform people about the environment *during a visit*, encouraging people to preserve Exmoor and contemplate nature. Awareness of the whole process of peoples' experience of Exmoor could be used to develop a new ways of addressing visitors. For instance, according to the *Exmoor Visitor Survey* the status of Exmoor as a National Park was important to 69% of visitors when deciding to visit the area. Since this is an important factor in people's decisions to visit, environmental managers may consider disseminating information about Exmoor to people *prior to a visit*. They might also encourage engagements with landscape that are not usually associated with the environment, for instance highlighting by the group experience of conservation work.

- Looking after Exmoor's environment involves associations between people; working together, chatting, learning. By fostering connections between people, experiences of the National Park's special qualities can be enhanced.
- If people are prepared to help look after the National Park, they want to know that what they are doing has a purpose. Providing a clear rationale and goal for a conservation activity confirms people's activity as useful.
- Special qualities of the National Park are important but so are people's experiences. Facts and figures about Exmoor are interesting, but also support visitors' imagination. Provide visitors with materials that offer a chance to elaborate their own thoughts about landscape, heritage and nature rather than giving them the official 'answer'.

8. From special qualities of place to qualities of experience

These are some examples of how to shift from a focus on special qualities of place to qualities of experience.

| Special qualities | Experiences |
|--|--|
| A sense of wilderness and remoteness | Feeling separated from the modern world, having breathing space, walking in a small group on the moor. The achievement associated with walking a particular path or sights. The challenge of a wild landscape. |
| Dark Skies | Imagining life beyond earth, pointing out constellations to each other, admiring the beauty of the night sky |
| A timeless landscape, mostly free from intrusive development | Contemplating nature, helping maintain Exmoor, escaping the hustle and bustle of the city to the tranquillity of Exmoor, reflecting on life in general |
| An exceptional rights of way network | Challenging yourself, 'earning the view' or just wandering around, eating a packed lunch of local food, spotting wildlife together, working out the way, poring over a map, learning about historic sites on the path, enjoying the view |
| A mosaic of habitats supporting a great diversity of wildlife | Understanding the landscape and ecosystem, the excitement of seeing a deer, paying attention to world away from the office |
| A complex and rich historic landscape that reflects how people have lived in, used and enjoyed Exmoor over the past 8000 years | Discussing the landscape and how it has changed, imagining a historic site that is now only humps and bumps, wondering what Exmoor was like in the past |

9. Conclusion

The main message of this research is that it is important to consider the ways that people engage with Exmoor. People do not want to just be 'visitors', they want a deeper connection to place which comes from their experiences. This research therefore advocates a shift from marketing special qualities of place to special qualities of experience. Exmoor's 'special qualities' are vital to the National Park designation but people access these qualities through different types of engagement with landscape. From visitors' point of view, Exmoor's special qualities are part of processes of their experiences. In terms of marketing, raising awareness of different opportunities to engage with and experience Exmoor should appeal to potential visitors.

By considering the details of people's experiences of Exmoor, this research balances the insights into general trends provided by survey research. Where previous research has given attention to the 'what' of tourism, this project focused on the rather than the 'why'. In so doing, patterns underlying people's connections to Exmoor and its special qualities have been highlighted. The types of engagement specified in this report are not an exhaustive system; the process of engagement between people and place is open to different interpretations. As such, future research may fruitfully consider qualities of peoples' experiences and reveal further patterns of relationship between people and place in Exmoor National Park.