

Perceptions of Nature - are we bewildered?

BACKGROUND

Dartmoor National Park (DNP) covers 954 km² of mostly rough-grazed moorland in South Devon, UK⁽¹⁾. The Park is often referred to as 'wilderness' in media⁽²⁾. The term 'wilderness' is used as a legal ecological land classification, most often defined as lacking in human impact⁽³⁾.

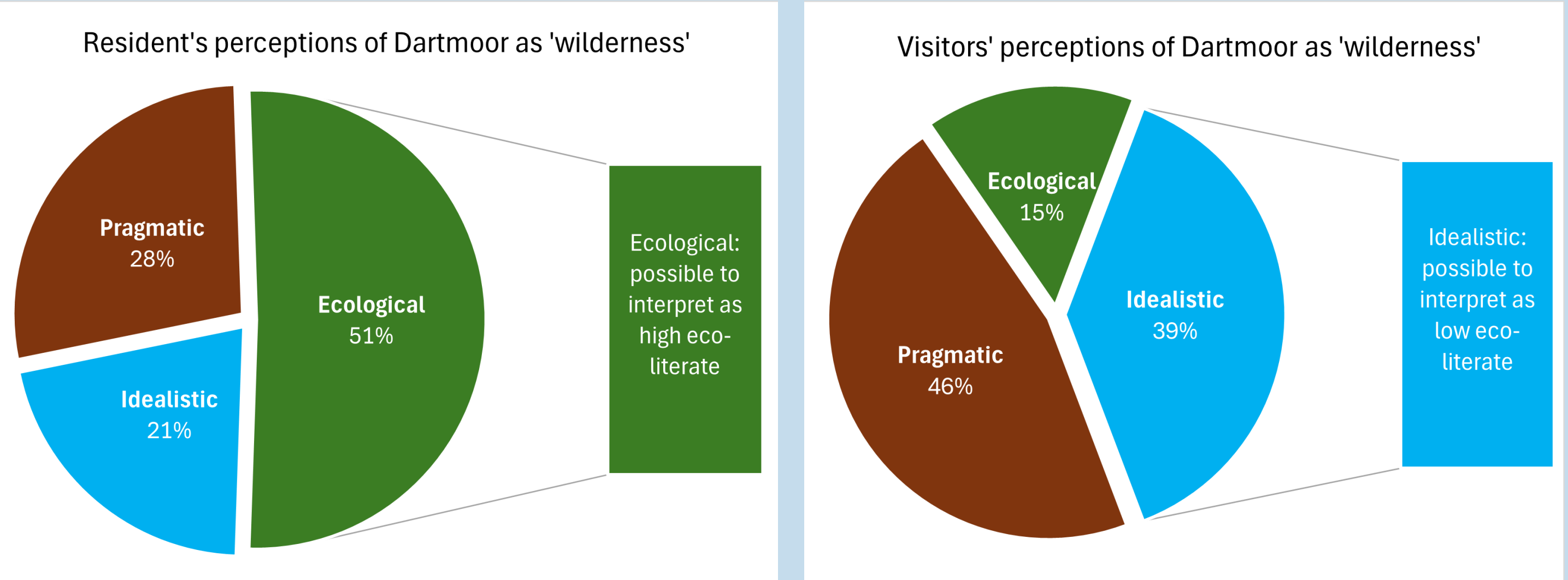


METHODS

Hypothesis: that there is a significant difference between how visitors and residents perceive DNP in relation to the concept of 'wilderness'. Questionnaires were collected from across DNP, and thematic and comparative content analyses⁽⁴⁾ were performed on responses to the questions below. Answers to Q.2 were coded into "Ecological", "Pragmatic" and "Idealistic" (Fig.1), revealing the presence of a group who see wilderness as meaning lacking in human impact, and who also see Dartmoor as a wilderness.

1. What is your definition of the term 'wilderness'?
2. How closely does the landscape of Dartmoor match your definition of wilderness?

RESULTS



(Fig.1) The charts show how the three types of wilderness perception found in this study are distributed among residents of and visitors to Dartmoor National Park.

CONCLUSION

A proportion of both visitors and residents may perceive the DNP landscape as an 'ecological wilderness'. The proportion of visitors that could have this perception appears significantly higher. The main theme running through all international definitions of wilderness is **lacking in human impact⁽³⁾**. DNP is not classified as a wilderness, it is a protected social-ecological system⁽⁵⁾. These findings could be indicative of a broader human-nature relationship disconnect.



Almost 40% of visitors to Dartmoor National Park may perceive the landscape as a 'pristine' ecological wilderness or 'lacking in human impact'

Potential Implications

Misunderstandings of land management needs ° Conflicts over land use ° Advocacy and policy issues ° Opportunities for education and collaboration

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REFERENCES:

(1) DNPA 2024; (2) Smith et al., 2018; (3) Landres et al., 2008; (4) Hall et al., 2020; (5) Dudley, 2008 (Scan QR code for full reference list).
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