


LEISURE IN NATURE: ECOFOLIA IN THE MATA DO LIMOEIRO STATE PARK

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ABSTRACT: The paper analyzes the relationship between leisure promotion and nature conservation based on the experience of individuals who participated in Ecofolia, an initiative developed in the Mata do Limoeiro State Park to integrate citizens with nature and promote socio-environmental inclusion. A quantitative survey was conducted with the 41 individuals who participated in the 10th edition of the project in 2024. The individuals answered a questionnaire, and the results were analyzed using the Likert methodology to understand the pre-established issues and by applying the critical valuation of environmental services to value the park, Ecofolia, and leisure. The study reinforces that leisure in parks is crucial for social engagement and environmental education, suggesting that such projects bring society closer to protected areas and promote sustainability.

KEYWORDS: Park. Ecofolia. Leisure.

LAZER NA NATUREZA: O ECOFOLIA NO PARQUE ESTADUAL MATA DO LIMOEIRO

RESUMO: O artigo analisa a relação entre promoção do lazer e conservação da natureza a partir da experiência das pessoas que participaram do Ecofolia, iniciativa desenvolvida no Parque Estadual Mata do Limoeiro que visa integrar os cidadãos com a natureza e promover a inclusão socioambiental. Foi realizada uma pesquisa quantitativa com as 41 pessoas que participaram da 10ª edição do projeto, em 2024. Estas

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responderam um questionário e os resultados foram analisados a partir de duas abordagens, usando a metodologia Likert para entender as questões pré-estabelecidas e aplicando o método de valoração crítica dos serviços ambientais para valorar o parque, o Ecofolia e lazer. O estudo reforça que o lazer em parques é crucial para o engajamento social e a educação ambiental, sugerindo que tais projetos são essenciais para aproximar a sociedade das áreas protegidas e promover a sustentabilidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Parque. Ecofolia. Lazer.

Introduction

The Mata do Limoeiro State Park (PEML) was created in 2011 and is located in the rural area of Ipoema, a district of the municipality of Itabira in Minas Gerais. The region has great tourism potential related to the numerous natural attractions, including waterfalls, viewpoints, and lagoons, as well as other historical attractions such as museums, craft fairs, and muleteer music (MINAS GERAIS, 2024). Since its creation, the Park has acted in important environmental education and social mobilization projects, especially involving the surrounding communities, resulting in greater dissemination of the objectives that justified its creation: environmental conservation and visitation.

The park management is organized by a program called *Limoeiro em Ação*, a portfolio that systematizes about 40 projects carried out by this conservation unit. The park appropriates leisure as a tool of engagement, considering the potential of its natural capital, which has waterfalls, trails, and rich fauna and flora, in executing its environmental conservation policies.

One of the most awarded actions of the *Limoeiro em Ação* program is the Ecofolia project, recognized as one of Brazil's best environmental education practices (MMA, 2016). This initiative has been held annually since 2014 and, through environmental education and leisure activities, promotes participants' involvement with the park and the formation and strengthening of a network of supporters and volunteers.

According to Carvalho and Carneiro (2020), the primary objective of Ecofolia is the promotion of activities that provide the involvement of participants with the park through the proposed activities, combining moments of lectures, round tables, workshops, entertainment, planting seedlings, community activities, and workshops, etc. Prior registration with a notice published on the website of the managing body of State Parks in Minas Gerais, the State Institute of Forests – IEF, is necessary to participate in Ecofolia.

Each edition of Ecofolia presents a theme, which becomes the centrality of its programming, guiding the actions proposed to the participants from the first to the last day of events. Themes related to tourism, the socio-environmental inclusion of communities with the park, the importance of the park as a leisure space, the history of the park, and society's relationship with nature have been addressed in the ten editions held (2014 to 2024). The project was not conducted in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article will present a survey of individuals who participated in the 10th Ecofolia, held a week before the period properly defined as Carnival in 2024. We aimed 1) to describe the experience of the participants in Ecofolia, 2) if, in their opinion, there is a relationship between leisure and conservation units, and if so, whether it should be the focus of park management to promote leisure actions, 3) to evaluate if leisure is something important in the lives of the interviewees, and 4) what values arise when the interviewees think about leisure in the park and Ecofolia.

This research is an important instrument to guide the conservation unit's actions. It can also be used by other parks to evaluate public leisure policies as a strategy to strengthen conservation, awareness, environmental education, and bonds with the

conservation unit. We hypothesize that leisure is a central tool for engaging supporters and demonstrating the importance of nature to people's lives.

This work is also justified by the curiosity of researchers on the subject. One of us is the manager of the Mata do Limoeiro State Park, and the other is a researcher who has been following the conservation unit for over ten years in studies and voluntary consulting action. Thus, understanding the relevance of the participants' experience and its impact on their lives can indicate elements for building other initiatives that contribute to the protection of nature in the park and to sustainable development strategies, in general, that combine leisure with these public spaces.

Theoretical Discussion

In Brazil, the National System of Conservation Units, SNUC, created in 2000, represented a milestone in improving, planning, and systematizing the processes of creating and managing these protected territories. It was institutionalized through Federal Law No. 9,985 of July 19th (BRASIL, 2000), being formed by legal equipment (laws and decrees) that guided the management of these territories. The SNUC innovated the way of managing Conservation Units by categorizing them into two groups: Integral Protection and Sustainable Use. The integral protection conservation units have greater restrictions on use; this category has a higher degree of environmental protection.

Vilela (2020) highlights that the integral protection group admits only to the indirect use of its natural resources, such as activities that use nature without causing significant changes in its natural attributes, such as scientific research and public visitation for educational and leisure purposes. On the other hand, those in the

sustainable use group have lower restrictions on use since their primary objective is to make nature conservation compatible with the sustainable use of its natural resources.

Vilhena (2022) defines a conservation unit as an institution, that is, a department or an organizational level, that assumes staff, budget, the existence of infrastructure appropriate to its functions, and management activities. Such activities include continuous monitoring and enforcement actions; consolidation of land regularization in the categories constituted by public domain areas by law; relationship and communication actions with the surrounding communities; promotion of scientific research and leisure activities within nature; and environmental education and interpretation, among others, according to the management categories and the specificities of each area.

Recreation, as an integrator of the range of social demands in the conservation units and characterized by the activities developed in moments of leisure, gains a particular connotation when it occurs in conservation units since they are favorable territories for them to occur, but with an important differential: direct contact with nature. Carvalho (2019) highlights that leisure in nature has become a relevant theme in our time and is highlighted by the physical and attractive characteristics of the conservation units.

Nature, as a territory of leisure experiences, is highlighted by Bruhns (2009) as:

a place of recess, of necessity, operating a re-enchantment of the world. The desire and sensations of being in nature bring feelings related to relaxation and introspection, which can be incorporated into a lost paradise that one has the pleasure of rediscovering within an instant (BRUHNS, 2009, p. 12, our translation).

The concept presented by Bruhns (2009) reaffirms the importance of these spaces as places of leisure experiences, breaking the stigma associated with the myth of untouched nature, especially existing in conservation units that still preach forms of

eliminating human action, disregarding societies and creating a forced separation between nature and culture, where human beings are prohibited by the State, thus breaking the symbiotic form between them; that is, between humans and nature. This thought of untouched nature, or the separation of humans and nature, has already had a lot of prominence as an anchor of environmental preservation. However, it has been destitute by society, which proves this destitution is the increase in visitation in these public spaces.

The parks belong to the integral protection group category of conservation units, which can be municipal, state, or federal. According to Irving and Matos (2006), this category of conservation unit has a fundamental role in protecting species and genetic diversity, maintaining ecosystems, and sustaining local populations with income generation through recreation and leisure opportunities and their practices in these protected territories.

Parks have been transformed and, in recent decades, gained new meaning with the change in society's view of nature and its role. This has led to proposals for differentiated uses linked to leisure and recreation in better-preserved environments, one of these great uses. The appreciation of parks from the involvement of society and leisure practices, claimed mainly by the most popular layers of society, is also noteworthy (RAIMUNDO e SARTI, 2019).

Parks are defined by Campelo Junior *et al.* (2020) as spaces for the protection of biodiversity with different geographical scales, considered as one of the means of safeguarding portions of ecosystems. They also aim to conduct environmental education activities and leisure moments within nature aimed at recreation and strengthening an environmental awareness of the environment and natural resource conservation. Campelo Junior *et al.* (2020) point out that these territories have been taking on an

importance that goes beyond environmental conservation, becoming places that allow the involvement of society by developing environmental education activities and leisure experiences. In this sense, leisure gains a particular connotation when it occurs in the parks since they provide direct contact with nature.

Leisure should be understood as a human need and a dimension of culture, of social practices involving a multiplicity of experiences constructed and situated in each context (GOMES e ISAYAMA, 2015). Thus, leisure has its own characteristics as a human manifestation, with great possibilities for transforming humans and society (BAHIA e SAMPAIO, 2007). We understand leisure in nature as a complex social phenomenon capable of providing people with enriching and enjoyable moments and social experiences from educational, spiritual, or (re) encounters within nature (PACHECO e RAIMUNDO, 2014).

This statement is easily found in the testimonies of park-goers, especially when developing approaches to the environmental theme as an integrating element. As a territory of leisure experiences, Bruhns (2009) highlights nature as a place of sensations that bring pleasurable and relaxing feelings (BRUHNS, 2009, p. 85; CARVALHO, 2021).

According to Pereira and Bahia (2018), leisure in nature, as a field of leisure itself, is directly associated with experiences in parks since body practices occur more constantly in this environment. Therefore, it is possible to realize the importance of leisure in nature, understanding that parks are physical links to experience it. This issue is reiterated by Carvalho (2021, 2019). Dantas (2016) states that parks are spaces that go beyond the contribution to environmental quality, highlighting that these areas play an aesthetic role, considering what refers to the beautiful, ecological-environmental, and leisure (rest, leisure, or pastime).

Many parks seek a strong relationship with society beyond the experiences in their natural attractions, highlighting their role in conservation and the development of projects and social actions of significant local and regional impact. Thus, a park's project can be thought of as a multifunctional tool in the management process, generating engagement through leisure and contributing to its social function and protective potential (CARVALHO e CARNEIRO, 2020).

Ecofolia, by its specificities, assumes leisure as a privileged place for developing a strategy of awareness and environmental education. Ecofolia can be interpreted as an educational process that aims to form ethical citizens in their relations with society and nature and that "contributes to the individual being an active part of society, learning to act individually and collectively in the search for solutions" (REIGADA e REIS, 2004, p. 150, our translation).

Oliveira (2021) complements the definition and states that it is a space for interlocations and innovation, oxygenation of ideas, discussions about conservation practices, and approximation of the protected area with the university. In turn, Carvalho (2019) states that Ecofolia provides its participants with an exchange of knowledge and experiences due to interpersonal relationships since it structures a series of activities in its programming that aim to strengthen the connection between society and the environment. It is essential to highlight that the project has received several public institutions and civil society awards, such as the Hugo Werneck Award in 2016 in the category Best Project in Environmental Education in Brazil, which was presented at the I International Forum on Management in Conservation Units, in Brasília/DF in 2018 and pointed out in the publication in the Instituto Ipê da Amazônia Journal as one of the 100 best Good Practices in Conservation Units in Brazil in 2019.

Based on the Ecofolia of 2022, a group of participants from the Editions from 2014 to 2020 created the Instituto Socioambiental Gigante Verde – ISGV. This live civil society organization aims to raise and promote resources and organize the participation of volunteers in the actions and other projects of the *Limoeiro em Ação* program. The ISGV is one of the most significant results of the engagement provided by the leisure activities promoted in the PEML and has already been pointed out by the management of the Mata do Limoeiro State Park as the most important construction of Ecofolia (MINAS GERAIS, 2024) and as a foundation for disseminating and supporting other projects.

The tenth edition of the Ecofolia project was held from February 1st to 4th, 2024, and included in its program lectures on topics related to the theme of the edition, which was “our nature is to connect”, also including trails, entertainment activities involving music, a quiz with questions about the park, a seedling planting, and a workshop on relations with society and this conservation unit. Prior registration with a notice published on the website of the managing body of State Parks in Minas Gerais, the State Institute of Forests – IEF, is necessary to participate in Ecofolia.

Each edition of Ecofolia presents a theme, which becomes the centrality of its programming, guiding the actions proposed to the participants from the first to the last day of events. Themes related to tourism, the socio-environmental inclusion of communities with the park, the park's importance as a leisure space, the history of the park, and the relationship of society with nature have been addressed in the ten editions held (2014 to 2024). The project was not conducted in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All these editions centered on the offer of leisure activities.

Actions such as the Ecofolia project are important mechanisms for promoting the purposes of Conservation Units, which can be of various categories and purposes

and are also understood as protected areas. However, they exist because there is a need for biodiversity conservation, protection of natural and cultural resources, and territorial planning to use their natural attractions (Padua *et al.* 2012). It is interesting to note that leisure is both a means of engagement and a reason for public visitation in parks. In this work, we present a panel built through the critical assessment of leisure and recreation activities during the Ecofolia project carried out by PEML in February 2024.

Instruments and Methods

A quantitative primary survey was conducted with participants of the tenth edition of the Ecofolia project in February 2024. The interview sample consists of 41 individuals who represent 100% of the participants. The identification of the respondents to the questionnaire was not requested to allow greater freedom in the answers and thus have more faithful data.

The survey consisted of a self-answered digital questionnaire applied on the last day of the event using Google Forms. In it, participants evaluated the questions presented and their experience in the project. The questionnaire was composed of structured and open questions analyzed using two approaches: the Likert scale and the Critical Valuation of Environmental Services.

The first four questions presented response scales from 0 to 10, aiming to identify the intensity of the items indicated in the evaluation of the participants with Ecofolia. They were evaluated using the Likert methodology, considering the level of agreement. Scores 9 and 10 refer to those who agree entirely, 7 and 8 to those who agree, 5 and 6 to neutral, 3 and 4 to disagree, and 0 to 2 to completely disagree. For a more general understanding, we calculated the mean of the opinions presented, from which we obtained the following scale for the means: above 9, entirely agrees; between

7 and 8, agrees; between 5 and 6, neutral; between 3 and 4, disagrees; and between 0 and 2, completely disagrees.

Still, we present another block with four structured questions aimed at better understanding four dimensions: whether leisure should be the focus of park management, what the participants think about the importance of leisure in their lives, whether leisure and parks are related to being associated, and what leisure activities participants usually perform in parks. The percentage of respondents for each was evaluated.

We seek to value the park, Ecofolia, and the idea of leisure for the participants using the Critical Valuation of Environmental Services, an approach developed by Carvalho (2021) in research carried out at PEML. In this methodology, based on the definition of analysis categories based on TEEB (2010), we seek to understand the meanings of environmental services perceived by the participating public. TEEB (2010) defines environmental service as benefits individuals naturally derive from ecosystems. Among these categories of environmental services are “cultural” ones, which include the services provided by sports, leisure, and sports activities (CARVALHO, 2021).

Thus, we asked the survey participants to define Ecofolia, leisure, and the park in one word each. These words were tabulated and a word cloud built presenting the values. Repeated words are displayed larger in the graphic presentation.

The Informed Consent Form of this research was duly recognized by the participants, who answered voluntarily and of their free will. The information collected was treated using two methodologies: the first, a digital tabulation using Excel, and the second, a word cloud built based on the database and an artificial intelligence algorithm, expressing the values perceived by the participants.

Discussion

The issue of time in any human activity cannot be disregarded, especially in a society in which it is the primary productive asset. Of the surveyed individuals, 95% stated that leisure is very important because it allows you to relax, have fun, and connect with others. However, 5% say that, although it is important, they do not have time to devote to leisure activities.

At Ecofolia, thinking about quality time to exercise the right to leisure and create connections is part of the strategy to raise awareness about the role of conservation and preservation of the park for which the participant's experience has an important role. Thus, we sought to understand the degree of relevance, the general opinion about the project, and the importance of leisure in protected areas. Finally, on a scale of 0 to 10, we asked participants if they would participate in the Ecofolia project again. There are no marks below 7 among the participants.

Table 1: Mean Agreement

Question	Mean Score
Ecofolia was relevant to you	9.97
Overall, the experience at Ecofolia was good	9.90
Leisure in parks is important for people's health and well-being	9.85
I wish to participate in the project again	9.95

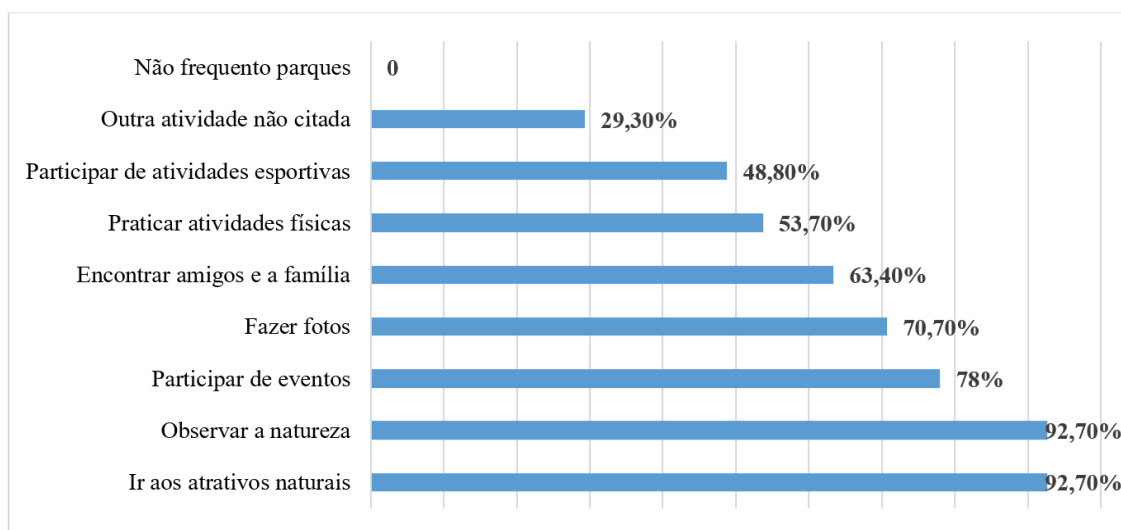
Source: Prepared by the authors, 2024.

Also, considering that leisure is part of the environmental services provided by nature, we questioned whether the promotion of public leisure policies should be a focus of park management. Ninety percent of respondents say that this issue should be considered together with preservation and conservation activities.

It is curious that, although 10% of the respondents did not state that leisure policies should be the focus of park management, all indicated that leisure in these spaces are related, which corroborates the discussion by Dias and Alves Junior (2009), which explains that parks fulfill a significant function in society as a recreation and leisure space, making them increasingly visited, highlighting the presence of family groups.

We asked the participants about the leisure activities they usually conduct in the parks they visit. Each respondent could choose more than one answer among nine hypotheses that we raised: participate in sports activities; practice physical activities; meet friends and family; participate in events; observe nature; take photos; go to natural attractions; another activity not mentioned; or do not attend parks.

Graph 1: Primary leisure activities conducted in the park



Source: Prepared by the authors, 2024.

No participant indicated the option "I do not visit parks," which reaffirms that the public participating in Ecofolia frequents these public spaces.

Critical Valuation

Critical Valuation is essentially qualitative and seeks broad meanings for the issues it values. Images 1 and 2 correspond to questions 8 and 9, where each participant wrote a word to define leisure and a first word that came to mind when hearing the name of the Mata do Limoeiro State Park. The word cloud technique was used to compile this information, highlighting those that were most cited by the participants. We follow the proposal of Vilela and Bonfim (2014), for which word clouds are graphic-visual representations that show the degree of frequency of words in a text. The more words are used, the more striking the representation of these words on the graph. Words appear in fonts of various sizes and different colors, indicating what is more relevant and what is less relevant in the context.

Figure 1: Definitions of leisure in one word



Source: The authors, 2024.

The image makes it possible to understand that leisure is related to joy, fun, and necessity. The dimension of leisure as a right, although not tacitly highlighted, is implied in the general sense, given the words mentioned. Still, about this conservation

From the perspective of leisure activities and experiences in the Mata do Limoeiro State Park, we can affirm that the Ecofolia project is a great opportunity to increasingly attract academic society (its target audience) to these spaces and promote actions of environmental awareness and leisure. This makes individuals aware of their responsibilities, enhances decisions, and enables the formation of a generation capable of seeing with other eyes the actions aimed at socio-environmental sustainability, creating this differentiated connection with the territory.

Leisure has been gaining a prominent space in projects conducted in parks, attracting ever more people and allowing a greater part of the population to know and interact with these protected areas. In this perspective, Ecofolia allowed the participants to directly connect to the protected area, indirectly leading to the academy since its target audience is university students and the discussions and experiences in the park. This contributes to greater dissemination in the tourist and scientific senses.

Parks can bring richness, generating employment opportunities, income, leisure, and well-being to the population. With more projects like Ecofolia occurring in these spaces, there will be more ways of disseminating the precepts of the protected area by society. This disclosure is fundamental for understanding their importance and need for our lives and, better, these spaces will be valued and, as a consequence, conserved.

The experience of the participants was very positive, presenting an average score higher than 9 in all the parameters analyzed. In addition, it is possible to perceive that the cognitive plantation, resuming an expression of Jota Mombaça, was carried out successfully since the participants affirm that there was a strong connection with the conservation unit, according to arguments present in Figure 3.

Most participants felt a relationship between leisure and conservation units. This corroborates the thesis that promoting leisure actions should be the focus of park

management. In this sense, we reaffirm that this is a mechanism of engagement and is a privileged activity of attraction for public visitation and attention. Leisure in conservation units humanizes the protective system and confers to it social importance, adding value. Thus, like the interviewees, we understand that managers of conservation units must seriously consider the dimension of leisure as central in the development of public policies.

We also realized that leisure is something important in the lives of the interviewees. However, one point caught our attention and may be the subject of a future research: the issue of lack of time for leisure. This is an issue we want to understand further, especially among students. Questions arose, such as to what extent academic life restricts leisure time or how the study routine can influence the reduction of time for such activities. However, this is a topic for other studies.

It also highlights the importance of discussions on the importance of leisure in a park, held at Ecofolia, reaffirming the importance of this theme and these places as spaces of resignification, reunion, and contact with nature, thus breaking old paradigms that preach a separation of parks with society.

Finally, Critical Valuation shows that the park is a place of welcome, peace, and love, senses similar to others presented in other research we conducted, but which reinforces that leisure supports the construction of positive values that empower notions of belonging and engagement, fundamental for the protection and conservation of nature. Nevertheless, regarding the valuation of leisure, it is interesting to realize how much this idea is connected to the notions of fun, free time, necessity, and rest. These are interesting issues in structuring spaces and actions in parks that foster inner peace, contemplation, and balance. This issue presents itself as a challenge in the planning of the space and uses of conservation units.

The research indicates that Ecofolia is a successful project, an initiative that must be replicated in other parks. It demonstrates that projects of this nature strengthen conservation, increase visitation, reaffirm leisure as an existing and strong theme in these spaces, and mobilize society, bringing them closer to protected territories, which are still seen in many places only as places of prohibitions and restrictions. This approximation of humans with the natural environment must occur so that the objectives that justify the creation of these areas are understood and disseminated, strengthening an environmental and sentimental connection related to the establishment of practices that seek leisure experience and the resignification of this human-nature relationship.

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