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# **Don't Rain on my Parade: Barriers to Ecological Tourism**

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## **Abstract**

This research investigates the perceived risks and perceptions of visitor experiences associated with visitation to an ecological tourist destination. The research identified a significant consumption barrier which appeared to impact significantly and reflect juxtapositions with regard to tourists' perceived (reflective) and lived (responsive) experiences with the tourist attraction. The conflicting reports of the "over-commercialisation" of the attraction and the enjoyment of the natural experience recorded at varying recollection periods, provided valuable insight into tourist consumption barriers to the establishment of relational bonds between tourists and ecological tourist attractions.

## **Research Focus**

Given the intangible nature of tourism products, visitors to tourist destinations may encounter uncertainty with regard to the expectations of quality and satisfaction with the tourist experience provided. Previous researchers have investigated various forms of uncertainty under the umbrella of perceived risk or barriers to consumption (Dowling, 1986; Stone and Grønhaug, 1993; Mitchell, 1999; Dholakia, 2001; Macintosh, 2002). This has provided valuable insight into ways in which businesses can market their products/services more effectively through the reduction of risk-associated uncertainty. An important marketing component for tourist destinations which offer an environmental or ecological experience for visitors is the establishment of enhanced relationships with tourists in order to gain ongoing support for the maintenance and sustainability of the environmental protection of the natural environment. Further to this, relational bonds have also been recognised as facilitating valuable consumption outcomes such as customer (visitor) loyalty, advocacy and enhanced satisfaction (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Sheth and Parvitiyar, 1995; Bove and Johnson, 2000). The establishment of long-term, committed relationships with customers [tourists] enables organisations to realise viability in a competitive operating environment.

Ecological tourism is learning-orientated tourism based upon the study of natural settings and experiences that requires environmental and economical sustainability (Savage, 1993; Weaver, 2003). Recent research has highlighted that ecotourism (which incorporates ecological tourism) as being one of the fastest growing tourism sectors worldwide (Wegner, Moore and MacBeth, 2004), with figures from 2004 indicating a 10 to 30% per annum growth rate per year (Ananthaswamy 2004). Given the importance of the sustainability of ecological tourism destinations this research assessed tourist perceptions of perceived risks which act as barriers to the establishment of valuable tourist-tourist destination relationships. The Phillip Island Nature Park (PINP) Penguin Parade was identified as a specific context in which to examine these perceived barriers. The PINP Penguin Parade is an ecological tourism destination located on Phillip Island, a 90 minute drive south-east of Melbourne, Victoria. Each night the beach-side destination attracts regional, inter-state, and international visitors to witness the arrival of the Little Penguins to their on-shore nests. As such the Penguin Parade

offers tourists the opportunity to experience a natural phenomenon, first hand, and to learn more about the protection and habitats of these creatures.

The unpredictable nature of wildlife experiences has been recognised as a perceived risk associated with engaging in these forms of tourism experiences (Dolnicar, 2005), however this research sought to identify additional barriers to consumption which may influence tourists' perceptions of the Penguin Parade, and their ongoing commitment or bond with PINP, and the Penguin Parade, as an ecological destination. By assessing the perceived risks identified by tourists, the research focus was to identify aspects of the tourist destination which may prove to act as a deterrent to the establishment of tourist bonds with the Penguin Parade, and through this, PINP.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Perceived Risks for Consumption**

Barriers associated with consumption (perceived risks) can be most clearly defined as consumers' sensitivities about both the probability and the extent of loss associated with the consumption of a product or service (Taylor, 1974). Consumer behaviour research has identified a number of significant perceived risks including: equipment risk, financial risk, performance risk, physical risk, psychological risk, satisfaction risk, social risk and time risk (Jacoby and Kaplan, 1972; Bettman, 1973).

A number of studies have investigated the role of perceived risk in relation to tourism consumption. These studies have predominately focused upon identifying those risks which are actively sought by the tourist when selecting a tourist destination or activity, as well as those that prevent tourists from visiting or engaging in a particular tourism experience. For example, one study by Dowling and Staelin (1994) identified that consumers tend to assess risk according to both category risk (i.e., risk associated with the product or service category) and specific risk (i.e., risk associated with the specific organisation or brand). In applying this classification to a tourism context the research highlighted the need to acknowledge distinctions between those risks that tourists/visitors attribute to the 'type' of tourist experience offered, and those risks that they attribute to being directly associated with the tourist destination itself.

Overall, research has revealed that while a standard set of risk perceptions have been identified across consumer consumption behaviours, the type of product or service to be consumed and the environment in which it is offered impacts upon the perceived risk identified by the consumer. It has become common practice in studies assessing barriers or risks to consumption that exploratory research is first undertaken to qualitatively identify the key, and sometimes specific, risks associated with the particular tourist destination (as it would be in this instance). For example, some perceived risks associated with domestic tourism include environmental risk (e.g., risk of natural disasters), and value for money risk (e.g., the experience may be a waste of money). Further, specific risks, such as, concern over the condition of the roads in relation to travelling to tourist attractions, or concern over wildlife or environmental damage, also have the capacity to influence decisions to visit a nature tourism destination.

What can be concluded from this past work is that while there has been some research conducted in relation to perceived risks associated with consumption, these studies are somewhat limited in regards to assessing the type of perceived risks of Australian tourism visitors. More specifically, there is currently no research which specifically assesses these

perceived risks in the context in which PINP currently operates, namely – a natural wildlife tourism destination.

Here we propose that the type of perceived risk that visitors identify with visitation to the PINP Penguin Parade may provide valuable insight into sustainable service outcomes such as service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty.

**Methods**

In order to obtain information on visitor motivations and perceptions, qualitative research techniques were utilised. Specifically, a multi-method approach was adopted with the two methods reported here being, focus groups and individual interviews with visitors (vox pops).

**Focus Group Design**

Potential focus group participants were filtered into three separate groups depending on the criteria as set out in Table 1.1. The selection of participants was random, insofar as they fitted the filtering profile, and were registered with a market research recruitment firm. As such, the responses could be considered to be an acceptable reflection of the perceptions of these chosen market segments. Reflectively, once the focus groups had been conducted a label was assigned to each group based upon their level of visitation to the Penguin Parade (as outlined in Table 1.1) and their overall perception (positive-neutral-negative) towards the Penguin Parade as a nature-based tourism attraction).

Each focus group consisted of 7-8 participants and ran for approximately 90 minutes each. The focus groups covered similar discussion material with this particular research focused upon assessing the participants’ attitudes, specifically toward visitation to the Phillip Island Nature Park Penguin Parade. In conjunction with this, participants were also encouraged to consider factors that serve as barriers as well as the factors that encourage them to visit the penguin parade.

**Table 1.1 - Focus Group Composition**

Focus Group	Inclusion Criteria	Label
FG 1 8 participants	Male/Female, aged 20 - 60, partnered or single, no children, who have NOT visited Phillip Island Nature Park (Penguin Parade) in the last 10 years	Non-visitors (negative)
FG 2 7 participants	Male/Female, aged 20 - 60, parents of children between the ages 2 - 15, who have visited Phillip Island Nature Park (Penguin Parade) in the last two years	Committed visitors (positive)
FG 3 7 participants	Male/Female, aged 20 - 60, parents of children between the ages of 2 - 25, who have NOT visited Phillip Island Nature Park (Penguin Parade) in the last 10 years	Ambivalent visitors (neutral)

**Individual Interviews (Vox Pops) Design**

In addition to the focus groups the researchers conducted individual interviews with visitors to the Penguin Parade. These interviews allowed the researchers to gather candid, and instantaneous, response to the Penguin Parade, prior to, and after the appearance of the penguins. In total, 23

interviews were conducted with 12 Interviews conducted prior to the Penguin Parade, and 11 interviews conducted after the Penguin Parade.

## Findings

The preliminary results which emerged as being of particular significance to this research, was the identification of a perceived risk or consumption barrier ascertained from the focus group discussions. This finding appeared to be somewhat at odds with the experiential evaluations ascertained through the on-site personal interviews.

The focus group discussions revealed that across all groups, including the committed visitors group (FG2), there was agreement that many of the attractions at the Penguin Parade are perceived to be overtly commercial. Furthermore, many respondents expressed a concern of the juxtaposition between a “nature” experience, and the clean, controlled, and sterile environment. Comments pertaining to this juxtaposition were made from respondents across the three focus groups:

*“I wouldn’t call that nature... it’s set up. Even though it is natural, it’s spoiled by all the stageyness – it’s spoiled by so much stuff – the buildings, the souvenirs... the penguins doing their show...” (FG3)*

*“It’s a sterile environment...it’s too clinical, too clean, you know you’re being played, being marketed to...” (FG2)*

*“You pay an entrance fee, which helps to pay for the rangers and the park, but all the crap around that spoils it. It seems that they are just trying to make money.” (FG3)*

*“I think it’s over-commercialised now...or monitored, or structured I suppose.” (FG1)*

*“I did feel funny pulling into the car park, I did feel, not embarrassed, but, a little bit, I’m a real tourist sort of feeling, rather than... the reason we were going was different to how I felt when we pulled in, just how big it is with all the set up for the buses and everything.” (FG2)*

*“...well it’s catering to tourists obviously, but not in a natural way, you know it just seems really structured.” (FG1)*

*“Commercialised – making money from it. Nothing natural” (FG3)*

In a sense, the respondents were expressing an inconsistency between the naturalness of the Penguin Parade and the, perceived, unnatural experience of the infrastructure around the Penguin Parade. Most respondents agreed that there needed to be an infrastructure for all of the buses, however, this was seen to have a negative influence on the desire to re-attend, particularly in light of other attractions that were seen to offer, ostensibly, the same nature experience, such as the Healesville Sanctuary, and the Werribee Zoo.

These comments appeared in striking contrast to the on-site evaluations given by visitors directly after they had experienced the Penguin Parade. While comments with regard to over-crowding at the time of the Penguins’ arrival were raised, no comment was made as to the commercialisation of the venue or the nature-based attraction, even when visitors were prompted to comment upon any negative aspects of their experience at the Penguin Parade. The following comments are indicative of how the immediacy of the experience has a mitigating effect over visitor perceptions of the Penguin Parade.

*“Just being so close to them, and each one seems to have a different little character... and then you watch these little fat ones come up and half of them sit down and have a little rest. No, it was really excellent...” (VP13)*

*“The fact that it’s kept as natural as possible...that you try to protect the penguins’ environment to your best capacity, but it also makes it possible for the general public to see what they do without interfering with them.” (VP15)*

*“Good, beautiful. They are very cute.” (VP18)*

*“I’d say just, it’s lovely to know that we can get so close to them, like in some parts of the world you can’t even get that close.” (VP22)*

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

While the research adopted a qualitative approach which thereby placed limitations on the associated sample size for the study, the breadth and depth of the research enabled the researchers to glean significant insight into the perceptions of nature-based tourism visitors and non-visitors. As such, this research highlighted two key findings that provide valuable insight for ecological tourist destination marketers/managers and consumption theorists. Firstly, the research identified an important, and somewhat uncommon, psychological risk to the consumption of ecological tourist experiences. The perceived over-commercialisation of the Penguin Parade, reported by the focus group participants, appeared as a dominant deterrent for future patronage and for possible advocacy for the nature-based tourist experience. This has ramifications for operators of ecological tourist experiences, particularly those who might approach the experience as an “attraction”. Previous research, conducted by Dolnicar (2005) in the field of tourism consumption, identified aspects such as safety/security, weather, value for money, and cost, as the main perceived risks influencing the choice of leisure/tourism consumption within Australia for both domestic and international visitors. Consequently, findings from this research broaden the theoretical focus of consumption barriers to tourist experiences, specifically for those offering an ecological wildlife experience in Australia, to include the psychological perception of over-commercialisation of the destination.

Secondly, at a theoretical level, this research highlights the existence of a short-term/long-term memory ‘recency effect’ with regard to the perceived risks associated with the consumption of nature-based tourist experiences. Instantaneous recall of the lived experience of the Penguin Parade, ascertained through the on-site interviews, appeared to be contextually driven as visitor evaluations focused upon accounts of the positive interaction they had experienced with the penguins as the main natural attraction. In contrast, the post-evaluative comments highlighted in the focus groups emphasised the over-commercialisation of the tourist destination, which demonstrated a temporal influence. These comments appear to complement current research into the current ecological tourism environment which highlights a managerial trend towards the commodification of nature in nature-based tourism (Wearing, Archer and Jackson, 2003). Although the comments from the focus groups were offered in conjunction with positive recollections of the viewing of the penguins themselves, the subsequent recollection of the commercialisation of the destination demonstrated the existence of a temporal distinction. As such, the recency effect identified in this research is recognised as a significant episodic memory phenomena (Isarida and Isarida, 2006), specifically based upon the principles of contextual retrieval (Glenberg, Bradley, Kraus and Renzaglia, 1983) and temporal distinctiveness (Crowder, 1993). These findings hold

important practical repercussions for marketers/managers of ecological attractions who are seeking to capture the positive involvement their visitors experience with their natural attraction. Ecological tourist destinations that are seeking to establish a relationship with local/regional markets, would be advised to begin the process of establishing the relationship as soon as practicable after the ecological experience. Consequently, this research identifies the importance of establishing relational bonds with key tourist markets (i.e. local/regional visitors) to facilitate strategic outcomes such as repeat patronage, advocacy, and ongoing financial support for the sustainability of the core ecological tourism product.

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