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An Exploration of Motives for Attending Australian Ecotourism Locations and their Influence on Future Intentions

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Abstract

This paper sought to explore the push [internal] motivations of eco-tourists and the influence of these motivational drives on their future ecotourism intentions. Findings from this exploratory study identified five key internal motivations, namely, ‘self-esteem’, ‘relaxation’, ‘social interaction’, self-fulfilment’ and ‘thrill and excitement’. Further analysis identified that ‘self-esteem’, ‘relaxation’ and ‘self-fulfilment’ motives were significantly related to eco-tourist’s intention to volunteer as well as their intention to donate money to an eco-tourism destination. Additionally, ‘self-fulfilment’ and ‘thrill and excitement’ motives were identified as impacting upon eco-tourists’ future attendance intentions. Consequently, findings from this research provide eco-tourism operators with insight into eco-tourist motivations to inform product and brand development and promotional activities and assist in the ongoing development effective eco-tourist retention strategies.

Keywords: eco-tourism, tourism, motivations, customer behaviour, marketing strategies
An Exploration of Motives for Attending Australian Ecotourism Locations and their Influence on Future Intentions

Introduction

Ecological tourism (ecotourism), or nature based tourism, is best described as learning-orientated tourism based upon the study of nature which requires environmental and economical sustainability (Savage 1993; Wight 1993; Herbig and O’Hara 1997; Blamey 2001; Weaver 2005). A consistent theme when defining ecotourism is the development of a tourist or visitation model that conserves the environment, as well as providing an economic benefit for local communities (cf. Holden and Kealy 1996). Similarly, an important element of the ecotourism experience is considered by many to be related to a longer-term connection to the natural environment, and a desire to commit to the ecotourism “idea” beyond transactional experiences. Obviously not all eco-tourists will seek this connection, however, the inherent difficulty in accessing many ecotourism locations suggest that motives to form longer relationships with eco-tourist destinations might be more complex than typical tourist experiences.

Background

An examination of ecotourism motivation can be located in the broader domain of tourism motivations. In the field of tourism motivations, researchers have postulated a number of motivation theory approaches. For example, McIntosh and Goeldner (1986) identified four motivators of travel, viz., physical motivators, cultural motivators, interpersonal motivators, and, status and prestige motivators. An alternative perspective is that of “push” and “pull” motives (see Crompton 1979) where internal motives such as rest, relaxation or exploration (intangible factors) are considered push motives, as they push a tourist away from home, while external motives such as the attractiveness of a destination (tangible factor) is considered to pull a person towards visiting a specific destination (Crompton 1979; Uysal and Jurowski 1994; Yoon and Uysal 2005; Chan and Baum 2007; Kim 2008). To date, tourism researchers have sought to examine the push and pull motivational forces influencing them to make travel based consumption decisions (Backman, Backman, Uysal and Sunshine 1995; Baloglu and Uysal 1996: Kim and Lee 2002). Specifically, motivations operating as push factors, towards consumer behaviour within the tourism literature, have been useful for explaining certain behaviour, such as tourist visitation or the desire to go on a holiday (Groossens 2000).

In this paper, we seek to examine push or internal motives on future intentions, predominantly because we are interested in attitudinal motives, and how they might influence the development of the marketing mix at the ecotourism location. In this context, then, it can be argued that pull factors may not necessarily be as important in understanding motives, as travel is motivated by “going away from” rather “going towards” something, and traveller’s motives tend to be markedly self-oriented (Witt and Wright 1992).

Given that ecotourism represents a growth area for tourism (Wight 2001), the examination of visitor motivations should be considered an important activity for ecotourism operators. By understanding the motives of eco-tourists, and the impact of these variables on eco-tourist behavioural intentions, operators can better tailor their offerings to particular tourist needs as well as more efficiently manage the environment in relation to the development of products.
contained within the ecotourism location. From the perspective of the managers of ecotourism
locations, there may be opportunities for other forms of support, beyond visitation, such as
volunteering, or donating, and understanding the drivers of this type of behaviour would be
useful in the development of ecotourism products. Clearly, the growth of ecotourism will put
pressure on many environments, and therefore, ecotourism operators need to look at
alternative forms of support, simply so that the locations are kept in states that are in harmony
with their natural environment and are sustainable.

Previous tourist motivational research aimed to identify various types and segments of tourist
and their preferences for travel decisions for various tourist destinations (Moscardo, Pearce
and Morrison 2001; McKercher, Ho, du Cross and So-Ming 2002; Bieger and Laesser 2002;
Carr 2006; Hsu, Cai and Wong 2007; Jönsson and Devonish 2008). Currently there is a
distinct lack of empirical research conducted into the intrinsic motivations of eco-tourists
(Holden and Sparrowhawk 2002; Chan and Baum 2007), and specifically how these drivers
can be utilised by eco-tourist operators to enhance the management of these destinations.

As such, this research aims to explore the push [internal] motivations of eco-tourists and the
influence of these motivational drives on their future ecotourism intentions. Specifically the
intentions of this study were two-fold: 1) to explore the underlying internal motivations of
eco-tourists, and 2) to determine the impact of these motivational factors on eco-tourist
behavioural intentions such as, future visitation, donations, recommendations and
volunteering.

Method

As the relationship between eco-tourist motives and future intentions has not been previously
explored in the literature, as far as we are aware, the following empirical study is exploratory,
rather than definitive. Adding further support for the exploratory nature of this research is the
recognition that there currently is no universally agreed theoretical approach to understanding
motivations in the psychological literature (Atkinson, Atkinson and Hilgard 1983; Davidoff
1994), and consequently there is not a commonly agreed approach to understanding tourist
motivations (Fodness 1994). However, through an examination of the current literature we
were able to identify five key factors that have been used to investigate motives to attend
nature based tourist locations. These factors are derived from research conducted by Pearce
(1988; 1993) who formulated a theory to understand motivational drives in tourism, the
‘travel ladder’. This theory was based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs motivational theory
(Maslow 1943) and as such, the five motivational factors consist of a range of items, clustered
around five hierarchically ascending categories namely: “relaxation”, “thrills and excitement”,
“social interaction”, “self-esteem and development” and “self-fulfilment”. Utilising previous
research from the tourist motivation literature conducted by Holden and Sparrowhawk (2002),
which explored the intrinsic motivations of eco-tourist trekking in Nepal, we adapted 25 items
to measure motives in the ecotourism context.

In relation to future intentions, we adapted previous single-item measures in services and non-
profit literature to identify consumption behaviour, including visitation, recommendation,
donating, and volunteering. A structured pre-test was conducted with four marketing
academics, two eco-tourist operators, and a psychologist, and comments were provided to the
researchers on comprehension, layout, and clarity. As the majority of the items in the
questionnaire were from pre-existing questionnaires, little modification was required. The
motivational items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree, while the future intention statements were measured on a 7-point scale with response categories ranging from 1=no chance to 7=almost certain. Data was collected via an online panel with access to 120,000 potential respondents. In all, 992 people from the panel participated in the study. All respondents were screened into the study based on the criteria that they were a previous visitor to one or more eco-tourism destinations within Australia. The screening question and the forced response mechanism built into the online survey eliminated non-response bias and limited the incidence of response error.

Results

To explore the internal motivation of eco-tourists a factor analysis was conducted. A principal component analysis with a varimax rotation was utilised. The analysis of the motivational items resulted in a five factors with eigenvalues over 1.0, and 19 of the 25 items being usable for further analysis (“Develop close friendships”, “Feel a sense of solitude”, “Feel as sense of freedom”, “Make new friends”, “Enjoy nature” and, “Volunteer my time and skills to support an ecotourism destination” were removed as they cross-loaded across items with factor loadings of <0.5) loaded significantly on five key factors (see Table 1). These five factors accounted for 69.28% of the total variance in eco-tourist motivations and provided statistical support for the motivational drives identified previously by researchers such as, Pearce (1988) and Holden and Sparrowhawk (2002). Reliability analysis of the factors (Cronbach’s alpha) indicated that all of the alpha coefficients for the motivational factors were significantly high with alpha scores well above the widely accepted minimum value of 0.5 (Nunnally 1967).

Table 1 Motivational Dimensions for Attending an Ecotourism Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational Factors/Item</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Eigenvalues</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>StDev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor 1: Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel a sense of control</td>
<td>0.797</td>
<td>3.461</td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td>3.453</td>
<td>1.349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over natural environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge my abilities</td>
<td>0.768</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>1.677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impress family/friends</td>
<td>0.750</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be in an unpredictable</td>
<td>0.732</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase my physical</td>
<td>0.720</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>1.756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fitness levels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place myself in risky</td>
<td>0.610</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>situations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 2: Relaxation</td>
<td>0.838</td>
<td>2.682</td>
<td>0.821</td>
<td>5.572</td>
<td>1.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relax mentally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>1.634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be in a calm atmosphere</td>
<td>0.814</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>1.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relax physically</td>
<td>0.802</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>1.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a change from my</td>
<td>0.539</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>3.677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daily routine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 3: Social interaction</td>
<td>0.853</td>
<td>2.409</td>
<td>0.851</td>
<td>4.916</td>
<td>1.446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a good time with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>1.588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friends/families visiting</td>
<td>0.831</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>1.665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your local area</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend time with loved</td>
<td>0.770</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>1.689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ones</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 4: Self-fulfilment</td>
<td>0.823</td>
<td>2.310</td>
<td>0.746</td>
<td>6.019</td>
<td>0.997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase my knowledge of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>1.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the natural environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel close to nature</td>
<td>0.755</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>1.211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy nature</td>
<td>0.746</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>1.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 5: Thrill and</td>
<td>0.799</td>
<td>1.610</td>
<td>0.790</td>
<td>4.925</td>
<td>1.389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>excitement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>1.420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel stimulated</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>1.630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel excited</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis
Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation
Total Variance Explained = 69.283%
To examine the relationship between the intrinsic motivations and eco-tourist future intentions, separate regression analyses were conducted, whereby each of the five motivational dimensions were regressed on six separate future intention criteria: recommendations to others, attendance within 1 year, attendance within 5 years, future attendance (a summative score), volunteering and donating. Table 2 provides the results of these independent regressions.

Table 2 Regression Results Using Eco-tourist Motivations to Predict Future Intentions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational Dimensions</th>
<th>Recommend to Others</th>
<th>Future Attendance (within 1 yr)</th>
<th>Future Attendance (within 5 yrs)</th>
<th>Future Attendance (total)</th>
<th>Volunteer in the Future</th>
<th>Donate Money in the Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-esteem</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>0.340</td>
<td>0.287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Relaxation</td>
<td>0.162</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social interaction</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Self-fulfilment</td>
<td>0.449</td>
<td>0.212</td>
<td>0.248</td>
<td>0.243</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Thrill and excitement</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>0.143</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>n/s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² = 0.328 104 0.136 0.132 0.121 0.101
Adj R² = 0.322 0.095 0.127 0.123 0.112 0.092

As indicated in Table 2, self-esteem, relaxation and self-fulfilment motivations are significantly related to an eco-tourist’s likelihood of recommending an eco-site to others; self-esteem motivations are related to both an eco-tourist’s intention to volunteer at an eco-tourism destination and their intention to donate money to an eco-tourist destination in the future. With regard to future visitation, self-fulfilment motivations are significantly related to the future attendance intentions of eco-tourists within a one year period, while self-fulfilment and thrill and excitement motivations are significantly related to future attendance intentions of eco-tourists within a five year period. Furthermore, both self-fulfilment and thrill and excitement motivations are significantly related to the overall measure of future attendance by eco-tourists to ecotourism destinations. An additional finding of interest, as a result of the regression analysis, is that the social interaction motivation is not significantly related to any of the six future eco-tourist behavioural intentions.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research sought to further explore the “push” motivational factors and their influence upon the future behavioural intentions of eco-tourists within Australia. The findings from this exploratory research contribute to confirming the valid existence of five distinct ‘push’ [internal] motivational forces (Pearce 1988; Holden and Sparrowhawk 2002) as well as their significant influence on eco-tourist future intentions with regard to eco-tourism visitation and support.

The findings of this research indicate that if ecotourism operators wish to attract eco-tourists who are identified as being more highly involved with the ecotourism destination, it is necessary to design marketing strategies according to their specific inner motivations to travel to the eco-destination. For instance, if an ecotourism operator is seeking tourist donations or volunteer assistance, then emphasis should be placed upon their self-esteem motives (refer to Table 2). In applying the premise of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow 1943) to the findings, it is recognised that future behaviour intentions of eco-tourists are more highly motivated by higher level needs, such as the need for self-esteem and personal growth (self-
fulfilment). The adoption of marketing strategies, by eco-tourist operators that espouse these need states may therefore result in the establishment of longer relationships with eco-tourists than strategies which are aimed at more hedonic or social needs (i.e., relaxation, thrills and excitement, or social interaction). This appears particularly true for social-based motivations. While Krippendorf (1987), and Holden and Sparrowhawk (2002) recognised that tourism travel is often motivated by an individual’s need to interact with family and friends, our research did not find any significant relationship between an eco-tourists’ social motives and their future involvement intentions. These results may reflect the ecotourism community, whereby many eco-tourists engage in this form of travel by themselves or to fulfil higher level needs than socialisation. Further to the findings based on the individual motivational drives, the results of this research also supported previous claims that multiple motivations are usually recognised as drivers of tourist behaviour (Wight 1996, Chan and Baum 2007). This is particularly the case for behavioural intentions such as, recommending an eco-tourism experience to a friend or family member and future attendance at an ecotourism site (refer to Table 2).

Overall, this study provides valuable insight to ecotourism operators who are continually seeking avenues through which to influence eco-tourists to support their service in an increasingly competitive market (Jayawardena 2002). Here, significant links between an eco-tourists’ “push” motivations and their future behavioural intentions have been identified and these relationships will allow eco-tourism operators to formulate more effective marketing strategies to entice directed eco-tourist behaviour, such as, donations or repeat visitation. These practices can be seen to contribute to the development and planning of sustainable management strategies for these destinations (Fennell 1999; Holden and Sparrowhawk 2002; Luo and Deng 2007).

Although this study highlights significant findings for ecotourism operators, there are recognisable limitations that can be seen to inform our future research directions. Firstly, this study focuses on the “push” aspects of motivation, largely ignoring the “pull” motivations of eco-tourists. “Pull” aspects are often associated with a specific destination or area – meaning they are less global and more situation specific (Luo and Deng 2007). Hence, these motives should also be examined with relation to ecotourism given that these destinations offer something that other tourism establishments cannot. Further to this, attributes unique to various ecotourism destinations should be identified as they can be identified as a source of differentiation and used in conjunction with motivational drives to better position these products in a growing market. Secondly, motivational drives are not recognised as exclusive predictors of eco-tourist behaviour. Fodness (1994) postulates that while motivations are only one of many variables that can be identified as influencing tourist behaviour, they are nevertheless important as they are the driving force behind human behaviour. For example, future research could examine the link between motivation and the personal goals to further explore the current and future behavioural intentions of eco-tourists.
References


