

UTILIZING THE PRODUCT CLUB APPROACH FOR BIRDING TRAIL PLANNING

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Abstract

As bird-watching gains popularity, ecotourism planners are using various techniques to attract birdwatchers. One method of drawing birders to a specific region is the development of a birding trail. Although numerous birding trails have been created with varying levels of success, there is little research on how birding trails are designed, implemented, and managed. One new and potentially viable approach is to implement and manage birding trails as tourism product clubs. A product club is an association of tourism service providers working together to deliver an integrated service. This study first explored internet birding blogs to discover what birders desire on their trips. We then conducted semi-structured interviews with key people connected to existing tourism trails. We eventually chose as a case study site the Essex and Chatham-Kent County area of southern Ontario and an advisory committee of key stakeholders was set up to assist with trail planning. This paper provides a brief synopsis of the results.

1.0 Introduction

Tourism continues to grow globally with over 1.6 billion people participating in different avenues of tourism and spending over US\$2 trillion annually (Lowman 2009). As a result of this growth, tourism is rapidly evolving, presenting tourism planners with new opportunities and new tourism segments. One niche market in tourism is ecotourism, and one niche market within ecotourism is bird-watching tourism.

Bird-watching or birding is the activity of viewing or watching birds either through the naked eye or by view-enhancing devices such as binoculars and pods, for the purpose of recreation (American Birding Association 2010). The activity is often challenging, as it involves searching for elusive, rare, and endemic species, but finding such creatures can be very satisfying (Birding B.C. 2009). As a result, bird-watching is often strongly correlated with photography and many birdwatchers use high resolution cameras and video equipment to capture rare birds and moments in the field (Birding B.C. 2009). According to Blondel (2004) and Connell (2009) birdwatchers are thought to comprise the largest segment of nature-based or wildlife viewing tourism in the world. If this is true, then bird-watching is the dominant activity in ecotourism, especially as society continues to shift away from consumptive to non-consumptive forms of wildlife tourism (Blondel 2004).

Since birding is such a growing tourism activity, the development benefits that bird-watching can bring through enterprises such as birding festivals or birding trails can alter the economy of a place or region (Colby & Smith-Incer 2005). Struggling communities or regions are sometimes able to put themselves on the global tourism map by facilitating bird-watching tourism (Chambliss et al. 2005).

Most countries have a national tourism plan with annual goals and objectives, which usually include promoting the nation's best tourism resources (Canadian Tourism Commission 2010). In Canada, some of the notable sites which hold national tourism significance are Niagara Falls, Banff and Jasper National Parks, and the Rocky Mountains, among others (Canadian Tourism Commission 2010). However, places like Point Pelee do not seem to play a vital role in Canada's national tourism plan, even though this national park is one of the premier bird-watching places in North America (Canadian Tourism Commission 2010). Thus, although bird-watching tourism is not taken very seriously as a national tourism activity, it can be promoted to foreign and domestic tourists alike. Perhaps bird-watching tourism can be developed as a more significant segment of the overall tourism market in Canada.

2.0 Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to attempt to fill a research gap regarding birding trail planning and to test the theory and practical application of developing a birding trail as a tourism product club. There are several well-known and successful birding trails, especially within the United States, that exemplify what a birding trail should look like and what its functions should be. Some of these famous birding trails include the North Carolina Birding Trail, the Maine Birding Trail, The Great Florida Birding Trail and The Great Texas Birding Trail. All four of these trails provide access to a wide array of bird species and fabulous scenery. However, in looking at bird-watching tourism and the development of birding trails from a tourism planner's perspective, literature regarding the design, function, implementation and management of bird-watching trails is lacking. There is very little

research about what criteria are used by tourism planners for developing a birding trail. Therefore, this research attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1.) What are the criteria for selecting bird-watching sites for tourism purposes?
- 2.) What are the components of a birding trail?
- 3.) What is involved in the planning of a birding trail?
- 4.) What are the necessary elements of a product club as one element of a birding trail?
- 5.) How will the birding trail product club be managed, monitored and evaluated to ensure success?

3.0 Methodology

This research project was conducted in three parts, using a mixed methods approach that incorporated both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Due to this three-step approach, the results of each step needed to be completed and incorporated into the next step of the research process.

Part one of the research methodology involved conducting a pilot study of bird-watching internet blogs. The purpose was to find out what birders were looking for on a potential birding trip and what their experiences were on a birding vacation. For this part of the research, 25 birding blogs were analyzed from 5 different birding blog sites.

We used two different types of assessment on the blogs to dissect their meanings and gain valuable information about birding trip desires. First, we put text from the blogs into a word frequency counter software system called Hermetic, which analyzed all the significant words and passages in the blogs and tabulated the results. This software can be manipulated to count only relevant words and it can then add them together to formulate themes and categories.

Following the quantitative analysis using Hermetic, a more thorough qualitative content analysis was conducted on the same blog text. First, initial coding took place whereby ideas and general themes were identified on a line-by-line basis and important words and passages were underlined or circled. After initial coding, axial or focused coding took place and the initially-identified ideas were grouped together and organized into categories. Consequently, different groups and categories began to emerge based on the color schemes. Lastly, another round of axial or focused coding took place, the different identified categories were examined, and relationships formed. As a result, major themes emerged.

Part two of the research involved interviewing 10 managers of established tourism trails to gain insight regarding the development and operation of the trails. Five of these trails were birding trails and five were other types of tourism trails. This was done in order to diversify potential findings and to try to understand planning similarities and differences between various tourism trails. The interviewees were sought through the internet and participated in an approximately 30-minute telephone interview that involved 6 open-ended questions using a semi-structured interview process. Trail managers were asked planning- and operations-related questions.

The last step involved selecting a case study location to test the theory of developing a birding trail as a product club and instituting an advisory committee composed of key stakeholders. The case study site chosen was the Essex and Chatham-Kent County area of southwestern Ontario, which has the internationally well-known bird-watching destinations of Point Pelee National Park and Rondeau Provincial Park. A local advisory committee was created to guide the product club development. The advisory committee members were chosen based on three criteria; birding expertise, local economic significance, and networking value. The advisory committee members were from the following organizations:

- Southwest Ontario Tourism Board
- Windsor, Essex and Pelee Island Tourism Board
- Chatham-Kent County Tourism Board
- Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority
- Essex Regional Conservation Authority
- Ojibway Nature Centre
- Point Pelee National Park
- Rondeau Provincial Park

4.0 Results and Findings

4.1 Birding Blog Analysis

4.1.1 Quantitative Analysis of Birding Blogs

Through the use of Hermetic word frequency software, 13 main themes were constructed that were deemed important to birders on their trips. Table 1 below illustrates the rank and frequency of each of the 13 themes appears while Figure 1 illustrates the percentage occurrence of the 13 different themes.

<Insert Table 1 and Figure 1 about here>

Almost all of the blogs list a wide array of species viewed by birders. A total of 877 words related to bird species were used, an average of 35 bird species in each of the 25 blogs. Clearly birds far outnumber anything else that a birder might desire on his/her trip.

According to the word frequency software, the second most important category was price and affordability. These two factors have always been important components of tourism marketing and often play a vital role in the success or failure of tourism destinations (Pizam & Mansfeld 1999). In recent years of global economic crises and lower disposable incomes, price and affordability have become an even more important competition factor in tourism (Conrady & Buck 2011). Even though price and affordability were only mentioned 27 times overall, this theme appeared within 19 of 25 analyzed blogs, sometimes with multiple references within the same blog.

As a result of vast lists of bird species, other categories such as price and affordability, accommodation, transportation and food were completely overwhelmed and appear insignificant. This is often a common limitation with simple frequencies, as the methodology overemphasizes numbers and does not delve deeper into the meanings of words and passages. Nevertheless, these other categories provide important information on travel needs.

4.1.2 Qualitative Analysis of Birding Blogs

The qualitative approach provides a more nuanced view of the blogs. Figure 2 reveals that observing birds is still an important factor for birders. However, the most influential factor that emerged from the qualitative research approach was related to characteristics of the birders themselves. The research indicates that whether a birder was a novice or expert and whether they were an individual or family birder had a strong influence on their trip planning. Expert birders were more likely to travel further and took more expensive trips, whereas novice birders took shorter trips closer to home. These findings coincide with previous studies conducted by Scott and Thigpen (2003) who identified 4 different levels of birdwatchers with similar travel and spending trends as identified by this research: 1) casual birders, 2) interested birders, 3) active birders and 4) skilled birders.

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

However, this study also found that approximately 30% of birders were family birders with fairly young children. As a result, they needed additional activities on their trips besides birding that could satisfy the entire family. Similar findings of 30% family participation were found by Kwan, Eagles and Gebhardt (2008) regarding ecotourism patrons, which would indicate a common ecotourism trend of family participation. Moreover, about 70-75% of birders conducted their activity close to home, never leaving their state or province. This finding is also supported by previous literature, which suggests that most bird-watching is done locally and in many instances literally in an individual's own backyard (Liska 2009). Therefore, birding trip planning is best summed up by Figure 3 below with an overall theory based on the findings. It suggests different components that are vital to bird-watching tourism; however, they are not all equally important. The components in the outer circles are most important and, moving inward, the smaller ones are less significant. There are also four outside factors based on birdwatcher characteristics that influence and impact the hierarchical ladder of bird-watching tourism planning.

<Insert Figure 3 about here>

4.2 Interviews

After interviewing key individuals from 10 different tourism trails, general themes began to emerge regarding their planning, implementation and management. It was clear that most tourism trails were not planned by professional tourism planners and few had specific criteria in place for site selection. Trail sites were seldom selected based on most appropriate form or function; most were purely based on aesthetic qualities or due to popularity. As a result, numerous trails employed a public nomination system for site selection (Kiser 2011). Of the trails investigated, only the Great Florida Birding Trail had a rigorous system in place for site selection based on seven key principles: ecological significance, birding characteristics, site resilience, physical and legal access, economic significance, maintenance support, and educational significance (Kiser 2011). Moreover, few trails had direct connections or partnerships with accessory institutions, such as hotels, restaurants, transportation companies, or guiding services. Rather, most trails just had a website and provided maps and guidebooks to the trail and sites. This left the tourist with a simple "flat map" of possibilities and did not provide much to help the tourist figure out how to get to the destination or how to access other local attractions and activities.

Most tourism trails were planned, implemented, and managed as a partnership between various stakeholders, such as state fish and wildlife agencies, state tourism agencies, local tourism boards, conservation groups, protected areas, and special interest groups. However, tourism businesses were seldom involved in the planning and management of the trails. Thus, many tourism trails struggled to remain operational due to a lack of resources and funding. Most started with various government or agency grants and were unable to remain financially self-sustaining. Also very few trails had regular monitoring tools in place to track visitor numbers, trends, and potential problems.

4.3 Formulation of the Product Club for the Essex and Chatham-Kent County area of southwestern Ontario

After much deliberation, the advisory committee outlined the parameters for the product club that will develop and manage the new birding trail, which will be named the Great Pelee Birding Trail. The trail will be launched with 12 birding sites, 6 in each of the two counties. These sites were selected based on 4 main criteria: birding characteristics, ecological significance, economic significance, and proximity. Mature birding sites were prioritized as most had existing facilities and established transportation routes.

Accessory institutions were also selected that will formulate the product club, including 10 accommodation providers, 10 food providers, 2 transportation companies, 2 specialty stores, and 5 birding guide service providers. Various service providers were selected in each category in order to cater to different birder characteristics and price levels. Each member service provider will pay product club membership fees. Various membership options will be available based on desired services, such as the level of advertising exposure. A communication hub in the form of an electronic bird locator will also be developed. Birders can purchase and download software to their mobile devices to have real-time communication in the field, including currently spotted birds and trail news and updates. Revenues earned from memberships and services will be allocated to cover operating costs. A website will also be developed that will aid birders in planning their trip and list all the members of the product club. Lastly, the product club will be managed by the Windsor, Essex and Pelee Island Tourism Board, which will conduct quarterly monitoring to ensure smooth trail operations.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear that birding tourism planning is multi-dimensional and there are many factors that a tourism planner needs to consider when planning related tourism products. Birding trip planners must recognize that there are different birders with diverse needs, thus various programs and activities must be planned to satisfy a range of clients. In the case of family birders, some activities and programs might need to be offered that are not related to bird-watching in order to satisfy those in the family who are not avid birders. Moreover, birding trails need to be more thoroughly planned so they can function as true tourism assets rather than just serve as an added marketing campaign. It is important to plan tourism trails as more than just simple routes and maps. Instead, they should be planned as cohesive tourism units with accessory institutions so they can provide the optimal tourism experience. Thus, developing a birding trail as a tourism product club seems like a very viable planning option.

6.0 Citations

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Table 1. Most Numerous Words and Their Rank by Category (based on Hermetic Software 2011)

Rank	Theme	No. of Occurrences
1	Birds	877
2	Affordability and Price	27
3	Access to Sites	21
4	Equipment	20
5	Accommodation	16
6	Satisfaction and Recognition	14
7	Food	13
8	Educational Opportunities	11
8	Family Activities	11
9	Transportation	10
10	Non-Bird Wildlife	9
11	Non-Nature Related Activities	8
12	Maintenance	6

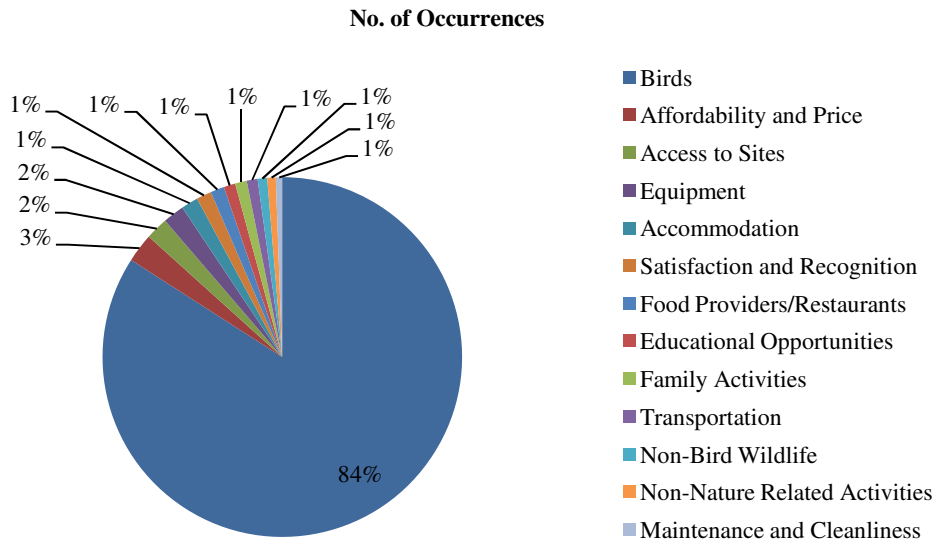


Figure 1. Percentage Breakdown of Relevant Birding Trip Components (based on Hermetic Software Assessment, 2011)

1.) Characteristics of the Birder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Birdwatcher versus Individual Birdwatcher • Expert Birdwatcher versus Novice Birdwatcher
2.) Chance to See Birds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To see as many different species as possible in as little time and place as possible • Colorful and visually appealing species • Endemic and rare species • Migratory species
3.) Satisfaction and Affordability of Trip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of accommodation • Food, beverage and services • Availability and cleanliness of facilities • Availability and ease of transportation to and from and within destination
4.) Educational Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of experienced and expert guide • On site birding center • Courses and seminars • Opportunity to take part in conservation projects/initiatives
5.) Availability of Equipment and Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cameras, pods, and binoculars • Blinds, screens, and shelter • Appropriate clothing, and footwear • Availability of trails and viewing platforms
6.) Non-birding Nature Related Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To see non-bird species (mammals, butterflies, monkeys, insects etc). • Hiking and mountain trekking • Fishing • Canoeing and kayaking • Sight seeing (waterfalls, caves, canyons, etc.)
7.) Non-nature Related Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shopping/souvenir • Nightlife/clubbing/bars • Festivals and events • Theme parks and child attractions • Golf, casino, spa and massage

Figure 2. Major Themes and Categories

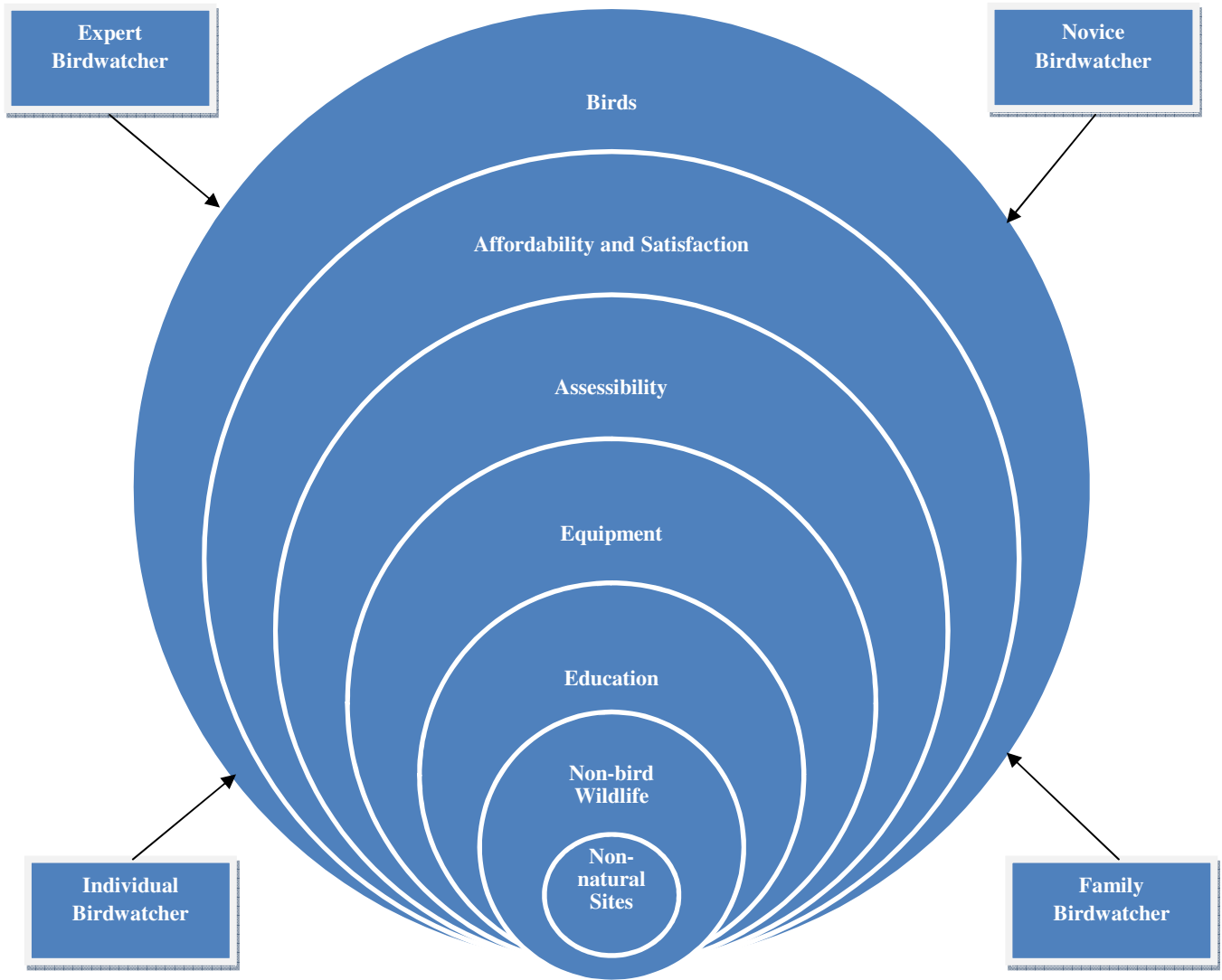


Figure 3. Hierarchical Theory of Bird-Watching Tourism Components