Investigating the salient factors of place attachment and its effects on tourists’ pro-environmental behaviour in national parks

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There is a plethora of studies on place attachment in environmental psychology and other social science disciplines. However, studies investigating this construct in the tourism literature are scant. The absence of debate about place attachment in tourism has called for an investigation of this socio-psychological construct in the study of tourist behaviour. One of the identified gaps in tourism literature is the need to construct a more robust scale for place attachment by investigating its salient dimensions. Furthermore, the relationship which tourists share with national parks as “places” is being recognised to play an important role in influencing their environmental behaviour (Halpenny, in press) but yet remains one of the understudied areas of research. While several studies have viewed place attachment as an outcome variable predicted by place characteristics and activities (e.g. Gross and Brown, 2008) or as a predictor of customer loyalty (e.g. Hwang et al., 2005; Yuksel et al., 2010), studies exploring different dimensions of place attachment on tourists’ place-specific pro-environmental behaviours remain in an infancy stage. Drawing from the place attachment and consumer behaviour literature, this study develops and presents a conceptual framework which aims at exploring four sub-dimensions of place attachment (place dependence, place identity, place affect, place social bonding) and further investigates their role in predicting place-specific pro-environmental behavioural intentions of tourists visiting national parks. Based on the framework, a number of propositions are developed. Additionally, the study proposes to test the moderating effect of place satisfaction on the respective relationships between each of the place attachment dimensions and tourists’ pro-environmental behavioural intentions in national parks.

Place dependence has been considered as an important component of place attachment by many researchers and has received considerable support from the literature. Existing studies suggest that people tend to depend on places which are likely to facilitate their leisure experiences (e.g. Brown and Raymond, 2007; Kyle et al., 2004). In other words, it relates to how far the place satisfies the individual’s behavioural goals as compared to other
alternatives. It is suggested that tourists’ level of place attachment at national parks may have an influence on their pro-environmental behaviours. Place identity is also a well researched dimension of place attachment. This construct reflects the connection between the individual and a particular setting (Prohansky, 1978). A tourist may develop an attachment to the national park because he/she identifies himself/herself strongly with the place. In other words, an individual may feel a strong sense of attachment if one feels that the national park is part of one’s self. Place affect reflects the emotional or affective bond between an individual and a place (Kyle et al., 2004; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). This conceptualization may suggest that the emotional ties/bonds which tourists share with the natural environment and activities in national parks may have an influence on their pro-environmental behaviour. Place social bonding reflects the importance of social relationships and the context within which they occur. The specific settings of the place share the meanings attributed to them by the individuals’ social environment. The importance of social ties to places have been well reflected by several authors (e.g. Gu and Ryan, 2008; Kyle et al., 2004) but to date, studies attempting to test the influence of social bonding on tourists’ pro-environmental behaviour is scarce in the literature. This study therefore proposes that social bonding will have a positive influence on tourists’ pro-environmental behaviours in national parks. In addition to the proposed relationships, place satisfaction is provided as a moderating construct to investigate the relationships between each of the place attachment dimensions and tourists’ pro-environmental behaviour in national parks. Although researchers have examined the influence of place attachment on tourists’ satisfaction (e.g. Yuksel et al., 2010), there has been to the authors’ knowledge no study conducted in tourism research where place satisfaction has been used as a moderating variable between place attachment and tourists’ pro-environmental behaviour. To bridge the gap in literature, this study proposes that place satisfaction moderates the relationships between the respective dimensions of place attachment and tourists’ pro-environmental behaviour in national parks.

The methodological framework of this study seeks to adopt scale constructions from literature which would be slightly modified to fit to the context of the research. The survey questionnaire will be pilot-tested on a sample of tourists in a selected national park of Victoria in stage 1 of the research. The second stage of research involves administering the questionnaire on a sample of 600 tourists in a selected national park of Victoria in Australia. The third stage methodology will seek to investigate the effects of place attachment on
tourists’ pro-environmental behaviour in a cross-country context. This involves the administering of the survey design to a sample of 600 tourists in a national park in Ontario, Canada using cultural, socio-demographic, and contextual factors. To date, there has been little if any comparative study on tourists’ levels of place attachment and their pro-environmental behaviours in a cross-country context. Contextual variables have been largely ignored and a comprehensive investigation of how tourists respond in different settings remains a paramount area of tourism inquiry. Furthermore, international and collaborative research in natural settings is strongly encouraged. This provides a strong theoretical basis for the proposed study. From an industry perspective, Parks Victoria works in partnership with Parks Canada with the aim of capitalising on seasonal resource differences between Australia and Canada in peak periods and, coupled with different management regimes (e.g. Parks Canada adopts a more consultative approach to park management), makes Canada a logical choice for a cross-country study. The study will employ the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique using LISREL V. 8.8 to test the proposed model and hypothesized relationships. To test the moderating effect of place satisfaction on the respective relationships between place attachment and tourists’ park-specific pro-environmental behaviours, the use of the Hierarchical Multiple Regression technique is proposed. It is expected that the empirical evidence will verify the theoretical statements brought forward in this study and hence progress the nature of debate on place attachment and pro-environmental behaviour in the tourism community. Additionally, it is hoped that testing the moderating effect of place satisfaction on these relationships will lead to a significant theoretical contribution to the tourism literature. The synthesis of findings from this research is further expected to offer important insights for park managers from the perspectives of promoting place attachment leading to more pro-environmental behaviours of tourists and secondly, in helping to plan and market environmentally responsible activities in national parks.
REFERENCES


