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‘Now that You Mention it…’: Visitor Least Satisfaction at a South Carolina Protected Area

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INTRODUCTION

User satisfaction has a profound impact on the viability and competitiveness of tourism and hospitality operations since it is directly correlated with repeat visitation and positive clientele referrals (Ozturk & Hancer, 2009). Protected areas are recognized as important venues for ecotourists who seek high quality viewing or interactive nature-based experiences often associated with charismatic megafauna (e.g. in-situ birding festivals, polar bears) (Buckley 2009, Lawton, 2009, Weaver, 2008). Persistent budget shortfalls have had an impact on the management and expansion of existing protected areas systems since the early 1990s (Bruner, Gullison, & Balmford, 2004). This has caused a reliance of park managers on visitor-based revenue generation and volunteerism, which in turn have become much needed facilitators of environmental and economic stability. Thus management has shifted from a protectionist ecological model to a hybrid ecological/business model with high client satisfaction and behavioral loyalty becoming the foci of attention to ensure the future of these protected areas.

The Francis Beidler Forest Audubon Centre and Sanctuary (FBF), the case study in this research, is a strictly protected area within South Carolina. This 6,438 hectare site contains USA’s largest remaining expanse of contiguous remnant old-growth hardwood bald cypress/tupelo gum swamp forest. FBF is concurrently designated as a National Natural Landmark, Globally Important Bird Area, and Ramsar Wetland of International Importance which attests to its ecological importance as this habitat provides a home for over 140 bird species, as well as other animals, reptiles, amphibians and mammals (National Audubon Society, 2009). A 1.78-mile boardwalk trail provides visitors with access to some of the most pristine park area. FBF is located on the outer edge of greater Charleston, a rapidly growing urban agglomeration of 700,000 residents (US Census, 2006). The area is displaying characteristics associated with a piecemeal peri-urban land use including road construction and commuter housing which contributes to habitat fragmentation. Sustained visitation (10,000 people per year; equally divided between walk-ins, bus and school groups) and stable revenue from repeat loyal visitors (roughly one-third of all walk-in visitors) are crucial to long-term management of FBF, and therefore it is critical that the parameters of visitor satisfaction and dissatisfaction are understood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of satisfaction has both a cognitive and affective dimension (Williams & Soutar, 2009). Expectancy/disconfirmation theory states that positive post-cognitive assessments of satisfaction are related to the degree to which one’s pre-expectations have been met either through positive word of mouth (WOM) referrals, visual images presented in the media or prior product usage. The fulfillment of specific physical, emotional needs and wants are associated with the concurrent affective satisfaction dimension (Lee & Beeler, 2009).

From a supply-side perspective, satisfaction in the hospitality context is equated with product quality (e.g. accommodation). The tourism sector also has a service quality dimension, but it is primarily linked with the setting itself and its associated offerings which facilitate the consumer’s interaction or experience with the product. Uysal, Williams & Yoon’s (2003) study of
a nature-based resort furthers the distinction between ‘expressive’ indicators which deal with core experiences, and ‘instrumental’ attributes which facilitate the latter.

The provision of high quality facilities (e.g. boardwalks, etc.) and the access they provide has contributed to patterns of high visitor satisfaction within national parks and protected areas, with only minimal dissatisfaction rates reported across a variety of protected area settings (see for example, Pan & Ryan, 2007). Warning signs of disappointment or less than full satisfaction with some aspect of their experience are often overlooked. To help address this shortcoming, empirical research was undertaken to identify and classify attributes of disappointment and least satisfaction amongst visitors to FBF to facilitate appropriate strategic responses by protected area managers.

**METHODOLOGY**

Visitor experience, including satisfaction, least satisfaction and disappointment, was solicited as part of an 8-page questionnaire distributed to on-site to walk-ins at FBF over a 13 month period. The questionnaire section “Characteristics of today’s visit” included 12 statements on specific FBF site and experience elements that required a response using a 5-point Likert-type scale. An overall statement ‘I was disappointed with some aspects of my visit to Beidler Forest’ was provided to elicit dissatisfaction, and visitors were asked to explain if they had circled a ‘4’ or ‘5’ (i.e. agreement or strong agreement). In addition respondents were asked to ‘please describe the least satisfying aspect of your visit to Beidler Forest today.’ This open-ended statement was necessary since it was recognized that: a) satisfaction levels associated with protected areas tend to be high; b) the selection of Likert-type statements cannot cover all aspects of visitor(s) experience or with the site itself; and c) quantitative analytical instruments alone are unlikely to explain complex behavior associated with visitor satisfaction. It was recognized that respondents would be reluctant to voice their personal dissatisfaction or disappointment per se, but that this statement would allow respondents to register their implicit disappointment with ‘least satisfying’ aspects associated with their experience or visit.

Visitor responses were entered verbatim in the SPSS computer application to analyze the data. Content analysis was used to group these responses into discrete items. Items were then grouped into appropriate sub-categories and categories based on emergent data patterns. Finally, another section of the questionnaire included several statements which related to respondent’s future intent to visit and willingness to provide a referral about FBF, which could be correlated with overall satisfaction.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A total of 988 valid surveys were collected by May 2009, representing 20% of almost 5,000 walk-ins recorded during the period of distribution. Low participations rates are associated with attrition caused by the length of the instrument, low rates of interception during peak busy weekends, 50% rate of non-return for those selecting the mail-in option and by group members designating one person to fill in the survey.

A total of 570 surveys contained open-ended responses which described one ‘least satisfying aspect’ of their experience or an element of ‘disappointment’ associated with their visit to FBF. The responses yielded 87 distinct items which were then grouped into 17 subcategories and five categories (or management dimensions). The main organizational basis for the classification was based on the agent (i.e. who or what) was directly responsible for the area of the least satisfying aspect or disappointment.

Category 1 – ‘Natural Environment’ accounted for 60.5% (n=345) of all responses. The largest sub-category ‘wildlife absence’ (n=207) accounted for the majority of generic responses (117), while the remainder of responses lamented on not seeing a particular species (91), such as alligators and venomous snakes. The second largest sub-category accounted for 68 responses and
dealt with ‘annoying wildlife’, such as black flies and mosquitoes. ‘Weather conditions’ variances accounted for a similarly sized sub-category with 63 references. The last and smallest sub-category (n=7) focused the ‘setting’ itself (e.g. the low water in swamp).

Category 2 – ‘FBF management’ accounted for 23.3% of all responses, and consisted of seven main sub-categories. The two largest sub-categories were the boardwalk (50) and visitor center (26). The boardwalk attracted a diverse array of comments, including: unstable planks, lack of toilet facilities and interpretive signage problems and overall trail shortness. Lack of video orientation and food availability at the visitor center were cited the most by respondents. The third largest sub-category dealt with ‘activities’ (20) and the majority of respondents commented on the overall lack of activities, including the need for guided swamp canoe trips. The remaining management sub-categories dealt with hours of operation, parking/entry issues, trip timing (e.g. hours needed at park) and lack of park information.

Category 3 – ‘Respondents’ pertained to the visitor’s themselves and accounted for 10% of all survey responses (n=57). Four sub-categories of ‘time’ (37), ‘personal behavior’ (10), ‘children’ (6) and ‘health/conditioning’ (4) were distilled. The sub-category ‘time’ was equally divided between underestimating viewing time and having to depart the site too early. The personal behavior subcategory, for example, included reference to getting dirty and unexpectedly falling into the swamp. Boredom and restlessness were recorded by family respondents under the ‘Children’ subcategory. Lastly ill health was cited by visitors to FBF under the last sub-category.

Misbehavior (e.g. making too much noise) was the only sub-category under Category 4 ‘Other Visitors’, which accounted for 5.6% of all survey responses (n=32). The last and smallest category ‘External Land Uses’ accounted for 0.5% of all open-ended surveys. Noise from a nearby shooting range, for example, negatively impacted one visitor’s experience.

Respondents who provided at least one least satisfying or disappointing aspect yielded significantly lower means on satisfaction statements related to the visitor center, the souvenir shop, overall interpretation, range of available activities, outdoor setting and overall disappointment with some aspect of their visit, but not on any statements related with security, staff or site cleanliness. A similar relationship was found amongst all three referral statements (i.e. telling positive things about FBF; recommending FBF to people who seek my advice; going out of my way to recommend FBF to other people). This result was not repeated on the intention statement ‘I would visit FBF again’ (4.74 for those providing no comments versus 4.64 making comments). The means of both groups, however, were still very high on all statements with respect to ‘interpretation’ for example, yielding means of 4.71 and 4.61 respectively, and disappointment 1.31 and 1.98. Thus, even with those providing open-ended response tended to disagree with the statement that they were disappointed with some aspect of their visit to FBF. With regard to visitor characteristics open-ended respondents were no more likely than other respondents to be repeat visitors, to have another member of their household visit FBF, or be more frequent visitors. Finally, no relationship was found with group size, time spent at FBF during the current visit, level of birding skill, residence, age or gender.

CONCLUSION

This research corroborates the very high level of satisfaction generally associated with visitor protected area survey research, which includes high levels of intended repeat visitation and referrals associated with such assessment instruments. This study, however, also found a discrepancy between respondents’ disappointment on the Likert-scale statement (roughly 8% agreed or strongly agreed that there were disappointing aspects of their visit) and the percentage of visitors who actually listed at least one disappointment or least satisfying aspect (about 55%) associated with their visit. Intended expressions of loyalty are not fully being met. First-time and repeat respondents were equally likely to list a problematic aspect associated with their visit. Are
visitors generally satisfied with their FBF experience, but not really satisfied enough to make a return visit? Are WOM referrals effected somehow by their experiences to dissuade potential visitors? The managers of FBF and other protected areas should take steps to correct the above identified issues associated with disappointment and least satisfaction to reduce the non-fulfillment associated with repeat visitor intention and conditional referrals. Failure to address these minor problems could develop into major issues leading to widespread visitor dissatisfaction.

REFERENCES