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A Comparative Analysis of the Travel Motivations of Ecotourists and Conventional Tourists in Wisconsin

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ABSTRACT

The growing field of ecotourism has led to several studies assessing the travel motivations of ecotourists. This study further examines ecotourists by comparing their travel motivations to those of conventional tourists. It is found that conventional tourists consider some natural aspects of travel to be important travel motivations; however, ecotourists place significantly more importance on nature as a travel motivation than conventional tourists. Furthermore, ecotourists considered experiencing and being in nature to be important considerations when making the decision to travel while conventional tourists were more concerned with the cost of the trip and the entertainment available at the site.

Keywords: *ecotourism, ecotourists, conventional tourists, travel motivations*

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in the 1980s, ecotourism has been a growing field of tourism centered on being a sustainable, non-invasive, locally-oriented form of nature-based tourism (Fennell 2008). Due to ecotourism's rising popularity, several studies have aimed at identifying the travel motivations of ecotourists. Understanding why tourists choose to travel is vital for tourism and hospitality operators, enabling marketers to develop relevant promotional materials to attract consumers. Knowing who to target and how to properly market to tourists' needs and wants will provide opportunities for ecotourism businesses to grow in the competitive tourism market.

However, most previous studies on the travel motivations of ecotourists neglect to compare the results with conventional or non-ecotourists. Furthermore, there have been relatively few studies examining domestic American ecotourists. In this study, surveys administered in Wisconsin are used to identify the travel motivations of both ecotourists and conventional tourists and are then assessed to determine if there are significant differences between the two groups.

LITERATURE

Crompton (1979) was one of the first to research travel motivations, identifying nine motivators for pleasure-seeking travelers, including: escape from a perceived mundane environment, exploration and evaluation of self, relaxation, prestige, regression, enhancement of kinship relationships, facilitation of social interaction, novelty, and education. The first seven of the motivations were found to be unrelated to the attributes of the destination and were instead focused on the function of the destination as a medium through which these motivations could be fulfilled. Subsequent research on travel motivations typically attempts to identify both the social or psychological factors and the destination attributes that motivate a person to travel.

Previous studies assessing the travel motivations of ecotourists found the most common motivations to be: learn about nature, experience wildlife, escape and relax, be physically active, have new experiences and view the natural attractions of the site (Saleh and Karwacki 1996;

Kerstetter et al. 2004; Tao et al. 2004; Pan and Ryan 2007; Luo and Deng 2008). Comparative studies examining motivations of North American ecotourists and general travelers found ecotourists were most interested in being in nature, viewing wildlife, being physically active, experiencing something new, meeting people with similar interests, being introspective, and escaping, while general travelers were more interested in visiting with friends/family, pursuing the need for relaxation and escape, shopping, nightlife/entertainment, and visiting amusement/theme parks (Eagles 1992; Wight 1996). Although several social or psychological motivations are shown to be important factors, the destination attributes were consistently ranked as more important than internal motivations, demonstrating that the natural attractions of ecotourism were seen as the most valuable aspects. However, studies comparing the travel motivations of ecotourists and general travelers are rare and only examined potential tourists.

METHODOLOGY

Surveys were administered at two separate sites in Wisconsin in order to reach both conventional tourists and ecotourists. The first site, Devil's Lake State Park, is located in Baraboo approximately 50 miles north of Madison and offers a variety of ecotourism activities including hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, boating, and swimming. The second site, the city of Wisconsin Dells, is located 20 miles north of Devil's Lake State Park and is a popular vacation town offering numerous attractions including museums, theme parks, water parks, tours, and outdoor recreational activities. Wisconsin Dells was used as a site to reach conventional tourists due to the large amount of tourist-oriented attractions.

The self-administered surveys contained a listing of 35 travel motivations to be ranked on a 7 point Likert scale from very unimportant (1) to very important (7). Open ended questions regarding the most important considerations for taking a vacation, why the participant chose to visit the site, and what activities the participant had engaged in were asked in order to gather a more comprehensive understanding of the participant's reasons for traveling.

The participants were also asked whether they were involved in any environmental conservation efforts in order to help classify participants as ecotourists or conventional tourists. Ecotourists were identified as participants who were: (1) visiting the state park; (2) ranked the travel motivations "learn about nature," "help preserve the natural environment," or "get a better appreciation of nature" as important or very important on the survey; and (3) indicated involvement in at least one environmental conservation activity by either belonging to an environmental organization, having donated money to an environmental conservation group or National/State Park in the past 5 years, regularly picking up litter, or shopping at mostly local businesses. Conventional tourists were identified as all participants who did not fit the ecotourist qualifications. A total of 117 useable surveys were gathered during July and August of 2011, with 72 participants classified as conventional tourists and 45 participants classified as ecotourists. The travel motivations of each group were analyzed and t-tests were used to determine whether there were significant differences in the rankings of each travel motivation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The travel motivations were ranked from the highest average to the lowest average for both conventional tourists and ecotourists. For conventional tourists, the desire to spend time with friends and family is considered the most important reason for travel, followed by escape, and rest and relaxation. Interestingly, viewing the scenery, being outdoors and experiencing the peace and tranquility of a natural environment were ranked in the top ten travel motivations. This

may be explained by the fact that Wisconsin Dells is considered a site of natural beauty by some tourists due to its location along the Wisconsin River. The least important travel motivations for conventional tourists included being away from crowds, introspection, learning, meeting people, shopping, and experiencing nightlife.

Similarly, the responses to the open ended questions indicated that conventional tourists found the most important considerations for taking a vacation to be the atmosphere, cost, entertainment, rest and relaxation, and spending time with their family. When asked why the participant chose to visit the site, the most common responses were the site's proximity to their home, past experience, water parks, camping, and the variety of activities available.

The most important travel motivations for ecotourists were being outdoors, viewing the scenery, spending time with friends and family, experiencing peace and calm, escaping, and resting mentally. The least important travel motivations for ecotourists were shopping, experiencing nightlife and entertainment, visiting amusement and theme parks, meeting people and experiencing something new. When asked what their most important considerations for taking a vacation were, ecotourists frequently responded with the atmosphere, nature, spending time with friends/family, and rest and relaxation. Similarly, the most common reasons for choosing to visit the site were past experience/tradition, being in nature and participating in outdoor activities, the atmosphere and beauty of the site, and the site's proximity to their home.

To further compare the differences in travel motivations between ecotourists and conventional tourists, t-tests were employed to determine if there were significant differences between the motivation rankings of each group. The results of the t-tests displayed significant differences for fifteen travel motivations, eight of which focused on the natural environment. The motivations with the largest differences were: get a better appreciation of nature, experience the peace and tranquility of a natural environment, feel close to nature, be outdoors, see wildlife in its natural habitat, and view the scenery. Therefore, ecotourists place a higher importance on nature-related travel motivations than conventional tourists. Although conventional tourists ranked viewing the scenery, being outdoors and experiencing the peace and tranquility of a natural environment as important, ecotourists ranked these motivations significantly higher than conventional tourists. These results reflect similar findings in the open ended questions with ecotourists citing nature as a motivation for travel more often than conventional tourists.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that ecotourists are a distinct market segment separate from conventional tourists. Although both groups consider escape, rest and relaxation, and spending time with friends and family to be important travel motivations, ecotourists place a higher importance on being outdoors and viewing the scenery. Ecotourists are more strongly motivated to experience nature than conventional tourists and ecotourists consider nature to be an important consideration when taking a vacation. These findings have important implications for destination marketing for both ecotourism and non-ecotourism sites. If ecotourism operators wish to draw more ecotourists to their sites, they should focus on the natural attractions, specifically being outdoors, viewing the scenery, and experiencing nature; on the other hand, if ecotourism sites want to attract more conventional tourists, they should emphasize that the site is family-friendly or a place to escape for rest and relaxation. Similarly, conventional tourism sites looking to attract more ecotourists could advertise the site's natural attractions while highlighting the potential for escape and relaxation with the family in order to appeal to conventional tourists.

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