1 ***Insights into the attributes of Pacific Island destinations that appeal to avitourists.***

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ABSTRACT

Avitourism is a specific type of bird-focused nature-based tourism that can potentially contribute to community development and avian conservation. The details of the most memorable as well as the most desired destinations for avitourists are relatively under-examined. To sample the global birding population, questionnaires were distributed electronically via birding forums, birder mailing lists and social media sites asking about birders' destination preferences. A total of 303 respondents identified their most memorable destinations and 290 their most desired destinations. Among the destinations identified, Pacific Islands were stated as memorable ($n = 23$) and desired destinations ($n = 55$). New Zealand was the most memorable destination for 17 of the 23 respondents and the most desired was Papua New Guinea (33 of the 55 respondents). Key aspects that made New Zealand memorable were the presence of multiple endemic species and seabirds, while Birds of Paradise are the main attraction for birders wanting to visit Papua New Guinea. Understanding what biological attributes appeal to avitourists may help island destinations increase their market share in avitourism. Targeted marketing and management of the industry can bring benefits to Pacific Island communities which in turn can enhance conservation.

Key words: birdwatching; bird conservation; ecotourism; sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Avitourism, or birdwatching tourism, is a growing sector of the nature-based tourism market, where tourists travel to exotic locations seeking bird species in their natural environment (Steven *et al.* 2014; Biggs *et al.* 2011; Şekercioglu, 2002). Some tourist activities, both mass tourism and nature-based, may present a threat to birds and biodiversity in general (Steven and Castley 2013; Morrison 2012). However, avitourism, where managed appropriately, can provide multiple benefits to local peoples and ecosystem conservation (Biggs *et al.* 2011; Puhakka *et al.* 2011). Some countries have had success in harnessing the benefits of nature-based tourism through setting aside islands for ecological restoration and well managed ecotourism activities that benefit locals (Newsome and Hassell 2014; Rocamora and Skerrett 2001). However, many island nations have yet to maximise their avitourism potential, including those in the Pacific Islands (PIs). Opportunities exist for these destinations to use their natural resources for sustainable tourism to enhance conservation awareness among locals and tourists, thus supporting habitat protection.

To effectively market avitourism and manage the potential impacts (negative and positive) of the industry, it is necessary to have a better understanding of the attributes that would attract avitourists to PI destinations. Using a globally distributed avitourist questionnaire, this study aims to explore the following research questions: 1) Which PIs are among the most memorable and desired islands for avitourists? 2) What attributes or species make PIs memorable and desirable? The information presented can guide marketing of ecotourism ventures to potential avitourists, thus enhancing the success of conservation projects funded by tourism.

METHODS

An online survey of avitourists was conducted using a questionnaire instrument. The 40 questions asked addressed four main areas related to birdwatching; (1) general birdwatching preferences, (2) the importance of birdwatching to the respondent, (3) travel and birdwatching, and (4) birdwatching in Australia. A further eight questions gathered information about respondent socio-demographics. Prior to distribution of the survey it was reviewed by 12 experts in the field of birdwatching and research, from various backgrounds including academics (social and natural science), tourism representatives and birdwatching groups.

The questionnaire was circulated for 10 months in 2013 through online channels, including: birdwatching forums, social media birdwatching pages, birdwatching mailing lists and magazine subscription lists (available online as Supplementary Material to this paper). Bird tour companies were also approached to distribute the weblink for the survey. Not all entities approached responded to requests for assistance; therefore it is uncertain how many of them forwarded the link to their mailing lists.

This study presents findings for the questions where respondents were asked to state their preferred destinations for birdwatching that they have visited previously (i.e. memorable) and destinations they would like to visit in the future (i.e. desired). Answers from respondents listing destinations in the Pacific Islands (as per the Secretariat of the Pacific Community member countries and territories [<http://www.spc.int/en/about-spc/members.html>]) were examined in detail. Specifically, the questions of interest were:

- Of the places you have visited, which are your top 3 memorable birdwatching destinations?
- Why are these 3 your favourites? (i.e. what species made these destinations memorable?)
- Where would you most like to travel in the future to watch birds?
- Why do you want to visit these places?

Data were analysed descriptively and using contingency table analysis (Fishers exact test, due to low sample size) to determine significant differences among socio-demographic groups. The statistical tests conducted could not detect heterogeneity among the socio-demographic groups of respondents. However, demonstrating the general trends within the larger dataset provides novel findings related to such a specialised population of nature enthusiasts and their knowledge of the PI region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 350 birders responded to the questionnaire, though not all questions were answered. Respondents who provided information about their origin ($n = 286$) were from 16 countries, predominantly Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA) and South Africa. Most respondents were male (71%), held tertiary qualifications (81%) and were not retired (79%) (available online as Supplementary Material to this paper). The average age of respondents ($n = 259$), was 46.

From the total respondent pool 303 provided responses about their most memorable destinations visited and 290 identified destinations that they want to visit in the future. Respondents could identify up to three locations each for memorable and desired destinations. Due to the variability in the geographic scale at which these destinations were specified (e.g. sometimes they were continental scale, others cited specific reserves), it is difficult to give a clear number of all locations. In total over 800 locations were specified by all respondents. Where specific reserves were identified, they have been allocated to their relevant country for analysis purposes.

Memorable Pacific Island destinations

Twenty-three respondents (8% overall) stated Pacific Islands were among their most memorable birdwatching destinations (Table 1). Of these 23 respondents, seven were Australian, five were British and five were from the USA. With a small sample size, it could not be determined whether distance from a destination is facilitating or obstructing avitourists travelling to the region. However, the data here suggest that it may be a factor, with Australia being closer to most PI nations than the UK and much of the USA. This would be consistent with previous research where the cost of travelling to the region (for many Northern Hemisphere avitourists) can also be a challenge to industry growth (Narayan 2000). This is difficult to control for locally, given the influence of global currency markets on the feasibility of long-distance travellers visiting the region. Opportunities exist to increase visitation from Australia, East Asia (i.e. Japan, China etc.) and Western USA, as these regions are relatively close to the Pacific Islands region, and interest in birdwatching in these areas continues to grow (Li et al. 2013; Connell 2009; Wong 2009).

New Zealand (NZ) was the most frequently stated memorable Pacific Island destination ($n = 17$), especially among British respondents ($n = 5$) and Australians ($n = 4$) (Table 2). The marked difference in figures between NZ and the other destinations is possibly related to the fact that NZ has built an especially strong nature-based tourism market share in recent decades. Reasons for this success are attributed to NZ's safe socio-political environment, a factor frequently cited as a challenge in some destinations (Conradie and van Zyl 2013; Puhakka *et al.* 2011; Lyons *et al.* 2009), its unique natural heritage and the marketing of that natural heritage (i.e. the 100% Pure campaign) by NZ's tourism authority (Morgan *et al.* 2002).

Desired Pacific Island Destinations

More than double the number of respondents ($n = 55$, 18% of all respondents providing an answer to this question) indicated they want to visit PIs than those that said PI destinations were their most memorable. Of these 55 respondents, 60% ($n = 33$) stated that PNG (or New Guinea) was their most desired destination for birdwatching (Table 1). While avitourists are eager to visit PNG, there are several explanations that potentially explain why NZ rated higher among previously visited destinations. First, as aforementioned, socio-political instability is often cited as an important factor affecting travel destination choices (Levantis and Gani 2000; Hall et al. 2004; Donaldson and Ferreira 2008), including for birdwatching in PNG specifically (Lyons *et al.* 2009). Sadly, PNG experiences relatively high levels of crime in general, with incidences of serious upheaval in localised areas (Lakhani and Willman 2014). Secondly, unlike some other PI destinations including Fiji and the Cook Islands, tourist infrastructure and transport networks in PNG are often expensive or poorly developed and managed. While the appeal of visiting PNG is clear, investigation into the logistical requirements for travel may result in avitourists choosing not to travel there. Finally, the sheer distance required to travel for many potential avitourists (especially from the East USA, UK, South Africa and continental Europe) may be a key deterrent, as is likely for other PIs. Despite these challenges, the interest in PNG as a birdwatching destination warrants continued efforts to enhance opportunities for avitourism ventures.

Attributes of Pacific Islands that appeal to avitourists

In this study, endemic species and diversity appear to be driving factors for a destination's memorability. Endemic species such as Kiwi, Kaka, Tui, Hihi and Saddlebacks were all mentioned by multiple respondents (between two and four respondents each) as reasons for selecting NZ as a memorable destination (Table 3). The NZ endemic Kiwi species are world-renowned icons for NZ, so it is not surprising this study found it important to birdwatchers. Similarly, Tui is also an iconic species, being the emblem of one of NZ's oldest beers (Tui brewery was established in 1889!). Iconic species can also be used to increase awareness for wider conservation issues, and previous research has examined this in the tourism context (Xiang *et al.* 2011; Veríssimo *et al.* 2009; Walpole and Leader-Williams 2002).

The drawcard for PNG's highly desired status was Birds of Paradise, with 22 of the 33 respondents wanting to visit PNG stating they were the reason. This endemic group of species are the national emblem for PNG, the emblem of the national airline carrier and have become famous after being showcased in David Attenborough's natural history

documentaries filmed between 1957 and 2010. This represents another opportunity for tourism flagships raising awareness about conservation issues, where Birds of Paradise are harvested for cultural uses (Eaton 1991), but have value as free-living resources also. For all Pacific Island destinations identified as desirable, some recurrent terms were used as justification for why, including; unique species, visible species, new species and endemics (Table 3). Endemism of species or families of birds is clearly an important factor in the appeal of a destination not yet visited. This is demonstrated here with the number of respondents that identify endemics as important either by using the term ‘endemic’, or by naming species or families endemic to the destination. The importance of species endemism and its appeal to tourists more generally (*cf* avitourists) has also been demonstrated for tourism in Africa (Morse-Jones *et al.* 2012) and the Seychelles (Veríssimo *et al.* 2009).

Final Recommendations

Increasing market share of avitourism in the PIs may be suffering from an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ trend among northern hemisphere birders. Avitourists obtain their information about potential destinations from several sources, including; online birding forums, birdwatching magazines, specialist birding travel companies and birding festivals and events where these companies have stands to convey information about their products offered (Simango 2011; Green and Jones 2010; Kim *et al.* 2010).

The Rutland Birdfair (UK) exhibits stands for 160 various tour companies that specialise in avitourism. However, few of these highlight that they have specialist tours to Pacific Islands (exceptions are PNG and NZ) (www.birdfair.org.uk/exhibitors-a-to-z/, accessed February 2015). These events are ideal for canvassing new clientele with a captive audience of birders keen to travel to new destinations. Perhaps a collaborative approach between the PIs could bring increased interest from events such as these. This has been the strategy for the multiple tour operators in NZ (see www.birdingnz.co.nz, accessed February 2015) who now share one large stand at the Birdfair showcasing the country as a birding destination in a more cohesive way. Despite the diversity within the region, collaborations among PIs have shown potential for achieving goals that benefit biodiversity and communities across the region (e.g. Pacific Island Roundtable for Nature Conservation and multiple initiatives by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme [SPREP]). Avitourists should also be encouraged by guides and operators to post trip reports online about their birding experiences, thereby increasing global awareness of birdwatching in the region.

Avitourism, as part of the broader ecotourism market, may provide valuable support for local communities and can be the catalyst for conservation action both onsite and abroad. This study has expanded the understanding of avitourist and birdwatcher preferences with respect the destinations and destination attributes that appeal to them. In particular, understanding the types of bird species that appeal to avitourists is poorly documented at a global level, let alone for specific geographic areas. This knowledge can highlight species and areas that may require additional management of avitourist activities while also guiding industry growth and enhancement. Avitourism may be more sustainable in the longer term it is one of the more environmentally mindful ecotourism activities (Steven *et al.* 2014; Connell 2009; Şekercioğlu 2002). Nonetheless, some evidence suggests tourism can have negative impacts on birds and habitats (Steven *et al.* 2011; Steven and Castley 2013), any new avitourism opportunities should be monitored carefully.

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282 **Table 1.** Number of respondents selecting Pacific Islands as their most memorable or desired
 283 birdwatching destinations

	Most Memorable Destinations Pacific Islands (<i>n</i> = 23)	Most Desired Destinations Pacific Islands (<i>n</i> = 55)
<i>Respondent Country of Origin</i>		
Australia	7	16
United Kingdom	5	14
United States	5	10
New Zealand	3	2
South Africa	1	4
Fiji	1	1
N/A	1	5
United Arab Emirates	-	1
Hong Kong	-	1
Germany	-	1
<i>Respondent Sex</i>		
Male	14	37
Female	6	11
N/A	3	7

284 N.B. Total response rate to survey *N* = 286 (memorable) and *N* = 303 (desired)

Table 2. Memorable ($n = 23$) and desired ($n = 55$) Pacific Islands for birdwatching by respondent origin and sex. Respondents could select up to three destinations for each.

	Memorable Destinations						Desired Destinations				
	New Zealand ($n = 17$)	Hawaii ($n = 2$)	Papua New Guinea ($n = 2$)	Cook Islands ($n = 1$)	Fiji ($n = 1$)	West Pacific Islands ($n = 1$)	Papua New Guinea ($n = 33$)	New Zealand ($n = 16$)	Pacific Islands ($n = 6$)	Vanuatu ($n = 1$)	Fiji ($n = 1$)
<i>Respondent Country of Origin</i>											
Australia	4	1	2	1	-	-	9	3	3	1	-
Fiji	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	1
Germany	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Hong Kong	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
N/A	1	-	-	-	-	-	4	1	-	-	-
New Zealand	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-
South Africa	1	-	-	-	-	-	3	1	-	-	-
United Arab Emirates	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
United Kingdom	5	-	-	-	-	-	7	6	1	-	-
United States	3	1	-	-	-	1	7	4	-	-	-
<i>Respondent Sex</i>											
Male	10	1	2	-	1	1	23	10	4	1	1
Female	4	1	-	1	-	-	6	3	2	-	-
N/A	3	-	-	-	-	-	4	3	-	-	-

Table 3. Attributes that contributed to destination selection as a memorable or desired birdwatching destination

Memorable Destination	Attribute/s ('n' per attribute)	Desired Destination	Attribute/s ('n' per attribute)
New Zealand	Kiwi (4) Kaka, Albatross (3) Tui, Saddlebacks, Hihi, Seabirds, Waders, Diversity, Endemics, Habitat (2) Kea, Kakapo, Kokako, Weka, Bellbirds, Yellow-eyed Penguin, Fiordland Penguins, Parrots, Robins, Teals, Petrels, unusual, visible species (1)	Papua New Guinea	Birds of Paradise (22) Diversity (4) Crowned Pigeon, interesting birds, stunning birds, fabulous birds, spectacular birds, colourful birds, unique species, new species, new families, visible species, ecosystems (1)
Papua New Guinea	Goshawk, Birds of Paradise (1)	Pacific Islands	Tropicbirds, Frigatebirds, Terns, Ocean birds, Seabirds, island endemics, unique island species, different species, visible species, diversity (1)
Hawaii	Albatross, Osprey (1)	New Zealand	Endemic species, new species, unique birds (2) New Zealand Falcon, Albatross, interesting species, new bird families, weird birds, birdwatching, habitat (1)
Western Pacific	Seabirds (1)	Fiji	Orange Dove (1)
Cook Islands	Rimatara Lorikeet, Tahitian Lorikeet (1)	Vanuatu	Endemic species (1)
Fiji	Endemics (1)		

Supplementary Information - Questions asked of avitourists about their destination preferences.

Questions asked of respondents		Type of answer options
Q1	Of the places you have visited, which are your top 3 favourite birdwatching destinations?	Up to 3 destinations
Q2	Why are these 3 your favourites? (i.e. what species made these destinations special?)	Open ended
Q3	Where would you most like to travel in the future to watch birds?	Up to 3 destinations
Q4	Why do you want to visit these places?	Open ended
Q5	What is your current age in years?	Open ended
Q6	Are you?	Male or Female
Q7	What is your country of residence?	Open ended
Q8	What is your highest level of education? Select one.	Primary/some Secondary School Completed Secondary School Vocational/Technical Qualification Tertiary/University Qualification
Q9	Please indicate the range of your gross (before tax) income. Select one.	< AUD\$40,000 < AUD\$40,000 AUD\$40,000-AUD\$59,999 AUD\$60,000-AUD\$79,999 > AUD\$80,000 > AUD\$80,000
Q10	Are you retired?	Yes or No

Supplementary Information – Online distribution channels for survey

Type of channel	Specific companies/organisations
Birdwatching forums	Birdforum.net, Feathers and Photos, Surfbirds, BirdingNZ, Birding UK and Ireland
Social media birdwatching pages (Facebook Pages)	US Bird Watching, Bird Watching Rocks!, Bird Watching in Sri Lanka, Bird Lovers, British Bird Lovers, British Birdwatching Fair, Birding Abroad, Birding, Southern Birding Services, American Birdwatching Association, Birdwatching Ecotours, Amazon Birdwatching, BirdLife South Africa
Birdwatching mailing lists	Various Yahoo mailing lists
Magazine subscription lists	American Birding Association, BirdLife South Africa, Birdwatching Daily Mag
Bird tour companies	Wingspan Bird Tours, Wings Tours, Limosa Holidays, Sunbird Tours, Rockjumper Tours, Birdquest Tours, Birdwatching Dot Com

Supplementary Information - Demographic information for the respondent pool, calculated from complete responses.

Demographic indicator	Response options	Responses	Percentage per category
Gender		<i>N</i> =259	
	Male	<i>n</i> =185	71%
	Female	<i>n</i> =74	29%
Retired status		<i>N</i> =259	
	Retired	<i>n</i> =54	21%
	Not retired	<i>n</i> =205	79%
Highest level of education completed		<i>N</i> =259	
	Primary/some Secondary School	<i>n</i> =7	3%
	Completed Secondary School	<i>n</i> =21	8%
	Vocational/Technical Qualification	<i>n</i> =22	8%
	Tertiary/University Qualification	<i>n</i> =209	81%
Income (gross before tax)		<i>N</i> =245	
	<AUD\$40,000	<i>n</i> =102	42%
	AUD\$40,000-AUD\$59,999	<i>n</i> =48	20%
	AUD\$60,000-AUD\$79,999	<i>n</i> =42	17%
	AUD\$>80,000	<i>n</i> =53	22%