Ecotourists: Do They Really Care More About Environmental Sustainability?

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Abstract

Ecotourism now represents a substantial economic contribution to many countries. However, it is still unclear as to whether there is, in fact, evidence for the existence of an ecotourist. It has been suggested most tourists, including ecotourists, care little for sustainability issues, are part of the “incurable cancerous greed endemic in society” and they are more interested in “price, value for money, and fun, fun, fun”, over and above being concerned for environmental sustainability issues (Wheeler, 2005, p. 271). In relation to the principles of green accreditation, this paper seeks to examine this issue of ecotourism and the ecotourist. Data were collected from 260 tourists and the results provide evidence for the so-called responsible tourist, who is more likely to demand evidence of sustainability credentials for all products and services.

Introduction

The World Tourism Organisation has reported that ecotourism represents one fifth of the global tourism market, accounts for approximately 20% of international travel, and is worth 20 billion US dollars annually (Page & Dowling, 2002, p. 280). Due to an apparent increasing demand for ecotourism, as evidenced by its steady and substantial growth rate, and its sizeable economic contribution, there seems then to be considerable collective power resting in the hands of the individual consumer of ecotourism in terms of the quality and nature of the tourism product offered.

Ecotourism has been consistently defined as a form of nature-based tourism that particularly emphasizes direct experience in nature as the focus of the activity, environmental learning as an outcome, and sustainability as a goal (Page & Dowling, 2002; Weaver, 2001a, 2001b). Embedded in this perspective is the notion that to understand and appreciate natural attractions implies an ethical desire to ensure that the integrity of those attractions is not undermined (Rolston, 1991; Weaver, 2001a), a perspective that may not be shared by consumers engaged in some other forms of nature-based activity. Ecotourism then can be differentiated from other nature-based activities that are more leisure-oriented, such as the “3S” form of sun, sand, and sea, as well as from a range of activities that are more adventure oriented, such as trekking, climbing or rafting (Weaver, 2001a; Weaver & Lawton, 2002). The motivations to engage in these latter forms of nature-based activities may have more to do with enjoying a hedonistic experience of relaxing in the sun and gaining a tan, or with seeking activities that offer memorable experiences with some degree of risk and personal challenge (Weaver, 2001a, p. 105). Thus, these motivations may well be in contrast to that of appreciation and concern for preserving the natural environment per se.

Even though the ethos of ecotourism involves explicit commitment to environmental sustainability (often by way of marketing) and, therefore, by association one might assume that ecotourists might share the same concern, Wheeler (2005) has painted a rather dismal picture of the average ecotourist. She believes most tourists, including ecotourists, care little
for sustainability issues, are part of the “incurable cancerous greed endemic in society” and that they are more interested in “price, value for money, and fun, fun, fun”, over and above being concerned for environmental sustainability issues (Wheeler, 2005, p. 271). Sharpley (2006) concurs to some extent, and remains unconvinced of ecotourists being any more concerned with environmental issues and conservation than the average mainstream tourist.

**Hypotheses Development**

Sustainability issues have become increasingly important to the tourism industry as global environmental awareness continues to gain momentum. Self-regulation through green accreditation systems (eg. Green Globe™) has been adopted by tourism, particularly ecotourism, in an effort to make the industry more environmentally (and socially) sustainable by monitoring and regulating environmental and social impacts. Green accreditation is the certification of businesses using standards for benchmarking responsible performance in terms the triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental sustainability. As an example, Green Globe™ has been marketed as “the only globally recognised brand that assures commitment to improved environmental and social outcomes for a more sustainable travel and tourism industry” (Green Globe, 2006). Tourist destinations can use the accreditation brand and logo as a point of market differentiation; the tourist as consumer can then assess potential destinations and attractions on the basis of their green accreditation, if these credentials are considered important. It may therefore be reasonable to suppose that those tourists who are more interested in (ie. prefer) ecotourism, with its apparent higher levels of commitment to environmental sustainability, over more mainstream tourism, might also consider green accreditation systems such as Green Globe™ of greater importance in their choice of product than tourists who are less interested in ecotourism. Therefore the first two hypotheses of this study are proposed:

**H1:** Those tourists who show higher levels of interest in ecotourism will consider green accreditation of tourism providers and venues to be more important than those who have lower interest in ecotourism.

**H2:** Those tourists who show higher levels of interest in ecotourism will be more willing to pay for green accredited products and services if the choice is available.

Weaver (2002) has previously tested tourists in an accredited ecotourism venue on the perceived importance of green accreditation to consumers. While the results confirmed that the sample of tourists from the ecotourism venue did place high levels of importance on green accreditation systems, Weaver expressed concern that this may have been more to do with the relatively advanced level of accreditation of the venue (ie. Green Globe™, Advanced Eco Certified) from which the sample was drawn. He, therefore, considered this may have confounded the results. In order to determine if this was, in fact, the case, it is important to examine perceived importance across differing tourism venues, both mainstream and accredited ecotourism venues. It is on this basis that the third hypothesis of this study is proposed:

**H3:** There will be no significant difference in support for the importance of green accreditation and willingness to pay for this between those who have been sampled from a mainstream tourism venue and those from the accredited ecotourism venue.
Method

A convenience sample of 260 tourists was taken from both an accredited ecotourism venue and a mainstream tourism venue. This sample included 167 day visitors to Seaworld, a Gold Coast marine park and mainstream tourism venue, and 93 visitors to O’Reillys Rainforest retreat, an accredited ecotourism venue in the Gold Coast hinterland. Approximately 42% of the sample was comprised of males and 58% were females.

The Ecotourism Interest scale (EI) has previously been shown to be a consistent and useful predictor of tourist behaviour and choice of ecotourism type activities (Juric, Cornwall & Mather, 2002). This measure was considered to be valuable in identifying ecotourists in the truest sense, being those consumers more interested in ecotourism vis-à-vis more mainstream tourism, and therefore it was used as an indicator of the ecotourist in this particular study. Tourists from both venues were administered a survey which included the EI comprised of the following seven items (wilderness and undisturbed nature; tropical forests and indigenous bush; national parks; lakes and streams; world heritage status areas; learning about nature; and photographing landscape and wildlife). These seven items were embedded within a set of eight other more mainstream tourism interest items, which have previously been shown to be related, or not, to the EI (Juric et al, 2002). For example, an additional 8 items were included in relation to importance of historical sites and museums (ie. preserved history of culture) and learning about other cultures as these have been strongly associated with ecotourism (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1991; Fennell, 2001). Furthermore, items such as sun and surf; shopping; exciting nightlife; gambling; wine/ food tasting; power boating or 4-wheel driving were also included in the instrument, randomly mixed among the items from the EI. Participants were asked to indicate the relative importance of each of these items when they choose a holiday, trip or attraction. A 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important) was used to collect information about the importance of each item. Tourists were also asked to respond (on a Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree) to items relating to green accreditation. After providing a definition of green accreditation, in the form of an extract from Green Globe™, the following two items were included:

- As a tourist it is very important to me that tourism products, services and venues are part of a similar “green” accreditation system to the one described above.
- I would choose a tourism product or service, which adopts a “green” accreditation system over one which does not if the choice is available.

Results

Firstly, in order to test the three major propositions of this study, ecotourists were defined as those more interested in ecotourism, assessed by their higher scores on the 7 item EI, rather than simply being sampled from an ecotourism setting at a particular point in time. Past ecotourism research has tended to define ecotourists as those who have simply attended an ecotourism venue (Page & Dowling, 2002). However, to provide evidence that the EI is a predictor of actual behaviour, as well as interest and preference, the sample groups of different types of tourists (ie. visitors to Seaworld and visitors to O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat) were also tested with regard to their general interest in ecotourism. Consistent with the research of Juric et al (2002), the day visitors to Seaworld (ie. a mainstream tourism venue) had significantly lower general interest in ecotourism (M=32.759, SD=9.570) than the
visitors to the O’Reilly’s ecotourism venue (M=37.239, SD=8.471), \( t(252)=3.735, p=.000 \). This further supports the usefulness of the Ecotourism Interest scale EI as both an indicator of interest in ecotourism and as a predictor of actual tourist behaviour.

A linear regression analysis was undertaken to test H1. Interest in ecotourism as measured by the EI was a significant predictor of the importance of green accreditation for tourism products and services \( F(1,251) = 66.224, p=.000 \) and accounted for 20.9% of the variance. Linear regression analysis was also undertaken to test H2. Interest in ecotourism was also a significant predictor of tourists’ willingness to purchase a green accredited product over one that was not if the choice was available \( F(1,251) = 45.372, p=.000 \), accounting for 15.3% of the variance. Thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 have been supported by the results from this sample of tourists. Independent groups t-tests were undertaken to assess H3. There was no significant difference between those who were at the mainstream venue, Seaworld (M=5.37, SD=1.281) and those who were at the ecotourism venue, O’Reillys’ (M=5.55, SD=1.113) in their opinion on the importance of green accreditation to tourism products and services \( t(256)=1.137, p=.257 \). There was also no significant difference between those who were at the mainstream venue (M=5.44, SD=1.368) and those at the ecotourism venue (M=5.63, SD=1.255) in their willingness to purchase a green accredited product over one that was not \( t(256) = 1.104, p=.271 \). Thus, hypothesis 3 has also been supported by the results. Table 1 below presents an overall summary of the results in terms of the three hypotheses tested in this study.

Table 1  Summary of Results for the Three Hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1:*</td>
<td>( F(1,251)=66.224 )</td>
<td>( p=.000 )</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Those more interested in ecotourism place more importance on green accreditation</strong></td>
<td>( R^2 = 20.9% )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2:*</td>
<td>( F(1,251)=45.372 )</td>
<td>( p=.000 )</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Those more interested in ecotourism more willing to pay for green accreditation</strong></td>
<td>( R^2 = 15.3% )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3:*</td>
<td>( t(256)=1.137 )</td>
<td>( p=.257 )</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advanced accreditation of venue sampled has no effect on opinion of importance of green accreditation or willingness to pay</strong></td>
<td>( t(256)=1.104 )</td>
<td>( p=.271 )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: Hypotheses stated in brief

Discussion

When we look at the differentiation of ‘true’ ecotourists from non-ecotourists by their pure choice criteria, a clear picture emerges. Those who demonstrated higher interest in ecotourism placed significantly higher importance on green accreditation systems for tourism products. In addition, with regard to tourists’ stated intention to choose an accredited product or service over one that was not, the same pattern was evident, with those more interested in ecotourism demonstrating a greater intention to choose green accredited products or services if they are available. Contrary to Weaver’s concerns that previous evidence for high levels of support for ecotourism accreditation may be skewed by the advanced accreditation status held by sampled venues (2002, p. 26), in this case O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat, the present results showed that support for green accreditation was not dependent on the sampled group either in
terms of importance rating for green accreditation or in the intention to choose an accredited product or service over one that was not if the choice is available. That is, irrespective of whether the respondent was a Seaworld day visitor or a visitor to O’Reilly’s there were similar levels of support for green accreditation and intention to purchase, and this support was strong.

Wight says that ecotourism has long been considered as having the potential to act as a force for nature conservation (2001). However, as previously stated Wheeler (2005) believes most tourists care little for sustainability issues and have a tendency to what he calls “materialistic avarice” (p. 271). However, the results of this research seem to suggest some hope that there may be a sizeable proportion of tourists who not only consider accreditation for environmental sustainability important, but also would purchase such products over ones that are not accredited. Perhaps, as Hawkins (1994) observed more than a decade ago, not only is ecotourism growing rapidly but it also may influence the overall tourism industry by championing a demand for general “greening” of the market place whereby tourists and tourism suppliers pay attention to more environmentally friendly products and services. Perhaps the emergence of the so-called responsible tourist who is more likely to demand evidence of environmental sustainability and social sustainability credentials from all products and services, irrespective of whether they are tourism products or not is now being overtly felt. It appears then that while there is very high general support for green accreditation of tourism products and services amongst this sample of tourists, irrespective of the venue from which they were sampled (ie. irrespective of their behaviour on the particular day of sampling), those more interested in ecotourism place significantly higher importance on this form of accreditation and also have stronger intentions to purchase an accredited product or service over one that is not. However, people’s support for green accreditation does not appear to be influenced in this sample by the advanced accreditation of the actual venue at which sampling occurred, contrary to the suggestion made by Weaver (2002). It may therefore be worthwhile for tourism products and services to not only seek appropriate green accreditation such as internationally recognised Green Globe™ but to market this as a point of differentiation in a plethora of competing product offers. If this sample is any indication of the importance of green accreditation to the general tourist population, mainstream tourists and ecotourists, then such a point of differentiation may become important in increasing tourism destinations’ market share in a highly competitive industry. This may be particularly important in the marketing of ecotourism venues and destinations seeking to attract consumers who are especially interested in this type of product, since these are the consumers who put the greatest importance on accreditation credentials.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study seem to suggest that there may be more of the environmentally committed and careful “treaders” than has been previously assumed, especially amongst those who express more interest in ecotourism. This may then provide some evidence of the rise of the so-called responsible tourist, that is, those who are more eco-driven than ego-driven, and who indeed do care more about sustainability, and further, are willing to put their money where their mouth is. However, this preliminary study is somewhat limited in scope and more and larger samples conducted over a range of tourism venues will be required to better understand the impact of accreditation on consumer choice. The trick in balancing the dilemma of protecting fragile ecosystems from the impact of human visitation through tourism, is “not by swinging the Range Rover doors wide open, but rather by gradually letting
in a trickle of carefully guided treaders, whose trip dollars ultimately benefit the local nature and culture” (1999, p. 46). Perhaps the tourism industry, particularly ecotourism, might be well served by marketing to target these carefully guided treaders, that is, those who care.
References


