HOW TO INFLUENCE TOURISTS VISITING PROTECTED AREAS TO MAKE CHOICES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

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Despite scientists attributing much of climate change to human behaviour, and that influencing human behaviour is clearly a key strategy for slowing climate change, surprisingly little research effort is being expended on how to foster appropriate human behaviour in the global endeavour to secure a sustainable future. This is evident in both protected area management and tourism management, which are fields that are rightly concerned with managing the impacts of climate change, but so far have put few resources toward using persuasive communication (as opposed to more restrictive direct management measures) to influence visitor behaviour. In particular, the use of research underpinned by theories of behaviour change and communication has been very limited (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2006; Beeton, Weiler, & Ham, 2005; Marion & Reid, 2007; McKenzie-Mohr, 2000).

While direct management approaches, such as regulations, fines, barriers and other forms of activity restraint, are used often by park managers, they do not always work and are sometimes not the most desirable way to influence behaviour. For example, policing of behaviour and enforcement of regulations can be expensive, not only because of the staff time it requires but because of the costs in damaged public relations. Such direct approaches can also rob visitors of their sense of freedom or intrude visually on the landscape they came to enjoy. Visitors may feel that their experience is compromised if, as they enter a park, they are issued with a long list of “do’s and don’ts” along with warnings that they will be punished for non-compliance. Direct management approaches that seek to control and limit behaviour may also raise issues in relation to political acceptability, community support and social injustice (Cullinane, 1997; Cullinane & Cullinane, 1999; Cullinane, Cullinane, Fewings, & Southwell, 1996; Eaton & Holding, 1996; Holding & Kreutner, 1998; Marion & Reid, 2007; Steiner & Bristow, 2000).

In contrast, indirect management approaches, such as persuasive communication, aim to influence people’s decision-making processes, thereby allowing them more volitional control over their own behaviour. According to a number of researchers (Beeton et al., 2005; Ham & Weiler, 2005; Manning, 2003; Marion & Reid, 2007; McCool & Christensen, 1996; Vander Stoop & Roggenbuck, 1996), volitional control is a key advantage of indirect management, as allowing people greater experiential freedom is more compatible with the notion of leisure typically associated with national parks and other tourism settings. Furthermore, indirect management measures can provide political and public relations advantages in terms of paving the way for the later introduction of more restrictive measures by initially raising awareness and acceptance that a problem needs to be addressed (Jones & Sloman, 2002).

Designing a persuasive communication intervention to influence behaviour requires an understanding of the underlying determinants of the target audience’s decision-making processes. The more that is understood about these determinants, the more likely that a persuasive communication intervention can be successful in bringing about a desired behaviour change (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2005). This paper therefore presents a research approach for developing and evaluating persuasive communication interventions designed to influence visitors to make decisions that are more environmentally sustainable. The approach is underpinned by one of the most influential and widely applied theoretical frameworks of behaviour change within the social sciences: Ajzen’s (1991) theory of planned behaviour (TPB). An alternative to more intuitive and arbitrary approaches, the TPB provides a framework for identifying the determinants of human behaviour that can be measured, manipulated and evaluated in a persuasive communication intervention. Given the complexity of human behaviour, the theory offers a means of capturing this complexity within a succinct framework of variables and constructs, making the task of understanding and influencing human behaviour more achievable (Michie & Abraham, 2004; Rutter & Quine, 2002). Over the past 20 years, the TPB has been used extensively to explain, predict and influence a multitude of behaviours, including condom use, blood donation, household recycling, exercise, leisure participation, smoking, and volunteering, just to name a few.

Based on the logic of the TPB and the need to understand the key “beliefs” that drive decision-making, the process of developing a persuasive communication intervention involves a rigorous, multi-phase data collection exercise customised to a specific “target” behaviour. After carefully defining the target behaviour and population, the first step involves an elicitation study to identify a pool of salient beliefs from a sample of the target population, typically through a series of open-ended questions. The next step is a belief measurement phase that involves measuring the strength and importance of the most frequently mentioned beliefs through a fixed-item questionnaire and identifying the beliefs that distinguish performers from non-performers of the target behaviour. This includes assessing whether these discriminating beliefs have potential for persuasion in an intervention. The final phase of research involves experimentally testing the effectiveness of persuasive message treatments that target this subset of amenable beliefs (Fishbein & Manfredo, 1992; Fishbein & Yzer, 2003; Sutton, 2002; van den Putte & Dhondt, 2005). During this phase, communication theories, such as the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, 1996), are often used to design the actual communication treatments. The extent to which the target beliefs have been replaced, altered or maintained is then assessed, along with evidence, where possible, of actual behaviour change (Ham & Krumpe, 1996).
Three projects have recently been undertaken in Australian national parks that demonstrate the value of this research approach. In the first project, research was undertaken at Port Campbell National Park in Victoria to determine whether messages could be developed that had a better chance of influencing visitors to stay on the designated walking track (Beeton et al., 2005; Ham & Weiler, 2005). Similarly, the second project explored the value of using persuasive communication to influence visitors to use voluntary shuttle bus services instead of their own cars to access park locations at the Grampians in Victoria and Cradle Mountain in Tasmania (Curtis, 2008). In the final project, a manual for park managers was developed, along with accompanying case studies, that provided the methods and tools for conducting research to inform a persuasive communication intervention based on the TPB (Ham et al., 2007). All three projects produced outcomes that highlighted the value of using persuasive communication as a means of influencing visitor behaviour.

While these studies have focused on the use of persuasive communication to influence the on-site behaviour of visitors to protected areas, the outcomes from these projects illustrate the potential of the TPB and the accompanying methods to be used to influence other target audiences and foster pro-environmental behaviours that may help slow the impacts of climate change. This may involve persuading tour operators to embrace specific business practices to reduce their carbon footprint, or influencing tourists to choose only tourism enterprises that have certain climate change credentials (e.g., operators accredited with a specific climate change program). Such persuasive efforts may also filter down to people’s daily lives, where further decisions are made that benefit the climate change cause based on the cognitive foundations provided through the initial persuasive attempts (Marion & Reid, 2007). While persuasive communication will not be able to influence all forms of behaviour, its potential remains somewhat unrealised, and when used in conjunction with other forms of management measures, has the opportunity to play an important role in dealing with the human components and causes of climate change.

References


