To use tourism as a conservation tool, first study tourists

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Di Minin et al. (2013) show that, at least for big-game watching in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, wildlife tourists are not all the same. Different tourists want to see different wildlife species. Some want to see adult males; others want to see family groups. Some want to see everything in one place; others are prepared to travel. Previous studies at this level of detail have focused only on single species, such as polar bear *Ursus maritimus* (Lemelin, 2006).

A number of Di Minin et al.’s results confirm accepted beliefs in the wildlife tourism industry. For example, big cats are the key for almost all tourists; African wild dog *Lycaon pictus* are also important, especially in packs; and African buffalo *Syncerus caffer* are not in such demand as other Big Five species. Inexperienced tourists pursue the Big Five before anything else; whereas, more experienced tourists have wider interests. Some tourists are cash-rich but timepoor, whereas others are time-rich but cash-poor. Many South African domestic tourists are keen birders. Domestic tourists are older, on average, than international visitors. These results are not unexpected. Several results raise interesting questions. Few respondents picked the ‘neither’ option in the choice experiment. The authors recorded these as protest votes, and ignored them. Perhaps, however, this could simply reflect the range of prices included in the choice cards. If the uppermost price had been higher, then presumably, more of the respondents would have rejected it. So perhaps this may show that people value wildlife sightings more highly than anticipated?

The results show that 9% of respondents were of Indian ethnic origin. Socio-economic characteristics for this subsector, however, are not presented. In India itself, there is now a wealthy and enthusiastic, but as yet relatively unsophisticated domestic wildlife tourism market sector. This constitutes a major, but currently rather high-impact clientele for tiger tourism (Buckley, 2012; Buckley & Pabla, 2012; Karanth & Nepal, 2012). Perhaps this is also reflected in South Africa.
The choice experiment itself did not include smaller charismatic wildlife species such as meerkats or pangolin. Responses to the open-ended questions, however, identified aardvark as one species that tourists particularly want to see. It would be very interesting to extend the approach taken by Di Minin et al. (2013) to include a wide range of well-known, but smaller species. Many of these species have now been featured extensively on television wildlife programmes, and perhaps this has increased popular interest in seeing these species in the wild. In addition, different specialist subsectors of the wildlife tourism market may have different desires. Experienced mammal tourists generally want to watch interesting behaviours, icon species from different continents, and rarely seen, but charismatic species. Many experienced birdwatchers, however, focus on their life lists of species seen, and the same may perhaps also apply for divers.

The most significant result from this study is that for some wildlife species, the key attraction for some tourists is a female with offspring; and breeding females are a necessary although not a sufficient condition for a viable subpopulation. For other species, however, at least some tourists are happy to see solitary adult males. These may or may not contribute to population viability, depending on social systems for the species concerned, the ability of the males to move across landscapes, and the degree to which population genetics are affected through relocation and managed breeding programmes. Even if wildlife tourism relying on single adult males makes no direct local contribution to biodiversity conservation, it may still encourage conservation behaviour by nearby resident communities, if it provides them with local economic gains. This, however, is by no means guaranteed, and there are also contrary examples (Buckley, 2010a).

Considering the wider context, it appears that charismatic wildlife species are used in tourism marketing in many regions, but in different ways. African tour operators focus on large mammals, even in forest ecosystems, with gorillas as a prime example (Wilderness Safaris, 2013). South American operators advertise biodiversity more broadly, especially birds. South-East Asian tour operators focus on primates, particularly orang-utan. India uses its iconic tigers to pursue the big-cat marketing model (Taj Safaris, 2013). Only a few tour operators in South America can advertise jaguar or puma, however, because these species are difficult to see (Explora, 2013; Naturetrek, 2013). All of these patterns may change in response to growth in domestic wildlife tourism in India, China, South America and Russia.
Tourism operators that contribute most to conservation seem to be those that maintain large private reserves, often adjacent to public protected areas, supporting significant populations of multiple threatened species (Buckley, 2010a,b). Some of these operators also manage and fund translocation programmes, in conjunction with conservation agencies (&Beyond, 2013; Great Plains Conservation, 2013; Wilderness Safaris, 2013). In some countries, tourism also makes significant contributions to conservation of a range of threatened species through the budgets of protected area agencies (Buckley et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2012; Steven, Castley & Buckley, 2013).

Di Minin et al. (2013) point the way for future research by: differentiating tourist demand sectors, distinguishing different mechanisms for contributing to conservation, and evaluating outcomes in conservation terms. They conclude that conservation supports ecotourism more often than ecotourism supports conservation, and no doubt this is indeed correct. More generally, if we want to use tourism as a conservation tool, we must study the behaviour and psychology of tourists as well as wildlife.
References


