

**Segmentation of educational tendencies among tourist markets:
Ecologe patrons at Lamington National Park, Australia**

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Published

2003

Book Title

Managing Educational Tourism

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Case Study 2.1

Segmentation of educational tendencies among tourist markets: Ecolodge patrons at Lamington National Park, Australia

By David Weaver and Laura Lawton

In 1999, a major market segmentation study was conducted among the domestic overnight patrons of two well-known and adjacent Australian ecolodges (Binna Burra Mountain Lodge and O'Reilly's Rainforest Guesthouse) to identify distinctive sub-sectors among these consumers

of a specialised ecotourism product (Weaver & Lawton, 2002). A 16-page questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 3000 patrons (1500 from each facility), from which 1180 valid responses were received. Segmentation was achieved through a cluster analysis of the first section of the questionnaire, which consisted of 37 Likert-type statements that pertained to the actual and intended ecotourism-related behaviour of the respondents. The questionnaire sought to obtain information on the respondents' overall ecotourism behaviour, and not just in relation to their experiences at the two ecolodges. The 37 statements were designed to reflect the core criteria that are now widely associated with ecotourism, including the desirability of educational and learning-related outcomes for participants (Blamey, 1997).

The cluster analysis itself revealed three distinct groups. 'Harder' ecotourists (34%), with their strong support for enhancement sustainability and untouched settings, largely conformed to the expected characteristics of hard ecotourists. The use of 'harder' instead of 'hard' is based on the assumptions that the truly hard ecotourists are more likely to eschew fixed-roof accommodation and other site-related services. In contrast, 'softer' ecotourists (27%) were similar to soft ecotourists in their preference for services, lower commitment to the environment, and tendency to participate in ecotourism as part of a multi-purpose tourism experience. The use of the relative term 'softer' suggests that the true soft ecotourist is likely to be a day-tripper who does not use specialised overnight ecolodge accommodation. The third cluster (40%) were 'structured' ecotourists who emulated the services-preferences of the softer group but had similar environmental views to the harder ecotourists.

Table 2.6 provides the overall and cluster-specific mean responses to six statements in the first section that were directly related to the education and learning criterion of ecotourism. These are listed in descending order based on the overall means on a five-point scale (where 5 = 'strongly agree' and 1 = 'strongly disagree'). Not surprisingly, all groups revealed a strong desire to learn as much as possible during their visits about the natural environment of ecotourism destinations, although the desire of softer ecotourists to do so was significantly lower than that of respondents from the other two groups. These responses were corroborated in the motivations section of the questionnaire, where 'learning about the natural environment' scored 4.04 overall, with the softer group at 3.73 registering significantly lower than the harder (4.17) or structured (4.14) ecotourists. A similar pattern of relationship among the three clusters, but a greater level of ambivalence, was revealed in the statement about

Table 2.6 Education- and learning-related behavioural statement means by ecotourist cluster

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Overall mean</i>	<i>Clusters</i>		
		<i>Softer</i>	<i>Harder</i>	<i>Structured</i>
I want to learn as much as possible about the natural environment of the sites that I visit while I am there.	4.04	3.73	4.17 ³	4.14 ²
My ecotourism participation has made me more environmentally conscientious.	3.99	3.66	4.11 ³	4.11 ²
I learn more about the natural environment on an escorted tour than through travelling on my (or our) own.	3.74	3.75	3.39	4.03
I prefer ecotourism sites at which the natural attractions are interpreted or explained to me.	3.66	3.65	3.34	3.94
I try to find out as much about the natural environment of a destination as I can before I actually go there.	3.54	3.13	3.75 ³	3.65 ²
I like my ecotourism experiences to be mentally challenging.	3.22	2.78	3.49	3.28

Notes: All ANOVAs significant at the 0.000 level.

Superscript indicates that this value is not significantly different from the value in the indicated cluster. Bold numbers signify means that are significantly higher than the other two clusters. Underlined numbers signify means that are significantly lower than the other two clusters.

pre-experience, off-site learning. Pending further investigation, this may indicate a desire to avoid any pre-empting of the actual experience that could result from assimilating too much knowledge or information in advance. The phenomenon of pre-experience and off-site learning, in general, is a neglected area of ecotourism-related education that requires more research (Weaver, 2001a).

Very different response patterns were evident in questions regarding interpretation, which is a central concept of ecotourism given its function of conveying meaningful and interesting information to ecotourists. Similar outcomes were obtained on statements pertaining to the superior learning outcomes of escorted tours and the preference for mediated sites. In both cases, the structured ecotourists scored significantly higher than the other groups, while hard ecotourists scored significantly lower than the softer or structured clusters. The latter appears to corroborate the conventional wisdom that hard ecotourists tend to prefer unmediated interactions with the natural environment. Yet it must also be borne in mind that this level of preference is relative to the other groups; the actual mean values for harder ecotourists on these two statements (3.39 and 3.34) still indicate substantial support for interpretation.

The statement on ecotourism participation is important in so far as it reflects the outcomes or *post-experience* dimension of the ecotourism-based learning experience. The overall mean of 3.99 indicates that most respondents were positively impacted by their ecotourism participation in terms of their attitudes toward the environment. The extent to which this derives from effective interpretation requires further investigation, though evidence from the Tangalooma Dolphin Feeding Programme on Moreton Island, near Brisbane, suggests the positive role of interpretation in fostering more environmentally aware behaviour (Orams, 1997). Yet, it is somewhat ironic that, while environmental well-being is an inherently serious and challenging topic, the respondents were ambivalent about the extent to which they preferred mentally challenging ecotourism experiences (overall mean = 3.22). Harder ecotourists were more positive in this respect, though not overwhelmingly so (3.49), while softer ecotourists showed the least inclination (2.78). This may attest to the importance of environmentalism-oriented interpretation that avoids a pedantic, heavy-handed approach.

There were no gender differences among the three clusters, while structured ecotourists were significantly older than harder ecotourists. However, to obtain more insight into the influence of age and gender on the responses, the means of the statements were also examined in terms of these variables. As depicted in Table 2.7, older respondents (those 65 or

older) are more likely to prefer interpretation, to pursue pre-experiential learning and to seek mentally challenging experiences. Females are more likely than males to want to seek on-site learning and to express the belief that ecotourism has made them more environmentally responsible. While this data indicates that advanced age and female gender are positively related with the desire to seek educational outcomes from ecotourism among ecolodge patrons, these are propositions that require further investigation from other case studies and other ecotourist market segments.

Table 2.7 Education- and learning-related behavioural statement means by age and gender

<i>Statement</i>	<i><65</i>	<i>65+</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>
I want to learn as much as possible about the natural environment of the sites that I visit while I am there.	4.03	4.11	<u>4.09</u>	<u>3.97</u>
My ecotourism participation has made me more environmentally conscientious.	4.01	3.92	<u>4.06</u>	<u>3.88</u>
I learn more about the natural environment on an escorted tour than through travelling on my (or our) own.	<u>3.70</u>	<u>3.93</u>	3.73	3.74
I prefer ecotourism sites in which the natural attractions are interpreted or explained to me.	<u>3.62</u>	<u>3.82</u>	3.68	3.61
I try to find out as much about the natural environment of a destination as I can before I actually go there.	<u>3.52</u>	<u>3.71</u>	3.56	3.53
I like my ecotourism experiences to be mentally challenging.	<u>3.19</u>	<u>3.32</u>	3.20	3.24

Note: Underline indicates significant difference at the 95% probability level.