

THE INFLUENCE OF DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS ON TRAVEL BEHAVIOUR OF VISITORS TO NATURE-BASED PRODUCTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Nature-based products in South Africa are playing an increasingly important role in attracting visitors to the country. It thus becomes more important to understand the travel behaviour of visitors as this can influence future development and marketing strategies to these products. However information in this regard is lacking which creates challenges in the sustainable development of nature-based products. It is therefore the aim of this paper to determine the influence of demographic factors on travel behaviour of visitors to nature-based products in South Africa. A survey was done in 2010 which included nine National Parks in South Africa resulting in 1300 questionnaires. A factor analysis on travel motivations revealed five factors with the highest mean value obtained for 'relaxation'. A second factor analysis for park experiences also revealed five factors with the highest mean value obtained for 'activities and facilities'. A t-test for Equality of Means was calculated for age, home language, presence of children and province, and revealed significant differences on both travel motivations and park experiences. Most differences exist on Relaxation and Learning for travel motivations and Maintenance for park experiences. An ANOVA was done on qualification and travel motivations and park preferences and revealed only one significant difference.

KEYWORDS

Nature Based Tourism, Parks, Travel Motivations, Holiday Choice Sets, Factor Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Nature-based products, such as game farms, national parks and natural areas, play an important role in attracting tourists in a quest to generate revenue and to uplift the local community (Uysal, McDonald & Martin, 1994:20). South Africa has 22 national parks that are under management of SANParks (South African National Parks). These parks are well-established brands that generate millions of Rands per annum (Saayman & Van der Merwe, 2004:42). However, the continuous development of competitive destinations urges SANParks to keep up with developments in the market and identify aspects that can influence travel behaviour to the parks. South Africa has over 2 000 privately owned game reserves, all competing for eco-tourists (Saayman & Van der Merwe, 2004:42). The neighbouring countries are also becoming more competitive and, according to Saayman (2003:2), it has therefore become imperative for national parks to keep up with the trends and the needs of tourists, since this will ensure future revenue and competitiveness.

The growth in demand for tourism to remote areas and unspoiled nature is a significant trend globally (Holden & Sparrowhawk; 2002:435), making ecotourism the fastest growing market segment of the tourism industry (Wight, 2001:37). Very little market information on ecotourists' characteristics, preferences and motivations exist. In the increasingly competitive ecotourism market, tourist satisfaction is a very important factor to improve the destination image, attract more consumption of products and services and generate repeat visits. Further insights into the demographic profile of tourists to nature-based products can benefit tourism marketers, specifically with regard to market segmentation, product development, service quality evaluation, image development and promotional activities (Fodness, 1994:555; Yoon & Uysal, 2005:45; Kozak, 2001:222). However, although the characteristics and motivations of ecotourists are more widely understood than 10 years ago, a lack of empirical research into the motivations of such tourists still exists (Holden & Sparrowhawk; 2002:435). Tourists' motivation is regarded as the combination of needs and desires that affect the propensity to travel in a general sense, which can also differ regarding the age, gender and nationality of tourists (Meng, Tepanon & Uysal; 2006:43). Although many factors influencing tourists' behaviour evidently exist, motivation is still considered a crucial indicator and force answering why tourists behave in certain ways. To market effectively, it is essential to generate more specific knowledge concerning visitors to parks and natural areas (Yoon & Uysal, 2005:45). More importantly, management of national parks can make better use of the information to successfully promote tourism packages and gain competitiveness in the market. Although various studies have been performed, research in this regard in South Africa is still lacking. Therefore the purpose of this study was to determine whether demographic factors influence the travel behaviour of visitors to National Parks in South Africa. This information has various marketing and management implications.

2. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative study was conducted by means of a structured questionnaire to collate socio-demographic data and data concerning travel motivations and park experiences. Surveys were conducted at nine of the National Parks and included the following: Tsitsikamma National Park (N=225), Addo Elephant National Park (N=131), Au-grabies National Park (N=53), Bontebok National Park (N=45), Karoo National Park (N=80), Kgalagadi National Park (N=149), Kruger National Park (N=436), Zebra Mountain National Park (N=50) and Wilderness National Park (N=131) for 2010, resulting in 1300 questionnaires. The questionnaire used to survey visitors was identical for all the parks and consisted of three sections: Section A included demographic details while Section B focused on tourist behaviour and Section C consisted of more detailed information regarding the visitors' experiences at the park. All three sections were used in this research. Convenience sampling was used, since all overnight visitors in the park during the time of the survey formed part of the sample. Microsoft© Excel© was used for data capturing and basic data analysis while SPSS (SPSS Inc, 2007) was used for the analysis of data. The statistical analysis comprised three stages. Firstly, descriptive statistics were used to analyse the socio-demographic profile of respondents. Secondly, two factor analyses were conducted – one focusing on travel motivations and the second on park experiences. Thirdly, t-tests and ANOVA's were used to determine differences between demographic detail and the identified factors.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Most visitors (52%) to the parks in 2010 are Afrikaans speaking, hold a diploma or a degree and are mostly between ages 36 and 45 (29%) and 46 and 55 (26%). These visitors are married (81%), have children (52%) and mostly reside in Gauteng (33%) and Western Cape (28%). The current visitors are fairly loyal to the parks with 39% that have visited the park between 3 and 5 times over the past three years and 36% less than three times.

3.2. FACTOR ANALYSES

Factor analyses for travel motivations and park experiences were done to identify smaller sets of explanatory composite factors that define the fundamental constructs assumed to underlie the original variables. Only those factors with an eigenvalue equal to or greater than 1.0 were considered. Firstly, a list of 19 travel motivations was provided to respondents and they were requested to indicate the importance of each when making travel decisions. Using a Principal Axis Factoring method for extraction and Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalisation, 5 factors were identified, explaining 66% of the variance. Factors were labelled as follows: Factor 1 is Learning, Factor 2 is Relaxation, Factor 3 is Interpersonal motivators, Factor 4 is Site attributes and Factor 5 is Novelty. The highest mean value was obtained for 'Relaxation' which is a very important travel motivator (not only to parks). The Cronbach's coefficients were examined to check the reliability of the data and all these values, besides Factor 5, were above 0.65. Factor 5 (constituting two motivations) will be reported on separately, as the reliability of these items is questionable.

Secondly, a list of 25 aspects related to visitors' experience at the park was provided to respondents and they were requested to indicate the importance of each during their visit to the park. Exploratory factor analysis was performed on the 25 items to reveal the underlying patterns of responses. Using a Principal Axis Factoring method for extraction and Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalisation, 5 factors were identified and 60% of the variance was explained. Factors were labelled as follows: Factor one is Park services, Factor 2 is Staff experiences, Factor 3 is labelled Activities and Facilities, Factor 4 is Maintenance, and Factor 5 is Information Provision. The highest mean value was reported for Activities and Facilities. The Cronbach's coefficients were examined to check the reliability of the data and all these values were above 0.70.

3.3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DEMOGRAPHIC DETAIL AND TRAVEL MOTIVATIONS AND PARK EXPERIENCES

A t-test for Equality of Means was calculated for age, home language, presence of children and province, and revealed significant differences on both travel motivations and park experiences. Most differences exist on Relaxation and Learning for travel motivations and Maintenance for park experiences. An ANOVA was done on qualification and travel motivations and park preferences and revealed only one significant difference.

4. CONTRIBUTIONS

This study adds to the body of knowledge regarding the travel behaviour and travel patterns of visitors to nature-based products, especially in South Africa. This is important if sustainability is a priority for the various Parks. This research indicated that although Parks are more focused on the learning experience, visitors come mainly to relax and spend time with family and friends. This study clearly shows the relation between ecotourists and nature-based products. Comparisons were drawn with international studies to show the similarities and differences regarding travel behaviour.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to determine the influence of demographic information on travel motivations to and experiences at selected National Parks in South Africa. Results revealed some interesting findings, namely in particular that 'Learning' is not the most important travel motivator to Parks, but 'Relaxation' as is the case with various other tourism products. 'Learning' was, however, indicated as very important in other studies. It was also found that demographic factors have an influence on travel behaviour to nature-based products. This research can be expanded to all National Parks but also to private game reserves in South Africa. This research shows that the current visitors to National Parks have specific preferences and motivations for visiting the park. However, continued market research is needed to stay ahead of trends and changes in the market.

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