

Recreation Specialisation and Destination Image: A case study of Birding Tourists values and their perceptions of Papua New Guinea.

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Abstract

Papua New Guinea (PNG) should be to Australia what Costa Rica and Belize are to the USA – a proximate and successful tourist destination that attracts sustainable numbers of tourists drawn to the extraordinary diversity of endemic wildlife, habitats and the diverse range of cultural groups. Belize and Costa Rica have embraced ecotourism to the extent that ecotourism is now a significant earner of foreign exchange as well as an important mechanism for conserving biodiversity and facilitating local and regional sustainable development (see Weaver 1999). This scenario has not been enjoyed by Papua New Guinea even though it is one of the earth's most biodiverse regions where spectacular and unique fauna can be found.

The fact that strong historical ties exist between Australia and PNG should work strongly in its favour in attracting Australian visitors but inbound recreational tourism to PNG remains low. In 2007, the best year on record for visitor arrivals, PNG received 33 168 tourists, of which just under half (16 612) were Australian (PNG Tourism Promotion Authority 2009). Given the small domestic market in PNG, the nation depends on inbound tourists to sustain its tourism industry. The aim of this study is to determine the factors and/or values that act as barriers to travel to PNG affecting one wildlife tourism market segment – birdwatcher tourism. Recent research indicates that bird watching is a fast growing segment of the tourism industry and, by extension represents a potential lucrative market for PNG. This market has a high yield, is ecologically sustainable, and attracts tourists to places that feature rare, endemic, and spectacular bird species. This study is significant because it is the first that seeks to explore destination perceptions and the values that underpin them amongst a rapidly growing and economically significant special interest market segment: birding tourists.

Destination image is regarded as an important component in the success of tourism development and plays an important role in travel decision making. The initial image formation stage (pre-travel) is the most important phase in tourists' destination selection

processes (Baloglu and McCleary 1999). Formation of image has been described by Reynolds (1965) as the development of a mental construct based upon a few impressions chosen from a 'flood of information' from many sources including promotional literature, WOM, and the general media (Echtner & Ritchie 1991). Potential travellers often have limited knowledge about a destination they have not previously visited, and for this reason, the image and attitude dimensions of a place as a travel destination are likely to be critical elements in the choice process, irrespective of whether or not they are true representations of what that place has to offer (Um and Crompton 1990). However, destination image when applied to specialised groups such as bird watching requires a deeper understanding of how recreation specialisation influences and perhaps drives destination perceptions.

Early work in recreation specialisation focuses mainly on creating a specialisation index (of anglers, canoeists, hikers) to understand recreation specialisation as a form of serious leisure. More recently researchers have centred on refining and recalibrating the index parameters to different forms of recreation – framing studies to examine behavioural, psychographic, activity commitment, centrality to lifestyle, and demographic dimensions of their subjects. This study takes account of previous work and uses a mixed method design which includes both surveys and focus groups to collect data on the perceptions of a sample of bird watchers from the east coast of NSW. A questionnaire survey was administered to elicit information regarding the subjects' awareness of PNG as a travel destination, perceptions and attitudes towards PNG as a potential destination, identification of incentives and disincentives to travel, and general travel history. 41 respondents completed the survey and focus groups were conducted to explore themes that emerged from the first stage of the study.

Results revealed that the age of the participants was mostly between 55 and 67 (55%) which reflected the high percentage of retirees in the cohort. They were highly educated (73% with higher degrees). The sample can be broadly described as specialised recreational birdwatchers with an average of 23 years bird-watching experience and an average length of club membership of 12 years who spent an average of 4.66 days per month engaged in birdwatching activities. Participants in this study were well travelled – 95% had previous overseas travel experience, 22% of the sample had previously travelled to PNG, and 83% having been on holidays specifically for the purpose of birdwatching.

The overwhelming majority of participants reflected safety concerns as the primary barrier for travelling to PNG to watch birds: concern for personal health, security, and threats of violence. Another significant barrier was the cost of travel to PNG. While this study found that the majority of participants indicated they were unlikely to travel to PNG, a large minority of participants (44%) indicated they were 'somewhat' to 'very' likely to travel to PNG. This

aspect was further explored in the focus groups where participants described strategies they would adopt to address the identified barriers associated with safety concerns. This paper examines those strategies and discusses how specialisation plays a role in overcoming safety and security concerns. This paper concludes by drawing upon literature related to cognitive-dissonance theory to explain these concerns and provides recommendations for further research.

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