Public perceptions of ecotourism activities and their ‘authenticity’ in regional Australia

Abstract

As a concept, ecotourism sells both ‘authentic’ nature and ‘authentic’ local culture and experience. Ecotourism has long invited debate surrounding a standard definition of the term itself. Most definitions and descriptions of ecotourism do not directly mention authenticity. When connected to authenticity, ecotourism can be defined as the rarity of the experience, in natural and pristine global environments free from the plunder of human development. Unnaturalness and human interference are eschewed by ecotourists, who wish to avoid any visible exploitation. A survey of households in the Central Queensland region was undertaken as one part of a larger survey: the 2009 Central Queensland Social Survey. The sample of questionnaire respondents included 1,273 persons, aged 18 years or older, who had experienced an ecotourism tour or holiday. The gender breakdown of respondents was 50.2 percent male and 49.8 percent female. Respondents were more favourable in their judgements of ecotourism if they had some previous ecotourism experiences. Women were more favourable towards ecotourism than men. More educated respondents also had more favourable views towards ecotourism. Three quarters of the respondents (75%) indicated a preference for an ecotourism tour or holiday in Australia, either nationally, intrastate or within their local region.

Keywords: Authenticity, ecotourism, ecotourist, ecotourism experience, regional Australia

Introduction

Ecotourism is a concept embroiled in a terminological and ideological debate where it has been conceptualised in a variety of different ways with synonymous terms such as:
responsible tourism, pro-poor tourism, sustainable tourism development, soft/hard tourism (Reichel et al. 2008: 38), nature-oriented tourism, environmental-friendly tourism, socio-ecological tourism, low-impact travel, ecocultural travel and nonconsumptive tourism (Sirakaya et al. 1999: 171). A range of descriptions for the concept of ecotourism also have been offered, and are captured in phrases like ‘getting off the beaten track’, ‘responsible travel’ and ‘tread lightly, take only photographs and leave only footprints’ (Sirakaya et al. 1999: 169-172).

Ecotourism’s three main components consistently present in definitions are: (1) attracting tourists to unique and accessible areas to undertake experiences, such as ‘rustic accommodation, muddy trails and … closer contact with wildlife, local culture and resource conservation’ (Williams 1992: 15); (2) preserving, protecting or restoring the environment through conservation education, attitudinal change, profit generation, community development and political support, whereby the ecotourists carry binoculars instead of guns; and, (3) producing local enterprises and employment from ecotourism (Fennell and Eagles 1989: 23-24).

Most definitions and descriptions of ecotourism do not directly mention authenticity. Instead descriptors such as ‘undisturbed areas’, ‘uncontaminated natural areas’, ‘unique’, ‘undeveloped areas’, ‘closer contact with wildlife and local culture’, ‘positive effect for conservation’, ‘little or no impact’ and ‘local community involvement’ allude to notions of authenticity in ecotourism activities. Iveniuk (2006: 105) describes authenticity as the ‘rareness of real conservation and the window it provides the tourist into some Edenic past’, a chance to see the world as it once was and not what it has become. Unnaturalness and human interference are shunned by ecotourists, who wish to avoid any visible exploitation. Ecotourism sells both the ‘authentic’ nature and the ‘authentic’ local culture.
The tourism industry is founded on organising and selling experiences, and consequently activities such as wildlife-themed tourism seek to commodify nature. Nature is made into a product, illustrating the relationship between (economic) consumption of nature and conservation (Iveniuk 2006:104). In exchange for dollars, the tourist returns home with authentic experiences in the form of images and narratives. Given that all tourism, including ecotourism, makes wildlife a commodity: Is ‘authenticity’ an important motivator for consumers? The concept ‘authenticity’ has featured extensively in many tourism articles and discussion (see Olsen 2002). Tourism is the business of manufacturing experiences to satisfy consumer expectations, and it is important to understand perceived differences between ecotourism and other tourism experiences that blatanty hijack reality, such as theme parks and zoos.

Presumably, at least some people seek and value authenticity in a tourist experience that stands apart from mass tourism. We explored the idea that people are interested in real nature experiences, and not just the artificially created ‘absolute fake’ (Eco1986) experiences that are created in theme parks and zoos. Artificial experiences of nature are convenient, but fall short of being real (Eco 1986).

We sought to identify public perceptions of ecotourism; and explore themes related to authenticity such as uniqueness, proximity/closeness to nature/wildlife, genuine emotional/spiritual connection, experience of the pristine/unaltered, and ecotourism’s contribution to conservation. A survey was used to identify a consumers’ view of ecotourism as a potentially ‘authentic’ experience. The focus on the concept of ‘authenticity’ was a way of exploring public conceptions of ecotourism experiences.

Past studies about what constitutes an ‘authentic’ experience have focused mainly on cultural heritage tourism rather than wildlife ecotourism. Surveying rural and regional
Queenslanders provided an understanding of perceptions of authenticity in ecotourism among a population that had experienced managed eco-encounters given the proximity and number of ecotourism tours and holidays available in and around Central Queensland. Socio-demographic characteristics of survey participants allowed an examination of the influence of additional variables including income, education level and age, on perceptions of authenticity.

Methodology

A survey of households in the Central Queensland region was undertaken as one part of a larger survey: the 2009 Central Queensland Social Survey. The region of Central Queensland was delineated into three areas for telephone interviewing: (1) Rockhampton Regional Council Area, (2) Mackay Regional Council Area, and (3) Remainder of Central Queensland (Other CQ). Participants were selected through a two-stage selection process, which involved the selection of households, and the selection of respondent gender within each household.

The population targeted for telephone interviewing were all persons 18 years of age or older who, at the time of the survey, were living in a dwelling unit in Central Queensland that could be contacted by a direct-dialled, land-based telephone service. A random selection approach was used to ensure that all respondents had an equal chance to be contacted (Hanley & Mummery 2009). The survey sample was drawn from the telephone database by using a computer program to select, with replacement, a simple random sample of phone numbers. Mobile and business phone numbers were not included in the telephone database (Hanley & Mummery 2009).

Within the household, one eligible person was selected as the respondent for the interview on the basis of gender, using the following selection guidelines to ensure an equal
yet random selection of male and female participants: (a) The dwelling unit must be the person's usual place of residence and s/he must be 18 years of age or older; (b) Each household was randomly pre-selected as either a male or female household; (c) If there was more than one male/female in the household then the male/female that had the most recent birthday was selected; and, (d) If there was no-one of the pre-selected gender residing in the house then the house was designated as not qualified (Hanley & Mummery 2009). The gender breakdown of respondents was 50.2 percent male and 49.8 percent female.

The questionnaire consisted of a number of demographic questions and 10 questions pertaining to public perceptions of ecotourism. It was administered through a CATI (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system, and interviewing occurred between October and November, 2009. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample included household composition, age, gender, marital status, highest level of education, household income, religion, federal and state political party preference, ethnicity, employment status, occupation, home ownership, and sample area.

Prior to participants being asked questions about their perceptions of ecotourism a definition of ecotourism was provided. This definition was: Ecotourism is environmentally friendly tourism that focuses on experiencing the environment, wildlife and culture of natural areas. To assist the interviewer further, the types of activities that comprised an ecotourism tour or holiday were provided to the interviewer to aid in classification of an ecotourism tour or holiday. As prominent examples, an ecotourism tour or holiday included whale watching ecotours on the Fraser Coast in Queensland, sea turtle conservation ecotours at Mon Repos, dolphin ecotours on the Sunshine Coast and Australian Aboriginal ecotours, such as Uluru cultural heritage ecotours, and cultural heritage walking tours. The following examples were given to interviewers as tourist activities not classified as ecotourism tours or holidays:
wildlife viewing or interaction at Australia Zoo on the Sunshine Coast, the Dream World theme park on the Gold Coast, solo 4WD and/or camping in the bush.

The sample of questionnaire respondents included 1,273 persons, and of this 354 had experienced an ecotourism tour or holiday. These participants were asked nine questions relating to ecotourism tours or holidays they had taken. Survey data gathered included: the time lapsed since their last ecotourism tour or holiday, the type of venture, and the preferred ecotourism destination. Six questions examined participants’ agreement or disagreement using a 5-point likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) with statements about what ecotourism offers tourists and what characterises authentic ecotourism. Reverse coded questions were used to prevent bias. An example of such a question is, ‘Ecotourism tours or holidays are generally more expensive than other holidays or tours’.

Results

An index of favourability to ecotourism was calculated as the sum of survey question items 4-9 on authenticity. This index identified those individuals ‘favourable’ or ‘not favourable’ to ecotourism. An ANCOVA model was used to ascertain characteristics of people who were favourable to ecotourism. The independent variables in the model included the destination they chose, whether they had a previous ecotourism experience, years of education, age and gender.

People were more favourable in their judgements of ecotourism if they had some previous ecotourism experiences. Women were more favourable towards ecotourism than men. More educated respondents also had more favourable views.
Ecotourism experiences

Based on respondents’ last ecotourism experience, the majority (49%) favoured the coastal/reef/marine animal tour experience (e.g. turtles, whales, dolphins, sharks) over wilderness/nature/outback/safari type ecotourism (21%) and cultural heritage tours (5%). These were favoured over forest or jungle tours and wildlife sanctuary or reserve tours. These results were not surprising given the region’s location to such ventures as shark interaction and whale watching tours at Hervey Bay, sea turtle conservation at Mon Repos, and dolphin tours on the Sunshine Coast.

Ecotourism provides pristine/unaltered nature

We found 76% of participants agreed that ecotourism is the best way to experience pristine, unaltered, natural places, wildlife and cultures.

Ecotourism provides unique experiences

The majority of participants (56%) disagreed with the statement that ecotourism does not really offer anything special or unique that cannot be experienced on a regular holiday or tour.

Ecotourism provides close-up experiences

There was a high level of agreement (76%) amongst participants that ecotourism gives the best chance of experiencing first hand or close-up the place, wildlife, or people from a different culture.

Ecotourism and cost of real experiences
Less conclusive was participants’ perception of ecotourism being generally more expensive than other holidays or tours. There was very little separating the participants agreeing (34%) and disagreeing (22%) over ecotourism being more expensive. There was also a substantial proportion (30%) of participants being unsure or giving no response to this question. The results indicate that the public do not have a strong awareness of ecotourism costs relative to other tourism holidays and tours.

**Ecotourism provides genuine emotional or spiritual experiences**

Approximately 55% of respondents agreed that a genuine emotional or spiritual experience is best attained through participation in ecotourism. This suggests that the emotional and cultural experience of a place, people or wildlife is highly valued by participants who engage in ecotourism tours or holidays.

**Authentic tourism provides conservation**

Similarly, there were a high percentage of participants (79%) who agreed that authentic ecotourism contributes to the conservation of wildlife, natural areas and culturally significant sites, and the well being of different cultures.

Only a small percentage (8%) of respondents expressed an opposing view. High levels of concurrence may reflect the motivations individuals possess for ecotourism due to perceptions of genuine ecotourism activities functioning to support conservation through sustainable environments and livelihoods.

**Preferred ecotourism destination**

When questioned about their preferred ecotourism tour or holiday the respondents showed a strong favouritism towards Australian-based experiences and a preference for developing (lesser industrialised) countries, such as Asia, Africa, Pacific region and South America over
destinations in developed countries (e.g. USA, UK, Canada, Europe). Three quarters of the respondents (75%) indicated a preference for an ecotourism tour or holiday in Australia, either nationally, intrastate or within their local region. This suggests ecotourism in Australia is viewed quite favourably in comparison to overseas options. It appears that people with highly favourable attitudes towards ecotourism were more likely to choose overseas developing countries or destinations within Australia as a preferred holiday, whereas developed overseas countries were preferred for holidays by those less favourable to ecotourism.

**Discussion**

The strong preferences for wildlife encounters and nature experiences may be explained by the human desire to have tangible interactions with the wilderness and to understand animal behaviour. This is due to humans’ ethnocentric and anthropomorphic attraction to animals (Curtin 2005). Particular wildlife animals (e.g. dolphins, whales) invoke strong emotional connections, due to their similarity as social animals that seem to replicate human bonds of affiliation and affection. Urbanisation and the alienation from food sources are also perceived to be an alienation from nature. Most humans obtain their food from other humans, and this may be distinctly different from the lifestyle of our distant ancestors. It is also different by degrees from some native peoples living traditional lifestyles. In short, the preference for tourism involving wildlife and nature experiences may come from the desire to reconnect with the natural world, which is normally modified by exploitation and development.

The results also suggest that the construct ‘authentic’ has positive connotations associated with sustaining not just the ecological component, but also the cultural and social components of society. The emotional and cultural experience of a place, people or wildlife is
highly valued by these tourists. While we did not seek to differentiate between participants’ experiences of place, people or wildlife, it does show tourists seek intangible elements to their experience. They ascribe emotive and symbolic meanings to images and experiences, especially when Indigenous culture is contrasted to the familiar European history and culture. The emotional connection humans have to animals and the magic or spiritual attraction to other species has been well documented and described as a ‘fellowship’ and feeling as one with the natural world (Vining 2003).

Lane and Waitt (2001: 383) found marketing of ecotours in remote locations in Australia manufactured a fake ‘authenticity’ around remoteness and emptiness of the land by focusing tourism promotional material on the physical/tangible, the isolation, ancient landforms, and native plants and animals. This was done to the exclusion of the Aboriginal people and their culture. It denies tourists the genuine emotional or spiritual connection to the people whose country they visit and shows that perceived ‘authenticity’ may be faked.

A constructivist view of authenticity can help explains how ‘place, time and culture affect what different social groups at different times understand to be authentic’ (Lane and Waitt 2001: 382). Concepts of wilderness and frontier, as descriptors of ‘authenticity’, appear fluid between different social groups. Tourist constructions of wilderness and frontier are alien concepts to Aboriginal traditional owners.

Packaging and separating nature from culture reinforces the dualistic view of humans being hyper-separated from nature. Yet in other contexts, Indigenous people are located closer to a nature/non-human sphere. This falseness reinforces the hyper-realistic reproduction of nature that similarly exists in zoos, as seen with the artificially chilled polar bear enclosure (Eco 1995).
Baudrillard’s conception of the tourist is of an individual seeking simulated tourist experiences through an artificial replacement of the real world with places like animal theme parks and zoos. Assuming Baudrillard is correct, then the more artificial wildlife experiences of animal parks and zoos should be seen as equally authentic as ecotourism wildlife experiences. Our results showed tourists viewed ecotourism as providing unique experiences and close-up encounters distinct to contrived encounters. Baudrillard also argues that while tourists perceive these encounters as authentic and real, all of these experiences are in fact simulacra. Others argue that the search for the authentic profanes and destroys it in the process making it a ‘doomed quest’ (Olsen 2002: 177).

People highly favourable to ecotourism preferred holidays overseas in developing countries or domestic ecotourism experiences. This was the opposite of those having the least favourable attitudes towards an ecotourism holiday; who opted for a desirable ecotourism holiday in an overseas developed country. There was no evidence that participants believed that the cost on average of ecotourism tours or holidays was greater than non-ecotourism tours or holidays.

It is not surprising that areas in Australia scored highly as preferred future ecotourism destinations given the place-images produced by the tourism industry, the uniqueness and remoteness of places, and the range of ecotourism activities on offer. Also, research on destination loyalty finds that previous experience is an influential factor in today’s and tomorrow’s decisions about the choice of travel destination (Oppermann 2000). This helps explain why tourists favourable to ecotourism continue to seek out similar experiences to past eco-encounters.

Conclusion
The empirical examination of the attitudes of ecotourism consumers suggests they realise the value and uniqueness of the product – the authenticity. Ecotourists are keen to experience less contrived or simulated environments of theme-related wildlife, nature and culture. These respondents are less favourable towards tourism based on ‘fake’ attractions. We found substantial support for ‘authentic’ ecotourism which contributes to the conservation of places, people, wildlife and culture. This ‘authentic’ ecotourism also provides a genuine emotional or spiritual connection.

Together with consideration of past results, our findings also point to there being different dimensions of ecotourism and a variety of positions and values associated with ecotourism, some of which may be closer to mainstream mass tourism than one may have initially thought. The notion that ecotourism is the opposite alternative to conventional mass tourism panders to a false dualistic construction, because both forms of tourism require financial sustainability and high consumer satisfaction with the product (Weaver 1995 cited in Reichel et al. 2008). Shared across both types of tourism is the commodification of nature, even though the ecotourist searches to buy the real experience rather than the fake, contrived or manufactured. Referred to as ‘ecological mass tourism’ (Reichel et al. 2008), this may be an area of further research to distinguish those differential values within the ecotourist consumer group. Also, further research could examine the belief that ‘authentic’ ecotourism is an attraction of interest for only the small segment of hard-core environmentalists oriented towards principles of ethical consumption.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge funding from the Institute for Health & Social Science Research’s Population Research Grant Scheme (2009 Round 2: Central Queensland Social Survey).
References


