

ECONOMICS

Sociology

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ECOTOURISM FROM BOTH HOTELS AND TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT. This empirical research about ecotourism was elaborated having in mind two perspectives: the lodging and the consumer. It was possible to conclude that the hotels involved in the research need to improve its performance in terms of market research and of the environmental accreditation, but it is convenient to empathise that the environmental and social concerns are present in its activities. Regarding ecotourists, the findings indicate that they are concerned with the environmental issues when they are lodgin. Their great motivation is the possibility of having a contact with the nature, the environmental conservation and the sustainability.

Keywords: ecotourism, sustainability, environmental concern

Introduction

Tourism can contribute to economic diversification and profitability by increasing employment, improving basic services, and increasing economic equity between urban and rural populations (MacPherson, 1997; Narayanan, 2002; Byrd, Bosley and Dronberger, 2008). However, tourism can also generate several negative impacts such as air, water and noise pollution, litter and solid waste, water shortage, traffic congestion, disturbance, lost of authenticity, soil and beach erosion, damage to ecosystems and loss of flora and fauna (Wilkinson, 1989; Buckley and Pannel, 1990; Inskeep, 1991; Narayanan, 2002; Nepal, 2008; Pappas, 2008; Van Winkle and Mackay, 2008). Given this scenario, an alternative type of tourism – the ecotourism – is being gaining adepts around the world.

Despite the mentioned problems, tourism industry is extremely important for some countries and it is expected to grow by 4.3% per annum between 2008 and 2017 (WTO, 2007). Ecotourism/nature-based tourism became the fastest growing sector (IES, 2008), and this fact seems to be also connected to the increasing trends in environmental concern.

The adoption of environmental principles and responsible behaviour in developing

sustainable ecotourism lodging is indicative of the increasing demand for these new travel alternatives (Wight, 1993).

Ecotourism has had a relevant role in some countries' developing strategies. It is attractive due its ability to generate employment, foreign exchange and regional growth (Weaver, 1998). Countries like Brazil are trying to take advantage of its natural conditions to develop not only tourism in general, but also ecotourism in some specific areas (ex. Amazonas).

This research aims to analyse the Brazilian ecotourism market having in mind the perspective of the eco-hotels operating in the subsector. More specifically, we intend to analyse some of their management practices related with the environmental aspects. This will allow us to discuss the projects' sustainability. Additionally, we will also perform a study aiming to know better the ecotourist's attitudes and behaviours.

On one hand, the knowledge of the target market nature allows ecotourism operators to change its marketing mix variables according to the needs and desires of the environmentally friendly tourist. On the other hand, that understanding of the ecotourist's profile has also significant implications for managers and protected areas agencies (Wearing and Neil, 2009).

As Brazil has a great ecotourism potential, because of its rich biodiversity, this industry is seen as a logical alternative to other more consumptive forms of land exploitation. Although the evidences showed that the nature-based tourism began in Brazil in 1960, its growth has been rising (kala and Maikhuri, 2011). Due its importance, it was developed a code of ethics for ecotourism in 1996 and the government has been investing millions of dollars to develop this industry (Fennell, 2008).

The paper is structured as follows. The concept of ecotourism, regarding both perspectives of the eco-lodges and the consumer market, is presented in the literature review section. After, a brief description of the methodological aspects, in terms of the case studies and the quantitative research is shown. This is followed by the discussion of results and conclusions.

Literature review

Ecotourism became a kind of tourism incorporating a diverse set of activities (e.g. bird watching, scientific study, photography, diving, trekking, etc.). For some authors it is a subset of nature-based tourism and for others is a niche market (Wearing and Neil, 2009).

Concepts as sustainable tourism, ecotourism and green tourism are growing trends, indicating the public concern and expectation to see destinations that aim to preserve both physical and socio-cultural environments (Uriely, Reichel and Shani, 2006). However, there are different perceptions about some terms related with this tourism. To Fotiou, Buhalis and Vereczi (2002), sustainable and responsible travel respects to the whole tourism sector, while ecotourism concerns mostly to travel to natural areas containing cultural/educational elements.

In its purist version, Parks, Parks and Allen (2009) defend that ecotourism definition should include these aspects: nature based, active participation, educational travel, social and cultural elements, involvement of the local community and ecological sustainability. Singh, Slotkin and Vamosi (2007) question if it is possible to have a "pure form" of ecotourism that effectively sustain economic, social and natural environment, since not all sustainable tourism is necessarily ecotourism, this is, sustainability alone does not defines ecotourism. However, when correctly regulated, ecotourism can provide numerous benefits like: long-term sustainable resource preservation, empowerment of local people living in that community, promotion of public and private cooperation and material for scientific and educational

research (Parks, Parks and Allen, 2009).

Marketing present in ecotourism should be socially responsible. The organisations of this sector should have as principles ethics, legality and social responsibility. Concerning to demand, it is necessary to identify the current consumption options and the criteria used by consumers at the moment of the buying decision. This way, the marketing professionals could intervene and promote a change to an ecologically consumption.

The idea behind the definition of marketing is that the consumers' needs should be attended and the organisation's aims should be achieved. This idea of the organisational objectives is crucial for any ecotourism operator that has to deal with the dilemma: sustaining the environment or profitability? (Wearing and Neil, 2009).

At this point it is important to talk about the contributions that ecological marketing and social marketing could bring to the field of ecotourism. Ecological marketing questions the role of demand stimulation (Henion and Kinnear, 1976). If more and more individuals chose a more experiential ecotourism product, there is a danger for less environmentally concerned mass tourism operators also enter in the sector. Regarding social marketing, its focus on client satisfaction and society welfare, should be adopted by ecotourism operators, since, in practice, this approach seeks to mediate the preferences of the tourist with the long term interests of the host community. Having all these aspects in mind, a definition of ecotourism marketing could be: the development of ecologically sustainable products, as well as its price, distribution and promotion, whose impact in physical and cultural environment is minimum, and the profits are accordingly (Wearing and Neil, 2009).

Marketing permits to better analyse not only the consumer's needs, but also the industry requirements, which is being diluted due the distortion of ecotourism by some operators who are only oriented to their own product (Fennell, 2008).

Given the expansion and changing nature of ecotourism, in order to market successfully, operators will have to alter the focus of their approaches to planning and communication strategies. This means that, instead of measuring the success by the number of tourists that visit the place, the level of the customer satisfaction and his predisposition to return, should be considered (Wearing and Neil, 2009).

According to Wearing and Neil (2009), the actions that characterise the corporate social responsibility depend from a set of conditions such as: the development of the surrounded community, the environment preservation, the internal and external clear communications, the investment in the work conditions, the employers' well-being, the profits for the stakeholders and the customers' satisfaction. The firm should be part of the society not only as an economic agent, but also as a social agent, following certain duties, pursuing rights according to the society development; this is, being a citizen-firm that cares with the Man's life quality in its all aspects.

Sustainable consumption can be applied to the field of tourism, and more specifically to the ecotourism. This way, ecotourist can be defined as "people who require environmentally compatible recreational opportunities ... where nature rather than humanity predominates" (Kerr, 1991, p. 248); usually has interest in visiting wildness, national parks, and forests, and in viewing fauna and flora, at the same time that is contributing towards conserving and benefiting local economy (Eagles, 1992).

Generally ecotourists are characterised as having higher incomes and qualifications than the average, and tend to be female (Galley and Clifton, 2004; Wight, 1996). Usually they are experienced travellers and have a college/university degree (IES, 2008). Wight (1996) adds that they tended to travel as couples, limited family or some singles, but the great difference, compared to general tourists, is in the amount they are willing to spend in the travel experience.

Along these traits, behavioural and psychographic characteristics are used to profile

the ecotourist. For instance, Ballantine and Eagles (1994), refer the possession on environmental ethic, the predisposition to conserve the resources, the focus on extrinsic motivations, the anthropocentric orientation, the desire to benefit the environment, etc. They are frequent and experienced travellers and they have preference for small groups, personalised service and outdoor activities (Wearing and Neil, 2009). Due their "science orientation", they are interested in the study, demand of information and instruction (Galley and Clifton, 2004).

Regarding the Brazilian market, the ecotourist is characterised by his high cultural and educational level, generally has a university education degree, medium to high income and is aged between 20 and 40 years old. This tourist seeks the direct contact with the nature, the exotic, the uncommon, unique cultures and environments. His daily routine is stressful, without any contact with the environment, and because of that he wish relaxation and leisure activities. The ecotourist is aware of the fact that he is paying a superior value for environmentally friendly programmes; he concerns itself with the environment preservation and with the life quality of the local community and he is able to contribute to its development, interact with it or consuming there (EMBRATUR, 1994).

Methodology

The topic of environment and sustainable tourism has becoming a critical issue for the lodging industry. A growing number of hotels are taking this trend seriously and some of them opted to operate in the subsector of ecotourism. One part of this research is focused in these units, more specifically in the ecotourism hotels in Brazil.

In order to study this topic we formulate some research questions as follows:

- Are the eco-lodges concerned with the analysis of their customers?
- Are environmental and social concerns present in the hotels managers' attitudes?
- Is environmental accreditation the standard practice in these companies?
- Which are the main promotional channels used to communicate and place the ecotourism product?

This is a qualitative research based in case studies. The target population comprised four directors of hotels that are operating in the ecotourism area. To collect the information documental analysis was used, as well as an individual interview. The latter included questions concerning the general description of the organisation; the demand perspective (knowledge about their clients' attitudes and behaviours) and the supply perspective (knowledge about the ecotourism theme, the ecological awareness of the sector and the use of marketing tools to promote and distribute the offer).

Concerning the demand side, this study intends to analyse the ecotourists' attitudes and behaviours, as well as to access their environmental awareness. Having these aims in mind we also formulate some research questions:

- Is there any relation between individuals' environmental concern and their behaviour concerning ecotourism?
- Is there any relation between the ecotourism practice and the concern with the conditions offered by the hotels?
- Will the ecotourists give preference to the hotels with environmental accreditation?
- Will the ecotourists prefer socially responsible enterprises?
- Will the ecotourists' demographic profile be relevant to differentiate the individuals that practice ecotourism from the other individuals?

The method used to announce the questionnaire was the internet, uploading it on specialised sites of ecotourism in Brazil and networks like facebook, twitter and orkut. Although the sample group was only 100 individuals, the number of visits to the

questionnaire site was 502 (response rate – 20%). The collection of data from this kind of sites (social networks and blogs) is considered very relevant by CMIGreen (2009), to find and study the buying behaviours of green tourists. Most of the respondents of the GMIGreen's study referred that usually they consulted sites, articles and publications containing other's tourists opinions.

The questionnaire included several parts in order to measure: the general environmental concerns and behaviours; the perception about the lodging industry regarding corporate social responsibility; the knowledge and practices of ecotourism; and the demographic data. This survey was previously pre-tested with a sample of 20 individuals.

After collection, data were statistically analysed and interpreted using the statistical software SPSS 19.0 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). A descriptive analysis was undertaken (frequencies, cross tabulations and central tendency statistics), together with nonparametric tests.

Results

In this section, the analysis concerning the case studies of the hotels involved in the study (illustrating the supply side), as well as the study of consumers (illustrating the demand side) will be presented.

Study of the Ecotourism Hotels

The case studies are based on four ecotourism hotels (Canto das Águas, Verdegreen, Uacari and Caiman Ecological Refuge) located in four Brazilian regions, which develop nature based activities. These companies employ between 8 and 69 employees and were founded between 1986 and 2008. Next, the results that aim to present the answers to the research questions are presented.

Q1. Are the eco-lodges concerned with analysing their customers? Based on the results found, it is possible to say that the majority of the surveyed companies, never performed a study concerning its costumers behaviour, with exception of the Uacari Hotel that in 2009 performed a research based on a questionnaire. The main results show that this kind of tourists is interested in maximising the possibilities for observing fauna and flora, and that they look for ways of knowing local populations life style. The results also show that they are more ecocentric than anthropocentric. Based on the opinion of the interviewed directors, the environmentally conscious habits of the guests are directly related to the established good practices standards. Guests comply with the rules, and besides that, are concerned with garbage treatment, with the local community and support the projects developed by the hotels. In order to evaluate guest's satisfaction, the hotels use tools such as book complaints and service evaluation forms.

Q2. Are environmental and social concerns present in the hotels managers' attitudes? Data collected from the interviews indicate that the hotels are concerned with the environmental aspects when the units were been constructed. Verdegreen is the more recent hotel and was projected as a sustainable construction. Remain hotels try to adapt the buildings with adequate technologies in order to minimise the negative environmental impacts. Additionally, the social responsibility of the companies is well established. All use means to diminish the social disparities and to value the local workers, as well as implement procedures to reduce the environmental impact of their activities (recycling, cleaning the forests, educational environmental projects, etc.). The Canto das Águas Hotel supports the local community through donations, financial help and training programmes, being this the most concerned company with the community. Also the Uacari is socially concerned as it uses a

rotating system involving 60 service providers of 7 communities of the natural reserve.

Q3. Is environmental accreditation the standard practice in these companies? From the four hotels only Canto das Águas (entitled as the first sustainable hotel in Brazil) has a certificate of environmental compliance. However, it is important to mention that Verdegreen Hotel and Caiman Ecological Refuge are in the accreditation implementation phase.

Q4. Which are the main promotional channels used to communicate and place the ecotourism product? In what regards communication and place of the ecotourism product, the interviewed companies demonstrated being synchronized with sector trends. The internet is the most used channel to communicate and place the ecotourism product. Faced with the easiness the consumer has in obtaining information through internet, companies are giving priority to this channel, ignoring or diminishing the frequency of the use of traditional channels like TV, magazines and newspapers. Some of the companies still use tourism fairs. The Uacari Hotel bases its communication strategy on word-of-mouth.

Study of the Consumers

The sample is mostly composed by woman, aged between 25 to 34 (36%) and 18 to 24 years old (23%). In terms of income, 19% belongs to class A and 15% of the individuals have a low income level probably because there is also a high number of students in this sample (30%). 31% of the respondents is attending some graduate course, 28% is graduated and 27% is pos-graduated.

It was performed a descriptive analysis of the questionnaire whose main results are reproduced as follows:

- Most part of the respondents refereed that they are very concerned with environmental issues.

- In relation to the lodgings, 58% of the individuals manifested concern with the environmental aspects of the same ones. The aspect more cited was “to have an efficient water management system” and “to use renewable energies”.

- A significant part of the respondents referred do not knowing any environmental accreditation entity, which shows a lack of information about the issue.

- 36% of the respondents said to prefer hotels with environmental accreditation and 31% always prefer the socially responsible companies.

- Most individuals (91%) had already listen about ecotourism, but only 55% practiced some connected activity, namely, trekking, nature walks, rappel and observation of animals and plants.

- The type of ecotourism more practiced is: Adventure, Recreation, and Flora and Fauna/Aquatic.

- The motivations more common were “like the nature” and “contribute to the environmental conservation”.

- The website is the more used mean to keep informed and buy tourism products.

Next, the results that will allow us to answer the research questions previously defined, will be presented.

Q5. Is there any relation between individuals' environmental concern and their behaviour concerning ecotourism? To measure the individuals' environmental consciousness level, a group of questions connected with the ecological awareness was analysed. The respondents were divided into two groups: the more environmentally conscious (they have got 4 or more points in the set of seven questions, in which yes= 1 and no= 0) and the less environmentally conscious (they have got 3 or less points). The scores resulted of the sum of the number of “yes” selected in the scale provided.

The results, using the chi-square test, show that there is no statistical significance

(0,709), for a significance level of 0,05. This is, the variable environmental consciousness is not relevant to differentiate the individuals regarding to the practice of ecotourism. Observing the statistical correlation between these variables, through the correlation coefficient, the conclusion is that the association is not relevant (- 0,039) (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Level of environmental consciousness versus Practice of ecotourism

		Do you practice some ecotourism activity?		Total
	Yes	No		
Less conscious	environmentally	14	11	25
More conscious	environmentally	41	27	68
Total		55	38	93

Correlation coefficient Sig.

Q6. Is there any relation between the ecotourism practice and the concern with the conditions offered by the hotels? Observing *Table 2*, it is possible to say that there is a significant relation (0,001) between the variables “environmental concern with lodgings” and the “practice of ecotourism activities”. As the correlation coefficient shows, there is also a strong association between the two variables (0,99).

Table 2. Environmental concern with lodgings versus Practice of ecotourism activities

When you stay in a hotel, does its ecological orientation concern you?	Do you practice some ecotourism activity?		Total
	Yes	No	
Yes	40	14	54
No	15	23	38
Total	55	37	92

Correlation coefficient 0,99
Sig. 0,001

Q7. Will the ecotourists give preference to the hotels with environmental accreditation? It is possible to say that the relation between the individuals that practice ecotourism and the preference for accommodation establishments that have environmental accreditation is significant (0,004). However, the correlation between the variables is low (0,347) (*Table 3*).

Table 3. Preference for environmentally accredited accommodation versus Practice of ecotourism activities

Do you prefer hotels with environmental accreditation?	Do you practice some ecotourism activity?		Total
	Yes	No	
Yes	28	7	35
No	4	2	6
Indifferent	23	29	52
Total	55	38	93

<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	0,347
<i>Sig.</i>	0,004

Q8. Will the ecotourists prefer socially responsible enterprises? By observing the significance value of 0,016, it could be confirmed that individuals practicing ecotourism prefer companies involved with cause related marketing and the ones that are socially responsible. However, the correlation between the two variables is low (*Table 4*).

Table 4. Preference for socially responsible companies *versus* Practice of ecotourism activities

Do you prefer socially responsible companies?	Do you practice some ecotourism activity?		Total
	Yes	No	
I don't know what that means	0	1	1
Never	0	2	2
Sometimes	32	29	61
Always	23	6	29
Total	55	38	93

<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	- 0,326
<i>Sig.</i>	0,016

Q9. Will the ecotourists' demographic profile be relevant to differentiate the individuals that practice ecotourism from the other individuals? In this case a bivariate analysis was undertaken, in which various cross-tables were carried out, between the variables "practice of ecotourism" and "demographics" (*Table 5*). Regarding to the significance of the demographic characteristics in the differentiation of the two groups, a Pearson's test was performed, and allow us to say that statistical significance exists just in the case of the variable age. However the correlation coefficient presents low values for all variables.

These results seem to differ from the ones achieved by Wearing e Neil (2009) that refer that ecotourists usually exhibit higher incomes. However the results are according with the ones of the research performed by EMBRATUR (1994), in the Brazilian market, concluding that the ecotourist is characterised by a high cultural and educational level.

Table 5. Correlation Coefficient and Significance

	Sig.	Correlation Coef.	N
Gender	0,312	-0,105	89
Age	0,045	0,109	89
Monthly income	0,367	-0,155	89
Level of education	0,146	0,107	89

Conclusions

Analysing this research it was possible to conclude, through the case studies analysed, that the companies have environmental concerns and well established practices that are not only respected by them but also by the guests. These companies employ local residents, contributing this way to increase the economic development of the region where they operate. Another aspect that was possible to verify was the implementation of several projects towards the local community social development.

However, besides the environmental concerns demonstrated by the hotels, it was possible to state that only some of them have already environmental accreditation. Another conclusion was that the majority of the hotels usually do not perform market research in order to deepen the knowledge about their costumers, which can constitute a serious barrier to achieve a really sustainable action. As Dinan and Sargeant (2000) state, sustainable companies need to focus its actions on those costumers that are not only economically attractive but also likely to adopt sustainable behaviours.

In what regards communications and place decisions, it was possible to verify that these companies rely heavily on internet and word-of-mouth to promote their ecotourism products. This is according to the results of the research performed by the CMIGreen (2009): the best way to target ecotourists is precisely word-of-mouth; also, social networks such as facebook, twitter and blogues are of extreme importance for the ecotourism buying behaviour.

Regarding consumer market, ecotourism seems to be a familiar term for most respondents. However, this tourism is not promoted or communicated enough. The market of the environmental tourism practitioners has been gradually growing due the increase of the environmental concern in the last years. The environmental consciousness is present in these respondents and the relation between environmental consciousness and practice of a more sustainable tourism is significant.

This way is it is possible to estate that hotels should continue their good practices on environmental preservation as tourists value their practices when they choose where to stay. On another side, this kind of hotels should promote more the information about their practices and even educate tourist about ecotourism in internet, since the tourists lack some more information and mainly use internet to search for this information.

As future research, we can indicate the exploration of the knowledge about the ecotourists' attitudes and behaviours, as well as the research of the firms that are working in the lodging industry. To do this it is necessary to interview more hotels, and other agents of the sector. Concerning the demand side, we intend to inquiry the ecotourist during the period of travel, this is, realise an in loco fieldwork which allow us to understand the characteristics that can be relevant for the study of their attitudes and behaviours. The aim would also be to increase the size of the sample, since this time its dimension was considered a limitation.

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