

Pro-environmental Tourists and their Views and Understandings of 'Green' Tourism Products

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Abstract

Consumers are becoming more aware of environmental issues but we are not sure what they know about pro-environmental tourism products and what they look for and expect from tourism businesses. It is suspected that the pro-environmental tourist has high levels of environmental awareness and may demand more from businesses in the future. The increasing knowledge of consumers has implications for marketers. This study explored a number of tourists across Victoria with the aim of finding out more about their knowledge, expectations and behaviours with regard to pro-environmental tourism products. The findings highlight differences between the more environmentally active tourist and the less environmentally active tourist.

Keywords: behaviour change, consumption, environmental, sustainable

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Introduction

The power of the consumer and their influence is not a new phenomenon but increasing concern for the environment has given 'consumer power' even greater prominence. The idea of the green, or environmentally aware, consumer surfaced a few decades ago and over time has waned and resurfaced. When the concept first appeared it was defined as an individual who avoids products that are likely to endanger the health of the consumer or others; cause significant damage to the environment during manufacture, use or disposal; consume a disproportionate amount of energy; cause unnecessary waste; use materials derived from threatened species or environments; involve unnecessary use of – or cruelty to - animals; and adversely affect other countries (Elkington and Hailes 1989). However, in recent times the environmentally aware consumer has also become ethically aware and is now challenging businesses to be more ethical as well. This emphasises the growing movement of consumers who are affecting the way businesses operate with regard to social and environmental considerations, and corporate social responsibility (Smith 2007), and points to the fact that pro-environmental and ethical consumers have higher expectations of organisations and products. Consumers who are pro-environmental can lead change in organisations in a number of ways. They can punish irresponsible business behaviour via extreme measures such as boycotts or in their everyday purchasing behaviour (for example, switching to other brands or products) or support environmentally and socially responsible organisations via loyal purchasing and positive promotion (Smith 2007).

Whilst the research about pro-environmental and ethical consumers is increasing there has been less of a focus on pro-environmental tourists. Given the impacts that tourists have on the environment during travel there is a need to improve our understanding of them, as their potential to drive change in the tourism industry remains untapped. This study identified a group of pro-environmental tourists from a general tourism sample with the aim of understanding more about their knowledge, expectations and behaviours with regard to 'green' tourism products. The intention of this work is to help marketers develop better communication strategies to engage pro-environmental tourists.

Characteristics of Pro-environmental Consumers and Pro-environmental Tourists

There is evidence that the number of pro-environmental consumers is increasing (Co-operative Bank 2008). For instance, work undertaken by *GlobeScan Inc* (Becker 2004) estimates that 22% of consumers in G7 countries are green consumers with 10% of consumers willing to pay a premium for green electricity or other kinds of green products. On the other hand, Vogel in his 2005 study (in Smith 2007) found that up to 90% of the consumers surveyed considered corporate responsibility in their purchasing and consumption. These examples highlight the huge variation in reported growth which is likely due to different methodological approaches. Some researchers claim to measure behaviour while others measure attitudes and intentions. Despite these discrepancies it would be difficult to dispute the growth of consumer awareness with regard to the impact of consumption on society and the environment.

Spurred by the increased interest in ethical and pro-environmental consumerism is a growth in tourism related research. Tourism is of interest to those concerned about conservation as tourists are very visible with regard to the impact their activities have on society and the environment. Despite various efforts, previous tourism studies have failed to find consistent links between demographics of tourists and levels of environmental concern. As explained by Lee and Moscardo (2005), it is becoming more important, for marketing purposes if nothing else, to segment consumers according to psychographics, that is, beliefs, opinions and interests (Zografos and Allcroft 2007). This ties in with the finding by Dolnicar and Long (2007) that “socio-demographic information is not highly informative with regard to understanding environmentally responsible tourists” (Dolnicar and Long 2007, p.11). It has been suggested that it may be possible to identify a segment of the market labelled not as ecotourists, that is those who often travel to protected areas, and are consciously low in their environmental and social impact, but as ‘Environmentally Responsible’ tourists, identifiable by their travel information seeking, destination preferences, travel behaviour and willingness to pay (Dolnicar and Long 2007, p.11). Later, Dolnicar, Crouch and Long (2008) suggested that consumers of tourism products who are pro-environmental in their behaviour are likely to have an emotional affinity towards nature; demonstrate pro-environmental behaviour in everyday life (e.g. recycle water and waste); campaign on environmental issues; are mindful about the transportation used; are willing to forgo comfort; and have high levels of regional identity. As part of psychographic segmentation, measuring environmental behaviour at home may prove a more fruitful way of predicting and understanding environmental behaviour on holiday. It also seems that those resisting pro-environmental changes are less willing to forgo comfort for environmental reasons.

Another study of consumer behaviour in the sustainable tourism field was undertaken by Miller (2003) who examined the levels of use of ‘green’ products, and ‘green’ product information and also the levels of activism of consumers (whether they watched consumer affairs programmes or bought consumer magazines). Tourist respondents were placed on a Green Consumer Index depending on how much of a green consumer they were. The research aimed to uncover whether consumers who are highly involved in consumer activism and were highly informed about green products were more likely to make environmentally friendly purchase decisions. Results showed that those who scored highly on the green consumer index, and considered to be pro-environmental tourists, were more likely to look for environmental information on their chosen destination. This suggests that pro-environmental tourists may perceive environmentally responsible practices as more valuable than other tourists.

Consumer Choice and Responsible Marketing

How pro-environmental consumers in general make purchasing choices is complicated. Preferences, in many cases are on the spot and in the situation where the purchase is made (Niva and Timonen 2001). Generally, there is nothing consistent about purchases. According to Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) purchases can occur out of necessity; be derived from mandated lifestyles; can reflect childhood acquisitions; can result from conformity to group norms; or from recommendations from others. These inconsistencies are even more apparent when it comes to environmental issues relating to products and services. There is growing interest in the role of marketing for the promotion of sustainable products, and tourism products in particular, to consumers and for changing organisational practices. This growth is evident in the emergence of responsible or sustainable marketing. Sorgem International refer to four kinds of strategies used by businesses - (i) a minimalist approach; (ii) a niche strategy with one or more product lines; (iii) an advanced strategy (as used by *The Body Shop*), or (iv) an integrated strategy where the entire mode of production is changed (Becker, 2004). Sustainable marketing, therefore, is a comprehensive business approach which focuses on more than just advertising and communication. Whilst good practice in sustainable marketing considers the entire product life cycle, packaging, disposal, pricing policies, and distribution and marketing communications, however, most firms are likely to start at a lower level.

Information can play a role in changing behaviour in general and also pro-environmental behaviour specifically. Green labelling and certification has been espoused as a way to help consumers separate the less environmentally friendly firms from those with a more ethical focus (Cary, Bhaskaran and Polonsky, 2004). Many businesses have jumped on the 'sustainability band wagon' and in doing so have adopted a range of 'green' strategies to promote their products. The strategies range from the use of superficial 'green labelling' using green colour schemes and images to the implementation of environmental certification and the logos and marketing advantages these provide (Harris 2007). The array of environmental certifications that have emerged within the tourism industry in the last few decades is substantial (Bendell and Font 2004). Unfortunately green marketing does not ensure the products are produced in a sustainable manner (Harris, 2007). Moreover, it is suggested that not all consumers devote time to reading product labels. Some consumers make informed choices, and these are likely to be people who already know more about green certification and environmental issues – potentially pro-environmental consumers. Others, however, tend to be more reactive and are influenced by branding and packaging (Becker, 2004). Because of the proliferation of greenwashing and the myriad green claims made by firms, many consumers (including tourists) have become confused and sceptical.

Whilst marketers in the tourism industry are aware that they need to do more this is not possible without a good understanding of the pro-environmental tourist sector. Researchers have not yet fully explored the links between pro-environmental tourists and the marketing of pro-environmental tourism products, in particular do tourists understand and use environmental information, what does the certification and accreditation of tourism products mean to them and what are their expectations of environmentally responsible operators? This study aimed to answer these questions to better inform marketers and to help develop effective communication strategies to sell and encourage pro-environmental behaviours.

Method

This pilot study is based on the view that there is value in measuring the environmental behaviour of consumers at home as a more beneficial way of predicting and understanding environmental behaviour of tourists (Dolnicar, 2008; Miller 2003). The researchers carried out 166 intercept interviews with a sample of general tourists at Visitor Information Centres in five locations around Victoria in Australia (Melbourne, Lorne, Bendigo, Mildura and Mount Beauty). To identify differences in their environmental focus consumers were asked about their pro-environmental behaviour at home, and also about their levels of environmental activism (Miller 2003). The respondents were categorised into Active (and therefore more likely to be pro-environmental) and Less Active (less likely to be pro-environmental) consumers. Once the level of activism had been established, this was used to check for significant between-groups differences in motivations, behaviours and expectations. Various inferential statistical techniques including regression and *t*-tests aided the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Previous studies found that the study of the psychographic characteristics of tourists is important in identifying pro-environmental segments. This study identified significant differences between those in the Active group and the Less Active group according to their motivations, knowledge and behaviours. Questions about their motivations for taking a holiday elicited significant differences between the Active and Less Active group, particularly in the scores for the variables 'a different or new experience' and 'something beneficial for my health'. The Active group rated both variables significantly higher than the Less Active group. Although these findings are different to previous research of the psychographic characteristic of pro-environmental tourists (Dolnicar et al, 2008) they add value in terms of building a more comprehensive profile. The interest in health fits with past work highlighting the values of the environmentally focused consumer, those concerned for human welfare as opposed to meeting hedonic needs, and the role they have in determining more sustainable behaviours (Steg, Dreijerink and Abrahamse, 2005; Thøgersen and Olander, 2002).

Those in the Active category were significantly more likely to look for environmental information about their holiday. However, nearly one third of all tourists (29.3%) sought environmental information about tourism products before booking, 25.8% sought this information prior to departure and 44.9% sought the information after arrival at their holiday destination. This suggests that having environmental information available at the destination is advisable, as 45% of those who look for environmental information only do so once they have arrived at their destination. Interestingly, the more pro-environmental tourist uses different information sources when planning a trip and use the Internet and Visitor Information Centres, suggesting they are searching for information both before and during their trip. However, all of the tourists are still making many 'on the spot' decisions, which is also evident in the work of Niva and Timonen (2001). There is little evidence in previous work relating to if and how tourists seek information on the environmental focus of different tourism products. This finding provides strong evidence for the importance of providing environmental information to visitors via a range of sources and at various decision stages.

In general, recognition of the logos and symbols was low, and understanding of these logos and symbols, and therefore what the awards and accreditations stand for, was equally low, and in some cases non-existent. When it comes to looking for award and/or accreditation logos it seems that very few respondents consider this to be a part of their tourism product

choice. This supports the conclusions of other studies such as that of Fairweather, Maslin and Simmons (2005), and provides further evidence of this trend. However, when asked how they know that a tourism operator is *environmentally friendly* the two groups responded differently. The Less Active group did not consider awards to be a major source of information regarding environmentally friendly practices (only 8%), whereas the Active group stressed the importance of accreditation/ certification and logos (20%). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that knowledge of accreditation and certification schemes is higher amongst those in the Active group. Although Harris (2007) highlights that 'green' marketing does not ensure that products are produced in a sustainable manner this study suggests that the pro-environmental tourist still has faith in pro-environmental marketing programs, but may not be using these to make purchases.

The tourists were also asked what they thought tourism operators should be doing to be more environmentally friendly. A number of respondents (approximately 20%) from both groups suggested that tourism operators should be recycling. However, the Less Active consumers were more likely to favour general statements such as 'be more eco-friendly', 'save water' and 'reduce pollution' while the Active consumers, who might be considered as those with a greater knowledge of environmental measures, were more specific in their suggestions - 'use grey water', 'not launder towels every day' and 'offset their carbon emissions'. Seemingly, the Active group have a better understanding of what being pro-environmental means and how this can be translated into action in tourism related businesses. Statistical tests also identified differences between the Active and Less Active categories with regard to what tourism operators should be doing. The Active group consistently rated the variables - 'more effective in saving resources', 'more likely to protect the environment' and 'encourage other businesses to be environmentally aware' - more highly than the Less Active group.

Conclusion

In summary, this study found significant differences between those in the Active group and the Less Active group in a number of areas important to marketers, including their travel motivations, search for and use of information, their knowledge of different pro-environmental practices, and their perceptions of the importance of green labelling /certification. With these findings a number of recommendations emerge to support communication strategy development. To begin with, the finding which highlights the value of the Internet (for pre trip) and the VIC (during the trip) as information sources has implications for the type of distribution channel for the promotion of sustainable products. Next, an interesting, but not an unexpected finding was that the pro-environmental tourist (those with stronger environmental values) seems to be more knowledgeable about the sorts of pro-environmental practices employed by the sustainably focused business operators. These tourists believe they can recognise pro-environmental behaviour which indicates a need for caution on behalf of marketers in the way they sell the sustainable practices of tourism businesses. Additionally, the knowledge that pro-environmental tourists have of accreditation and certification schemes and the value they place in these brands reinforces the need for industry to continue to support the development and take up of such programs. Of course, effort is also needed to maintain rigour in the accreditation and certification of tourism product for pro-environmental purposes. On the whole, a key issue is whether operators are working to meet the needs and expectations of the pro-environmental segment, which may be moving ahead of product suppliers. The pursuit by industry to find ways to assist operators to be more proactive in interacting and engaging tourists in their pro-environmental activities is likely to be a long term but important goal.

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