

Exploring Characteristics, Travel Motivation and Experiences of Tourists in Private Ecotourism Sites: A Case Study in Zhejiang, China

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Abstract: Ecotourism has been promoted in China, but little research is available to understand the characteristics, motivation and experiences of tourist who visit privately-leased ecotourism sites. To address such research deficits, we collected survey data from 677 tourists in Taihuyuan Ecotourism Park (THY) in Zhejiang Province, China. The study objectives are to identify characteristics, travel patterns and motivations of tourists, and explore their perceptions of price and service quality. It was found that tourists to THY were mostly similar to previous ecotourist description, except that there were more senior women than men travelers. A number of important internal (push factors) and external reasons (pull factors) for their trip were identified. In addition, most respondents considered the entrance fee (60 RMB) to be reasonable (69%). The importance-performance analysis (IPA) resulted in a number of different attributes in four quadrants respectively. It was concluded that promoting types of services to senior travelers will become increasingly important and potentially lucrative for private ecotourism operators. Private enterprises have customized the 'green' travel experience for urban populations as an economic, short-duration holiday experience, and succeeded in providing easy access, clear signage, rural food experiences, and opportunities to enhance visitors' exposure to the natural environment. Strategies of enhancing the effectiveness of private ecotourism marketing and management are further discussed.

Key words: private ecotourism, motivation, service quality, tourist experience, China

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Introduction

Forms of nature-based tourism, such as ecotourism, have been promoted in China as a means towards environmental conservation, high quality tourism experiences, and rural economic development (Nenon & Durst, 1993; Lindberg, Tisdell, & Xue, 2003; Gao, Huang, & Huang, 2009). Most often, ecotourism in China takes place in public protected areas such as national parks or national forests, where government agencies provide tourism and recreation services at prices much lower than private landholders (Huang, 2007). However, many Chinese public land managing agencies are under-funded, under-staffed, and lack integral tourism policies (Li, 2004). The growing demand for ecotourism has placed an increasing strain on the public

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agencies' ability to manage both visitors and natural resources. On the other hand, this trend is providing a financial incentive for private business to operate in protected areas and contribute to their establishment and management. Therefore, there are many potential opportunities for pursuing mutual benefits from partnerships between public and private tourist operators.

Since the 1990s, innovative public-private partnerships began to emerge in China. These partnerships include small-scale guided tours, where private tour operators gain a commercial opportunity and the park management agency obtains greater control over some of its visitors. Other examples include long-term leases on public land areas where private companies develop and/or operate tourism facilities and contribute revenue to assist in managing the remainder of the protected area estate. The private lease approach with customized arrangements is currently becoming the most common and significant option among these types of partnerships (Su, Wall, & Eagles, 2007).

Despite the importance and development scale of private ecotourism destinations, we have a very limited understanding of such phenomenon (Hall, 1999). Even less research has been carried out to investigate tourist experiences and perceptions toward private ecotourism destinations. In order to add to this body of literature on ecotourism destinations, this study examined one privately-owned ecotourism site in China and the tourists who visit there. A number of research issues will be addressed including the characteristics, behavioral patterns, travel motivation of tourists, as well as their perceptions of price and service quality of the ecotourism site.

Literature Review

Public-private Partnership

From a global perspective, the public and private sectors have had limited collaboration on tourism development until recently (De Lacy et al., 2002). Although some concerns still exist on involving private investment on public land, such as losing equitable public access, unwise development, and social responsibility, there is an increasing awareness of the mutual benefits of partnerships (Mistilis & Daniele, 2004; Billington, 2005). For example, Bramwell and Lane (2000) suggested that partnerships are able to pool resources together from various stakeholders. Buckley (2002, p. 32) argued that private tourism on public land is "likely to be most efficient, in that it combines the business skills of commercial tourism operators with the land management skills of protected area agencies." In China, Su, et al. (2007) provided an initial analysis of the functioning of three emerging types of public-private governance models of protected area tourism: the leasing model, the non-listed share-holding model, and the public listed share-holding model. They concluded that all models are theoretically viable. In examining the literature, various operation models have been identified for rural tourism development in China over the last two decades (Gao, et al., 2009). Thus, three management systems involving public-private partnership have been established: corporation plus farmer, corporation plus community plus farmer, and government plus corporation plus farmer. It has been clear that the private sector is playing an increasingly important role in promoting and delivering ecotourism services, local economic development and environmental conservation.

Ecotourism in China

Ecotourism has been defined from various perspectives including the traits of the 'ecotourist', the range of destination settings, the type of activities, the impact to the local community,

the differences with mass tourism, and so on (Boyd & Butler, 1996; Meric & Hunt, 1998). Most definitions share three common components: nature based, learning oriented, and conservation focused, despite the fact that the emphasis of each component may vary across context. Blamey (1997) suggested that an operational definition that adapts to the research purpose is more important than a standardized definition. In China, ecotourism is viewed as a model for sustainable rural development (Zhuang, Lassoie, & Wolf, 2011). Since 1995, the development of ecotourism has increased more rapidly than other types of tourism (Li, 2004). According to the definition of ecotourism published by the China National Committee for Terms in Sciences and Technologies (CNCTST), ecotourism development in China aims to absorb natural and cultural knowledge, reduce negative impacts on an eco-system, and ensure the sustainable use of tourism resources. Thus, for this study ecotourism was defined as a specific kind of tourism activity that effectively combines environmental protection, public education and socio-economic growth.

Characteristics of Chinese Ecotourists

The majority of ecotourism-related research in China has focused on macro factors including environmental protection, local communities, economic impact, and planning principles. Only a few studies have explored marketing issues and characteristics of individual ecotourists. According to Zhang and Zhao (2005), Chinese ecotourists tend to be middle aged, have higher levels of education and income, which are similar to the western ecotourism market segment. In general, key motivations to visit ecotourism destinations include: environmental education, proximity to nature, solitude, relaxation, sociability, physical challenge, search for self, and contributes to conservation (Eagles, 1992; Wight, 1996; Palacio, 1997).

The literature has also shown that ecotourism motivations can vary by different destination settings and type of visitors. Some studies found that Chinese ecotourists are motivated to pursue physical health through ecotourism experiences, which is less prevalent than in the western hemisphere (Kerstetter, Hou, & Lin, 2004). From a behavioral approach, Chinese ecotourists have been considered as 'soft ecotourists'. This means that they engage in less physically demanding activities such as walking and sightseeing, prefer greater comfort and services, have more demand for urban-based accommodations such as hotels or motels, rely on more formal interpretation to learn about nature, and are less involved in conservation (Krider, et al. 2010). Chinese ecotourists' average length of stay is 3-7 days. They are more likely to travel in organized package tours and collect travel information through traditional media such as newspapers and television (Huang, Chen, & Zhang, 2003). In addition, Weaver (2002) reported that Asian ecotourists are distinctive in that they are attracted to vegetation and geology more than wildlife. In spite of the above findings, ecotourists are not homogeneous, and subtypes require distinct marketing and management approaches.

Tourist Perceptions of Price

Previous literature on tourist's perception of price for ecotourism have mainly focused on respondents' willingness to pay for a hypothetical situation or tourists' attitudes toward existing fees and its determinants (Chase, Lee, Schulze, & Anderson, 1998; Williams, Vogt, & Vittero, 1999; Arin & Kramer, 2002). Differences linked to perception of price have been identified in visitors' social-demographic characteristics such as income and place of residence; psychological factors such as environmental attitude, travel motivation, tourist satisfaction,

and perceptions of fairness; previous travel experience such as frequency of visit and place familiarity; as well as resource variables such as land affiliation and wildlife species (Laarman & Gregersen, 1996; Williams, et al., 1999; Johnston, Ranson, Besedin, & Helm, 2006; Deng & Bender, 2007).

Entrance fees to tourism destinations in China are generally determined by a number of factors including scenic class (1A and 2A classes for local recreation market, 3A class for regional tourist market, 4A class and world heritage sites for long distance domestic and international tourist market), management system (state-led, local government-led, state-owned enterprise-led, private enterprise-led), as well as product type (nature-based tourism, culture and heritage tourism, man-made attractions, and resorts) (Huang, 2007). In recent years, entrance fees are increasing dramatically for 4A scenic areas and world heritage sites, most of which are on public lands. It has been reported that entrance fees have become the highest proportion of domestic travelers' total spending (China Tourism Academy, 2012). On the other hand, the fees for visiting private-led tourism sites have declined due to intense market competition (Huang, 2007). These trends have caused wide public concern and hot discussion on price fairness for tourism destinations (Zhang & Shi, 2012). Thus, there is a need for more research on this issue to gather more information about tourist perceptions of price (Yang & Zhang, 2007).

Tourist Perceptions of Services and Facilities

As tourism services are intangible, tourist perceptions become powerful in differentiating a tourism product from its competitors and influencing consumer choices (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002). There is recognition that tourists are attracted to tourism destinations by a combination of factors such as location, price, security, attractions, events, and services. Service quality has been recognized as one of the major determinants of tourist experiences (Crompton & Mackay, 1989; Hudson & Shephard, 1998; Palmer & O'Neill, 2003; Kyle, Absher & Chancellor, 2005). Service quality is the gap between tourists' expectations and their perceived performance of the service (Ryan, 1997). A widely used method of assessing service quality is importance-performance analysis (IPA). As implied by its name, this method involves a two-dimensional grid with the vertical axis indicating the importance of the service attribute to the consumer and the horizontal axis indicating the consumers' perceptions of the service providers' performance on a given attribute. As reported by Pike (2002) in tourism research, most destinations of interest are at country and city levels. There is limited understanding of perception towards products and services for specific tourism types. Further, most studied regions are in North America and much less are known about visitors' perceived images about Asian destinations.

Without adequate understanding of tourists' characteristics, motivation, and travel experiences, marketing and management at private ecotourism sites can hardly be improved. However, little empirical evidence is available in this aspect. Therefore, the current study aims to address such research gaps, specifically, the research objectives are: (1) identify the salient socio-demographic traits and travel patterns of tourists to private ecotourism sites; (2) assess tourists' internal and external travel motivations; (3) investigate tourist perceptions of price and its determinants; and (4) explore tourist perceptions of services and facilities on-site.

Method

Study Site

Taihuyuan ecotourism park (THY) was selected for this study. This park is named after the vast resource of Tai Lake, which adjoins Jiangsu province, Zhejiang province and Shanghai (Figure 1). The park is located in the forest region of the province where tourism development has been promoted for poverty alleviation and provision of alternative livelihoods for people living in and around forested areas. The main topographic feature in the park is canyon terrain with steep valleys, hanging waterfalls, trickling brooks, and natural sceneries. The park area is about 2000 acres with a 98% forest cover. A wide variety of activities are offered such as hiking, sightseeing, mountain climbing, boating, cableway, picnicking, Buddha worshipping, tea tasting, lodging, dining, and shopping.

Hangzhou Taihuyuan Ecology Tour Co Ltd, the exclusive investor of THY with registered capital of 1 million, is among the first private enterprises that participated in a public-private partnership for tourism management in 1998. The company first signed a group agreement with the THY village committee to develop tourism on the forest resource for 50 years. Subsequently, the village committee signed individual agreements with the local farmers on tourism development. The agreement indicates that the company pays a resource fee to the village government at 50,000 RMB/year, increasing by 10% each per year. The company has

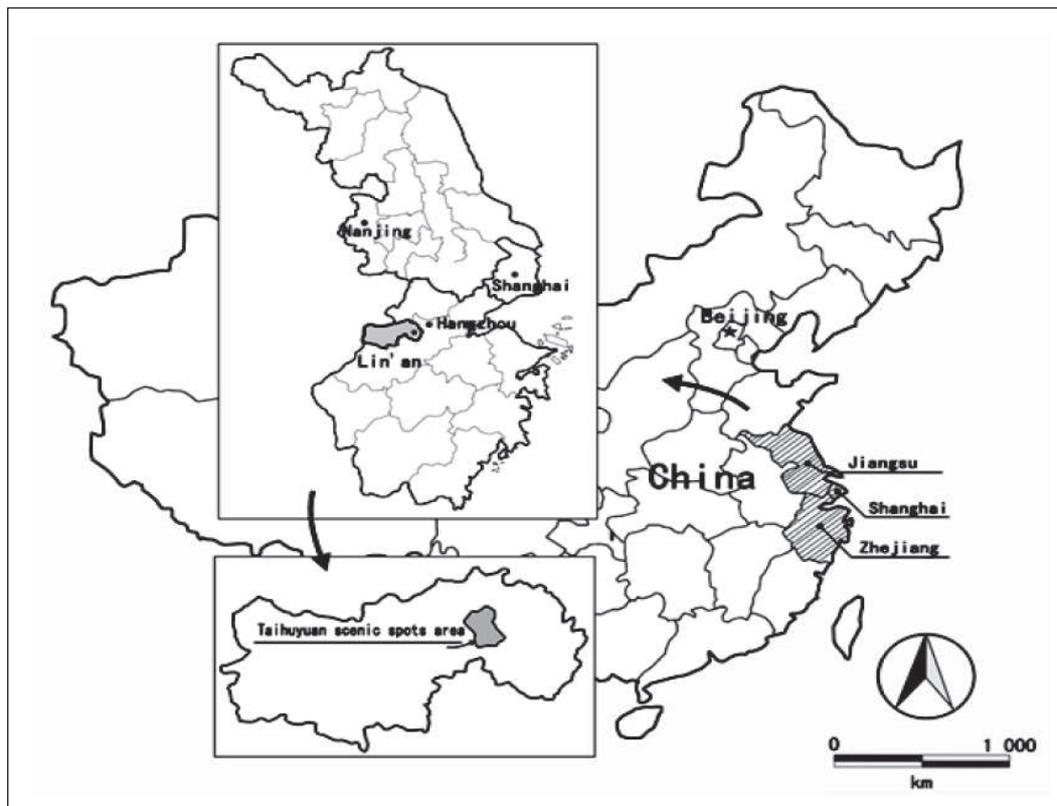


Figure 1. Map of the Taihuyuan ecotourism park.

70 employees with half of them hired from the local community. Environmental monitoring is conducted 1-2 times per year by a joint team from Zhejiang University and Zhejiang Forestry University. In 2009 over one million tourists visited the park, which generated 5.82 million for the company (personal communication with the CEO of Taihuyuan Ecology Tour Co Ltd, May 12, 2010).

Data Collection

A visitor survey was conducted from June to December 2009. Data were collected on both weekdays and weekends. Tourists were randomly approached at the gate, the restaurants, and the shuttle bus station. The mode of questionnaire administration was mixed, namely in-person, self-administered, or a combination, depending on the situation and the respondent's interest in clarifying questions.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section elicited tourists' behavioral choices including length of stay, whether or not such a stay was part of a wider tour, had the respondent taken an organized tour, travel information source, and activity participated. The second section explored respondents' internal motivations based on previous literature (Manfredo, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996; Kerstetter, et al., 2004; Mehmetoglu, 2007; Nowaczek & Smale, 2010). External motivations were focused on destination attributes developed from a personal interview with the manager and the promotional materials of the THY. These might also be designated 'push factors' and 'pull factors'. In the third part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to evaluate the price and services provided by THY. The service items were based on the literature and incorporated the importance-performance analysis (IPA). An option for non-response was provided so that those who had not used the facility did not need to check the five-point scale. The final section sought socio-demographic data, e.g., gender, age, income.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

A total of 1000 questionnaires were distributed to tourists, and 748 were collected, yielding a response rate of 74.8%. Of the returned questionnaires, 699 were usable. The demographic characteristics of respondents are presented in Table 1. There were 423 females (60.5%) and 276 males (39.5%). The main age group was 65 and up, representing 28.2%. The next two groups were 55-64 (26.6%) and 35-44 (23.1%). Nearly half of the respondents had some college education, accounting for 47.8% of the total respondents. Respondents' median monthly family income was 4000-6000 RMB.

Travel Patterns

Regarding the number of visits to THY, the majority (89%) were first time travelers. Over a third of the respondents traveled with organized tour members (36%), while 29% and 19.6% respectively, traveled with family and friends or colleagues. On average, it took the respondents 3.5 hours to get to the destination, and they spent 1.2 days in the park. Over half (66.1%) reported this trip as a part of a wider tour. Their main activities included sightseeing (86.0%), tasting rural cuisine (82.7%), hiking (81.3%), and water-based recreation (45.9%). Their main

Table 1. Demographic profile of survey respondents.

Demographic characteristics	Percentage
Age	
under 18	.5
18-24	3.3
25-34	13.2
35-44	23.1
45-54	5.1
55-64	26.6
65 up	28.2
Gender (%)	
Male	39.5
Female	60.5
Education (%)	
Junior high school	2.2
Senior high school	42.8
Technical school	7.2
Junior college	10.7
College	36.3
Graduate	.8
Monthly income (median)	4000-6000 (RMB)

Table 2. Travel patterns of survey respondents

Travel patterns	Overall	Organized tourists (N=353)	Independent tourists (N=280)
First time traveler (%)	89	91.1	85.7*
Length of stay (day)	1.2	2.0	0.5*
Part of a wider tour (%Yes)	61	51.5	76.7*
Main activity (%Yes)			
Sightseeing	87.1	88.2	86.3
Tasting rural cuisine	82.7	83.5	82.0
Hiking	81.3	81.8	81.1
Water-based recreation	45.9	45.0	47.7
Main information source			
Newspaper	57.1	65.2	52.1*
Travel agency	22.2	32.7	11.5*
TV	17.2	19.0	14.3
Internet	12.8	6.3	17.6*
Word-of-mouth	16.0	9.5	22.6*
Total spending (RMB)	460.1	264.0	630.9*

*Significant differences in the mean scores using independent t-tests and chi-squares between organized group tourists and independent tourists ($p < .05$).

information source was traditional public media such as newspaper (57.1%), travel agency (22.2%), and TV (17.0%), compared to the internet (12.8%) or word of mouth (16.0%).

Several significant differences were also found in comparing travel patterns for organized tourists and independent tourists (Table 2). For example, independent tourists were more

likely to be repeat visitors. Organized tourists tend to use traditional media as their information source, stay on-site for longer periods of time, and spend less money for their trip. In addition, independent tourists were more likely to visit other destinations for their trip.

Motives for Travel

The respondents were asked to select motives that are important for their trip to THY. The results are shown by percentages in Table 3. They perceived 'to relax' (82.4%), 'to be close to nature' (62.8%) and 'to be with family and friends' as the most important internal reasons (push factors) for their trip. The fourth and fifth most important internal motivations were 'learn about nature' (22.8%) and 'physical exercise' (18.1%). It was found that 'escape urban life', 'solitude', and 'excitement and risk seeking' were rated as the least important internal motivations. When examining the external motives (pull factors), the respondents considered 'beautiful scenery' (88.1%), 'excellent reputation' (74.1%), and 'affordable cost' (52.3%) as the most salient attributes. The fourth and fifth most important attributes were associated with 'convenient transportation' (26.8%) and 'safe destination' (26%). The lowest ratings were given to 'good service' (12.6%), and 'variety of activity choice' (9.1%).

Tourist Perceptions of Price

Overall, the majority of the respondents felt that the entrance fee to THY (60 RMB) was reasonable (69%). To examine determinants of visitors' attitudes toward fees, three nested logistic regression models were tested. Before conducting logistic regression analysis, a correlation analysis was conducted to examine the possible multicollinearity between independent variables. No VIF value larger than 3.0 was found. The fit of nested logistic regressions was contrasted using the log likelihood ratio test (Bohrnstedt & Knoke, 1994).

Table 3. Travel motivations of survey respondents

Motivation	Percent of respondents who said yes
Internal motivation (push factor)	
Relaxation	82.4%
Close to nature	62.8%
Be with family and friends	46.6%
Learn about nature	22.8%
Physical exercise	18.1%
Escape urban life	12.5%
Solitude	5.6%
Excitement and risk seeking	5.3%
External motivation (pull factor)	
Beautiful scenery	88.1%
Famous site	74.1%
Affordable cost	52.3%
Convenient transportation	26.8%
Safe destination	26%
Good service	12.6%
Variety of activity choice	9.1%

Model 1 included only control variables to test the effect of demographic variables on their attitudes toward fees. As compared to Model 1, Model 2 added two variables regarding travel patterns: first time/repeat visit and independent/organized visit. Adding these variables significantly improved this model over Model 1 ($G^2 = -134.02$, $df = 2$). Model 3 added variables representing psychological factors (motivation and overall satisfaction), which again significantly improved the model fit over Model 2 ($G^2 = -121.44$, $df = 6$). As Model 3 had the highest overall fit, we focused on Model 3 to discuss the findings (See Table 4).

In terms of demographic variables, the results showed that income is the only negative significant predictor of their attitudes toward fees, meaning that a tourist with lower income was more likely to feel that the entrance fee is too high. For variables associated with travel modes, tourists traveling independently were more likely to hold the perception that fees are too high, compared to organized group visitors. In examining psychological factors, overall satisfaction had a negative and significant coefficient in Model 3, suggesting that the more satisfied a tourist is, the less likely he/she will believe that fees are too high. 'Close to nature', one of the internal motives, was positively and significantly linked with their feeling about fees. This finding indicated that visitors with a focus on natural resources are more likely to consider fees as too high. Scenic beauty of the destination, an external motive, was also found to have a positive influence on fees.

Tourist Perceptions of Services and Facilities

The IPA was applied to evaluate services and facilities provided onsite. The results were plotted in the IPA grid. The grand means for importance (3.8) and performance (3.7) were used for the placement of the axes on the grid. As shown in Figure 2, five attributes were identified in the Concentrate Here quadrant, ten in the Keep Up the Good Work quadrant, ten in the Low Priority quadrant and 0 in the Possible Overkill quadrant.

Table 4. Logistic regression results of tourists' perception of fees.

Independent variables	Model1		Model2		Model3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender	.74**	.22	.65*	.27	-.008	.33
Age	-.056	.07	-.02	.09	.13	.11
Income	-.36**	.12	-.11	.11	-.32*	.14
First visit/repeat visit			-.22	.40	-.34	.48
Independent/organized visit			2.85**	.39	2.20**	.57
Overall satisfaction					-2.09**	.34
Internal Motivation: Experience nature					1.32**	.31
External Motivation: Scenic beauty					-1.55**	.37
Log likelihood		519.47		385.45		264.01
R ²		.07		.25		.54

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Note: Only statistically significant motivation predictors were displayed.

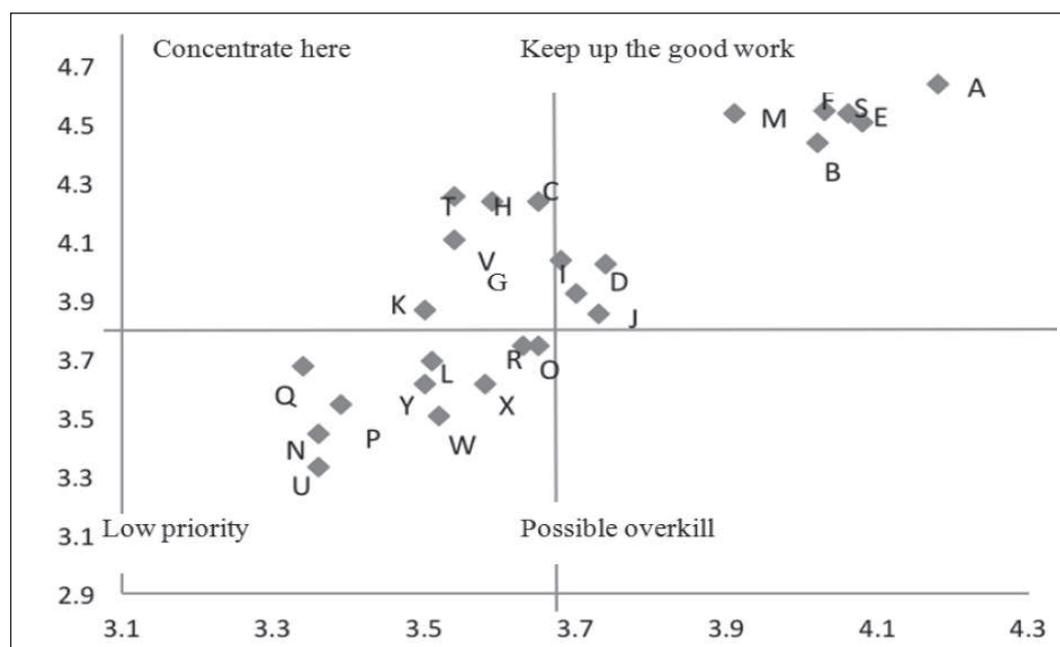


Figure 2. Importance and performance analysis of services and facilities

Note: A. Road access; B. Road signage; C. Parking lot D. Site maps; E. Brochures; F. Site signage; G. Benches; H. Toilets; I. Garbage bins; J. Trail system; K. Picnic tables L. Campsite; M. Children's playground; N. Rock climbing; O. Cable car; P. Hotels Q. Outdoor equipment rental; R. Souvenir shops; S. Restaurants; T. Travel information in nearby areas; U. First aid; V. Environmental interpretation; W. Manager's assistance; X. Marketing service; Y. Website service.

Keep up the Good Work. This quadrant includes those services that are both important to the visitor and are being delivered to a high level of performance. Among 25 services and facility attributes, ten were identified in this quadrant. These were road access, road signage, brochures, site signage, site maps, benches, children's playground, outdoor equipment rental, trail system, and garbage bins. The results showed that all the mean score ratings of performance were still lower than those of the importance ratings, indicating that continued effort could be made to maintain and improve these services.

Concentrate Here. This quadrant contains features which the tourists still view as important; however, the services and facilities received lower ratings with respect to their performance. This quadrant captured five features; parking, toilets, travel information in nearby area, picnic tables, and environmental interpretation. There were relatively large gaps between performance and importance for the five features (>0.50). This result suggests that improvement efforts and special attention are needed in these areas.

Low Priority. In the 'Low Priority' quadrant were items which have received low marks on both the importance and performance scales. The 10 items loaded in this quadrant were campsite, outdoor equipment rental, cable car, souvenir shops, restaurants, hotels, rock climbing facilities, website service, manager's assistance, marketing services, and first aid. Since members did not view these items as being particularly important to them, relatively fewer resources from the company should be expended in this effort.

Possible Overkill. No items ended up in the 'Possible Overkill' quadrant which shows that resources are not being wasted.

Discussion

This study sought to develop a deeper understanding of tourists to private ecotourism destinations in Zhejiang, China. The results showed that private ecotourism developments have made a series of positive achievements in a relatively short development history. First of all, the results indicate that the private ecotourism products are serving an important tourism market niche. The socio-demographic profile of respondents showed that tourists to private ecotourism sites were similar to previous ecotourist description in terms of education, and income, with the exceptions of age and gender. There were more senior (above 55) women than men travelers in these data. According to the aging demographic trends in China, there will be 14 million more elderly women than men by 2020 (Dai, 2009). Elderly women in contemporary Chinese society have increased choices, resources, and opportunities to access a greater array of tourism and leisure attractions. With reference to this finding, it might be noted that there have been more than a hundred leisure farms developed in local forest communities. Leisure farms in China are developed for the purpose of creating and promoting agricultural tourism and sustainability. With 5000 beds in total, these farms not only serve as popular summer holiday spots for seniors from major urban areas (for example, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang), but also provide an effective complement to the reception capacity for nearby ecotourism sites (Yao, Gao, Zhan, & Zhang, 2011). Promoting these types of services to senior travelers will become an increasingly important and potentially lucrative market segment for private ecotourism operators.

Secondly, it is evident with the results of tourists' external motivations (pull factors) that by using their business skills, private enterprises have customized the 'green' travel experience for urban populations as an economic, short-duration holiday experience. Private ecotourism destinations are often enroute to well-known public ecotourism attractions e.g., national preserves, national parks, national forests, and therefore are convenient for coach tours and private cars. Private ecotourism destinations generally have abundant natural resources (e.g., water, mountains, forests), although these natural features or attractions maybe less spectacular than what is found in public attractions. These private entities provide more facilities and recreation activities than public destinations and costs for entrance fees and accommodations tend to be less expensive. After the adjustment of Chinese golden week holidays, the frequency of public holidays increased while the duration of holidays was shortened from 7 to 3 days. With many private ecotourism destinations located within a 3.5 hour drive from major metropolitan areas in East China (total population of 41.6 billion), private ecotourism sites are competitive tourism products for short distance travel.

Thirdly, privately ecotourism development has contributed to the integration of tourism resources and products from nearby areas. We found in this study that a visit to an ecotourism attraction is seldom just a visit to the scenic area, but to the adjacent region as well. The surroundings of the scenic area and other tourism services have a positive impact on the visitors' experience (Machlis & Field, 2000). This finding is consistent with the ecotourism development process in the region. In 2008, The 'Ning-Hang ecotourism zone' urban alliance was established to connect five largest cities in the East China region with the expressway system to form an ecotourism corridor. This ecotourism corridor has emerged as real hot spot in the domestic tourism market in China. In this corridor, there are thirteen 4A class tourist areas, fourteen 3A tourist areas, five national forest parks and a national geological park, in addition to a large number of private ecotourism parks. This approach suggests that

by clustering with other tourism destinations and institutions through geographical proximity and independence, privately ecotourism sites can contribute positively to the competitive advancement of ecotourism in regional development and economic growth.

Further, the results of the IPA convey the message that in general, private ecotourism sites have been very successful in providing easy access, clear signage, rural food experiences, and opportunities to enhance visitors' exposure to the natural environment. Therefore, this type of information should be utilized in future promotional efforts for privately leased ecotourism destinations.

Implications

The findings of the current study also revealed some issues related to ecotourism management, which make the study findings relevant for both researchers and managers. As reported in this study, tourists' most valued internal motivations (push factor)--relaxation, close to nature, being with family and friends--are similar to mainstream travel motivations. Ecotourism core motivators such as environmental education and solitude were rated low. This finding supports Sharpley's (2006, p. 19) view that "ecotourism is more appropriately considered as a supply-led market niche and that there is little to distinguish ecotourists from mass or mainstream tourists". Over the last ten years, the THY park has established itself as a successful model for ecotourism development in terms of community engagement and environmental conservation in China. However, there seems to be a gap in appealing to tourists' understanding of ecotourism. Many consumers of those experiences may not be aware of the key components of the industry definition in any explicit sense. This means that marketers should make sure that the key motivators of ecotourism are appropriately addressed and effective for potential tourists (Perkins & Grace, 2009).

It is believed that examining push and pull motives permit an effective explanation of travel motivations and may assist in accurately tailoring services and amenities to better suit the needs of tourists (Iso-Ahola, 1982). Therefore, it is important for private ecotourism business operators to identify and achieve an optimal combination of push and pull factors to better serve the tourists. While not conclusive, the finding from this study suggests that the natural scenery, brand reputation, and low-cost price strategy combined with tourists' desire for relaxation, socializing with family and friends, and being close to nature are critical for designing tourism packages. Unsurprisingly, advertisements or press releases with vivid images and text illustrating beautiful natural landscapes, families, relaxation, discount prices, and word-of-mouth promotion from previous visitors would be effective in reaching various target markets. Furthermore, these data indicate that nearly half of the tourists are 55 years or older, which indicates a potentially seasoned traveler which may be the main market for this type of destination. In addition, the second largest age group is at 25-44 years of age which mostly represent generation X. This generation is believed to be high technology-oriented and frequently use the internet, but the results shows only around 12% of the respondents learned about the website from the internet. Hence, online promotion may be one area that needs more attention from these private enterprises.

From the service management perspective, tourists pointed out more of a need for improvement of several existing facilities (e.g., parking spaces, toilets, and picnic tables) and communication services (e.g., travel information of the surrounding areas and environmental interpretation). Although transportation conditions are good, the parking areas do not meet

the needs for independent tourists. The respondents in this study reported low importance and performance with a number of services such as outdoor recreation facility rental, hotels, and souvenir shops. Since the duration of tourist visits is relatively short (average 1.2 days), the tourists may not be able to engage in a variety of recreation activities. Therefore, they may prefer less infrastructure development and service provided for outdoor recreation. The tourist commodities sold from souvenir shops tend to be monotonous, such as bamboo shoots, sweet potatoes, eggs and other agriculture products. A lack of memorable products, souvenir brands and inflated prices in the souvenir shop may affect tourists' attitudes towards the souvenir shops on-site. This result may prompt managers to learn more about what products to sell and how best to price these items competitively for ecotourists.

Our findings did not support the statement that 'soft ecotourists' have more demand for urban-based accommodations, such as hotels (Krider, et al., 2010). There are at least two explanations. Firstly, tourism facilities have key effects on tourists' aesthetic and sensory experience. Especially for ecotourism destinations, if the accommodation facilities aren't managed to be environmental friendly or aren't developed in harmony with the natural and culture resources, tourists' experiences may be diminished. On the other hand, competition for overnight tourists with other ecotourism sites and leisure farms in local communities may lower the demands for accommodations inside the scenic area.

This study showed that majority of visitors considered the entrance fees as reasonable. Consistent with past studies, the negative effect of income on their attitude towards fees was supported by these data (Jim and Chen, 2006). Visitors traveled independently, compared with those travelling in organized groups, were found more likely to perceive the fees as too high. This result may be due to the fact that group discounts are offered at THY. Visitors motivated for nature experiences and scenic beauty are more likely to believe the fees are too high. Because of the lack of literature on this subject, it is not clear about the underlying cause of the association. However, some research has indicated that 'hard' eco-tourists or wilderness recreationists prefer less infrastructure development and services provided within tourism destinations. Since these tourists are less likely to use many of the facilities on-site, they may develop a negative perception about the fees charged (Vaske, Kiriakos, Cottrell, & Khuong, 2009). Last but not least, the results showed that overall satisfaction is an important predictor on attitudes toward fees, which is supported in the previous literature.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand Chinese tourists' attitudes toward private ecotourism destinations. The study adds to a fairly limited body of research on innovative public-private partnerships. The study opens the door for more investigation into senior women travelers as potential ecotourism market segment in China. Given the evidence that organized tourists and independent tourists may be distinct in their travel patterns, more systematic comparisons on their respective psychological profiles, including core values, beliefs, and relationship with nature, would add to our understanding of Chinese ecotourists. It appears that the emphasis of services and facility enhancement lies with environmental protection, on-site interpretation, and parking areas for private cars. As tourists to private ecotourism sites are also interested in traveling the surrounding areas, it is therefore important to recognize the tourists' need for services such as accommodations, food and transportation. Despite these significant findings, this study has several limitations. The results of the study

are limited to one park; if other sites had been included in the study, the magnitude and direction of the relationships may have been different. Future studies should investigate ecotourism sites in different geographic areas that have other natural features or visitation levels. In addition, future research approaches could use alternative data collection methods such as personal interviews or focus groups to obtain more in-depth data about the ecotourist experience.

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