

MOTIVATIONS AS A PREDICTOR OF SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY IN ECOTOURISM

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Abstract

Purpose – Ecotourism is a growing sector, which is increasingly important because it promotes two things, the environment and activities in contact with nature. This study analyzes the motivations for ecotourism and their influence on satisfaction and intentions to return and recommend a protected area.

Design – The empirical analysis was carried out in The Fauna Production Reserve “Puntilla de Santa Elena” in Ecuador. It is the most visited protected area in this country, filled with natural and cultural wealth.

Methodology – The sample consisted of 369 surveys obtained in situ, using the convenience method. For the statistical procedure, factor analysis and multiple regression analysis were used.

Approach – The approach was quantitative with simple random sampling.

Findings – Among the findings, the motivational dimensions "Escape and ego-defensive function," "Marine nature," and "Building personal relationships" were found as predictors of satisfaction in this destination. While the motivational dimensions "Escape and ego-defensive function," "Marine nature," and "Marine terrestrial" predict the intentions of returning to this protected area. Also, the dimensions "Marine nature" and "Escape and ego-defensive function," predict the intentions of recommending this destination. Therefore, products and services related to the nature and escape of tourists must be developed.

The originality of the research – This study analyzes motivations as important predictors of loyalty in ecotourism, which implies significant results that will serve to create management plans in protected areas. Since this research examined Ecuador’s most visited protected area, considering its natural and cultural attractions, its findings contribute significantly to the academic literature. Finally, this study’s practical and social implications will allow institutions and companies related to ecotourism to have information to plan strategies related to nature, achieving better benefits for their sustainable management.

Keywords Tourism, marketing, sustainable, destination, Ecuador

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry (Das and Chatterjee, 2015). It has an annual growth of 5% worldwide and expands three times faster than tourism in general (Hultman et al., 2015). Specifically, ecotourism areas have become crucial destinations for their efficiency in environmental protection, education, recreation, and job creation (Tao and Wall, 2009). In this sense, tourists seek significant experiences, such as being in contact with local communities, learning from their ecosystems, and participating in the conservation of their natural resources (Balmford et

al., 2009). Likewise, tourists are more environmentally aware and have stronger motivations to attend attractions and activities due to environmentally-related content (Luo and Deng, 2008). Therefore, each visitor can have different motivations and preferences for various destinations (Kozak, 2002). Particularly, tourists have different reasons to visit destinations that are related to nature (Chikuta et al., 2017).

Motivation is a crucial factor that determines trip satisfaction and the reasons for traveling to a specific destination (Castaño et al., 2003). Also, motivations influence tourists' revisit intention (Lee et al., 2014), taking into account that attracting new visitors is more expensive than attracting those who have already visited the destination (Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999). So, it is essential to analyze the motivations that tourists have and their influence on their intentions to return and recommend a tourist place. However, currently, only a few studies examine these variables in ecotourism.

In this context, The Fauna Production Reserve "Puntilla de Santa Elena" is located in the city of Salinas (2°12'52.3" S. 80°57'5.4" W.), Santa Elena Province, Ecuador. It is a privileged destination for ecotourism practices. Its visitors are mainly interested on landscape photography, fauna (including whales, birds, sea lions, turtles, and others) and flora (with dry thorny thickets and shrublands, among at least 80 species of plants), observation on the trails, or sports (running, cycling, surf, bodyboarding).

Although ecotourism demand in coastal and marine fauna protection areas is considered highly valuable (Kruger and Saayman, 2010; Lombard et al. 2020; Pham-Do and Pham, 2020; Philips et al., 2019; Queiroz et al. 2014; Smallwood et al., 2012). However, studies of motivations for ecotourism in marine and coastal protected areas are scarce.

This article aims to analyze the motivations for ecotourism and their influence on satisfaction, the intentions of returning and recommending The Fauna Production Reserve "Puntilla de Santa Elena," to provide information to institutions and tourism companies for efficient planning of marketing strategies. This paper is organized in several sections to meet its objective, beginning with the introduction, followed by the review of the relevant literature, and the area of study. Then, the research methodology is analyzed, as well as the results, to finish with the discussion, conclusions, the limitations of the study, and future research lines.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivations are psychological needs and desires that provoke, direct, and integrate behavior and activity (Pearce, 2013). Motivations, related to tourism, are psychological needs that play an essential role in making a person feel that his or her psychological imbalance can be corrected through a travel experience (Crompton, 1979; Kim et al., 2000). Therefore, motivations are the set of needs that influence a person to participate in a tourist activity (Meng et al., 2008). They are a central factor in the decision-making process (Yolal et al., 2015) since they allow us to understand the choice, preferences, and needs of a traveler (Bansal and Eiselt, 2004). Hence, it is essential to understand the motivations of tourists and their relationship during the visit (Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

In ecotourism, several motivations make tourists go to a national park (Carvache-Franco et al., 2019a). In this sense, Page and Dowling (2002) mention that some ecotourists travel to meet their recreational and leisure needs, as well as to learn about specific areas. Holden and Sparrowhawk (2002) point out that ecotourists' main intrinsic motivations are learning about nature, being physically active, and meeting people with similar interests. Panin and Mbrica (2014), in the Republic of Serbia, found that the most important motivations for ecotourists were social, sports and health activities, nature and culture, and educational activities. They argue that the motivations related to sports and recreational activities, the positive impact on health, walking through the forest, seeing and enjoying nature, are the main motivations in ecotourism. While Lee et al. (2014) analyzed tourists visiting restored ecological parks in South Korea, finding seven motivational factors: self-development, interpersonal relationships, rewards, building personal relationships, escape, ego-defensive function, and nature appreciation. According to Queiroz et al. (2014), most tourists are attracted to parks due to their landscape, biodiversity, and geodiversity. For Fonseca et al. (2014), tourists choose islands as a holiday destination, mainly due to their landscape and natural value, maritime tourism activities, and distinctive character. Likewise, Rid et al. (2014) name some factors that motivate visitors: heritage and nature, having an authentic rural experience, learning, sun, and sand.

Nickerson, Jorgenson, and Boley (2016) have concluded that sustainable tourists are willing to spend more money, which can increase the income of sustainable tourist destinations. Cheng, Gurzoy, and Del Chiappa (2016) consider that ecotourists would positively influence the intention, interest, and willingness to pay a higher price for ecotourism products and services. Xu and Chan (2016) also mention several motivational dimensions related to nature: self-enhancement, relaxation, and knowledge, escaping from routine life, the scenery of the destination, information and convenience, and various activities for fun. Similarly, Iversen et al. (2016) explain five motivational dimensions related to nature: status, novelty, relaxation, active in nature and social interaction; while Kamri and Radam (2018) only address four motivational factors to visit a national park: challenge excursion, social trip, nature tour, and getaway outing.

On the other hand, Jeong, et al. (2018) conducted a study at the Kuang Si waterfall and Konglor cave in Lao Republic, and found four motivating dimensions: health, related to physical health and skills. Nature, related to the observation of scenic beauty, and being and learning from the natural environment. Cohesion, related to doing things with my partner and being with family and friends. Escape, related to loneliness and get away from other people. Another study is that of Carvache-Franco et al. (2019b) who found six motivational dimensions in ecotourism: self-development", "interpersonal relationships and the ego defense function", "personal relationship building", "escape", "appreciation of nature" and "reward". By the way, Chow et al. (2019) carried out a study in the Ramsar wetland in Hong Kong, found that the main motivations in nature tourism were: relaxation, escape from daily life and physical and mental health.

Moreover, numerous authors state that motivations influence the intentions of visiting a destination and several of them found a relationship between satisfaction and the intention to revisit the tourist site (Huang and Hsu, 2009; Jang and Feng, 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Rittichainuwat et al., 2008; Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

2. STUDY AREA

The Fauna Production Reserve “Puntilla de Santa Elena” is the principal protected area in the province of Santa Elena, located 115 km far from Guayaquil in the most privileged spot of the Pacific Ocean. It has 52,231 protected hectares, but only 203 hectares are land, including some cliffs, rocky zones where waves crash, and a coastal-marine area. Also, thousands of different migratory coastal and marine shorebirds from both hemispheres arrive at ECUASAL pools, which are near to the reserve and have become a bird-watching area (Peralta and Moscoso, 2015).

Santa Elena Peninsula has plenty of records and evidence of human presence known as “Las Vegas” (10,800 BC - 6,600 BC) and “Valdivia” culture (5600 BC - 3500 BC) that developed the oldest pottery in America. This reserve also protects coastal waters, rocky reefs, sandy beaches, mixed beaches (sand and rock), cliffs, dry shrublands, and dry thorny thickets. It was declared a protected area to prioritize actions about sustainable wildlife management, environmental education, ecosystem restoration, and nature-oriented tourism (Ministry of Environment, 2009).

The Fauna Production Reserve “Puntilla de Santa Elena” is one of the best places to observe at least nine migratory whales from July to September, such as Sei Whales (*Balaenoptera borealis*), Bryde’s Whales (*Balaenoptera edeni*), and Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), and others (Rosero, 2017). Other animals are stationary, such as Galapagos fur seal wolf (*Arctocephalus galapagoensis*) and South American sea lion (*Otaria flavescens*), which lie over one area popularly called “La Lobería”. Besides, there are 16 species of marine mammals, 160 species of birds, and 03 species of turtles (green turtles, hawksbill turtles, and pacific ridley sea turtles), which use this place as their feeding area. Its trails also house lizard species such as *Microlophus occipitalis* (Tropiduridae), *Ameiva* sp. (Teiidae), and the common iguana (*Iguana iguana*) (Ministry of Environment, 2009).

Some of its most popular activities include landscape photography, walking to observe fauna and flora on the trails, running or cycling independently or in organized competitions, and water sports in its beaches (Ministry of environment, 2020). FAE beach is ideal for surfing and bodyboarding, and together with Punta Brava beach hosted the US Open Master of Surfing in 2004 (Ministry of Tourism, 2013) and the Junior World Championship of Surfing in 2009 (International Surfing Asociation, 2014), with massive attendance of people who enjoyed some wood facilities next to the beach.

3. METHODOLOGY

The sample of the population was obtained from national and foreign tourists who were in The Fauna Production Reserve “Puntilla de Santa Elena.” The surveys were applied from January to March of 2019 to the visitors of the aforementioned protected area. The measurement tools developed for this research were based on several previous studies on tourism motivations (Crompton, 1979; Fodness, 1994; Galley and Clifton, 2004; Jang and Wu, 2006; Lau and McKercher, 2004; Lee et al., 2014; McGehee and Kim, 2004; Weaver and Lawton, 2002). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient reached a high value (0.94), indicating a meritorious index on the scale. The survey for this study included two parts. The first part of the instrument measured the sociodemographic and visiting characteristics of the respondents. The second part measured the motivations, satisfaction, and intentions of returning and recommending the destination, based on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 was little and 5 a lot.

The data analysis occurred in two stages. First, factor analysis, a widely used technique in visitor segmentation research (Formica and Uysal, 1998; Johns and Gyimothy, 2002; Kastenholz et al., 1999), was carried out to identify the constructs underlying the variables, providing a global vision of the most important motivations. Varimax rotation facilitated the interpretation of the data, and the Kaiser criterion helped to find the number of factors, where eigenvalues greater than one were used (Kaiser, 1960). The KMO index (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) and Bartlett's sphericity test was used to determine whether it was appropriate to perform the factor analysis (Kaiser, 1970; Bartlett, 1950). In the second stage, the stepwise multiple regression method helped to assess the intentions of returning and recommending the ecotourism destination. The type of sampling used was convenience, in relation to the accessibility of the tourists who were in the protected area and their predisposition to answer the questionnaire. The population variability was estimated at 50% ($p = q = 0.5$). For the sample size, a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$ and a confidence level of 95% have been considered, resulting in 369, which was the sample for the present study. The data collected were organized, tabulated, and statistically analyzed using the SPSS 22.0 program.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Factorial analysis

Factor analysis allowed the extraction of six motivational dimensions. The principal component analysis was the factor extraction method. The Varimax rotation method was applied to obtain a better interpretation of the factors so that each one had very high or low factor loads. The Kaiser criterion was used for the number of factors, considering only factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.00. Six factors were part of the solution and represented 66.9% of the total variance. The KMO index (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) was 0.92, being close to 1, so the relationship between the variables was high, and it was appropriate to perform the Factor Analysis. Besides, the Bartlett sphericity test was significant <0.05 , so the Factor Analysis could be applied. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1: Factor Analysis

Factors/variables	Factor loading					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Self-development and Interpersonal relationships						
To feel inner harmony/peace	0.781					
To have a sense of self-confidence	0.742					
To be independent	0.738					
To strengthen the relationship with my family	0.734					
To know what I am capable of	0.694					
To reflect on memories	0.678					
To avoid interpersonal stress	0.672					
To feel that I belong	0.652					
To learn about the destination	0.648					
To be in contact with family/friends who live elsewhere	0.598					
To reminisce about parents' time	0.543					
To gain a new perspective on life	0.509					
Building personal relationships						
To know the locals		0.840				
To be with others if I need them		0.821				
To meet people with similar interests		0.768				
To have the opportunity to know me better		0.751				
To understand more about myself		0.654				
To experience different cultures		0.561				
Escape and ego-defensive function						
To escape from routine			0.777			
To meet people with similar interests			0.769			
To be away from daily stress			0.756			
To join the social discussion			0.703			
To be away from the crowds of people			0.549			
Marine nature						
To get a better appreciation of nature				0.807		
To observe marine flora and fauna				0.769		
For the importance of tourism in natural spaces				0.744		
For the importance of sun and beach tourism				0.732		
To study nature				0.598		
Terrestrial nature						
To observe terrestrial flora and fauna					0.808	
To observe its landscapes					0.596	

Factors/variables	Factor loading					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Rewards						
To have fond memories						0.721
KMO			0.92			
Eigenvalues	11.91	2.70	2.36	1.47	1.26	1.04
Variance explained	38.42%	8.71%	7.62%	4.74%	4.06%	3.36%
Total variance explained			66.90%			
Cronbach's Alpha for each factor	0.93	0.91	0.76	0.83	0.78	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity			Chi-square= 7176.64		sig.=0.00	

According to Table 1, the central dimension was related to “self-confidence” and “being independent” motivations, as well as to “family and friends” motivations. For this reason, this dimension has been referred to as "Self-development and Interpersonal relationships". The second dimension was related to motivations for knowing the inhabitants of the place or people with similar interests. That is why this dimension has been called “Building personal relationships”. The third dimension included motivations for escaping routine and daily stress, as well as those associated with joining the social discussion and interest of the people.

For this reason, it has been called “Escape and ego-defensive function”. The fourth dimension was related to motivations to appreciate nature, and marine flora and fauna, so it has been named "Marine nature". The fifth dimension was related to motivations for observing terrestrial flora and fauna and its landscapes; therefore, it has been called “Terrestrial nature”. And finally, the sixth dimension included the motivation to obtain good memories; for this reason, it has been called “Rewards.”

4.2. The motivations and satisfaction

The stepwise multiple regression method was used to analyze the motivational dimensions that influenced visitor satisfaction in this protected area. This method uses criteria to decide which predictors contribute significantly to the model and in which order they are introduced, excluding the other variables. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: Motivational dimensions and satisfaction

Motivational dimensions	Beta	t	Sig.	Ajusted R2	F-value	p-value
Escape and ego-defensive function	0.287	5.940	0.000	0.151	22,614	0.000
Marine nature	0.243	5.030	0.000			
Building personal relationships	0.114	2.351	0.019			
(Constant)		93.323	0.000			

According to Table 2, the adjusted R² had a value of 0.15. However, the p-value of the F value was significant (p <0.01), so this model is adequate and confirms the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The motivational dimension, "Escape and ego-defensive function", was found as an important first predictor of visitor satisfaction (Beta = 0.287, p <0.01). The "Marine nature" dimension was also considered as an essential predictor of satisfaction (Beta = 0.243, p <0.01). Finally, the "Building personal relationships" dimension was determined, as well, as a meaningful predictor of visitor satisfaction (Beta = 0.114, p <0.01). Therefore, "Escape and ego-defensive function", "Marine nature", and "Building personal relationships" are significant predictors of visitor satisfaction in this protected area.

4.3. Motivations and Return Intentions

The stepwise multiple regression method was used to analyze the motivational dimensions that influenced the return intentions of visitors in this protected area. This method only took into account the variables that were statistically significant (p <0.05) and the others were excluded from the study. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3: Motivational dimensions and return intentions

Motivational dimensions	Beta	t	Sig.	Ajusted R ²	F-value	P-value
Escape and ego-defensive function	0.367	7.946	0.000	0.220	35,378	0.000
Marine nature	0.272	5.890	0.000			
Terrestrial nature	0.133	2.882	0.004			
(Constant)		123.894	0.000			

According to Table 3, the adjusted R² had a value of 0.22. However, the p-value of the F value was significant (p <0.01), so this model is adequate and confirms the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The motivational dimension "Escape and ego-defensive function" was found as an important first predictor of visitors' intentions to return to this protected area (Beta = 0.367, p <0.01). The "Marine nature" dimension was also considered as a meaningful predictor of visitors' intentions to revisit this place (Beta = 0.272, p <0.01). Finally, the "Terrestrial nature" dimension was found, as well, as a significant predictor of visitors' intentions to return to this protected area (Beta = 0.133, p <0.01). Therefore, "Escape and ego-defensive function", "Marine nature", and "Terrestrial nature" are essential predictors in tourists' revisit intentions to this destination.

4.4. The motivations and intentions to recommend

The stepwise multiple regression method was used to analyze the motivational dimensions that influenced the intentions of recommending this protected area. This method only took into account the variables that were statistically significant (p <0.05) and the others were excluded from the study. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4: Motivational dimensions and intentions to recommend

Motivational dimensions	Beta	t	Sig.	Ajusted R2	F-value	p-value
Marine nature	0.276	5.695	0.000	0.143	31,557	0.000
Escape and ego-defensive function	0.268	5.539	0.000			
(Constant)		114.867	0.000			

According to Table 4, the adjusted R2 had a value of 0.14. However, the p-value of the F value was significant ($p < 0.01$), so this model is adequate and confirms the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The "Marine nature" motivational dimension was found as an important first predictor of visitors' intentions to recommend this destination (Beta = 0.276, $p < 0.01$). The "Escape and ego-defensive function" dimension was also determined as a meaningful predictor of visitors' intentions to recommend this place (Beta = 0.268, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, "Marine nature" and "Escape and ego-defensive function" are both significant predictors in visitors' intentions to recommend this protected area.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to the findings, there are several motivational dimensions in ecotourism. The primary motivational dimension is "Self-development and Interpersonal relationships" which is related to gaining self-confidence and being independent, and also to the strengthening of relations with family members. Self-development has also been understood and defined as the search for personal growth and the desire to learn and interact with a host culture and its community (Crompton, 1979; Calantone and Johar, 1984; Dann, 1981; Etzel and Woodside, 1982; Woodside and Jacobs, 1985). The second dimension is "Building personal relationships", related to a visitor motivated to meet new people. For McGehee and Kim (2004), people tend to behave according to socially desired problems. The third dimension is "Escape, and ego-defensive function", related to a visitor motivated to escape their daily routine and join people's interests (Crompton, 1979; Lounsbury and Hoopes, 1985; Woodside and Jacobs, 1985). The fourth dimension is "Marine nature", related to the tourist's motivation to appreciate the marine nature. The fifth dimension is "Terrestrial nature" associated with the visitor's motivation to enjoy the terrestrial nature. It has often been found that appreciation of the natural environment is ecotourists' predominant motivation (Weaver and Lawton, 2002; Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006). The sixth dimension is "Rewards", which relates to a visitor who wants to have fun and experience new things. Therefore, tourists travel to reward themselves when taking a break (Broad and Jenkins, 2008). These findings are similar to those of Lee et al. (2014), who found seven motivational dimensions in ecotourism: self-development, interpersonal relationships, rewards, building personal relationships, escape, ego-defensive function, and nature appreciation. Besides, these results support other previous research related to ecotourists' motivational dimensions (Carvache-Franco et al., 2019b; McGehee and Kim, 2004; Weaver and Lawton, 2002; Zeppel, 2006).

As for motivations and their relationship with other variables, tourists' specific motivations are essential predictors of satisfaction and loyalty in ecotourism. Therefore, proper management in certain aspects of the destination services can increase the visitors' motivations, and predict their satisfaction, return, and recommendation, bringing benefits to the destination, the tourists, and the community.

The motivational dimensions "Escape and ego-defensive function", "Marine nature" and "Building personal relationships" are important predictors of visitor satisfaction. Therefore, activities different from the visitors' daily routine should be included, considering those related to natural marine attractions, such as the observation of marine flora and fauna. These activities could encourage socialization among people with similar interests or with local inhabitants. In this way, the level of satisfaction of visitors in protected areas could improve.

The motivational dimensions "Escape and ego-defensive function", "Marine nature", and "Terrestrial nature" are significant predictors of visitors' return intentions. Thus, it is recommended to consider activities related to natural marine and terrestrial attractions, such as the observation of marine and terrestrial flora and fauna, and the observation of landscapes to increase visitors' intentions of returning to protected areas.

The motivational dimensions "Marine nature" and "Escape and ego-defensive function", are important predictors of visitors' intentions to recommend this destination. Therefore, activities related to marine natural attractions such as marine flora and fauna observation, which differ from the visitors' daily routine, should be offered. In this way, the intentions of recommending protected areas could significantly rise.

The findings of this research are similar to the results obtained by Lee et al. (2014), who found that the dimension "appreciation of nature" and "escape" are significant predictors of ecotourism revisit intentions. Therefore, it is vital to develop products and services related to marine and terrestrial nature and the escape of tourists, to increase the visitors' level of satisfaction, return, and recommendation in ecotourism. Besides, the results are similar to other studies that state that motivations influence the intentions of visiting the destination (Huang and Hsu, 2009; Jang and Feng, 2007; Rittichainuwat et al., 2008; Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

Among the theoretical implications, motivations related to nature and escape are the most important predictors of tourists' satisfaction and intentions to return and recommend an ecotourism destination. On the practical implications, institutions and companies related to ecotourism could have information to plan strategies and develop products and services related to nature, achieving better benefits for tourist companies and the community. As for the social implications, a satisfactory offer in ecotourism products and services could increase small businesses and employment, as well as benefit the population and the community. The main limitation of the study was the temporality in which the sample was taken. As a future research line, it would be interesting to analyze visitors' concerns towards preserving the environment, considering satisfaction and loyalty.

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