ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS INFLUENCING TOURISTS’ EXPERIENCE TO SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL PARKS

Liezel du Plessis  
M.Com, Lecturer at the Department of Tourism, Tshwane University of Technology  
duplessisl@tut.ac.za

Peet van der Merwe  
PhD, Lecturer at the School for Business Management: Tourism Programme, North West University,  
Potchefstroom campus  
pHEET.vandermerwe@nwu.ac.za

Melville Saayman  
PhD, Lecturer at the School for Business Management: Tourism Programme, North West University,  
Potchefstroom campus  
melville.saayman@nwu.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The conservation role of South African National Parks (SANParks) is primarily to protect South Africa’s biodiversity which is ranked third in the world (Spenceley, 2005: 141; Retief, 2006: 104). Land under conservation and managed of SANParks increases, whereas government funding decreases. To compensate for the lack in enough government funding, SANParks are becoming correspondingly more dependent on income generated through tourism to support conservation (Phillips, 2009). As a result, SANParks management is being pressured to permit more tourists to enter national parks to cover the shortcomings of government funding. However, the rising number of tourists to national parks led to increased environmental impacts (Shafer & Inglis, 2000: 73). These environmental impacts not only affect the sustainability of the natural environment but also impacts upon on the experience of tourists to national parks (Hillery, Nancarrow, Griffen & Syme, 2001: 853; Chin, Moore, Wallington & Dowling, 2000: 21).

Research done by Deng and Bender (2007: 183) and Alant and Bruwer (2004: 34) furthermore established that visitation frequency of tourists to natural areas will influence their perception regarding environmental impacts. Consequently, to sustain tourism to national parks it is imperative for the park management to identify environmental impacts caused by tourism that will reflect negatively on the experience of tourists to national parks (Bresler, 2007: 167).

KEYWORDS

Environmental Factors, Environmental Impacts, Tourist’s Experience, South African National Parks.

1. OBJECTIVES

This study had two main objectives. The first objective was to evaluate whether tourism impacts due to tourists to South African National Parks affected their overall experience. Second to this, was to establish whether the frequency of visitation has a role to played in what extent the tourists’ experienced environmental impacts in South African National Parks.
2. METHODOLOGY

The data was gathered through conducting a survey (quantitative). The survey was hosted on the website of South African National Parks from June to August 2009. During this time period a total of 451 (n) relevant and completed questionnaires were received back. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A: determined respondents demographic details; section B, measured the environmental impacts caused by tourism and section C determined the degree in which tourism impacts on the environment influences tourist’s experience whilst visiting national parks. A five-point Likert Scale was used as the measuring instrument to determine to what degree the environmental impacts perceived by the respondents affected their experiences at South African National Parks (1=very negative; 2=negative; 3=neutral; 4=positive and 5=very positive).

The data was captured on Microsoft Excel where after it was statistically analysed using the software programme SPSS 16. An exploratory factor analysis was done in order to identify environmental factors that affected tourist’s experiences. ANOVAs was furthermore conducted to test whether the environmental impacts that influenced the experience of tourists was affected by the tourists visitation frequency to South African National Parks.

3. MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

The most important contributions of the study are the following:

- It was the first time in South Africa that research was conducted regarding environmental impacts of tourism and the effect they have on the experience of tourists visiting South African National Parks;

- Second to this, the relationship between frequency of visitation and the degree to which tourists’ experiences are affected by environmental impacts was also determined for the first time in South Africa National Parks history.

- Last but the least, can the results pertaining, environmental impacts of tourism in national parks, assist SANParks to management and address these issues in order to ensure the sustainability of South Africa National Parks.

4. CONCLUSION

This research disclosed that certain environmental factors (speeding of employees and violation of rules/regulations) do influence the experience of tourists negatively. Management of South African National Parks are therefore being put under pressure to manage these impacts to ensure a better quality of environment that is not negatively affected by the impacts of tourism. If management do not minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment, the number of tourists to SANParks could decrease due to tourists having negative experiences. The results furthermore indicate that there is a strong link between the frequency of visits to South Africa National Parks and the degree to which tourists experience environmental impacts caused by tourism. Research has proved that tourists to South African National Parks are loyal to SANParks (Saayman, Fouche & Kruger, 2008: 68). Therefore, it is important to minimize environmental impacts caused by tourist to
ensure that the experiences of loyal tourists are optimal and that tourists who visit South Africa national Parks frequently continue to do so.

REFERENCES


