



# Nature-based tourism development in Hong Kong: Importance–Performance perceptions of local residents and tourists



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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the potential and the sustainability of developing nature-based tourism in Hong Kong based on local resident and tourist perspectives. Two separate demand-side and supply-side indicator sets are empirically tested with two samples of Hong Kong residents ( $n = 97$ ) and tourists ( $n = 93$ ). Both the levels of importance and performance of these indicators are rated by the respondents, and the importance–performance differences are verified. Two resultant grids from the Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) present the condition of nature-based tourism in Hong Kong. The performance scores are further entered into regression analysis, which generates two separate demand-side and supply-side models revealing the satisfaction of the locals and the tourists. The findings offer both theoretical construct and policy recommendations for the development and sustainability of nature-based tourism in Hong Kong.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is one of four-pillar industries of Hong Kong (HKCSD, 2014) that provide directive impetus to economic growth. The total number of tourists arriving in Hong Kong in 2014 reached over 60 million, and they spent more than HK\$484 billion. However, the expenditure of overnight visitors was dominated by shopping activities (61.7%), but entertainment and tour guiding contributed only a very small portion (3.4% and 0.3%, respectively). The percentage of shopper spending was over 90% (HKTb, 2015). Faced with such an imbalanced pattern of tourism demand and economy, it is therefore essential to diversify the markets in Hong Kong to reflect its alternative resources such as cultural heritage and natural attractions so as to reduce the pressure on the urban environment and to tackle the problem of the monotonous urban destinations of tourists in Hong Kong.

One of the opportunities for diversifying the tourist attractions in Hong Kong comes from its wider natural environment, and in particular from its largely available and accessible Country Parks and other public parks territorywide. There are over 10 million domestic and inbound visitors to these public parks per year (AFCD, 2016). The significant demand on these parks and their recognized value over the years should articulate the potential of such destinations for nature-based tourism, which caters for the recreation of local residents and some of the inbound visitors. In earlier years, there were some initiatives to promote Hong Kong's non-urban or natural environment to tourists (Yuen, 1999; Jim, 2000). Recent studies practically extended these ideas to

understand visitor preferences and perceptions in various natural area locations in Hong Kong (Chen & Jim, 2012; Cheung & Jim, 2013). However, there has hitherto been no attempt to model and compare the perceptions of residents and tourists in one single study of the resources and features for nature-based tourist locations in Hong Kong.

The terms “nature-based tourism” and “nature tourism”, as used largely interchangeably in the literature, connect to sustainability because of the attempt of tourism activities to achieve sustainable economic development (Place, 1991). The development of nature-based tourism requires a sustainable environment with well-perceived natural attractions (Prosser & Cater, 1994). As a result, a combination of the knowledge about the sustainable tourism, nature-based tourism, and the perception of visitors to the city's natural areas can provide important insights useful for devising an effective strategy for nature-based tourism development in Hong Kong. Capturing and responding to the visitors' perceptions of a destination and its resources is one important indicator for the success and sustainability of nature-based tourism (Tyrväinen, Uusitalo, Silvennoinen, & Hasu, 2014). Visitors to natural areas include local residents and inbound tourists, while their differing perceptions may reflect the factors affecting the conditions of nature-based tourism in Hong Kong. These conditions may represent a number of indicators that can be integrated to formulate a model for nature-based tourism destinations based on local and non-local visitor perceptions. The resultant models may allow decision-makers to understand the potential and the limitations, and also underpin the suggestions for nature-based tourism development in Hong Kong.

To embrace the above-mentioned rationale of the study, this paper contains several precise objectives. Firstly, it establishes separate sets of indicators of nature-based tourism perceptions for local residents and inbound tourists, respectively, based on a literature review and

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the collective views derived from open-ended responses from visitors in natural areas in Hong Kong. Secondly, the study measures the importance and performance levels of the respective perception indicators among local and non-local visitors. Thirdly, the study identifies the indicators that largely affect nature-based tourism based on visitor perceptions through the development of multiple regression models for local and non-local respondent groups. Finally, the results provide suggestions for promoting Hong Kong as a nature tourism destination.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Sustainable tourism and nature-based tourism

Rooted in the concept of sustainable development, sustainable tourism was regarded as the effective measurement of reducing negative tourism impacts and promoting the balanced development of destinations (Lu & Nepal, 2009), and a holistic and ethical approach of tourism development that follows the three-tier sustainability principles (Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Welford, Ytterhus, & Eligh, 1999; Hardy & Beeton, 2001).

Sustainable tourism applies to a continuum of environments between the urban and the rural destinations. Those non-urbanized nature-based areas or landscapes are very often destinations for nature-based tourism though it also embraces other similar forms of tourism such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, responsible tourism, and green tourism (Higginbottom, 2004; Cater, 2006) because of the broad delineation of the “nature-based” concept, the inclusion of various natural features as attractions, and the continuous evolution of the philosophy in the sustainability of tourism development.

Despite a wide context of nature-based tourism, it still defined as “any form of tourism that relies primarily on the natural environment for its attractions or settings” (TIES, 2006), and this study is related to it. The location of the nature-based tourist attractions, whether in rural or urban areas, is indeed not the primary concern (e.g., Jim, 2000; Henderson, Koh, Soh, & Sallim, 2001; Nyaupane, Morais, & Graefe, 2004; Weaver, 2005; Chen & Jim, 2012; Cheung & Jim, 2013). Unlike the arguably small-scale emphasis of ecotourism (Blamey, 2001), nature-based tourism may bring a large number of tourists closer to nature in an urban destination, especially in ones where a high urban–rural proximity can be found (Jim, 2000).

### 2.2. Sustainability of nature-based tourism

There are numerous studies on planning, development, policy, and the impacts of nature-based tourism throughout the past decade (e.g., Bejder, Samuels, Gales, Hindell, & Kirkwood, 2003; Mackay & Campbell, 2003; Naidoo & Adamowicz, 2003; Saarinen, 2005; Yang, 2008; Balmford et al., 2009; Han, Fang, & Huang, 2011; Mcnical, 2013; Huhta & Sulkava, 2014; Mccool, 2014). Regardless of the locations, nature-based tourism relies heavily on the natural environment and it is strongly resource-dependent (Priskin, 2001). As a result, there can be numerous multidisciplinary factors which affect the success of sustainable nature-based tourism (Spenceley, 2008). The sustainability of nature-based tourism requires assessment through measurable parameters like indicators (James, 2001; Lemelin, Koster, & Youroukos, 2015; Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2015) which can also be extended to urban areas (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2014). One important part of these indicators refers to the subjective aspect of visitor satisfaction and the visitors' perception of the destination resources and environment (Tyrväinen et al., 2014). A study from a user perspective that investigates both local visitors (domestic users) and non-local visitors (tourists) is nonetheless lacking, particularly in a compact and high-densely populated setting like Hong Kong.

### 2.3. User perceptions of nature-based tourism resources

Literally, the concept of “perception” is the subjective and inferred way of seeing and understanding something by a person (Klemm, 1992). In the context of tourism, the perception of a destination by tourists can largely influence their travel motivation, destination selection, and travel behaviour (Jenkins, 1999; Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003). It is therefore important to understand the perception of visitors or users to a nature-based destination and its products so that the growing demand for this form of tourism can be met effectively (Ryel & Grasse, 1991; Suh & Gartner, 2004) and with its resources managed sustainably (Jenkins, 1999). Tourism perception is therefore a process that transforms the external information about tourists' to or insiders' thoughts (Decrop, 1999), and ultimately addresses tourist experiences (Hillery, Nancarrow, Griffin, & Syme, 2001).

Tourists and local residents are of paramount importance in tourism development (Krippendorf, 1987), and their preferences and perceptions are of paramount importance among tourism stakeholders. On the one hand, studies on the resident perception mainly focused on the nature, influencing factors, and theoretical explanations of tourism-induced impacts (Wang & Lu, 2005), particularly on the local community-oriented ones (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005). Examples of some recent findings include Wang and Ren (2010), who identified a number of the factors affecting resident perception such as demographic characteristic, the level of host–guest interaction, and the economic benefits perceived. Zhuang, Zhu, and Deng (2014) also confirmed the effect of tourism on institutional ethics by comparing resident perception and attitudes towards the impact of different levels of tourism development. In summary, it is clear that the understanding of the residents' perceptions has been insightful in detecting the multi-dimensional impacts and reducing the host–guest conflicts caused by tourism (Lankford & Howard, 1994).

On the other hand, apart from market demand research, studies on tourists have often evaluated the influencing factors of tourism development and attempted to explore its disadvantages and to make feasible suggestions for sustainable tourism development (Whelan, 1991). These demand-side studies (e.g., Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002; Chan & Baum, 2007; Mehmetoglu, 2007; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2011; Chen & Jim, 2012; Cheung & Jim, 2013), especially on travel motivation and satisfaction (e.g., Heung & Cheng, 2000; Heung & Qu, 2000; Ryan & Mo, 2001; Kau & Lim, 2005; Li & Chen, 2006; Hui, Wan, & Ho, 2007; Kim, 2009; Fan, Zhong, & Zhang, 2012), are richly available across the literature globally and locally.

Nevertheless, the results of most of these studies reflect only the tourist experiences on eco-trips or in developed nature tourism settings (Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009), rather than the general perceptions of nature-based attractions by people, or their attitude towards a particular form of tourism, such as nature-based tourism. A research gap appears in a single study involving or modelling both tourists and local residents (Wang, 2014), especially in the area of nature-based tourism and in a highly urbanized destination like Hong Kong.

### 2.4. Nature-based tourism potential in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a popular international urban destination rather than a nature-based or ecotourism location (Euromonitor International, 2015). According to the 2015 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report, Hong Kong won acclaim because of its transport infrastructure, business environment, and human capital (ranked 1st, 2nd, and 8th), but not because of its environmental sustainability and nature-based resources (ranked 79th and 39th) (World Economic Forum, 2015). There are abundant and readily available resources for nature-based activities by tourists and local users. These resources include a well-protected Country Park system and a series of public parks territorywide (Jim, 2000; Development Bureau, 2011; AFCD, 2016), and some smaller sites mixed with natural and cultural features outside the conservation

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