



Developing a better understanding of the complexities of visitor loyalty to Karijini National Park, Western Australia



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Developing a better understanding of loyalty as a multi-dimensional construct.
- An increasing hierarchy of effort for loyalty from visiting another park through to advocating, and volunteering.
- There is a need to examine loyalty to parks generally rather than just a single destination.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 September 2016

Received in revised form

7 March 2017

Accepted 11 March 2017

Available online 2 April 2017

Keywords:

Advocacy

Behavioural intention

Donating money

Loyalty

Park

Volunteering

ABSTRACT

Visitor loyalty is essential for the future of parks; however our knowledge of it is poor and confounded by conceptualisation and measurement issues with loyalty often considered a single construct. Furthermore, previous research has focussed on loyalty to a single destination rather than loyalty to a park system. This paper analyses the loyalty intentions of visitors to Karijini National Park, Western Australia. Relationships between loyalty measures to this park and to parks generally are explored. Rather than a single construct, loyalty was evidenced by three dimensions within an increasing hierarchy of effort – a) visiting another park, b) referring and recommending, and c) advocating, paying, volunteering, and visiting again. Visitors who wanted access to friendly, helpful rangers were more likely to undertake loyalty behaviours requiring greater effort. Further refining loyalty's multiple dimensions is an important focus for future research complemented by recent efforts to match loyalty measures with actual visiting behaviour.

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1. Introduction

National parks have a pivotal role in nature-based tourism as well as global nature conservation efforts (Buckley, 2009). As such, it is essential that the agencies responsible for their management can provide for tourism and recreation opportunities whilst also protecting their biological diversity (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2013). A paradigm shift is underway, moving park management from perceiving visitors as a threat to ecological integrity, to recognising the importance of visitors in providing economic and political support for parks and other protected areas (Phillips, 2003; Weaver & Lawton, 2011). Visitors to such areas are considered to be an important source of revenue, but equally importantly satisfied

and loyal visitors provide social, political and financial support (Newsome et al., 2013; Moore, Weiler, Moyle, & Eagles, 2013; Weaver & Lawton, 2011). Such support is recognised as essential in the changing social and political environment of the twenty-first century (Rodger, Taplin, & Moore, 2015; Weaver & Lawton, 2011; Weiler, Moore, & Moyle, 2013).

Due to changing political and economic priorities park agencies are facing decreasing budgets (Kaczynski & Crompton, 2004; Lee, Graefe, & Burns, 2007; Moore et al., 2013). For some park agencies visitors can provide up to 80% of total revenue for a park through individual charges to them, such as entrance fees (Buckley, 2009). Visitors are an increasingly essential source of revenue as well as providing support on-site through volunteering to help with park management, as well as off-site through advocacy, donations, and positive word of mouth recommendations that encourages others to visit and contribute to park management. Parks and other protected areas are increasingly recognized as delivering

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physical, psychological, sociocultural, environmental, and economic benefits (Driver, 2008; Moyle, Weiler, & Moore, 2014). When they do so, visitors are satisfied and more likely to contribute to park management in a variety of ways (Eagles, 2001; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Lee et al., 2007; Taplin, Rodger, & Moore, 2016).

In today's highly competitive world of public sector funding and park management, loyalty is considered essential to mitigate against budget cuts and increasingly scarce resources (Taplin et al., 2016; Weiler et al., 2013). Loyalty, however, remains an elusive concept, with recent reviews (e.g., Dolnicar, Coltman, & Sharma, 2013; Moore, Rodger, & Taplin, 2015) identifying concerns regarding the association between satisfaction and loyalty (the latter also operationalized as behavioural intentions), and inconsistency in operationalizing key constructs such as loyalty. Moore et al. (2015) further elaborate on questions regarding loyalty as a single construct, as construed in most structural equation modeling efforts, or as having multi-dimensional properties.

As such, the aim of this paper is to investigate the nature of loyalty to a single destination and to parks more generally. The dominant focus in previous research has been loyalty to a single destination, hence the important contribution of this research to the latter. This investigation includes: (1) describing the loyalty of adult visitors to a single park and to parks more generally; (2) analysing the structure of loyalty as a construct with a particular emphasis on the constituent dimensions; and (3) analysing the influence of selected visitor and visit characteristics to further understand the nature of loyalty. The concept of loyalty and recent associated research in parks and protected areas provide the focus for the literature review. The rationale for selecting Karijini National Park and parks more generally follows. The methods are then described, followed by the results and a discussion of the conceptual and methodological implications of this research.

2. Literature review

Customer loyalty has been long recognised as important in the tourism, hospitality, and leisure fields (Chi, 2012; Oliver, 1999; Tian-Cole, Crompton, & Willson, 2002; Weaver & Lawton, 2011). Loyalty can be simply defined as a commitment to a particular destination, place or brand (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Rivera & Croes, 2010). Loyal customers are important because they are regarded as less sensitive to increased pricing and apart from being repeat purchasers, they can enrol new customers through positive word of mouth. Given it is cheaper to retain existing customers than pursue new ones, clear financial benefits can come from loyalty for businesses and service providers (Weaver & Lawton, 2011).

Loyalty to tourism destinations has been the subject of intense academic interest and debate (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Oppermann, 2000; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). It has generally been investigated as part of a complex relationship with the antecedents of service quality and satisfaction (Dolnicar et al., 2013; Kyle et al., 2004; Moore et al., 2015; Rivera & Croes, 2010; Tian-Cole et al., 2002; Weaver & Lawton, 2011). Visitor loyalty is now considered to be a more accurate predictor and measure of performance than satisfaction (Chi & Qu, 2008; Moore et al., 2015). An influential model in loyalty research is as proposed by Oliver (1999). Loyalty is conceptualised as a complex but sequenced construct (Lee et al., 2007; Weaver & Lawton, 2011). Oliver (1999) described four stages: *cognitive* loyalty where the consumer is aware of the brand; *affective* (attitudinal) loyalty with attendant increased commitment; *conative* loyalty, which is the behavioural intention stage (and the focus on this study); and finally *action* loyalty where intentions are converted to actions. All phases are hypothesized as contributing to the causal relationship of loyalty with visitors

becoming loyal in attitudinal sense, followed by a conative manner and finally in their behavioural actions (Lee et al., 2007; Oliver, 1999; Weaver & Lawton, 2011). Limited use of this model has been made in tourism research in parks; notable exceptions are studies by Lee et al. (2007) and Weaver and Lawton (2011).

Studies have focused on loyalty to destinations (e.g. del Bosque & san Martin, 2008), festivals (e.g. Zabkar, Brencic, & Dmitrovic, 2010), and iconic tourism destinations such as the Galapagos (Rivera & Croes, 2010) and Mauritius (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Structural equation modelling is a favoured method, with the relationships between service quality, satisfaction and loyalty explored (Dolnicar et al., 2013; Kyle et al., 2004; Moore et al., 2015). Other variables frequently included in such models as antecedent to loyalty include destination image (e.g., Prayag & Ryan, 2012), price and value (e.g., Rivera & Croes, 2010), commitment (e.g. Kyle et al., 2004), activity involvement (e.g., Lee et al., 2007), and place attachment (e.g., Lee et al., 2007; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Weaver & Lawton, 2011). This study extends consideration of loyalty beyond a single destination to parks in Australia and more generally. This is a new contribution conceptually and empirically given the focus on destinations and place attachment in research to-date. A broader approach to understanding loyalty was recommended by Moore et al. (2015) in their review and research agenda for loyalty in nature-based tourism.

In tourism research, where loyalty is widely explored using structural equation modelling, many include loyalty as a single construct, albeit with multiple dimensions (Dolnicar et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2015). To add to the confusion, in recent years this end product of satisfaction and quality has been operationalized as 'loyalty' and 'behavioural intentions'. In their meta-analysis of tourism papers addressing satisfaction and behavioural intentions Dolnicar et al. (2013) concluded that it is not possible to distinguish between the two. To add further to the research challenge, researchers such as McKercher and Tse (2012) have suggested that intention to revisit is not a valid proxy for actual repeat visitation. This concern can be countered by collecting data on actual behaviour: for example, how many days in a year the visitor spends recreating at a destination, such as in the study by Lee et al. (2007) at Umpqua National Forest in southwestern Oregon (Lee et al., 2007). Another example of actual behavioural data collected, in a study of visitors to the Appalachian Trail (Kyle et al., 2004), was days spent on and miles hiked along the Trail, and the proportion of annual use devoted to the Trail.

Over the last decade loyalty and behavioural intentions have been the focus on research efforts in ecotourism and park and protected area research (Kim & Brown, 2012; Kyle et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2007; Rivera & Croes, 2010; Ramao, Neuts, Nijkamp, and Shikida 2014; Rodger et al., 2015; Taplin et al., 2016). Confusingly, the end point of such research, as single construct, has been given a plethora of names: loyalty (Romao et al., 2014), behavioural loyalty (Kyle et al., 2004), destination loyalty (Kim & Brown, 2012), and future behavioural intentions (Tian-Cole et al., 2002). Other researchers provide two or more dimensions in their efforts to operationalize loyalty, for example, Rivera and Croes (2010) provide return and recommend as the endpoints for their quality, satisfaction, behavioural intentions model. Lee et al. (2007) sought to operationalize Oliver's (1999) model through having destination loyalty as multi-dimensional, including attitudinal, conative and behavioural loyalty. Dolnicar et al. (2013) rightly note that these diverse operationalization efforts have done little to advance this field, instead leading to confusion and an inability to compare across studies.

Where structural equation modelling has been used for analysing loyalty to natural destinations such as parks, forests, and long distance walk trails, multiple items have been deployed to measure

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