



Visitors' attitudes towards responsible fossil collecting behaviour: An environmental attitude-based segmentation approach

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Visitors' environmental attitudes towards pro-environmental behaviour were examined.
- There were two distinct segments based on environmental attitudes towards fossil collecting.
- Significant differences between two segments were found in terms of age and use of interpretation.
- There is the need to target different communication strategies for effective visitor management.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine visitors' attitudes towards an environmentally-responsible tourist behaviour – fossil collecting – and towards the visitor management strategies for managing this behaviour at an environmentally sensitive tourism destination. In particular, a market segmentation approach based on environmental attitudes was applied to identify distinct types of tourist groups and understand differences between segments in terms of demographic, attitudinal and behavioural characteristics. Data from 453 visitors were collected from the Charmouth coastal area, located in the South West of England, which is popular for fossil collection. The results of the research highlight that such nature-based areas tend to attract tourists who have favourable environmental attitudes and support management approaches related to responsible fossil collection. However, further analysis reveals that two distinct types of environmental attitude-based market segments exist that are significantly different in terms of gender, age and usage patterns of on-site interpretation. This study suggests that targeting the two segments (namely, the “high environmental attitude” versus “low environmental attitude” groups) with different on-site communication strategies is not only possible, but may prove to be a more efficient and effective approach to visitor and site management.

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1. Introduction

The growth in visitor numbers to both inland and coastal areas has led to growing concern about the negative environmental impacts caused by inappropriate tourist behaviour (Brown, Ham, & Hughes, 2010; Leung, Marion, & Farrell, 2001). This is particularly the case in nature-based tourism destinations, that is, destinations where services and facilities for various recreational activities (e.g. camping, bushwalking, wildlife viewing, rock climbing, and fishing) are developed around natural parks, marine parks, conservation reserves, and environmentally sensitive areas (Brown et al., 2010;

Priskin, 2001). In these natural areas, it appears that many other problem behaviours that are the product of misconception, naiveté or ignorance can be managed by less direct strategies such as providing information and education and adopting persuasive communication strategies, while malicious and criminal behaviours require direct management strategies such as regulation and enforcement of penalties (Gramann & Vander Stoep, 1987). Environmental management practices, ranging from regulation to nature interpretation, are thus used in order to minimise the negative environmental impacts of tourist activities, while still responding to tourists' desire for diversified nature-related experiences (Dolnicar, Crouch, & Long, 2008; Kuo, 2002; Marion & Reid, 2007). However, with growing tourism demand from increasingly diverse participants, there appears to be a need for a more strategic approach to on-site communication informed by a better understanding of visitor markets.

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Persuasive communication strategies can be effective in fostering behavioural change, particularly “low impact behaviour” by willing but ill-informed visitors who have a poor understanding of the benefits and consequences associated with the relevant behaviour (Azjen, 1992; Lai, Soric, Nepal, & Cheng, 2009). However, the development of more effective strategies can be challenging for protected area managers, requiring them to identify which behaviours are amenable to persuasion and which visitor groups to target with communication (Brown et al., 2010). In particular, visitors’ attitudes towards both the behaviour and the management approaches for controlling the behaviour are regarded as key determinants of environmentally responsible behaviour (Cottrell, 2003; Lai et al., 2009). Attitudes of visitors to nature-based tourism destinations are neither homogenous nor predictable based on the tourism experiences they select; that is, so-called “ecotourists” are not necessarily more pro-environmental in their attitudes (“environmentally caring”) than other tourists (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008; Luzar, Diagne, Gan, & Henning, 1995; Perkins & Grace, 2009; Sharpley, 2006; Wurzinger & Johansson, 2006). Moreover, empirical findings drawn from previous tourism research indicate that tourists’ attitudes towards environmental behaviour and their commitment to engage in relevant behaviour can vary depending on the site they are visiting and the type of environmental conservation issues at hand (Ballantyne, Packer, & Hughes, 2009; Kim, Airley & Szivas, 2011; Weaver & Lawton, 2004). In other words, not only are nature-based tourists heterogeneous, but an individual tourist’s environmental attitudes and behaviours may play out differently at different sites. The aim of the present study therefore is to determine visitor attitudes towards a site-specific behaviour (in this case, fossil collecting) as well as attitudes towards management strategies regarding this behaviour at one specific nature-based tourism site.

Importantly, recent research suggests the merits of integrating a market segmentation approach into the management of visitors to protected and other nature-based tourism sites (Andereck, 2009; Knopf, 1990; Lai et al., 2009) to help identify differences between subgroups in terms of understanding who they are, their environmental attitudes, and how they engage with and respond to visitor management approaches such as on-site interpretation. By adopting this approach, key messages and communication (regulatory, informative, educational, and persuasive) strategies can be targeted to specific tourist groups to influence their behaviours (Brown et al., 2010; Lai et al., 2009).

Few researchers have used environmental attitudes as a basis for market segmentation in order to inform the management of on-site visitor behaviour (Andereck, 2009; Lai et al., 2009). While environmental values have been used to conduct psychographic segmentation in the specific context of ecotourism, segmentation remains relatively unexplored in nature-based tourism (Dolnicar, 2010). This is also the case for the use of persuasive communication as a tool for managing on-site impacts. As such, a second key focus of the present study is to explore whether nature-based tourists can be segmented based on their environmental attitudes and, if so, how this information might inform on-site management strategies aimed at minimising impacts. The desired management outcome is to strike a balance between meeting demand from diverse tourists and fostering environmental conservation, in this case protection of the geological environment, which has been largely neglected as a management focus in many nature-based areas (Dowling & Newsome, 2010).

This study examines visitor attitudes towards a site-specific responsible behaviour among nature-based tourists at an environmentally sensitive tourism site – Charmouth coastal area in the UK – and explores whether market segments can be differentiated on the basis of their environmental attitudes, socio-demographic

characteristics and use of on-site interpretation. The next section of the paper summarises our review of both the environmental attitude and the segmentation literatures. Responsible “fossil collection” behaviour was chosen for this research as this behaviour has been recently introduced as part of a visitor management strategy at the selected case study site. Profiling visitors based on their attitudes towards responsible fossil collection is thus explored as a platform for refining management strategies – particularly communication strategies – for this nature-based destination. While caution must be exercised in generalising the results of the current study to other contexts and behaviours, the theoretical basis and procedures adopted by this research may be transferable to a wide range of protected area settings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Environmental attitude as it relates to environmentally responsible behaviour

Considerable research has investigated environmental attitude, particularly since it is regarded as a key determinant of environmentally responsible behaviour (Cottrell, 2003; Newhouse, 1990). Environmental attitude is seen as a psychological tendency characterised by the cognitive and affective evaluation of environmentally-related activities or issues (Beaumont, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Fairweather, Maslin, and Simmons (2005) examined tourists’ general environmental attitudes using the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP), a scale originally developed by Dunlap and Van Liere (1978), which purports to measure one’s general “environmental worldview”. The NEP scale consists of 12 items measuring people’s attitudes towards the balance between human activity and environmental protection, the endpoints of which reflect biocentric and anthropocentric perspectives (Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, & Khazian, 2004). Fairweather et al. (2005) identified three segments, biocentric, ambiguous and anthropocentric groups, which held distinctly different environmental attitudes; for example, the biocentric segment favoured the use of ecolabels and expressed a willingness to pay more for environmentally friendly accommodation. Thus, some researchers have viewed general attitudes towards management approaches and environmentally responsible behaviour as being useful indicators of tourists who are environmentally caring – that is, who hold pro-environmental attitudes and are supportive of resource management practices. A logical extension of this line of thinking is that visitors who are found to be environmentally caring would strongly believe that they should do something for the protection of the environment, whilst those with less environmental concern would be more likely to believe environmental problems will resolve themselves (Dolnicar, 2010; Wurzinger & Johansson, 2006). However, Weaver and Lawton (2004) and Ballantyne et al. (2009) argue that there are different types of environmentally caring tourists and that their environmental attitudes can vary depending on the environmental issue they are being asked about or the site they are visiting. With respect to the types of environmental issues that have been researched, some studies examined tourists’ environmental attitudes towards environmental protection in general (Fairweather et al., 2005; Luo & Deng, 2008), while others focused on specific environmental issues, such as beach litter (Brown et al., 2010), CO₂ emissions (Becken, 2004) or the protection of endangered species (Orams, 1997).

Many other studies have demonstrated significant differences between tourist subgroups with respect to site-specific environmental attitudes. Ballantyne et al. (2009), for example, examined specific environmental attitudes of tourists visiting the Mon Repos Conservation Park in Australia. This study found that most visitors

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