

Importance-satisfaction analysis for marine-park hinterlands: A Western Australian case study

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Abstract

Tourist use of national and marine parks continues to increase worldwide. Effective management depends on being able to evaluate the quality of visitors' experiences, as well as protecting the natural environment. In tourism management, importance-performance analysis (IPA) has been used as part of quality management. It has recently been applied to national park management. This paper reconceptualises this analysis to one of importance satisfaction, enabling a focus on the quality of experience. Two methods, importance-performance analysis and service quality gap, were modified and applied in the hinterland of Swan Estuary Marine Park in Western Australia. Both provided data useful for evaluating satisfaction, with the choice of method depending on the end user's resources and requirements as well as cognisance of each method's limitations. For most of the Marine Park attributes, satisfaction exceeded importance and hence no management attention is needed. Exceptions were the condition of the Swan River and associated footpaths, and the presence of litter and wildlife. For these, satisfaction was lower than importance, suggesting management attention is needed. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Importance-performance analysis; Protected area management; Satisfaction; Service quality gap; Swan Estuary Marine Park

1. Introduction

Protected areas such as national and marine parks have long held a special attraction for people. With increasing mobility, education levels and leisure time, their use has increased dramatically over the last two decades (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2002; Scherl & Valentine, 1992). Most protected areas have the dual mandate of conserving natural resources as well as providing opportunities for recreation and tourism. To meet the second part of this mandate, managers require knowledge about visitors and the type of experiences they are seeking. Also, for today's managers, maintaining high-quality experiences is essential if protected areas are to remain competitive with other forms of tourism and retain budgetary allocations from government treasuries (McCool, 2002).

Concerns regarding the effects of increasing levels of use on the quality of visitors' experiences stimulated the first

studies in the 1970s (Manning & Lime, 2000). Over time, satisfaction has become the principal measure of the quality of a visitor's experience, with numerous measures and methods now in use. Understanding visitor satisfaction allows managers to provide facilities and services that match visitor expectations, while also validating that visitors are satisfied with their experiences (Hornback & Eagles, 1999). The search continues, however, for the most effective framework for representing these experiences and measuring their quality (Borrie & Birzell, 2001; McCool, 2002). Also of great interest to researchers and managers alike, is how the opportunities provided by agencies, especially their facilities and services, affect the quality of visitors' experiences (Hamilton & Crompton, 1991; Hollenhorst & Gardner, 1994).

Several approaches to performance analysis in tourism and hospitality research have direct relevance to the experiential component of protected-area management (Ryan & Cessford, 2003). One such approach is importance-performance analysis (IPA) (Oh, 2001). This approach combines measures of performance and associated

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importance in a two-dimensional grid to provide a graphic representation of the performance of managers, suppliers or operators in providing a range of services (Borrie & Birzell, 2001; Oh, 2001). Another related approach is the service quality gap which measures service performance as the difference between expected and perceived evaluations of services (Tribe & Snaith, 1998). Both are relatively easy to use but have had limited application in protected areas (Wade & Eagles, 2003).

This article further develops current work on the quality of tourism experiences in protected areas by focusing on satisfaction and its relationship with importance, as perceived by visitors to protected areas. The widely used importance-performance analysis and the service quality gap are re-conceptualised as importance-satisfaction analyses and applied to visitor use of the hinterland of Swan Estuary Marine Park in Western Australia. The results are compared and the relative efficacy of the methods analysed. The article concludes with management implications.

2. Methods

2.1. Study site

Many of the issues and concerns of terrestrial protected area management, including increasing visitor use and the

associated provision of recreation and tourism opportunities, are also relevant to managing marine protected areas. Marine-based visitor research is lagging behind its terrestrial counterparts, with a lack of information on the types and numbers of marine visitors and their satisfaction with the recreation opportunities provided (Vrana, 1999). Recent increases in the number of marine protected areas, as well as in the numbers visiting these areas, also emphasises the need for visitor-related studies (Shafer & Inglis, 2000).

Conducting this study, with a focus on a marine park, meets the dual objectives of testing the re-conceptualised importance-satisfaction approaches as well as collecting visitor data to inform management. The Swan Estuary Marine Park and associated hinterlands provided the study site (Fig. 1). A narrow band of the associated hinterland is nature reserve, while beyond these boundaries is the Perth metropolitan area. Perth is the capital of the state of Western Australia (WA) and home to over one million people. The Marine Park and adjacent nature reserves are managed by the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), who have a mandate to protect the natural environment as well as providing opportunities for recreation and tourism experiences.

This Marine Park is recognised internationally as important habitat for migratory birds as well as providing a diversity of visitor experiences (CALM, 1999; Keeling,

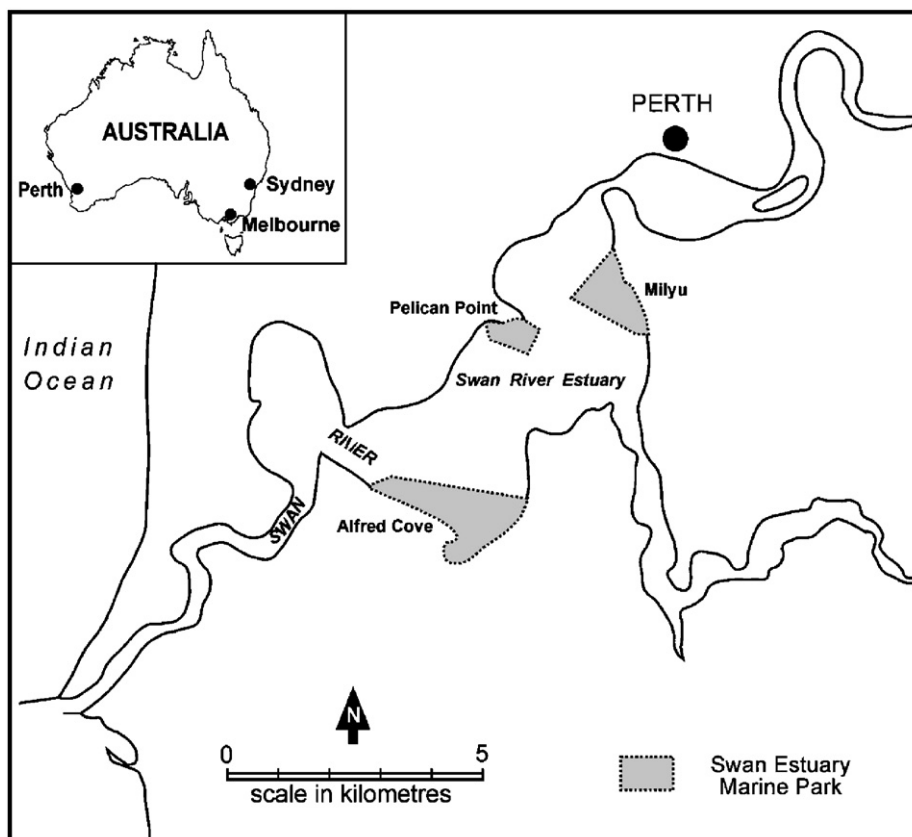


Fig. 1. Location of Swan Estuary Marine Park, Western Australia.

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