

How does 'crowding' affect visitor satisfaction at the Horton Plains National Park in Sri Lanka?



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how crowding affects visitor satisfaction at the Horton Plains National Park (HPNP) in Sri Lanka. 'Crowding' is considered as a norm for estimating social carrying capacity. 'Normative theory' is applied to estimate social norm curves for each viewing point in HPNP to examine the relationship between crowding and visitor satisfaction. The findings indicate that visitor satisfaction decreases with crowding. Using the data on acceptability levels (satisfaction), a multinomial logit model estimates the willingness to pay (WTP) for each scenario, and indicates WTP decreases with crowding. The results of the present study may aid decision making by Park management with regard to (a) fee structures and (b) diversifying tourist activities within the Park for the purpose of enhancing visitor satisfaction while minimizing the crowding.

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1. Introduction

Nature-based tourism is indubitably one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry all over the world (Mehmetoglu, 2007) with 'visitor satisfaction' recognized as one of the key judgements that consumers make with regard to a tourism service (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2003). Therefore, the recreational services and settings provided by nature-based tourism providers including managers of Parks should match visitor demand.

'Visitor crowding' carries both social and ecological effects in outdoor recreation as documented by Graefe et al. (1984), Manning (1999a), Needham, Rollins, and Wood (2004) and Pigram and Jenkins (1999). Among the negative ecological effects are damage to vegetation, collection of plants and animal parts, off-road walking and driving, trampling of grasslands, littering the water bodies, and feeding and disturbing animals. Among the adverse social impacts are unacceptable levels of noise, over-crowded and congested trails and viewing points, unwarranted visitor behaviour and/or actions that would interfere with the viewing pleasure of others, all of which would decrease the levels of enjoyment and satisfaction of visitors at a recreational site. This, in turn, would lead to some visitors either changing recreational sites and/or desisting from repeating their visits in future. Therefore, increasing numbers of visitors to a Park may require Park management to make decisions with regard to the protection

of the quality of park resources for the purpose of maintaining the quality of the visitor experience in the interest of ensuring visitor satisfaction.

There is a growing body of research on areas of the tourism industry that have a direct impact on visitor satisfaction where questionnaire-based quantitative methodologies have been commonly used to measure customer satisfaction. Among the areas that have received the attention of researchers are motivation (Cohen, 1988; Dann, 1977; Gnoth, 1997; Iso Ahola, 1987; Mannel, 1989; Mannel & Iso-Ahola, 1987); social impacts (Lawson, Merret, & Williams, 1996); wilderness perceptions (Higham, 1996; Kearsley, 1990, 1997; Kilskey, 1992; Shultis, 1991; Shultis & Kearsley, 1988); and Carrying Capacity (CC) (Graefe, Vaske, & Kuss, 1984; Shelby, Vaske, & Heberlein, 1989). In addition, Bramwell (1998) introduced the 'place marketing' formula in his study of tourism satisfaction while Joppe (1996) and Haywood (1997) have estimated the positive or negative effects of newly developed products on the local community. Social Carrying Capacity (SCC) is another widely used concept of measuring visitor satisfaction. According to Beaumont (1997), visitor satisfaction levels decrease with increasing numbers of visitors at a particular tourist site.

However, a review of the extant literature on visitor satisfaction suggests that no study has yet estimated visitor satisfaction with regard to 'crowding' in monetary terms. Hence, the present study will estimate levels of visitor satisfaction in relation to increasing numbers of visitors or 'visitor crowding' at different viewing points at the Horton Plains National Park (HPNP) in Nuwaraeliya, Sri Lanka, using SCC, the Normative Theory Approach to SCC, and Willingness-to-Pay (WTP). In the next section, we discuss these concepts in depth.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Social Carrying Capacity (SCC)

According to Sumner (1936), quoted in Manning (1999a), 'Carrying Capacity' (CC) as a concept was first introduced to the field of recreation management in the mid-1930s when the American National Park Service report on policy recommendations for parks in the California Sierras asked the question, "how large a crowd can be turned loose in a wilderness without destroying its essential qualities?" Over the next two decades, Wagar (1951, 1964) began the campaign to include CC as a major principle of recreation management.

Social standards are considered to be normative if there is consensus regarding the norm and its relative importance (Heywood, 2002). SCC, often referred to as 'crowding', can be described as a normative concept because crowding norms are generally understood as visitor-based standards used by individuals and groups for evaluating behaviour and social and environmental conditions (Donnelly, Vaske, & Shelby, 1992). If park managers have available to them such normative standards, they can be used for managing the SCC of recreation in and conservation of protected areas.

The perception of crowding is a complex phenomenon, which is influenced not only by use levels but also by user conflicts, unwanted visitor behaviour and resource conditions. Several studies have shown how visitor volume and unwanted visitor behaviour can compromise a recreational experience and even lead to user conflicts (Graefe et al., 1984; Manning, 1999a; Rudell & Gramann, 1994; Shelby et al., 1989). According to Manning (1999b), visitors may hold widely divergent perceptions on the preferred conditions for recreation settings and what constitutes 'disturbance' by crowding conditions." To date, most crowding research has focussed however on recreation in wilderness or natural areas with rather low user densities as opposed to more developed or urban recreation settings (Westover & Collins, 1987).

2.2. Normative theory approach in estimation of SCC

Within the context of CC, scientific approaches to park and wilderness related values have been developed, primarily for the formulation of standards for 'crowding'. These consider the number of visitors in a given viewing point as an indicator while the maximum acceptable number of visitors is estimated through the 'normative approach' as widely used by Manning (2007). In this approach, visitors are asked directly about the maximum acceptable number of encounters within a hypothetical context. This numerical approach (Manning, Lime, Freimund, & Pitt, 1996) depends on the evaluation by respondents of encounters with other visitors during a specific time-period, mostly the number per day. The analyses of such data yield encounter norms or preference curves, such norm curves tracing the acceptability ratings of a sample of visitors for encountering a range of groups of other visitors along a trail or at a site per time unit. In addition, visual hypothetical approaches have been applied for the purpose of measuring 'crowding' in outdoor recreation (Behan, Richards, & Loe, 2001; Davis & Lindvall, 2000; Manning et al., 1996; Manning, Valliere, Wang, & Jacobi, 1999). According to Manning et al. (1996), a visual presentation of crowding situations seems particularly appropriate in high use areas where it may be unrealistic to expect respondents to accurately judge the maximum number of encounters that would be acceptable to them without such visual aids.

Many authors have used acceptance or preference as the evaluative response scale (Freimund, Vaske, Donnelly, & Miller, 2002; Manning et al., 1996). In a study conducted in 1999, Manning et al. used absolute tolerance as the evaluative response scale where visitors were asked whether the visually presented condition was acceptable or unacceptable to them and whether, on the basis of their response, they would shift their use to a different location or time. Fig. 1 presents a hypothetical social norm curve in order to illustrate the normative theory and

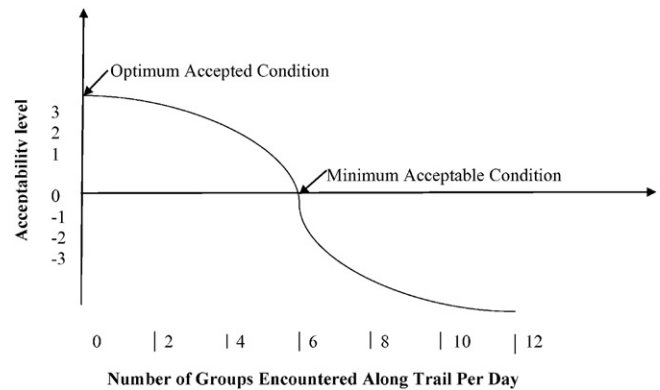


Fig. 1. Hypothetical social norm curve (Manning, 2001; Manning, 2007).

methods where the norm curve traces the average acceptability rating of sample recreationists for encountering a range of groups of visitors along a trail (Manning, 2001) or a particular viewing point. The minimum acceptable condition is here defined as the point at which the norm curve crosses the neutral point of the acceptability scale. This is the point at which aggregate ratings of condition of the indicator variable fall out of the acceptable range into the unacceptable range. At this point, the maximum acceptable 'crowding' standard (i.e., the minimum satisfaction regarding crowding) is measured.

Several approaches to measuring norms have evolved with time as research on normative standards has proceeded. In general, outdoor recreation-related norms have been measured using a "numerical" or "narrative" approach. For example, respondents might be asked to evaluate a range of encounters (0, 5, 10, 15, etc.) with other groups per day along a nature trail. The normative data derived are then aggregated and graphed to construct a "norm curve" from which social norms might be identified.

2.3. SCC and willingness-to-pay

One of the methods commonly used for non-market valuation is the Contingent Valuation Method (CVM). CVM is 'a tool to place an amount or value on goods and services that are typically not exchanged in the market place' (Ajzen & Driver, 1992). One of the most important concepts in CVM is willingness to pay (WTP), which is 'the maximum amount that consumers are prepared to pay for a good or service' (Asian Development Bank, 1997). More specifically, in the context of tourism research, WTP is the amount of money that a person is willing and able to pay to enjoy recreational facilities (McConnell, 1985).

Scholars have conducted several studies on the WTP entrance fee for parks and other recreational places during the past three decades (Arim & Kramer, 2002; Laarman & Gregersen, 1996; Reynisdottir, Song, & Agrusa, 2008; Wang & Jia, 2012). Though these studies have provided information on factors to be considered in determining a park entrance fee, they have not provided information on how crowding affects a visitor's WTP, which gives a monetary value for visitor satisfaction. The present study shows that an increase in crowding may decrease the visitor's satisfaction which would in turn lead to decreased WTP for a particular tourism product or service. Therefore, in the present study, not only are crowding standards at different viewing points in the study site estimated but the mean WTP values under different 'crowding' levels too have been estimated for HPNP.

3. Study site: Horton Plains National Park (HPNP)

The HPNP is situated in the south of the Nuwaraeliya district of Sri Lanka and forms a plateau in the south-eastern corner of the main

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