Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism 17 (2017) 64–76

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jort

Iowa wetlands outdoor recreation visitors' decision-making process: An extended model of goal-directed behavior

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Decision-making process
Model of goal-directed behavior
Wetlands
Outdoor recreation
Perceived benefits

ABSTRACT

While wetlands are recognized to be a potential nature-based tourism destination, little information has been known regarding wetlands visitors for outdoor recreation activities. This study developed an extended model of goal-directed behavior to examine the impact of perceived benefits of wetlands on the decision-making process and to identify differences between residents and non-residents. An online survey was conducted to outdoor recreationists in Iowa and 462 responses were used for data analysis. The structural equation modeling revealed that perceived benefits of wetlands were significant in the decision-making process. Desire was an important key element, conceptually different from behavioral intention, to link attitude, anticipated emotions, and frequency of past behavior to behavioral intention. Compared to non-residents, residents showed that positive attitude and past experience were significant in forming desire and intention to visit wetlands. The research contributes to highlighting the importance of wetlands benefit and group differences, extending the literature on decision-making process in the outdoor recreation context. This study suggests wetland operators develop differentiated marketing promotions by recognizing complicated decision-making processes and group differences by residential status.

Management implications:

1. This study shows that the perceived benefits of wetlands play a vital role in strengthening the decision-making process to visit wetlands. Wetlands management are suggested to recognize the essential values of wetlands and develop promotional programs based on the environmental, educational, and recreational resources in wetlands.
2. Furthermore, this study suggests marketing managers should consider differences between residents and non-residents in the decision-making process for planning effective advertisements or promotions.
3. Residents showed that a positive attitude toward wetlands played a significant role in forming a strong desire to visit wetlands. And they were more likely to revisit wetlands if they were frequent visitors in the past, compared to non-residents. Therefore, tourism organizers are suggested to recognize frequent visitors as an important market among residents and to develop an appropriate marketing program, meeting the corresponding needs and demands of the consumers.

1. Introduction

Iowa has been recognized for its agricultural production and possession of numerous natural resources and heritage sites. In particular, Iowa has abundant wetlands where plants and animals live surrounded by non-flowing water or soils that are saturated with water (Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2005). The state constitutes the southernmost area of the Prairie Pothole region with 143,000 acres of wetlands located in central and northern Iowa. These wetlands have varying sizes and heights from less than one acre to shallower than large lakes such as Storm Lake, Clear Lake, Spirit Lake, and West Okoboji in Iowa (Iowa Association of Naturalists, 2001).

Wetlands provide a range of direct and indirect beneficial functions and services such as food resources, flood control, storm protection, water purification, and agriculture (Barbier, 1993; Barbier, Acreman, & Knowler, 1997; Oglethorpe & Miliadou, 2000; Othman, Bennett, & Blamey, 2004). Furthermore, they offer various recreational opportunities based on natural resources such as plants and animals (Hentges

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2017.01.001
Received 16 June 2016; Received in revised form 6 January 2017; Accepted 7 January 2017
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& Stewart, 2010; Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, 2011). In fact, about 50 million Americans visit wetlands for wildlife viewing and photography, spending approximately $10 billion a year (Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), 2010).

Iowa's wetlands have been recently identified as one of America's Great Outdoor areas (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2011). This recognition is expected to provide Iowa with a potential opportunity to promote the State as an outdoor leisure destination. Some states (e.g., Florida, Colorado, and Arkansas) that have wetlands have made promotional efforts to attract potential visitors for outdoor recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing. Previous wetlands-based research has generally focused on wetlands characteristics, conservation, restoration, monitoring, and assessment from an environmental perspective (Erwin, 2009; Hentges & Stewart, 2010; Stewart & Downing, 2008). However, relatively little research has explored in identifying who visitors are, why they visit, and what processes are utilized in making a decision from a consumer perspective.

A model of goal-directed behavior (MGB) was proposed to examine the decision-making process (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). The model describes the decision-making mechanism, concerning various factors such as desire, past experiences, motivational and affective factors in addition to attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control that were introduced in the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen, 1991). Numerous studies have successfully applied the model in understanding the decision-making process across various fields including marketing, psychology, sociology, and tourism (Leone, Perugini, & Ercolani, 2004; Richetin, Perugini, Adjali, & Hurling, 2008; Song, Lee, Kang et al., 2012; Taylor, Hunter, & Longfellow, 2006).

Wetlands visitors consist of residents who live in the same state and non-residents who travel from other states (McCool, 1978; McDowall, 2010). However, the majority of research has focused on residents only in understanding visitors' behaviors (Lee, 2013; Zhang & Lei, 2012), which results in little research on non-residents and group differences in the decision-making to visit wetlands (Choi & Murray, 2010; Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Lee, 2013; Zhang & Lei, 2012). This indicates that there is a need to include non-residents and develop a more extensive approach in understanding visitors' attitude and behavior toward wetlands, comparing differences between the two groups.

Given the lack information about wetland visitors, this study developed a conceptual framework to understand visitors' decision-making process. The purpose of this study is to explore visitors' decision-making process in predicting future intention to visit wetlands, and to examine if there are differences in the process between residents and non-residents. In particular, the objectives include: (1) to explore if visitors' perceived benefits of wetlands are important in influencing their desire and future intention to visit wetlands; and (2) to examine if residents and non-residents differ in causal relationships depicted in the destination decision-making process model. A theoretical framework was developed as an extended MGB (EMGB) by incorporating the perceived benefits of wetlands into the MGB.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perceived benefits in wetlands

Wetlands are lands that are saturated or covered with standing (non-flowing) water, either permanently, or for a large part of the year (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2012a). Examples of wetlands include marshes, ponds, swamps, and bogs. Wetlands are smaller in size and shallower than lakes (e.g., Clear Lake, Lake Okoboji). Wetlands provide cultural, aesthetic, educational, spiritual as well as recreational opportunities (McInnes, 2007). Wetlands can provide people with various benefits such as supporting communities, regulating natural areas, and preserving cultural benefits (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2016). Residents recognize the value of the environment of wetlands that provide a connection to the area for the community (Nassauer, 2004). The values of wetlands can be enhanced by supporting wetlands management, expanding/or regulating access to communities for cultural activities (e.g., camping), and establishing the citizen-based advisory group or watershed council for wetlands (Davenport et al., 2010; Nassauer, 2004). Wetlands must be designed, concerning wetland restorations and landscape characteristics such as recreational access, improved scenery, and increased safety (Hands & Brown, 2002).

According to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2004), wetlands have been recognized as one of the important ecosystems providing numerous benefits to people, namely, environmental (e.g., biodiversity conservation, flood prevention), educational (e.g., interpretative services), and recreational (e.g., leisure activities) realms.

2.2. Environmental benefit

Wetland functions include water quality, flood control, and wildlife habitat as ecological or hydrologic benefits. Wetlands provide diverse and valuable environmental benefit along the shorelines or along the banks of streams (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2012b). Environmental benefits relate to environmental and ecological goods of wetlands such as aquatic habitat, biodiversity, flood damage, and environmental forest areas and usually correspond to a product's tangible attributes (Carlsson, Frykblom, & Liljenstolpe, 2003; Othman et al., 2004; Trebitz et al., 2005).

2.3. Educational benefit

Educational benefits refer to research, interpretive services, and ecological learning opportunities derived from wetlands (Birol, Karousakisb, & Koundouric, 2006; Moore & Hunt, 2012; Zedler & Leach, 1998). Wetlands provide various educational and research opportunities such as nature observation, exhibition, demonstration, experiential learning, and field laboratories for scientific research (Calhoun, McGarry, & Reeve, 2003; De Groot, Wilson, & Boumans, 2002). Wetlands can offer these positive benefits to schools, local communities, and tourists (Birol et al., 2006).

2.4. Recreational benefit

Wetlands consist of important natural resources that offer leisure activities to visitors. In particular, wetlands provide a wide range of recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and hiking (Moeltner & Woodward, 2009). A large number of studies have focused on tourists' recreational activities, particularly wildlife watching (Lee, Lee, Kim, & Mjelde, 2010; Naidoo & Adamowicz, 2005). People who visit wetlands for recreational benefits appreciate the importance of unique nature-based resources as those benefits cannot be substituted with other forms (i.e., watching TV) (Gürlük & Rehber, 2008; Ward & Beal, 2000). Therefore, recreational benefits can further play a powerful incentive in conserving the ecosystem (Ye, Laws, Costanza, & Brix, 2016).

2.5. Economic benefit

Wetlands can also contribute to the benefit for the development of national and local economies such as expanding job opportunities and increasing national income through tourism industry (Aber, Pavri, & Aber, 2012). The economic benefits of wetlands are estimated based on the services and functions of wetlands. This indicates that the economic benefit is considered as monetary consequences of wetland values to local communities, recreations, and tourism industries while environmental, educational, and recreational benefits are primary values of wetlands (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers & Matanuska-Susitna

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