



Visitor perspectives of risk management in a natural tourism setting: An application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour



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ABSTRACT

Effective management of visitor risk in nature-based tourism and recreation settings requires land managers to have a clear understanding of the perspective of the visitor. The Theory of Planned Behaviour is presented as a valuable analytical framework to better understand visitors' motivation to voluntarily engage in a behaviour classified by land managers as being risky. Using Penguin Island in Western Australia as a study site, visitors' reasons for walking across the water-covered sandbar which management had identified as risky were explored. Visitors undertaking this behaviour were interviewed using the theory as a conceptual guide to understand influencing visitors' decision making process. Results revealed that the activity of walking the sandbar was an experience offering instrumental as well as affective benefits. Subjective norms also influenced visitors' decision to engage in the behaviour. Even though the decision to perform the behaviour was perceived as a free and deliberate choice, visitors approved management guidance stemming from perceptions of shared responsibility for safety at the site. Our research illustrates that the Theory of Planned Behaviour is a useful tool to identify important insights into individual and situational aspects of visitor behaviour in risky situations.

Management implications: Managing visitor safety in Australian protected areas is a complex interplay between risk and responsibility. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour as a conceptual framework, the behaviour investigated was disseminated into three distinct elements on which future intervention strategies can be built.

- Visitors' perceived benefits derived from pursuing the risky activity outweighed perceived risks and visitors showed a personal detachment from danger.
- Visitors were encouraged to follow others already pursuing the activity, because seeing others led to the belief that it must be safe.
- Visitors felt that responsibility for their own safety was shared due to the high presence of management including signs, life guards, and commercial operations.

1. Introduction

The natural environment is a key ingredient in nature-based tourism and recreation (Fredman, Wall-Reinius, & Grunden, 2012); however, such environments can embody a wide variety of risks to visitors (Bauer, 2001). Visitor risk is defined in terms of the uncertain consequences that exposure to environmental hazards may have for individuals who visit natural environments (Espiner, 2001; Sakals, Wilford, Wellwood, & MacDougall, 2010). Environmental hazards can

include a variety of different factors such as exposure to adverse weather conditions (Jeuring & Becken, 2013), unstable terrain or rock falls (Aucote, Miner, & Dahlhaus, 2012; Hayes, 2008), dangerous animals (Newsome, Lewis, & Moncrieff, 2004; Reed & Snow, 2014), or tidal currents and ocean rips (Matthews, Andronaco, & Adams, 2014; McKay, Brander, & Goff, 2014). Managers of protected areas, where much nature-based tourism and recreation takes place, generally operate under a duty of care principle and are legally required to manage situations where visitors are exposed to hazards (e.g.

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Ghelichipour & Muhar, 2008; McDonald, 2003).

The management of visitor risks poses significant challenges to protected area managers as they need to balance accessibility of nature-based experiences for visitors with their legal responsibilities to manage risk (Lalasz, 2013). Visitor risk management practice requires protected area managers to identify and assess potential risks to visitors and then determine which control measures to implement in order to promote the safety of visitors (VSCG, 2011). As a result, managers need to view the environment from the perspective of the visitor who approaches the hazard, including making assumptions about visitors' skills, experience and their likely behaviour. Following this, managers must then decide which risk management tools to apply to either mitigate the risks (e.g. through physical changes to the landscape) or manage the risk by influencing visitor behaviour (e.g. through installation of warning messages or restricting access to the hazard) (VSCG, 2011).

Managers are often surprised by the observation that some visitors choose to ignore risk management interventions put in place, deliberately behaving in ways that put themselves at risk (Espiner, 2001; Hayes, 2008; Parkin & Morris, 2005; Rickard, McComas, & Newman, 2011). Espiner (2001) suggested this may be because managers and visitors operate in different risk dimensions, indicating that perceptions of risk as well as priorities differ between the two parties. Protected area managers tend to determine the level of risk as a function of the probability and severity of a negative outcome occurring from a hazard, based on their specialised understanding of the natural setting as well as previous records of accidents and fatalities (Kennedy, Sherker, Brighton, Weir, & Woodroffe, 2013; Sakals et al., 2010). Visitors, on the other hand, tend to assess the natural setting rather intuitively (Espiner, 2001) and the pursuit of nature-based activities is associated with a sense of freedom and choice (Williams, 2001). In other words, managers focus on avoiding costly liability claims, whilst visitors are seeking to have a positive outdoor experience (Espiner, 2001; McDonald, 2003).

For risk management interventions to be effective, visitors' attitudes and social experiences need to be considered (Ham et al., 2009). Effective management of visitor risk in the context of nature-based tourism and recreation requires a clear understanding of the visitor perspective, including decision making factors influencing behaviour as applicable to any given situation. This paper uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2005, 2012) as an analytical framework to better understand the visitor perspective in the context of risk in nature-based tourism and recreation. As a means of illustration, visitors walking across a water-covered sandbar from the mainland to Penguin Island, Western Australia were interviewed to better understand their motivation to voluntarily engage in this behaviour which has been classified by protected area managers as risky.

2. The Theory of Planned Behaviour

2.1. Motivation of behaviour based on beliefs

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) was designed to explain human behaviour in specific situations (Ajzen, 2005). It assumes that people base their behaviour upon careful consideration of available information, or beliefs, relevant to the behaviour at the time of making a decision, taking account of possible implications of their actions within different contexts (Ajzen & Driver, 1991). According to the TPB, people's motivation to behave in a specific way within a specific context is based on three interrelated elements: an individual's attitude towards the behaviour (behavioural beliefs), subjective norms (normative beliefs), and perceived behavioural control (control beliefs) (see Fig. 1) (Ajzen, 2005, 2012).

For the TPB motivation of behaviour begins with the individual realising that there is a situation that needs a decision to be made. From here an individual cognitively assesses possible courses of action, collects information on possible outcomes, and evaluates each potential

outcome based on the probability of each outcome as well as the values placed on each outcome (Lalasz, 2013). By determining and evaluating these possible consequences, individuals form beliefs about an expected outcome linked to performing the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). According to Ajzen (1991), this attitude component consists of both, instrumental and affective beliefs. Instrumental beliefs refer to the perceived benefits and costs of associated with the behaviour (*is it beneficial or harming?*), whilst affective beliefs are feelings derived from performing a behaviour (*is it enjoyable or unenjoyable?*) (Ajzen, 1991; Walker, 2013). Affective beliefs stem from the positive or negative evaluation of a specific behaviour, recognising that affect heuristics may colour evaluative beliefs in that "they may be based on invalid or selective information, be self-serving, or otherwise fail to correspond to reality" (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000, p. 7). It follows that attitudes toward a behaviour form most favourably when individuals believe this behaviour to result in beneficial and enjoyable outcomes.

According to the TPB, the process of reaching a decision on future behaviour is also shaped by social influences, or normative beliefs, such as the opinions that important others would place on them performing or not performing a behaviour (*do they approve or disapprove?*), including the actual motivation to comply with the wishes of these important others (Ajzen, 2005; Ham et al., 2009; Walker, 2013). Ravis and Sheeran (2003) suggest that the subjective norm component also extends to include social influences of descriptive nature (*do others actually do it or not?*), in that, direct observations of others performing the behaviour allows individuals to make inferences about the decision making processes of others, which may also be used in their own decision making process.

Finally, individuals consider any presence or absence of facilitators or inhibitors of the behaviour in question (*is it easy or difficult?*) and evaluate their actual capability or control to perform the behaviour if they wish (*do I have little control or a lot?*) (Ajzen, 2012; Walker, 2013). Cognitive evaluation on perceived difficulty to perform a behaviour and the degree of individual freedom to do so forms the perceived behavioural control factor included in the TPB.

2.2. The TPB and visitor behaviour in conditions of risk

Risk in nature-based tourism and recreation is characterised by the uncertainty about a potential negative consequence stemming from the exposure to natural hazards. Individuals perceive, evaluate and respond to risk in a variety of ways, depending on psychological processes and the perceived situational context at the time of making a decision (Trimpop, 1994). In light of this pre-requisite, this study explored risky behaviour in the context of nature-based tourism and recreation guided by the TPB as a conceptual framework. By acknowledging that visitors' attitudes and social experiences as occurring need to be considered in risk management interventions, the theory is used to structure motivational constructs in order to enter the 'visitor risk dimension' (Espiner, 2001) and allows the decision making processes of visitors facing risk to be explored.

Firstly, in line with the conceptual constructs of the TPB, when visitors are faced with the decision whether to perform a risky behaviour, they form an attitude towards the behaviour, which may be of positive or negative nature. The likelihood of them experiencing an adverse outcome is cognitively evaluated, as is the expected severity of this outcome, which is balanced against the benefits visitor expect to gain. Dickson (2012) suggested that the participation in risky activities in the context of outdoor recreation and tourism only makes sense when individuals expect to gain benefits, for example allowing one to experience hormonal arousal such as excitement and thrill (Fletcher, 2010; Schlegelmilch & Ollenburg, 2013) or skill and competence development (Barlow, Woodman, & Hardy, 2013; Buckley, 2012). Parkin and Morris (2005) suggest that risk taking may also be influenced by the simple expectation to have a fun experience, without giving much consideration on what may go wrong.

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