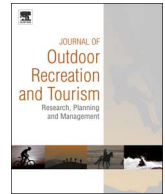




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Tourism operators' perspectives of environmental supply of guided tours in national parks

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ABSTRACT

Environmental supply is a concept that links tourism demand to the sustainability of park offerings of natural features, physical attributes, management initiatives and/or governance policies that influence environmental conservation and protection of ecological and cultural environments. This study presents results of commercial tour operator's perspectives of environmental supply in two highly used Canadian Rocky Mountain national parks. Understanding of environmental supply, from a commercial stakeholder perspective, contributes positively to park management actions regarding commercial visitor activities and behaviours in protected national areas. Tour operators must supply quality visitor experiences while operating within a different policy environment than required by other tourism operators providing guided tours outside of park boundaries. This paper includes the results of a four-stage mixed methodology including one-on-one field interviews and surveys targeting commercial tour guiding businesses operating within Banff and Jasper national parks from 2011 through 2015. Each interview included formal questions, ranging from a description of the types of activities included during tours to actual or perceived limitations placed on operations due to managers' considerations about environmental supply. Results presented are from the final 2015 study, reflecting 17 randomly sampled formal interviews and 41 completed on-line surveys with representatives of tour companies operating within Banff or Jasper national parks; this equates to a useable return rate of 43.6%. Both qualitative and quantitative results are discussed and grouped for presentation.

Management implications: Research informs decision making by providing the following:

1. Understanding of how tourism operators perceive their roles and abilities and how these relate to creating a quality visitor experience, a sustainable business and assurance for the conservation of natural resources within a protected park environment;
2. Understanding of the concept of environmental supply and identifying which characteristics of environmental supply are important for guided tour operators who are attempting to meet park environmental management standards while also meeting commercial tourism demands;
3. Identification of possible 'weak links' or informational gaps in a government agency's process-driven approach to managing tours and guided recreational activities in national parks; and
4. Demonstration of the value of social science research in illuminating the link between practice and policy as it relates to tourism and environment for protected areas.

1. Introduction

Functions of sustainable tourism are a challenge in national parks where ecological values are often in direct opposition to human use activities. Ecosystem services, such as use of the natural environment for recreation, directly benefit human use while impacting natural park resources. Inherent contradictions (between human use and protection)

enshrined in the 1930 National Parks Act and ensuing policy documents continue to contribute to the contentiousness of decisions relating to commercial tourism operations and visitor activities and behaviours within Canada's national parks (Canada's National Park Act, 1930).

Sustainable tourism refers to a form of tourism in which the use of resources meets the needs of visitors while preserving the environment for the enjoyment of generations to come (Hall, 1998; Hunter, 1997). In

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this definition, sustainable tourism ties together concern for the land use and carrying capacities of ecological systems with the challenges of human uses. The management of sustainable tourism includes environmental sustainability (environmental management) and sustainability of the tourism experience (visitor management) in national parks. Over time, an understanding of natural and ecological processes in national parks has evolved with a strong focus on physical scientific research. Environmental management initiatives influencing environmental protection legislation and policies have often evolved devoid of social science research. The impacts of tourism activities in national parks, however, remain a perceived threat to ecological integrity where visitor management objectives focus on commercial tourism ventures and development. Despite the best science, policy and legislative tools at their disposal, national parks such as Banff and Jasper, in the Canadian Rockies, continue to struggle with the consistent application of a balanced management approach between environmental protection and human uses (Dearden & Rollins, 2009; Manning, 2007).

Over time, creative approaches to understanding and addressing both traditional human-use values and ecological integrity-based management policies have become necessary in national parks, especially where visitation levels are high and sections of some parks have been land-marked as attractive tourism destinations for international visitors. Consequently, conservationists and commercial tourism operators are currently acting side-by-side in a federal parks policy environment that often focuses deliberately on encouraging high visitation while managing and attempting to protect natural and cultural resources and minimizing negative visitor-use impacts.

An ecologically-oriented visitor management approach is necessary in order that park mandate and management effectiveness targets might be met. This includes understanding and assessing the demand for tourism experiences of both international and domestic visitors that are participating in commercial guided tours in national parks.

Environmental supply is one recent conceptual approach that attempts to link the growing demand for commercial tourism use of national park landscapes to the supply of quality visitor experience (McNicol, 2015). Environmental supply includes all aspects of the natural environment and provides an interface to evaluate natural features, physical attributes, management initiatives and/or governance policies about environmental management and conservation to commercial business considerations. Environmental supply, therefore, will include the ecosystems of the park destination, visitor education and interpretive programs, zoning and access, environmental impact assessment procedures (such as class screening for businesses), policies and guidelines, and any other characteristics, offerings and initiatives that contribute to visitor satisfaction and may impact the conservation and/or preservation of nature at a visitor-centered site. How commercial tour operators respond to and manage these for environmental protection in a conservation environment will determine tourism sustainability at the destination (McNicol, 2016a). Inherent in this concept is protection of the environment that is the foundation of sustainable tourism (Bramwell & Lane, 1993, 2008; Butler, 1993; McCool & Bozak, 2016).

To function credibly within a national park, commercial operators must understand park management directives, policies and operational procedures. If there is lack of awareness or understanding, then both parties need to identify where the gap or weak link occurs to achieve a balance of goals and objectives that will result in sustainable tourism (Kilipirisand & Zardava, 2012). Skipping an important step of how environmental supply is interpreted by suppliers as they seek to accommodate tourist demand, suggests that park managers will miss a clear understanding of what needs to be measured for integration of visitor satisfaction with environmental management (McCool, Moisey, & Nickerson, 2001; McNicol, 2016a, 2016b; Ryan, 2003; Tribe, 2008).

Research has revealed that a major group of visitors to Banff and Jasper National Parks are those people that actively seek out the services of commercial tour operators who provide a diversity of activities

and educational experiences within both front country and back country areas (Paran & Rettie, 2009; Parks Canada Agency, 2007). At the same time, as recreational and tourism activities and infrastructure diversify and grow in numbers, national park managers are passing more and more responsibilities to private delivery. Commercial tourism operations are currently providing increased recreation and visitor opportunities within high-use parks and in high-density areas of national parks. New park recreation opportunities, such as climbing via-ferratas, zip lines and elevated 'skywalks' in Canada's national parks have become activities offered by third party operators working for privately-owned tour businesses.

While commercial guiding activities provide benefits to tourists and park visitors, uncontrolled guiding activities can have negative effects on ecosystems and natural areas (Buckley, 2000; Manning, 2007). For instance, guiding activities may increase the number of visitors to environmentally sensitive areas in the parks. Some guiding operations are associated with large group sizes, or with seasonal or repetitive activity patterns that may cause increased disturbances to vegetation, wildlife or other visitors' experience in the backcountry. High levels of use can result in crowded conditions at trailheads and viewpoints, also affecting the quality of visitors' experiences (Boyd, 2002; Buckley, 2004). These issues are especially problematic for first-time and international visitors who are unfamiliar with more secluded areas of the parks and/or knowledge of the best times to visit for a quieter experience.

This paper seeks to describe, relate and prioritize tourism operators' understanding of their relationships to the characteristics of environmental supply. Research results identify the different aspects of environmental supply given the importance of commercial businesses in Banff and Jasper national parks in the Rocky Mountains of Western Canada. Qualitative annotation, provided during supplementary field interviews, supports how aspects of environmental supply affect commercial business operations. This information subsequently provides a compilation of the most important characteristics of environmental supply. These are discussed within the context of the national park mandate and management goals as they contribute to the sustainability of a quality visitor experience and a protected natural park environment.

2. Commercial tourism and protected areas

Protection of the natural resources in parks with high visitation and an increasing diversity of recreational activities includes recognition by stakeholders of the need to balance commercially hosted tourist behaviours with conservation initiatives (Jamal & Dredge, 2011; Manning, 2001). Ryan (2003) suggests that stakeholders in the tourism industry become allies of environmental protection when there is a common cause for preserving the quality of the landscape. Studies in environmental management clearly emphasize an ongoing need to include commercial tour operators in national park decision making and monitoring to understand visitation impacts (For example: Reid, Fig, Magome, & Leader-Williams, 2004; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Rodger, Smith, Davis, Newsome, & Patterson, 2010; Heck, Dearden, McDonald, & Carver, 2011).

As Hall (1998) has declared, a landscape in any tourism environment is a consumer product. This often fragile product relies on the sustainable management of selective supply at the destination. At the same time, a protected area, such as a national park, relies on the planning and management of a supply of recreational activities and services that ensure natural resource conservation and a quality visitor experience (Bronson & Noble, 2006; Tisdell & Wilson, 2012; White & Noble, 2012).

National parks and tourism necessarily bring together two camps: economic development and conservation (Eagles, 2007). In fact, in the national parks of the Rocky Mountains of Canada, conservation was adopted as an original tool to protect wilderness while ensuring that tourists from foreign countries (mostly Europe) would keep coming for

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