



Enhancing satisfaction and sustainable management: Whale watching in the Azores



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Seeing whales, cost of the trip, boat type contribute to whale watching satisfaction.
- Satisfaction is related to participants' place of residence.
- Performance-only approach provides better insight to satisfaction than IP analysis.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores satisfaction with whale watching tours in relationship to expectations and demographic variables and identifies tour aspects that contribute to satisfaction. Based on a survey of 466 participants it applies both importance-performance (IP) analysis and a performance-only perspective to strengthen the reliability of the results and enable a critical analysis of both approaches. Environmental friendly conditions were the most important expectation. Seeing one whale, seeing lots of whales, the cost of the trip and the boat type were the most influential factors contributing to satisfaction. Cost has not been previously identified as a factor influencing the satisfaction of whale watching customers. Satisfaction was related to participants' place of residence, with Northern Americans and Northern Europeans being more satisfied than participants from Southern and Western Europe. Some results of the IP analysis have little impact on satisfaction, suggesting that the performance-only approach provides a more valid insight into satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Measuring satisfaction in recreation activities

There are two dominant conceptual approaches for measuring satisfaction in outdoor recreation. One is rooted in expectancy theory and suggests that participants engage in recreation activities with the expectation that this will fulfill selected needs, motivations, or other desired states (Manning, 2011; Oliver, 1980). The congruence between expectations and outcomes defines satisfaction (Chon, 1989; Dann, 1981). If expectations are met or exceeded,

the participant is satisfied and unfulfilled expectations alter judgments of satisfaction about a destination or activity (NOE & Uysal, 1997; Pearce, 2006). Several approaches derive from this model including contrast theory, aspiration theory, gap analysis and importance-performance analysis (Kozak, 2001a).

The other dominant approach to satisfaction assessment is the performance-only perspective where the customer's perception of the quality of the product or experience is what really matters for satisfaction (Kozak, 2001a; Pearce, 2006). It is argued that regardless of the existence of previous expectations, the customer is likely to be satisfied when a product or service performs at a desired level. Clarity of the task for the respondent and consequently higher reliability of results are advantages of this strategy. The approach is recommended for measuring tourist satisfaction with scenic qualities and environmental features as opposed to instrumental, basic

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setting features of an experience (such as toilets, physical comfort of the location) (Pearce, 2006). Studies applying this approach examine which factors are related to satisfaction.

Generally, studies measuring satisfaction apply either a technique based on expectancy theory or on a performance-only perspective. In this study both approaches are applied to measure satisfaction with whale watching tours enabling a critical analysis of the two approaches for measuring satisfaction in outdoor activities.

1.2. Human dimensions of whale watching

Whale watching is a marine wildlife tourism market with the potential to generate economic and environmental benefits to regional economies. Whale watching in Europe generated 97 million dollars of revenue in 2008 and has grown at an annual rate of 7% during the last decade (O'Connor, Campbell, Cortez, & Knowles, 2009).

Research on whale watching has studied the potential environmental impacts (e.g. Bejder et al., 2006; Duffus, 1996; Lusseau, 2004; Magalhães et al., 2002), as well as recognizing the complexity of factors influencing whale watchers such as participant personality, attitude, motivations, preferences, satisfaction and perceptions (e.g. Andersen & Miller, 2006; Amante-Helweg, 1996; Avila-Foucat, Sanchez Vargas, Fisch Jordan, & Ramirez Flores, 2013; Christensen, Needham, & Rowe, 2009; Duffus & Dearden, 1993; Evans, 2005; Higham & Carr, 2003; Orams, 2000; Valentine, Birtles, Curnock, Arnold, & Dunstan, 2004). However, what people value in a whale watching trip and which factors contribute to overall satisfaction have been less studied.

Satisfaction with outdoor activities can be influenced by many variables (Orams, 2000). The demographic profile of the visitor can influence satisfaction including gender (Musa, 2002), education level (Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001), previous experience (Christensen et al., 2009) and nationality (Kozak, 2001a; Moscardo, 2006; Pearce, 2006). Environmental conditions such as weather as well as crowding can have an impact on overall satisfaction (Birtles, Valentine, Curnock, Arnold, & Dunstan, 2002; Musa, 2002). Satisfaction with whale watching tours has been related to factors such as proximity to whales (e.g. Duffus & Dearden, 1993; Kessler, Harcourt, & Bradford, 2014; Moscardo, 2006; Mustika, Birtles, Everingham, & Marsh, 2013; Valentine et al., 2004; Zeppel & Muloin, 2013), the number of cetaceans seen (Moscardo, 2006; Mustika et al., 2013; Orams, 2000; Valentine et al., 2004) and whale behavior (Duffus & Dearden, 1993; Zeppel & Muloin, 2013). Other important factors related to satisfaction include knowledge provision on whales and marine life, the variety of different marine wildlife seen (Duffus & Dearden, 1993; Moscardo, 2006; Zeppel & Muloin, 2013), the natural setting and scenery (Mustika et al., 2013; Zeppel & Muloin, 2013) and satisfaction with the facilities (Moscardo, 2006). Many of the factors contributing to satisfaction in wildlife tourism such as whale watching (e.g. the number of whales seen) cannot be controlled in the same way as attractions which do not rely on wildlife encounters. Given the complexities of understanding satisfaction at a site where a key attraction cannot be controlled, alternative approaches are considered particularly relevant in less structured tourism settings, such as nature-based tourism, where services are only one element of the opportunities and experiences provided (Coghlan, 2012; Scarpaci & Parsons, 2014).

This study presents a quantitative analysis of overall whale watching satisfaction and with tour attributes and has four specific objectives:

1. Explore satisfaction compared to expectations of tour participants;
2. Analyze participants' overall satisfaction and explore factors significantly related to, and contributing to, satisfactory whale watching;
3. Compare the results of an expectancy theory approach with a performance-only perspective and the implications for improved satisfaction measurements in outdoor tourism activities; and
4. Discuss the results as an input for improved whale watching management.

1.3. The Azores as a case study

The Azores archipelago, situated on the mid-Atlantic ridge, consists of nine small islands (Fig. 1). Coastal recreational activities are a major tourist attraction featuring sailing, boat tours, cruise tourism, hiking, whale and dolphin watching, sport fishing and scuba diving (Calado, Ng, Borges, Alves, & Sousa, 2011). Whale watching plays an important role within the tourism sector, as the Azores offer a great diversity of cetacean species close to the shoreline (Bentz, Dearden, & Calado, 2013; International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), 2010). Resident populations of common dolphins, bottlenose dolphins and sperm whales can be spotted all year long. Migratory species such as blue whales and sei whales can be spotted in certain seasons. The Azores with a 15.5% annual growth rate in whale watching are one of the European regions with a higher growth rate (O'Connor et al., 2009). Whale watching is reported by 12.5% of tourists as the main motivation to visit the Azores (Serviço Regional de Estatística dos Açores (SREA), 2007). Twenty-four operators have active whale watching permits to offer trips around the islands of São Miguel, Terceira, Pico and Faial. Most operators use rigid hull inflatable boats for twelve to twenty-four passengers, and there are also medium-sized cabin-boats for up to 80 people (Regional Directorate for Tourism, 2014).

Despite considerable growth of the whale watching industry in the Azores, little emphasis has been placed on assessing the tourism experience (Oliveira, 2005; Sequeira et al., 2009). Measuring whale watching tourist satisfaction in the Azores is a necessary pre-requisite for successful destination marketing and for sustainable management of the activity. This study explores user satisfaction to enhance sustainable whale watching management and provide a broader base of understanding on user satisfaction in outdoor tourism activities.

2. Methodology

A self-administered questionnaire was the primary data collection instrument. It consisted of 23 mainly closed-ended questions addressing various aspects of the experience including demographics, visit characteristics, motivations and satisfaction, specialization and impact perception. The questions were developed through a literature review and refined following a pilot study in May 2013. Questionnaires were provided in Portuguese, English and German and distributed on São Miguel, Pico and Faial Island from May to August 2013, the main whale watching season. Both weekdays and weekends were sampled. Tourists were selected opportunistically as they descended from the boats returning from the tours. Most operators facilitated the approach to the tourists by a brief introduction of the researcher and the assistants. The researchers distributed the questionnaires and stayed nearby in case of questions and collected the completed questionnaires. In total, 466 whale watchers responded to the questionnaires. The response rate was 45.87%.

The concept of satisfaction was studied from different angles. An importance-performance (IP) analysis was performed to assess

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