



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tourism Management

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

Analysis of wildlife tourism experiences with endangered species: An exploratory study of encounters with giant pandas in Chengdu, China

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Tourist reviews of the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding site in China were content analyzed.
- Tourist motivations, preferences, and satisfaction levels were found to vary.
- Generally tourist satisfaction levels increased with the levels of proximity and interaction with giant pandas.
- Three features of this wildlife tourism experience were found; tourists, pandas, and settings.
- A number of important management implications and recommendations were derived from this research study.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history:

Received 19 August 2012

Accepted 6 July 2013

Keywords:

China

Content analysis

Giant panda

Social media

Tourist experiences

Thematic analysis

Visitor–wildlife interaction

Wildlife tourism

A B S T R A C T

This research examined wildlife tourism experiences in a unique site and species combination: giant pandas at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding (CRBGPB) in Sichuan, China. Content analysis was undertaken on tourist reviews of CRBGPB on TripAdvisor.com in early 2012. The thematic analysis qualitative method was adopted in examining respondents' written reviews of experiences interacting with giant pandas. ROST CM6 and NVivo 8 were used for the content analysis and qualitative coding.

A variety of tourist experiences, motivations, and preferences were revealed. Although respondents' experiences were varied, satisfaction increased with closer encounters and interactions with the giant pandas. The thematic analysis identified three features of the wildlife tourism experiences at CRBGPB: tourists, giant pandas, and settings. Implications and management recommendations were identified for sites offering wildlife tourism experiences.

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1. Introduction

Many countries and regions rich in biodiversity but poor economically have been vigorously promoting tourism as a conservation tool in their protected areas since the 1990s (He et al., 2008). These include Nepal (Bookbinder, Dinerstein, Rijal, Cauley, & Rajouria, 1998); Indonesia (Walpole & Goodwin, 2000, 2001); Uganda (Adams & Infield 2003; Archabald & Naughton-Treves 2001); Central Africa Republic (Blom, 2000); and Costa Rica (Stem, Lassoie, Lee, Deshler, & Schelhas, 2003). China, with its fast-growing economy, has also advocated tourism to improve the

economic status of reserve administrations and local communities (Han & Ren, 2001; Liu et al., 2003).

Wildlife tourism is playing a significant role in these efforts. People have had close relationships with animals throughout history (Orams, 2002). Wildlife interactions (observing, feeding, touching, photographing or otherwise experiencing wild animals) occur in a wide variety of settings worldwide. Wildlife tourism is regarded as a minimum impact activity and wildlife viewing is described as a non-consumptive use of wildlife (Duffus & Dearden, 1990; Green and Higginbottom, 2001). However, the importance of these interactions to the tourism sector and their impacts on many species of wildlife is not yet well understood, especially for endangered species of animals. The interfaces between tourists (social) and wildlife (environmental) can make a critical contribution to the sustainability of tourism (Rodger & Moore, 2004; Rodger, Moore, & Newsome, 2007). The key to sustainable development is

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the management of tourists, not the animals (Rodger & Moore, 2004). Therefore, it is vital to develop an in-depth understanding of tourist experiences. Wildlife tourism aims to educate visitors about the threats facing wildlife and the initiatives required to protect the environment and maintain biodiversity (Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011; Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011). It also has been recognised that an increased understanding of tourist–wildlife interactions will contribute to the sustainability of wildlife tourism experiences (Rodger & Moore, 2004) and wildlife conservation.

The understanding of wildlife tourism experiences has become more complex with the larger spectrum of information sources and channels. The focus of this research was on the features of giant panda interaction experiences and the four specific research objectives were to:

1. Describe the types of tourism experiences that people have when encountering and interacting with giant pandas.
2. Identify tourist motivations for wanting to see and interact with giant pandas.
3. Examine satisfaction with the quality of tourism experiences when encountering and interacting with giant pandas.
4. Pinpoint factors or features that influence wildlife tourism experiences in the context of captive giant pandas.

2. Literature review

2.1. Previous research on wildlife tourism

There is increased demand for tourists to interact with wildlife and especially with animals that are unusual or endangered (Rodger et al., 2007; Semeniuk, Haider, Cooper, & Rothley, 2010; Shackley, 1996) and when tourism products feature non-captive animals that are deemed to be particularly attractive or interesting (Weaver, 2005). The growing demand to interact with wildlife has led to the emergence of a wide range of wildlife tourism activities (Semeniuk et al., 2010; Weaver, 2005). Paralleling the growth in wildlife tourism is the expanding demand for closer interactions with wildlife in their natural habitats (Rodger, Moore, & Newsome, 2009). Tourism can provide the economic rationale for the long-term conservation of endangered and rare species (Higginbottom, 2004; Newsome, Dowling, & Moore, 2004; Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001), and result in the creation or continued existence of protected area integrated conservation and development projects (Johannesen & Skonhofs, 2005).

Wildlife tourism experiences occur from interactions between humans and wildlife (Higham & Shelton, 2011; Orams, 2002). In fact, the experiencing of wildlife has now become the business of wildlife tourism (Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001). This can be broadly defined as tourism undertaken to view or encounter wildlife (Newsome et al., 2004). Wildlife tourism takes place in a range of settings in natural or artificial environments, where animals are free or captive, and where visitors can interact closely with the animals or merely watch from a distance (Higginbottom, 2004; Newsome et al., 2004; Rodger et al., 2007). Wildlife tourism experiences provide opportunities to observe and interact with animals that may be endangered, threatened or rare. They are being offered in an increasing number of destinations worldwide (Cousins, 2007; Orams, 2002; Woods & Moscardo, 2003).

Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001) developed a conceptual framework for wildlife tourism and six intrinsic quality factors of the wildlife tourism experience were suggested. These quality factors were authenticity, intensity, uniqueness, duration, species popularity, and species status. Orams (2002) analyzed what

attracted people to want wildlife tourism experiences and concluded that the decreasing number of opportunities to interact with nature was one of the important reasons. Higham and Carr (2003) developed insights into tourist experiences by gathering their viewpoints regarding the sustainability of wildlife experiences. This research was based on 12 ecotourism operations in New Zealand providing wildlife tourism as either primary or secondary components of tourism experiences. The study used content analysis of the comments from 76 tourists that were interviewed.

Higginbottom (2004) developed a model of the interactions of the components in wildlife tourism experiences. At the core of this model were the tourist–wildlife encounters and the wildlife tourism product. She further identified three factors influencing the core model components; wildlife and habitats, tourists, and the operators/businesses and settings. The impacts resulting from the consumption of the core components of wildlife tourism experiences were defined as being the effects on the natural environment, tourists, tourism operators, host communities, and economic returns. The Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001) and Higginbottom (2004) models provide a solid conceptual and theoretical platform for future research on wildlife tourism. There is, however, a need for more empirical research to test and refine these models.

Ballantyne, Packer, and Hughes (2009) explored the perceptions, preferences and conservation awareness of tourists visiting the Mon Repos Conservation Park in Queensland, Australia. The findings suggested that wildlife tourism management practices that enlist tourists as conservation partners, communicate the reasons behind any constraints imposed, and present a consistent message regarding interactions with wildlife are likely to be successful in meeting the needs of tourists and the wildlife. Ballantyne et al. (2011) used structural equation modeling to identify factors that best predicted the long-term impacts of wildlife tourism experiences. The objective was to investigate how visitors' entering attributes combined with specific aspects of the wildlife tourism experience to produce changes in visitors' environmental knowledge, attitudes, and engagement in environmentally sustainable practices. Ballantyne et al. (2011) examined participants' memories of wildlife tourism experiences and explored processes through which such experiences could lead to long-term changes in conservation behaviour. Qualitative analysis revealed four levels of visitor responses to experiences: what visitors actually saw and heard (sensory impressions); what they felt (emotional affinity); thought (reflective responses); and finally what they did about it (behavioural responses).

Overall, there have been many valuable contributions to the research literature on wildlife tourism from 2001 to 2011 inclusive. However, the importance of these interactions to the tourism sector and their impacts on many species of wildlife is not completely comprehended. There is still a need for more empirical analyses especially on tourist experiences when encountering wildlife of specific species and in different settings. More in-depth analysis of tourist experiences is important for the sustainable development of wildlife tourism as well as helping to ease potential conflicts between economics and wildlife conservation. Exploring tourist preferences and response behaviours for specific destinations and for certain wildlife species will help with sustainable tourism development (Mazanec & Strasser, 2007). Moreover, greater analysis of wildlife tourism experiences will provide useful guidelines for tourism management and marketing.

2.2. Background and research on giant pandas

The giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) is the rarest member of the bear family and among the world's most threatened animals. They live in the bamboo forests of six isolated mountain ranges in south-western China (Reid, 1994). The third national giant panda

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