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Exploring visitors' desired benefits in Paklenica National Park, Croatia: Development, validation and management implications of measurement instrument

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ABSTRACT

For protected area managers, understanding visitors' desired benefits are a key priority. However, because of financial restrictions and insufficient capacity, Park managers often are not capable of developing appropriate and reliable measurement instruments for tracking visitor's needs. The main purpose of this study was to develop a simple and cost-effective measurement instrument to monitor visitors' desired benefits in Paklenica National Park in Croatia. We used a literature-driven approach to test the relevancy of five hypothesized benefit dimensions, composed of 18 recreational experiences items on a general visitor sample (n=342). These dimensions were: Enjoy nature, Novelty and learning, Socializing, Escape and solitude, and Personal achievement. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) process proceeded through two distinct phases. In the first phase, we tested the data fit for two competing models: orthogonal and correlated. In the second phase, we assessed the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement instrument. The results revealed that the model with correlated benefit dimensions reproduced the data better than the orthogonal model. Inter-correlations between latent benefit dimensions were statistically significant and positive. Reliability and convergent validity indicated a reasonable consistency of the measurement instrument. Further research should focus on continuous improvement of the measurement instrument and its application, according to different management demands.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The measurement instrument developed represents a reliable and cost-effective tool that may aid Park managers in empirically evaluating at least a basic level of performance in visitor management. Moreover, this instrument may assist managers in economizing management strategies by focusing their efforts on the improvement of specific setting characteristics to facilitate the realization of visitor's desired benefits.

1. Introduction

Outcome Focused Management (OFM) or Benefit Based Management (BBM) emerged in the early 1990s as the managerial element of a broader concept known as Benefit Approach to Leisure (BAL), which has its roots in the work by Wagar (1966) and Driver & Tocher (1970). In contrast to experience based management, which is a concept entrenched within the recreational experience and viewed as the final output of the recreation process; the scope of OFM surpasses this by admitting the existence of benefits beyond recreational experiences. In other words, OFM perceives outdoor recreation as an experience providing a wide spectre of different psychological outcomes or benefits to participants. Within OFM, these benefits are identified as a function of setting conditions (i.e., social, biophysical and managerial) and the activities the visitors engage in (Driver, 2009; Lee & Driver, 1992). Moreover, this evolutionary process is echoed in the outdoor recreation demand hierarchy (i.e., level 1-activities, level 2-settings, level 3-experiences, and level 4-benefits), a concept based on the assumption that ultimate experience could be acquired if higher-order demands are satisfied (Driver & Brown, 1978). Within OFM, the term benefit is defined as: (1) improved condition, (2) reduction of an undesired

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condition, and (3) desired condition (Driver, 2009). Although the first two types of benefits may accrue to individuals, society or biophysical environments, the third type is specifically relevant to individuals (e.g., protected area visitors) (Roggenbuck & Driver, 2000). This study concentrates on desired conditions, assuming that the desired benefit could be identified by asking the visitors to rate the importance of specific recreational experiences as a reason for visiting the Paklenica National Park.

In recent decades, a number of protected areas, including national parks, became hot spot destinations for nature based tourism (Mason, 2005; Reinius & Fredman, 2007), investigations that addressed visitors' desired benefits have attracted considerable attention from various research teams, predominantly from Western countries (Anderson, Nickerson, Stein, & Lee, 2000; Ballantine & Eagles 1994; Beh & Brett, 2007; Crilley, Weber & Taplin, 2012; Graefe, Thapa, Confer, & Absher, 2000; Kerstetter, Hou, & Lin, 2004; McCool & Reilly, 1993; Palacio & McCool 1997; Pierskalla, Lee, Stein, Anderson, & Nickerson, 2004; Shin, Jaakson, & Kim, 2001; Stein & Lee, 1995; Weber & Anderson, 2010). Despite the differences in methodological approaches and the statistical techniques employed, the key findings revealed that the desire to enjoy and admire nature, learning about cultural and natural features, escaping and solitude, social affiliation and personal achievement were considered as the most important benefit sought to bring visitors to protected areas. The majority of these studies were based on the evaluation of visitors' ratings of the importance of selected recreational experience statements derived from the Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scales, developed, conceptualized and empirically tested by Driver and associates (Driver, Tinsley & Manfredo, 1991). However, the original REP scales contain an extensive list of recreational experience statements classified in 19 domains, for the purpose of development of measurement instruments, researchers commonly used smaller and more concise lists of statements or specific domains considered to be appropriate for this particular study's objective, target sample or setting characteristics (i.e., visitor profile, geographical features of selected area or nature of management itself).

The main intention of this study was to develop the reliable and cost-effective measurement instrument for monitoring visitors' desired benefits in Paklenica National Park in Croatia. We used a literature-driven approach to test the relevancy of five hypothesized benefit dimensions, composed of 18 recreational experience items, on the general visitor sample. These were: *Enjoy nature, Novelty and learning, Socializing, Escape and solitude and Personal achievement*.

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To test the data fit of the two competing models, orthogonal and correlated.
2. To test the reliability and convergent validity of the proposed measurement scale.

The following hypotheses are developed:

H1. The model with correlated benefit dimensions will fit the data significantly better than the orthogonal one.

H2. The set of measurement items will show satisfactory internal consistency and ability to measure distinct benefit sought by visitors.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Case study

Established in 1949, Paklenica National Park (φ: 44° 18′ N; λ: 44° 25′E) is the second oldest of the eight national parks in the Republic of Croatia. This park extends along the coastal slope of the southern part of the Biosphere Reserve "Velebit Mountain" in the north-east Adriatic Sea. The total park surface is estimated to be 95 km^2, of which more than two thirds is wilderness or semi-wilderness area. As a result of its unique geographic position, the Park is characterized by highly diverse karst landscape (Bognar, 1995; Božičević, 1995; Perica, Marjanac, Lončar & Trajbar, 2004) and a remarkable richness of endemic species (Alegro, 2004; Lukač, 2004; Rota, 1999). Because of the importance of the preservation of valuable landscape and biodiversity, the Park is specified as a focal point of international significance within Natura 2000 Ecological Network and is included in the Mediterranean Forest Protection Programme (Šikić, 2007). With more than 200 km of arranged hiking trails and approximately 400 climbing routes, the Park is known as an international nature-based tourist destination. Since 2000, the Park annually hosts approximately 100,000 visitors (Croatian Bureau of Statistics. 2015). The Park is managed and coordinated by the Public Institution National Park Paklenica and because 2004, has been under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia (Šikić, 2007).

2.2. Sample

The population for this study consisted of 342 visitors, 18 years and older, who visited Paklenica National Park during the month of August, 2014. The majority of the respondents were male (53%), young to middle-aged (60.8% were between 22–34), foreign (82.6%), economically stable (68.8% reported personal monthly household income exceeding € 1000) and well-educated (70.4% had a university degree).

2.3. Instrument

Visitors were requested to rate how important were each of eighteen preselected recreational experiences for their decision to visit the Paklenica National Park. The ratings were operationalized using the 5 – point Likert scale ranging from one (1-not important at all) to five (5-extremely important). The recreational experiences items were drawn from previous research that used the REP scale (e.g., Crilley et al., 2012; Stein & Lee, 1995; Weber & Anderson, 2010). The hypothesised benefit dimensions *Enjoy nature* (e.g., to enjoy the scenery and aesthetics of the protected areas' locations), *Novelty and learning* (e.g., to learn new things about Park history, local culture and traditions) and *Personal achievement* (e.g., to improve general health and wellbeing) each included four items. The hypothesised benefit dimensions *Socializing* (e.g., to meet new people) and *Escape and solitude* (e.g., to escape everyday routines and pressures) contained three items.

2.4. Procedure

Data were collected from visitors by means of a self-administered questionnaire using a face-to-face approach. In total, 352 questionnaires were collected, of which 97,1% (342) were usable for further analysis. Samplings were conducted on a daily basis from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. For the purpose of interviewing, the mouth of canyon Velika Paklenica near the main Park entrance was chosen because of the highest visitor flow. Using 10-minute time intervals, visitors were randomly approached and requested to participate in the survey. When the groups were approached, one visitor was randomly sampled to ensure the statistical independence of the data. No other visitors were approached unless the previous did not complete the questionnaire. On average, it took each respondent approximately 10 minutes to complete the survey. Visitors interviewed once were not approached again, regardless of repeated visits.