

ELUCIDATING WILDLIFE PARK ATTRIBUTES LEADING TO VISITOR SATISFACTION: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM MINNERIYA NATIONAL PARK IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Wildlife tourism plays a vital role all over the globe and modeling the drivers of visitor satisfaction at nature parks is critical for the elucidation of the thesis as well as better manage them. This study aims at modeling attributes leading to visitor satisfaction at a wildlife safari park in Sri Lankan context. A self-administered questionnaire was fielded to secure 360 responses and PLS path modeling was used to test the proposed theoretical model. The findings suggest that anyone visiting a destination is closely linked to the image of the tourist destination visited, especially for repeat visitors. Study postulates that tourist satisfaction on park attributes alone can't predict visitor satisfaction. Study draws recommendations on both theoretical and empirical concerns on visitor park management.

Keywords: Park attributes, Visitor satisfaction, Travel motivation, Destination image, PLS path modeling.

BACKGROUND

Tourism is regarded as one of the world's fastest-growing sectors. It serves millions of visitors from around the world, both domestic and overseas. Global tourism has risen in importance over the last few years. International visitor arrivals will rise by 3.3 % each year, reaching 1.8 billion by 2030. Especially, Natural wonders, hospitable cultures, and ecological hotspots abound in Asian nations. Hence, Asian regions automatically receive the ability to cater to tourists (UNWTO, 2013). Being a country in Asian region, Sri Lanka has grown in popularity as a tourist destination around the world in last decades. According to Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) annual report 2017, the total number of tourists who visited Sri Lanka was 2,116,407, up 3.2 % from the previous year. Recently there is a huge demand for nature-based tourism and wildlife tourism attending on natural protected areas. As a result, tourist interest in national parks has improved over time, both domestically and globally. Since some

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tourists are primarily interested in seeing indigenous or endangered species. Hence, the refurbishment and redevelopment of parks are the key concerns of local governments. In this, determining the ideal number of tourists in the park, as well as the attributes and features is significant. According to previous researchers, Changes in park attributes have a significant impact on park visitation, (Veitch, Ball, Crawford, Abbott, & Salmon, 2012). Further, previous researchers mentioned that nature-based tourism engaged with the different factors including expected time, the experience of the tour, involvement in the site, revisitation, and regathered phases. (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001).

Minneriya national park is one of the prominent national parks situated in the center of the cultural triangle of Sri Lanka. In addition, it is the largest elephant gathering national park when considering the other national parks in Sri Lanka. With the recent higher demand in tourism, Visitor participation in the Minneriya national park has increased with the time nationally and internationally. As a result, this park has the potential to provide economic benefits not only to the Minneriya area but also to the whole island, while maintaining environmental values. National parks have been the subject of several studies. Wildlife tourism, wildlife restoration, national park management, and sustainable tourism planning are some of the topics included. However, research on national parks that focuses on the importance of park attributes on visitor satisfaction in the Sri Lankan context is still minimal. Filling this gap this study is design to; identify the park attributes influence on visitor satisfaction, identify the intermediating role of travel motivation in shaping visitor satisfaction, identify the intermediating role of destination image in shaping visitor satisfaction and to identify the most significant attributes affecting visitor satisfaction at Minneriya national park.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Wildlife tourism and experiences related to national parks are becoming more common in today's world (Duffus & Dearden 1990; Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001). Since People are more interested in visiting national parks to obtain a good experience and understanding due to their busy schedules. In this, the number of visitors to the national park can be seen as an indicator of the importance of these protected areas (Han & Patterson, 2007). The host region reaps more social and economic gains as a result of this popularity in wild life tourism. Various park features that are linked to leisure and visitor happiness have been established in numerous studies. Those studies studied a sample of visitors as well as the parks' internal and external characteristics. (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000) described that sights, amenities, and transportation services have a positive impact on a visitor's satisfaction with a destination. Further, (Naidoo, Ramseook-Munhurrun & Seegoolam, 2011) argued that Transportation, shopping malls, and cultural events were among the highlights of the destination that were rated highly in terms of satisfaction. In the travel and tourism industry, customer satisfaction is critical. Since it raises visitor perception and facilitates tourist destinations in their survival (Gursoy, Chen & Chi, 2014; Neal & Gursoy, 2008). Further Visitor happiness plays a crucial part in influencing behaviors such as recommending the location to others and returning (Kozak, et al, 2000). According to (Alegre&Garau,2010).some visitors rate their enjoyment based on factors such as the park's geographic location, the length of the routes, the types of amenities available, while some park visitors determine their enjoyment based on the sights and experiences present.

The destination image is made up of various considerations and activities or attractions in the destination. According to (Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017)

when a tourist visits a certain location and has a positive experience, they will return to that location in the future. Since destination image is dependent on the area's expertise and the connectivity of each service and facility in the area. (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001). stated that the availability of adequate parking spaces, a safe setting, a variety of wildlife watching, and the national park's frame or prestige are the criteria used to assess destination image. (Valle, Silva, Mendes, & Guerreiro, 2006) highlighted that motivation was the most significant thing that can influence travel decisions. In addition, (Van der Merwe et al., 2011) stated that travel motivation was a multidimensional factor. Previous study has shown that different travel destinations have different motives for travelers before deciding on a destination. Travel motivation aids in the selection of a destination based on a variety of considerations (Kozak, 2003). (As Wang, Qu, & Hsu, 2016) mentioned, the travelers' cognitive picture is influenced by their travel motives. (Yoon & Uysal, 2005) argued that travel is linked to two different motivational perceptions, which are called as push and pull influences. The push factor is the psychological power that influences tourists' decisions between enthusiasm and relaxation. In addition, external effects on the features of the destination, such as the destination's environment or culture, are examples of pull factors. According to (Mohammad & Som, 2010) the majority of push considerations are intangible or inherent desires of individual travelers, while pull variables arise from a location's attraction, which includes physical properties as well as traveler views and aspirations.

METHODOLOGY

In the light of post positivistic paradigm, a quantitative design was used where a self-administered questionnaire was fielded in a purposive sample to secure a total of 360 responses. Using descriptive statistics, SEM (PLS path modeling) the proposed theoretical model was tested.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Majority of tourists were Europeans (35 %), both Asian and Americans were 21.25%, other countries were 22.5% and in addition 505 of the total were domestic visitors. Majority of visitors to were of young age opt to interact with the nature and 2.5% of visitors were above 54 age category. Greater part of the sample was married while both foreign and local visitors expected watching wildlife and interact with nature during visit.

Proposed relationship between park attributes and Travel Motivation was supported with path coefficient value of 0.510 for strong positive relationships (+0.5 to +1) and a t value of 6.823 for visitor satisfaction R^2 . Positive relationship between Travel Motivation and Visitor Satisfaction proposed was supported with a path coefficient of 0.343, and indicated a weak positive relationship (t=4.042) with a visitor satisfaction R^2 of 0.611. The proposed positive relationship between park attributes and visitor satisfaction was significant at 95% degree and the path coefficient was 0.199 indicating a positive relationship. The proposed intermediating role of travel motivation between park attributes and visitor satisfaction was supported and the beta coefficient of Park Attributes was 0.808, P-value is 0.000. Statistics travel motivation Sobel test value was (Z=7.10360) Signifying a strong mediator effect. The impact of park attributes to the destination image was strong positive with a path coefficient value of 0.511. Respective t-statistic value was 7.402 and the P value was 0.000. The R^2 value of the destination image was 0.261. Proposed positive relationship between destination image and

visitor satisfaction was supported with a path coefficient value of 0.374 ($t=4.538$, $P=0.000$), indicating a weak positive relationship. Finally, the proposed intermediate role among destination image, park attributes and visitor satisfaction were supported resulting Z value 5.60 ($t=8.49$, $P=0.00$). The following figure illustrates the final model tested with path coefficients for each item and R² values for proposed variables (**Figure 1**).

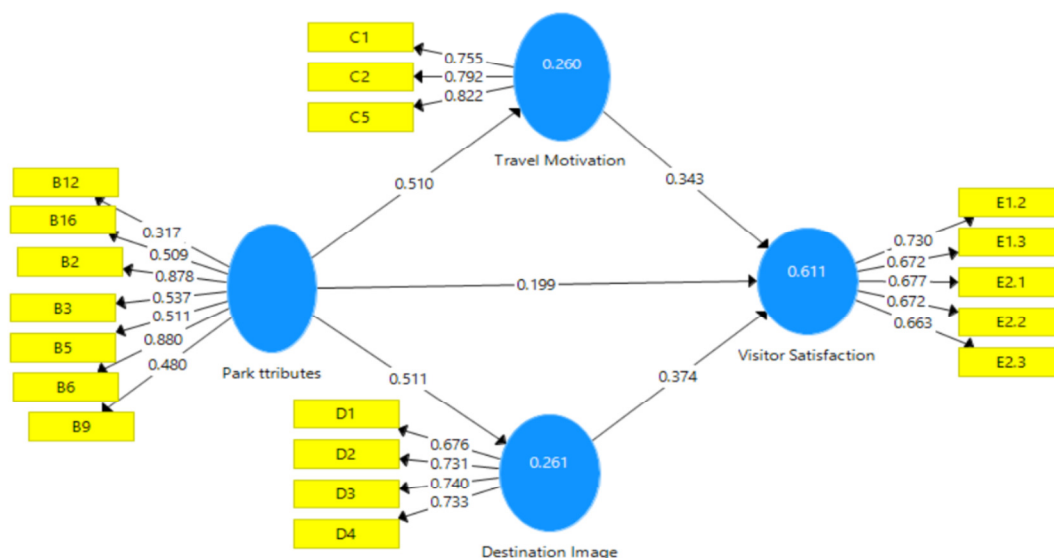


Figure 1: Survey, 2019 final model tested.

CONCLUSION

Aim of this study was to elucidate visitor satisfaction at Minneriya National Park in order to explore existing gaps in park management thesis. The proposed model consisted with an independent variable, two mediators, and one dependent variable. All proposed hypothesis during the theoretical development were supported in the empirical test. Several recommendations could be made based on the findings of this study specifically for the park management. The park authority must provide toilet facilities, minimize the speed of jeeps, provide appropriate safety services, take severe measures against irresponsible visitors who abuse tourist amenities, increase the provision of tourist amenities, build personnel expertise, implement better pricing of goods and services, and check transportation alternatives. Further information and promotion materials on the national park should be produce in major languages.

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