Environmentally Responsible Behavior of Nature-Based Tourists: Related Concepts, Measurement, and Research

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Introduction

Nature-based tourism can be defined as tourism that directly depends on, or involves visits to, natural resources in relatively undeveloped or undisturbed natural areas. Scenery, topography, water features, vegetation, wildlife refuges, wetlands, and natural reserves may all be of particular interest [1,2]. Laarman and Durst [3] indicated that nature-based tourism activities have three specific elements: education, recreation, and adventure. Nature-based tourism has become popular globally because it gives rise to economic benefits associated with the conservation of natural resources and directly supports both local communities and nations in sustainable environmental development [4].

However, recreation/tourism activities may damage a tourism destination[5,6]. To mitigate impact on the environment, tourists should be educated to engage in general and site-specific Environmentally Responsible Behavior (ERB) at tourism destinations [7]. Accordingly, developing related concepts and methods of measurement of nature-based tourists’ ERB may help to provide an holistic understanding of sustainable tourism.

Concepts and Measurement

ERB has been extensively discussed in the tourism/recreation and environmental literature. Scholars have assessed the behavior of nature-based tourists that least damages the environment, or even protects environment. Such behavior has been called environmentally concerned behavior [8], ecological behavior [9], pro-environmental behavior [10], environmental behavior [11], sustainable behavior [12], and ERB [7]. Recently, Lee et al. [7] conceptualized ERB as involving seven constructs: civil action, financial action, physical action, persuasive action, sustainable behavior, pro-environmental behavior, and environmentally friendly behavior.

Although ERB has been hotly debated in the tourism literature, most studies measure ERB on scales that were developed by Smith-Sebasto and D’Costa [13], Kaiser [9], or Stern et al. [11]. Few studies have surveyed tourists to develop a measure for assessing the ERB of nature-based tourists. Recently, Lee et al. [7] developed a reliable and valid measure of both general and site-specific ERBs of nature-based tourists. Their study applied several approaches (content analysis, fuzzy Delphi method, EFA, CFA, and multi-group CFA for cross-validation) to construct surveys. They used seven constructs to conceptualize and measure the ERBs of community-based tourists. Their research has been tested by applying composite reliability, content validity, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and cross-samples validity, and a 24-item scale with a first-order, seven-factor model to assess tourists’ ERBs, has thus been obtained.

Most studies assess ERB using self-reported measures, which may over-estimate the positive effects of behavior because social desirability or the existence of a specific set of norms [7,13,14]. Relatively few studies have used the observations of participants to evaluate ERB [15]. Any difference between self-reported and actual behavior in the context of tourism is worth examining. Future studies should develop a research instrument based on observation of participants to assess the ERBs of nature-based tourists.

Related Research

Several scholars have employed behavioral theoretical models to assess ERB. The attitude-behavior model, as a theoretical basis for elucidating the relationship between environmental attitude and ERB, indicates that environmental attitude crucially determines an individual’s environmental behavior [16]. Based on TRA, environmental attitude has been found positively to affect an individual’s ecological behavior [17].

Previous studies have suggested that the biospheric value of a nature-based tourist is an important predictor of ERB [18]. An individual with a higher biospheric value pays more attention to nature and the environment, taking actions to protect nature and the environment [19]. Thus, greater biospheric value is likely to be associated with more ERB.

Several scholars have found that place attachment, perceived value, satisfaction, and recreation involvement are significantly related to ERB [14,20-22]. The studies cited herein have indicated that tourists develop ERB via place attachment, perceived value, satisfaction, and recreation involvement when they visit nature-based destinations, such as national parks, ecological reserves, isolated islands, and wetlands.

Recreational activities at a tourism destination may negatively affect the environment. The recreational experience of nature-based tourists may play an educational role in the development of sustainable tourism. The recreation/tourism experiences of nature-based tourists increase their concern for the natural environment and wildlife, improving their ecological knowledge, environmental awareness, and ERB [23].

Based on the above, environmental attitude, biospheric value, place attachment, recreation involvement, and recreation experience may be regarded as precedents of ERB. Assessing and combining these latent variables into an integrated model to better understand the ERB of a tourist is thus warranted. Moreover, most studies apply their ERB models using one nature-based tourist destination, and more rigorous testing of multi-group models should be undertaken by using various nature-based recreational settings, such as community-
based destinations, isolated islands, intertidal zones, wetlands, forests, national parks, and natural protected areas in different countries. Additionally, a longitudinal analysis of a model of nature-based tourists’ ERB is needed to support researchers by helping to develop a sophisticated assessment of sustainable tourism.

References