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Nature-Based Tourism Businesses in Colorado: Interpreting Environmental Ethics and Responsible Behavior

by

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Abstract

Tourism businesses operate from a primarily economic-centric point of view, but nature-based tourism businesses are also acutely aware of the need to sustain the natural resource that attracts the client to their outdoor recreation service. A preliminary qualitative inquiry reveals how nature-based tourism organizations in Colorado view themselves as operating from environmentally ethical positions, what specific actions they take to minimize negative environmental impacts, and how they educate their clients about resource conservation. Findings indicate that too often companies fail to realize opportunities in which they can encourage meaningful bonds between people and nature through the use of education and environmental interpretation. Education is seen more as a means to equip tourists with skills pertaining to a certain sport/activity, rather than as a way to enrich the total experience. Due to the industry's reliance upon natural resources, a higher level of resource interpretation should be encouraged, promoting natural resource conservation.

Introduction

Successful business organizations generally appreciate the many resources offered by their local community whether those resources are economic capital, human capital, or natural resources. Likewise, the tourism industry both appreciates and exploits the various community resources at its disposal: local labor, financial resources, and natural and cultural attractions. Tourism businesses exist to make a profit, but also take on a role, actively or passively, as agents in the construction of a destination's sense of place. Therefore, as part of their operational philosophy, do nature-based tourism business organizations (in order to succeed in communities beyond market considerations) develop a strong environmental ethic that helps create a special 'sense of place', and adds to a community's place image?

This paper focuses on nature-based tourism businesses as both stewards of local natural resources, and agents in the co-construction of a physical sense of place through education efforts. The focus is on increased environmental awareness and conservation efforts made by businesses and can lead to collaboration between the tourism business and its community. To explore this business/client relationship, a preliminary qualitative study was conducted on how nature-based tourism businesses in northern Colorado defined and practiced environmental ethics and education of conservation activities.

Literature Review

Nature-Based Tourism and Place

Nature-based tourism and other forms of "green" tourism have become an important source of monetary income for many local communities throughout the world (Akama & Kieti, 2007). Tourism has always had a strong physical and geographical element, as the location of a destination is a key part of the tourist experience. Nature-based tourism companies are often in a unique position, as they both exploit local natural resources for profit, and yet maintain a positive stewardship relationship towards these same natural resources in order to sustain programmed activities with their clients.

The effects these companies may have can encompass environmental, social, and economic concerns. These impacts may be beneficial to the surrounding areas (Lundie et al., 2007) such as jobs and economic prosperity brought to the community by tourists participating in the local economy. Often this may lead to an increased quality of life (QOL) of local residents living in the communities surrounding the tourism site. Increased spending by tourists may lead to increased tax revenues, increased employment opportunities, and economic diversity (Andereck, Valentine, Vogt, & Knopf, 2007). Conservation of wilderness sites for tourism purposes is an example of how tourism can have a positive impact upon the ecosystem being utilized (Lindsey et al., 2007; Mulder

et al., 2007). Vaske and Korbin (2001) illuminated the relationship between place attachment and environmentally responsible behavior. As individuals develop emotional connections with local natural resources their environmental concern for other places increases. Environmental concern is the collection of one's values that influence attitudes and behaviors towards conservation of natural areas (Winter, 2007).

On the other hand, tourism often leads to unfavorable impacts upon destinations. Economic well-being may be inequitably distributed to residents of the community. Larger national businesses may force smaller, more specialized local businesses out of competition. Increased tourism to an area may also decrease the QOL of the community residents. Increased crowding, traffic, and parking problems, increased crime, increased cost of living, and changes in the residents' way of life are all possible negative side effects of tourism (Andereck et al., 2007).

Increased public use of outdoor recreation areas pressures managers, who must uphold their dual mandate of resource protection while simultaneously allowing public access (Constantine, Brunton, & Dennis, 2004; Keller & Bender, 2007; King & Heinen, 2004).

Tourism literature has also been instrumental in developing the concept and meaning of *place* along with other disciplines: geography, psychology, sociology, architecture, and biology (Low & Altman, 1992). Place is generally agreed upon as a socially generated construct (Stedman, 2003) in which individuals and groups create emotional bonds with a physical setting (Tuan 1977; Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983; Smith, 1994; Twigger-Ross & Uzzel, 1996). Concepts of place attachment, place identity, and sense of place have been examined and described by many scholars (Giddens, 1991; Hummon, 1992, Mitchell, 2001, Williams et al, 1992). Hay (1998) interviewed tourists to examine their sense of place at a popular tourist site in New Zealand, the Banks Peninsula. He found that tourists may have emotional connections with a place outside the peninsula, but their feelings for the peninsula were more of an aesthetic nature.

Common characteristics of nature-based tourism include outdoor recreation activities (fishing, hiking, hunting, rafting, ballooning) located in beautiful places (mountains, beaches, lakes, rivers, forests, deserts) lead by professional staff (trained, certified, and non-certified guides) who are knowledgeable about both the recreation activity and the natural resource. Because of the direct

contact with the client during the length of time of the program or activity (anywhere from an hour to several days) nature-based tourism lends itself to the incorporation of interpretive education. Do tourism guides see the benefit of utilizing effective educational techniques when working directly with customers? So far little research has been completed on what is known about how companies use educational outreach, therefore it was a key research question posed in this study.

Providing guides with environmental and conservation information and training in interpretation and education skills can lead to successful dissemination of this information to customers, which in turn can increase the positive interaction of customer behavior towards natural systems. Interpretive education could potentially mitigate detrimental environmental tourist behavior while augmenting constructive effects of nature-based tourism.

Interpretation and Environmental Education

Interpretation is a communications process that forges meaningful emotional, intellectual, and spiritual bonds between people and natural or cultural resources (Brochu & Merriman, 2002; NAI 2007). Interpretation aids in attachment to a place. Several studies have examined the potential of infusing interpretive style programs into ecotourism services (Kimmel, 1999; Orams, 1996; Powell & Ham, 2008). Ecotourism can readily make use of interpretation to enhance the quality of the experience and to communicate appropriate behavioral messages (Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 2003). Powell and Ham (2008) showed that people's attitudes towards conservation were altered by the inclusion of interpretation on a nature-based tour. Through use of surveys and interviews, the researchers were able to show that inclusion of interpretive education in the tour increased tourists' ecological knowledge, connectivity to the natural environment, and philanthropic giving to conservation programs. Similarly, Kimmel (1999) discovered that tourists can build a sense of place with the aid of interpretation.

The character of nature-based tourism lends itself to the incorporation of interpretive, environmental education. Tourism guides could make use of interpretive skills to communicate appropriate behavioral messages to tourists. Minimal impact educational programs, such as Leave No Trace, along with environmental information provided to tourists through a professional guide may help to accomplish the goal of sustainability and encourage tourists to consider the environmental and social consequences of their actions (Marion & Reid, 2007).

A goal of this research was to address several questions: How do nature-based tourism organizations: 1) practice environmental ethics and 2) make use of education to facilitate an atmosphere in which place attachment and conservation can occur? How are tourism businesses appreciative of the natural resources in their area (that they typically exploit)? Do tourism businesses apply environmental ethics in their guiding practices? Do these businesses take specific actions to minimize negative environmental impacts? Do businesses view themselves as having responsibility for their clients' interactions with the environment?

Methodology

This pilot qualitative study was conducted with a purposeful sample (Creswell, 2007) to preliminarily assess the environmental ethics of nature-based tourism businesses, and if they educate their customers in minimizing negative environmental impacts. Owners/managers were initially contacted via email and/or telephone to solicit their participation in the study. In-person interviews were conducted with seven nature-based recreation/tourism business owners/managers in northern Colorado. Many of the nature-based tourism companies located in Colorado are small business retailers as well as guided services providers, thus many companies are open year round. Due to demands of being an on-site small business owner/manager or guide, interviews were conducted at their place of business during store hours. In

cases where the owners/managers or guides were able to be interviewed off-site, a location of their choosing was utilized. Owners/managers acted as representatives on behalf of their respective organization.

The businesses sampled met the key criterion of 1) offering recreational guided services or interpretive talks to customers, 2) in a natural setting, and 3) for monetary profit. Examples of these services included guided white water rafting tours, guided fishing trips, family campground programming, and guided hunting trips, and guided balloon trips. All of the seven companies were locally owned and operated, and two were part of a national brand. This study relied upon semi-structured interviews as the primary means of data collection (Creswell, 2007). Respondents were asked sixteen open-ended questions about how they operationalize environmental ethics and stewardship in their day to day responsibilities, and in their client interactions. Interview questions fell into three broad categories: 1) Inquiry into the environmental ethics of the business, 2) Questions about how the business conveys its ethics to their clients, and 3) General questions about the tourism industry operating in an environmentally responsible way (Table 1). Interviews were audio-recorded (with back-up notes) and lasted approximately 45 minutes. A copy of the transcription was sent to each participant for accuracy and checking. The interviews took place in the summer and fall of 2008.

Table 1: *Nature-Based Tourism Businesses: Individual Semi-Structured Interview Questions*

1. How does your organization define environmental ethics?
2. How does your organization practice environmental ethics? Can you provide specific examples?
3. Why do you think companies would want to practice environmental ethics?
4. What are some factors that may keep companies, including yours, from practicing environmental ethics?
5. What specific actions does your organization take to minimize negative environmental impacts?
6. Does your organization provide products or services that contribute to environmental conservation?
7. Do you feel responsible to educate your clients about environmental issues?
8. What techniques does your organization use to educate clients?
9. How do you view the role of education in environmental stewardship?
10. Does your organization employ a minimal impact strategy while engaging in outdoor activities with clients?
11. How do you convey this strategy?

Findings

Upon transcription of the data, several themes were revealed. The first question asked how the company defined environmental ethics. Responses to this question varied, with a range of answers, saying, “respect for the resource we are using”, “valuing the land in its natural state”, “protection”, “taking care of the environment and recycling”, “conservation and open space”, and “picking up trash”. Thematically speaking, the nature-based tourism businesses did have a definition for environmental ethics which can be described as resource-centric and protective, i.e. protecting the resource from substantial human alteration or degradation.

In response to the question, “How does your organization practice environmental ethics?” five of the seven companies mentioned some form of “picking up trash”. Litter removal seemed to be a major ethic which companies could convey to their customers through “leading by example.” One company representative mentioned, “All my guides carry a mesh bag or at least a grocery store plastic sack, and pick things up (on a trip). And by the afternoon you’re finding your guests are doing the same thing.”

Another ethic nearly all businesses shared was that of recycling programs. Two companies explicitly mentioned going so far as to travel to nearby towns to recycle cardboard and paper. Four companies said they practiced environmental ethics by recycling their trash locally. Four businesses mentioned supporting associations such as Trout Unlimited. For the fly-fishing companies, catch and release fishing was very solidly a part of their ethical philosophy, and they strongly communicated this (primarily through demonstration) to their clients.

One company got involved in two to three environmental projects during the year, and belonged to organizations that practice environmental ethics. And three tourism businesses looked at in-house energy efficiency, mainly through the use of energy efficient light bulbs.

Many of the businesses did say they took specific actions to minimize negative environmental impacts, and five of the seven companies talked about practicing Leave No Trace ethics. One owner said, “Each guide is responsible for their group – so they go over the campsite several times to be sure everything is picked up.” Other businesses were concerned about staying on trails and using established access points – the guides were mindful of where they were walking.

Five out of the seven companies were product vendors in addition to providing guided services. Each stressed the importance of carrying products that met their own company’s standards of environmental stewardship. All five of these companies mentioned that they carried Patagonia products, and that Patagonia participates in the “1% For the Planet” donation program. One company representative said, “We have a number of recycled products here in the shop. We carry Patagonia. We are firm believers in their company and that includes recycled clothing.” Providing the opportunity for customers to purchase environmentally-friendly products was a common response to how the company practiced environmental ethics.

Six of seven companies mentioned cost as the biggest factor hindering the practice of environmental ethics and stewardship. Costs associated with recycling and donating to conservation efforts were brought up by three companies. Only one business aggressively pursued progressive conservation methods. This company invested in low flush toilets, washing machines that use only 18 gallons of water, low consumption shower heads, activated sludge sewer treatment plant, and phosphate-free soaps. Interestingly, this company specifically mentioned that they don’t recycle because 1) customers aren’t demanding it and 2) it’s too labor and cost intensive. All but one nature-based tourism business said customers have not been demanding environmental responsibility from their company, or inquired about the company’s environmental practices.

When it came to education or environmental interpretation of nature (or the natural resource) to their customers, most companies concentrated on educating their clients on specific skills, such as fly-fishing, hiking in the woods, or rafting, or ballooning. These organizations primarily use education as a training opportunity, to teach clients about certain skills pertaining to a sport. One fly fishing company manager explained his educational approach as: “It’s more of a demonstration, you know, show and tell. I’ll show you and you do it type of thing. But, as far as the non-fishing part of it do you mean? It’s just worked into the day...most of us that guide work the conservation part in throughout the day, even starting with the drive to the destination. That’s a great time to get to know the guests a little bit. Find out what their expectations are; their needs, wants, and desires, etc. What do they expect out of the day? And then a little bit is spent talking about where we are going and the resource that’s there.”

Three of the businesses slightly acknowledged that educating clients about environmental issues was important to them, and said if they could make it part of the day, that was fine, but they did not go out of their way to educate the client. Only one of the companies had a strong sense of the opportunity to educate clients about environmental stewardship. "... Get people familiar with nature and then they're not scared of it and they'll learn to love it and value it, you know to save it and protect it," was a response given by one respondent. "We definitely do view [the role of education in environmental stewardship] it as important – the more people that are aware, the better – if they are educated about the resource, they will be more sensitive".

Most (four of the seven) nature-based tourism businesses thought that the tourism industry was good at mitigating environmental impacts – especially those in outdoor recreation in Colorado. The remainder believed the tourism industry was not as good as it could be. Others in the tourism industry viewed as operating with an environmentally responsible philosophy were the outfitters in the national parks in Colorado.

Discussion

Conclusions drawn from this pilot qualitative study demonstrate that nature-based tourism businesses do operate from a set of environmental principles. Ethics such as picking up trash while on guided trips and company recycling are incorporated into their daily responsibilities. Each company expressed the importance of meeting these standard environmental expectations. To several of the companies these activities (trash pickup, recycling, energy efficient lighting, practicing catch and release) demonstrated their environmental efforts and ethics, along with selling products from environmentally friendly companies.

And, these businesses passed on their environmental ethic to their customers through personal interaction during the guided outdoor experience, and through demonstrating environmentally responsible behavior on the trail, in the river, or on the land. Their main educational technique was "modeling".

The most striking conclusion drawn from this study was the nature-based tourism businesses' lack of realization of the educational opportunity they have with their clients. Many companies are unaware of the positive educational impact they could make on tourists that participate in their services. While each of the seven

companies mentioned that being in nature was a large part of the total guided experience, which led to a special 'sense of place' experience, all but one business failed to build off this understanding. Nature-based tourism companies have a unique opportunity to engage their customers in pleasurable activities while simultaneously affecting their perceptions of the natural environment. Interpretive education that is theme based could be productively utilized in conjunction with the routine guiding services these companies provide to enhance customer experience and environmental conservation.

As one respondent said, "You know, I think listening to your questions actually makes me realize that we do have an opportunity to talk more about the environment, and probably aside from our instructors leading by example... there probably is an opportunity to do that and I think it would be something that is really easy for us to incorporate into our classes".

Most tourists are looking for a fulfilling and meaningful experience when they engage in a nature-based tour. The quality of the setting holds a very important role in how deeply visitors experience the essence of a place. Social engagement is central to human behavior and the affective realm, and thus opportunities for guide/client and client/client interaction can be made readily available during nature-based tours. Nature-based tourism is a unique industry that provides people interaction and experience with natural settings. To ensure tourists construct intellectual and emotional bonds with the resource, themed interpretation could be creatively infused into services nature-based tourism companies offer.

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