

UNDERSTANDING VISITOR DEMAND AND SERVICE PROVIDER PERCEPTIONS OF GREEN TRAVEL IN WEST VIRGINIA

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Abstract

Understanding visitor demands for and service provider perceptions of green travel is important for destination managers seeking to capitalize on the growing green niche tourism market. This study sought to understand the extent to which West Virginia visitors seek green travel providers and the extent to which sustainable practices influence their travel decisions. The study also simultaneously sought to determine the level of interest in green travel certification as well as the main factors influencing adoption of green practices by West Virginia tourism service providers. Overall, results showed that tourism providers see potential in green travel and are keen to participate in a green travel certification program. Results show that visitors are generally conscious of sustainable practices and would choose a green destination over a non-green one as well as pay more to experience a green destination.

1.0 Introduction

Travel and tourism is the world's largest industry and its contribution to economic growth is undisputed. Domestic and international travelers spent \$807 billion in the U.S. in 2011, generating \$1.2 trillion in total economic activity and supporting 7.6 million American jobs ("Fast Facts", 2011). Tourism has grown to become the third largest economic sector in West Virginia supporting over 44,000 jobs and contributing \$4.27 billion to the state's economy (Runyan, 2010). For tourism to continue being profitable it must also be sustainable providing benefits to tourists and hosts, while at the same time protecting the resources on which it depends (Poser & Swenson, 2009). Interest in sustainability and tourism grew rapidly in the 1990's with the emergence of the ecotourism movement. The year 2002 was designated the international year of ecotourism by the United Nations in an attempt to promote environmentally and socially responsible practices among tourism providers and consumers worldwide ("International Year of Ecotourism", 2002). Previous studies have shown a strong green trend among U.S. Travelers ("Trip Advisor survey", 2012) and that the majority of the traveling public think it's important that their visits do not damage the destination's environment ("Geotourism Survey", 2003).

A 2012 lodging survey conducted by the American Hotel & Lodging Association found that 49% of U.S. hotels are working toward green certification, up from 30% in 2004. Certification programs can encourage adoption of sustainable practices by service providers; however, it is complicated by the lack of uniform standards (Honey, 2001). Today there are approximately twenty-one tourism certification programs operating in the U.S. alone, the majority of which operate at the state-level focusing on the lodging sector (Poser & Swenson, 2009). Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) for Hotels and Tour Operators were introduced in 2008 in an effort to come to a common understanding of sustainable tourism and serve as the minimum standard that any tourism business should aspire to reach (Poser & Swenson, 2009). A 2009 study by Poser & Swenson of four U.S. state level programs found that none of them meet the GSTC accreditation requirements and presumed that none of the current U.S. state level programs would meet GSTC accreditation requirements either.

1.1 Background

In 2007 the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (WVDEP) initiated development of a green travel certification program for service providers in West Virginia. WVDEP partnered with the West Virginia Division of Tourism (WVDT) and created a statewide task force to engage additional partners. The role of the taskforce was to determine the best way to create and promote a certification program with recognizable standards in West Virginia. Font (2002) argues that the lack of robust methods to authenticate sustainable and ecotourism products, coupled with the proliferation of awards, labels and endorsements confuse consumers to an extent they just ignore the green messages. Additional information is needed on: level of demand; visitor needs and preferences for certified green travel; and service provider interests in participating in a certification program in order to justify investing state resources in the development of such a program.

This study, therefore, sought assess the current state of green travel in West Virginia by identifying green travel preferences among their visitors as well as interest in and perceptions of green travel among tourism providers in. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Assess green travel preferences of visitors to West Virginia.
2. Establish the extent to which sustainable practices influence visitor travel decisions.
3. Determine the level of interest in green travel certification among tourism providers in the state of West Virginia.
4. Identify the main factors influencing tourism service providers' adoption of green/sustainable practices.

2.0 Methods

This study was conducted in November 2008. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered online. The samples were drawn from service provider and visitor databases provided by WVDT. A total of 108 responses were collected from service providers (58) and visitors (50). The Division of Tourism maintains a database of 600 service providers representing a 10% response rate. The visitor survey was distributed online through a Division of Tourism external contractor to visitors and/or potential visitors to West Virginia of which the sample size could not be established.

Descriptive analysis was used to determine: consumer and service provider preferences for green travel; consumer willingness to pay more for a green destination; factors that influence travel decisions; influence of information source on travel decisions; provider perceived demand for green destinations; willingness to participate in a green travel certification program; willingness to invest in sustainability practices; and perceived benefits from participating in a green travel program.

3.0 Results

3.1 Visitor characteristics

Of the 50 visitor respondents, the majority were either between 45-59 yrs. old (48%) or 60 yrs. or older (32%). Annual household income levels varied with 16% between \$25,001-\$39,000, 32% between \$39,001-\$75,000, and 22% between \$75,001-\$150,000. The majority (96%) use the internet often or all the time.

3.1.1 Visitor green travel preferences and extent to which sustainable practices influence visitor travel decisions

Results showed that visitors are generally conscious of sustainable practices as most (75%) would often or always choose a green destination over a non-green. About a third (32%) would pay would pay six to 10% more to experience a green destination (Figure 1)

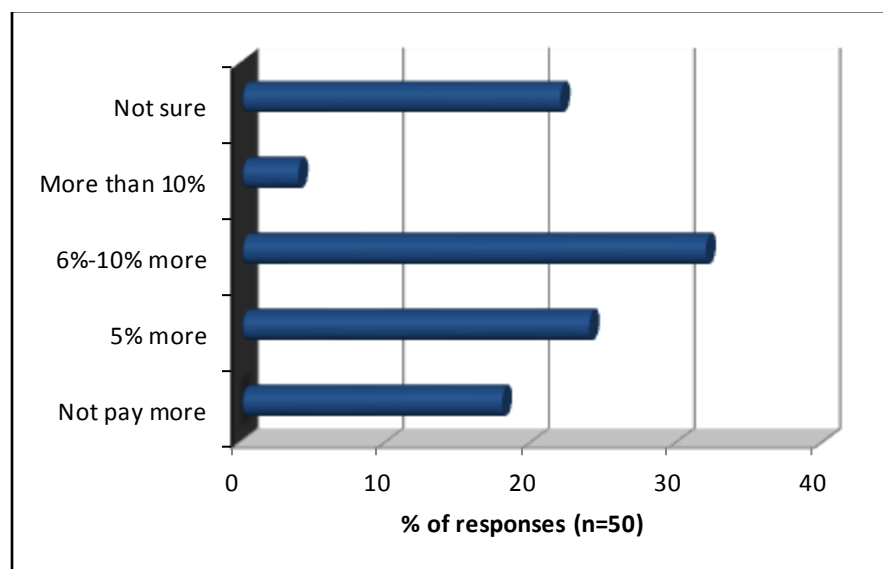


Figure 1. *Willingness to Pay More for Green Destination*

Although the majority (74%) of respondents had not used an online reference tool to select a sustainable destination, most (80%) indicated that they would use travel guides that show a destination's green practices during travel decision-making if they were readily available. Even though visitors indicated they would use green travel information during trip planning if it were readily available, and that they would pay more for a green destination, they still make travel decisions based primarily on cost and past experience (Table 1). Other important factors that influence visitor travel decisions include: quality of service, proximity to other destinations, and recommendations by friends and acquaintances (Table 1).

Table 1. *Factors Influencing Visitor Travel Decisions*

| Factor | Average Score* |
|---|----------------|
| Past experience | 4.8 |
| Overall cost | 4.6 |
| Quality of service from staff | 4.5 |
| Proximity to other destinations | 4.4 |
| Recommendation from friend/acquaintance | 4.3 |
| A rating from a trusted travel guide | 3.9 |
| “Green” sustainable practices | 3.5 |
| Proximity to home | 3.1 |
| Connectivity-internet/cell phone | 3.1 |

*Rated on a 5-point scale: 1 = No influence at all and 5 = A lot of influence.

3.2 Provider characteristics

Of the 58 provider respondents most (86%) had been in travel and tourism business for more than three years and operated outdoor recreation/entertainment or cultural/historical tourism businesses. The service providers were fairly evenly distributed between small to large businesses based on annual customer visitation. Approximately one-third received more than 25,000 annual visitors while about half were small businesses (less than 5,000 annual visitors).

3.2.1 Level of interest in green travel certification among tourism providers in the state of West Virginia.

Service providers felt that launching a green travel program should be the state’s priority. About two thirds (61.9%) felt that a green travel program for the state is very to extremely important and the majority (87.9%) were either somewhat or very interested in a green travel certification program (Figure 2).

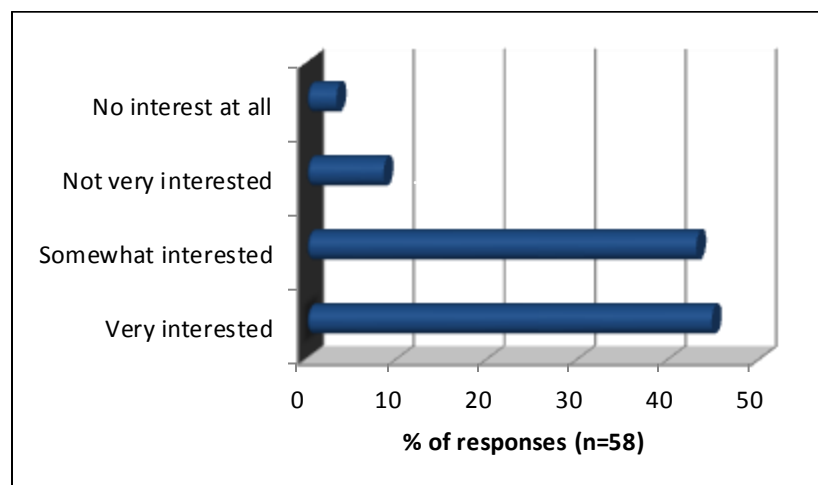


Figure 2. *Service Provider Interest in Participating in a West Virginia-Branded "Green Travel" Program*

3.2.2 Main factors influencing tourism service providers’ adoption of green/sustainable practices.

Providers believed there is demand for green tourism businesses or services. About 70% indicated that they believe there is some to a lot of demand for green travel and tourism products and services. It seems providers are interested in a green travel program to increase business by attracting more visitors. They see adoption of green/sustainable practices as a means to attract more visitors and reduce cost, thereby, improving their bottom line (Figure 3 & Table 2). The most attractive benefits for service providers to participating in a green travel certification program were to attract green travelers followed by improving their bottom line and reducing their company’s environmental impact (Figure 3).

<insert figure 3 about here>

<insert Table 2 about here>

Since businesses main concerns are to increase customer volume and improve profitability, it is expected that they would be interested in knowing return on their investments and pay-back period before making any commitments. About 67% of service provider respondents indicated five years or less would be an acceptable pay back period on investments to become greener. Providers indicated that they would need additional information to commit to program participation including: market data showing demand for green travel service providers; details such as cost to them and time commitment; evidence for return on investment.

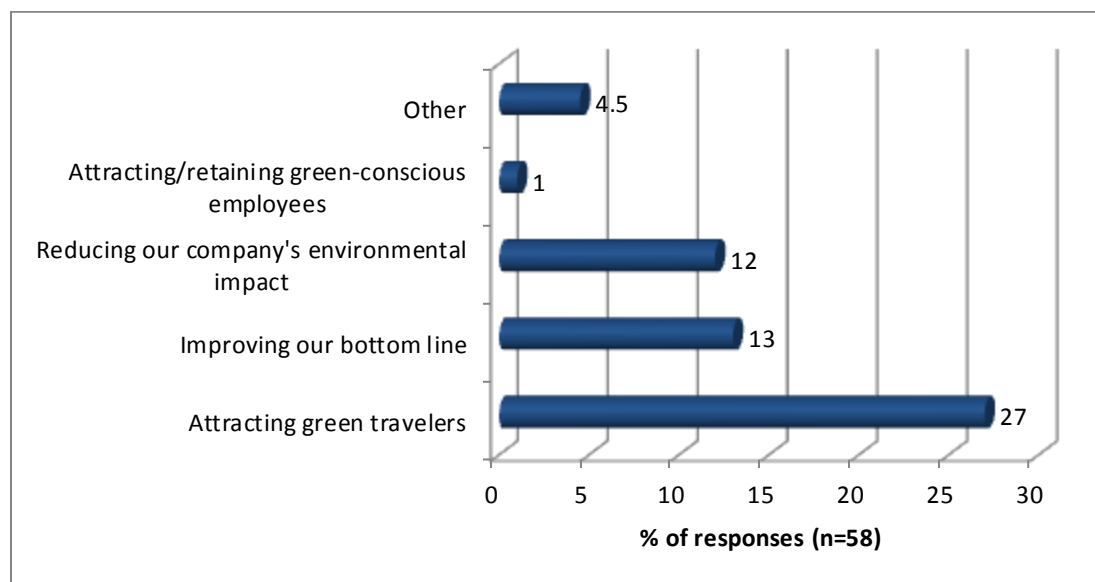


Figure 3. Service Provider Perceived Benefits for Participating in a Green Travel Certification Program

Table 2. Importance of Issues in Existing Business/Service

| Issue | Average Score * |
|---|-----------------|
| Attracting visitors/customers (marketing) | 4.9 |
| Reducing operational costs | 4.1 |
| Aligning our values with our business practices | 4.0 |
| Attracting and retaining good employees | 3.9 |
| Access to credit or investments to grow | 3.2 |

*Measured on a 5-point scale with 1 = Not important 5 = Extremely important

4.0 Conclusion and Implications

Study results are useful to destination managers, service providers and policy makers by identifying that there is industry and visitor demand for green travel in West Virginia. Visitors to West Virginia demonstrated an interest in choosing a green service provider over a non-green one and a willingness to pay more for experiences in green/sustainable destinations thus encouraging the state to invest resources in attracting this market. Visitors also demonstrated an interest in using an online travel planning tool that highlights sustainable practices during their travel planning but difficulty finding and using such a tool. This may suggest a lack of effective online marketing among states that have established green travel programs. West Virginia therefore has an opportunity to create and promote an online green travel planning tool that would assist potential visitors during travel planning and decision making.

To destination managers like the WVDEP and its partners and service providers the study shows that promoting sustainable practices is not only the right thing to do, but that it can also attract visitors, and potentially reduce costs, and increase profits. The results of this study can encourage policy makers to institute programs that encourage businesses and service providers to adopt sustainable practices in their business processes through participation in a certification program whereby business and

service providers are promoted for complying with a recognizable green tourism standard. Service providers are very interested in the marketing benefits associated with being identified as a green tourism business, therefore, a green travel program would need to have a variety of marketing features associated with it to create excitement and enthusiasm among service providers that participate and generate awareness among the niche market of green travelers.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

Study limitations included very low response rates. Researchers were engaged after the consulting firm had already been hired and contract terms already agreed upon, making it difficult to get access to data for further and deeper analysis. Though findings show some interesting insights into the green travel market for the state of West Virginia, the results from this study can't be generalized across all service providers and/or visitors to the state due to the low response rates and should be interpreted cautiously. This study was exploratory and more needs to be done with more robust data collection and analysis methods in the future.

This initial research in the early stages of program development helped to establish demand and encourage the WVDEP to continue investing time and funding into the development of a green travel program. Future research should include updating the study prior to program launch to establish current trends at a larger scale. The program is still in development; thus, based on these initial results and since it has been several years since the initial study was conducted, a more expanded study should be conducted with a goal to achieve higher response rates. Following program launch and implementation research should be conducted on adoption rates among service providers in West Virginia, visitor responsiveness, and program impact on the triple bottom line (people, profit, and planet) of participants.

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