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Understanding Public Preferences for Development of a Heritage Tourism Corridor: A Choice Experiment Approach

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ABSTRACT

Development and management of heritage tourism attractions pose several challenges, such as conserving heritage under limited financial resources. Heritage sites or attractions often include numerous attributes (e.g., education, guided tours) that can be provided at various levels. However, the financial constraints of heritage tourism sites inhibit the ability to implement every preference of visitors and potential visitors. The purpose of this study is to identify and compare the preferences of visitors and non-visitors for the improvement of management programs and services of the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor using a choice experiment (CE). Users and non-users indicated some different preferences for the development options. As agencies seek to develop programs and services that will increase total visitation, both groups are important to assess to satisfy current visitors so they will be repeat visitors, as well as implement programs and services that offer the best opportunity to convert non-visitors to visitors.

Keywords: *tourism development, heritage tourism*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism products and services should meet the needs of tourists, be marketable on a cost efficient basis, and developed to capitalize on the cultural and natural resources of the destination (Smith, 1994). Making this more complex is tourism products are composed of a number of attributes, including services and facilities. In addition, tourism organizations responsible for developing and offering such programs and services often face financial challenges that inhibit their ability to implement every preference of visitors and potential visitors. As a result, management agencies benefit from a comprehensive understanding of the preferences of their

current and potential visitors to identify feasible development options. In order to respond to these needs, the purpose of this study is to identify and compare the preferences of visitors and non-visitors for the improvement of management programs and services of a heritage corridor located in South Carolina (i.e., the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor: SCNHC) using a choice experiment (CE).

LITERATURE

Smith (1994) indicates that “product development is a prerequisite for satisfying tourists’ changing demands and insuring the long-term profitability of the industry” (p. 582). Inherently, this requires agencies that develop and manage tourism products and services to have a comprehensive understanding of both actual and potential visitors’ preferences for different aspects of the tourism product. As Jamieson (1998) points out, however, product development related to heritage tourism can be challenging given the multifaceted nature of the heritage tourism experience. In other words, heritage tourism may not only include both development and preservation, but is comprised of many elements, such as education and recreation experiences (Garrod & Fyall, 2000), to name a few. To add to the complexity and challenges faced by heritage tourism organizations, Garrod and Fyall (2000) suggest the ultimate goal of heritage sites is to conserve heritage sites and attractions with limited financial resources. Given these challenges in developing and managing heritage tourism sites, organizations involved in such efforts would benefit from a comprehensive assessment of the programs and services current and potential visitors prefer.

As a result, it is important to assess the preferences for development to enable management agencies the best opportunity for success. The CE approach, as a joint preference evaluation method, enables researchers to identify the relative importance of different trip attributes and levels included, making it a better approach for understanding tourists’ holistic preferences (Louviere, Hensher, & Swait, 2000). Alexandros and Jaffry (2005) suggest such a joint evaluation approach is useful for policymakers to understand how visitors make tradeoffs among various trip characteristics, such as a trip to a heritage site that includes numerous attributes or characteristics that affect the trip decision.

METHODS

The multi-attribute nature of heritage tourism validates the use of the CE method. There are four primary steps using the CE method as represented in Figure 1. The first step is to identify the attributes and appropriate levels for each. The attributes and levels are then used to generate choice sets which respondents are asked to consider and indicate which trip they would prefer by making tradeoffs between the trip choices. Data were analyzed using a conditional logit model with a discrete choice for the dependent variable.

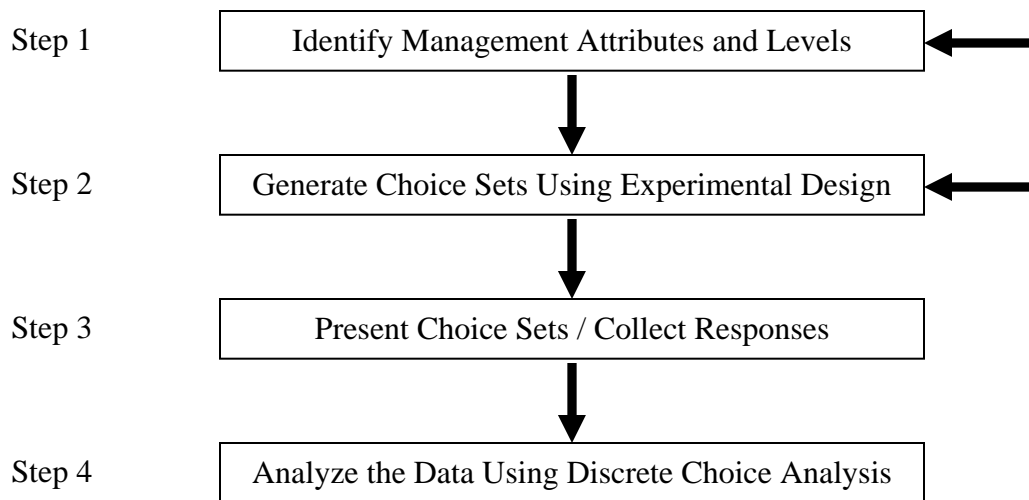


Figure 1: The Process of the Choice Experiment Method

Five trip attributes were carefully identified for this study after extensive literature review and discussions with managers: local shopping, tour programs, education/interpretation, benefits of the Corridor Cruiser program, and cultural experience (Table 1). Each attribute had three levels (e.g., low, medium, and high) and respondents answered three choice sets. The detailed descriptions were provided in the questionnaire to help respondents understand their choice tasks (i.e., choose their preferred trip alternatives).

Table 1: Proposed Attributes and Levels Used for the Choice Experiments

Attribute	Description	Level
Local Shopping	The overall shopping opportunities to buy local products (e.g., peach, apple, strawberry, tea, etc.)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Low: Sparse availability of local farms and/or stores 2. Medium: Some availability of local farms and/or stores* 3. High: Ample availability of local farms and/or stores
Tour Programs	The types of heritage tour programs guided by trained local residents available	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-guided tour: No tour programs available 2. Half-day guided tour: Half-day group tour programs available* 3. One-day guided tour: One-day group tour programs available
Education/ Interpretation	The types of education and interpretation materials available to visitors at Discovery Centers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Low: Brochures and signs only 2. Medium: Audio-visual (AV) materials in addition to brochures and signs* 3. High: Trained interpreters in addition to audio-visual (AV) materials, and brochures and signs
Benefits of <i>Corridor Cruiser</i>	The types of benefits offered to <i>Corridor Cruiser</i> members (individual membership: \$30/family membership: \$60)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Current benefits: free admission or a free gift at designated sites, special invitations to events, etc. 2. Upgraded benefits: 15 % discount for designated shopping, restaurants and lodging in addition to the current benefits* 3. Extensive benefits: 30% discount for designated shopping, restaurants and lodging in addition to the current benefits
Cultural Experience	The overall opportunities to experience local communities and cultures (folk arts, indigenous festivals, etc.) at or near SCNHC	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sparse opportunities 2. Some opportunities* 3. Ample opportunities

Note: * represents the base level for each attribute for model estimation

Each choice set differed on at least one attribute, requiring respondents to consider tradeoffs between the trips offered in each choice set. A “no trip” option was included to simulate real market choice behavior. An example choice set is displayed in Figure 2.

Suppose that you could only choose from the trips below (Trip A, Trip B or I would not choose either trip). Which would you prefer?

TRIP A	ATTRIBUTES	TRIP B
High	Local Shopping Opportunities	Low
One-day guided tour	Tour Program	Half-day guided tour
Medium	Education / Interpretation	Low
Upgraded benefits	Benefits of <i>Corridor Cruiser</i>	Upgraded benefits
Some opportunities	Cultural Experience	Ample opportunities

Given these choices, I would choose... (Please check only one)

TRIP A

**I WOULD NOT CHOOSE
EITHER TRIP**

TRIP B

Figure 2: Example of a Choice Set for the SCNHC Trip Participation

The sample for this study included visitors to the two Discovery Centers along the SCNHC, attendees on the SCNHC’s Ambassador Tours, and residents in the counties where the Discovery Centers are located and bordering counties as potential visitors. Email and mail procedures were utilized to disseminate the questionnaire using a modified Dillman (2007) procedure. The sampling strategy provided both users and non-users of the SCNHC. Of 1,701 questionnaires sent, 388 (71.4% Users and 28.6% Non-Users) were completed for an effective response rate of 25.7%. Once incomplete choice sets were deleted, there were 791 paired choice set observations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The average age of respondents was almost 58 (57.9) years of age. Close to 50% (47.5%) of respondents were 60 years of age or older. The gender of respondents was very evenly split with 49.7% female and 50.3% male. Over one-fourth (28.7%) reported a household income of \$100,000 or greater. Respondents were fairly well educated with 31.4% being a college graduate and 36.3% who completed post graduate school. There were no significant differences between SCNHC Users and Non-Users for age and household income. However, there was a significant difference between SCNHC Users and Non-Users for education, with Users being more educated.

The alternative specific constant (ASC) measured the utility shift of “no trip” to that of choosing a trip (Bennett& Adamowicz, 2001). The ASC was significant in the user model only, indicating that users were more interested in taking a trip to the SCNHC under current conditions (Table 2). The two groups show some different patterns of preferences for the proposed attributes. In particular, the significant coefficients of the two levels for the attribute of Education/Interpretation imply that respondents who visited the SCNHC were more interested in

having different types of heritage and cultural education and interpretation. These coefficients were not significant for Non-Users, signifying that respondents who had not visited the SCNHC in the past five years did not give much weight to education/interpretation opportunities available during a trip to the SCNHC. The negative coefficient for the ‘low’ level for the Local Shopping attribute for both groups indicates that respondents did not prefer the option of sparse availability of local farms and/or stores during a trip to SCNHC compared to the base option of the ‘medium’ level (some availability of local farms and/or stores). The coefficient for high level of local shopping opportunities was significant and positive for SCNHC Users, indicating they preferred to have additional local shopping opportunities available. Both groups opposed lower levels of cultural experience than the base option as indicated by the significant and negative coefficients for each group.

Table 2: Results of Conditional Logit Models (SCNHC User Vs. Non-User)

Attributes	Levels	SCNHC User	Non-User
		Coefficients	Coefficients
ASC		0.4458** (0.100)	-0.1577 (0.131)
Local Shopping	<i>Low</i>	-0.3385** (0.092)	-0.3514** (0.142)
	<i>High</i>	0.1480* (0.086)	0.0192 (0.132)
Tour Programs	<i>Self-guided tour</i>	-0.0512 (0.089)	0.0697 (0.133)
	<i>One-day guided tour</i>	-0.0076 (0.095)	-0.3408** (0.149)
Education/ Interpretation	<i>Low</i>	-0.3134** (0.092)	-0.1876 (0.140)
	<i>High</i>	0.1710* (0.094)	0.2380 (0.148)
Benefits of Corridor Cruiser	<i>Current benefits</i>	0.0651 (0.083)	-0.0176 (0.134)
	<i>Extensive benefits</i>	-0.0586 (0.088)	-0.0993 (0.141)
Cultural Experience	<i>Sparse opportunities</i>	-0.3244** (0.087)	-0.3184** (0.140)
	<i>Ample opportunities</i>	0.0828 (0.088)	0.1672 (0.134)
Log Likelihood		-598.7	-271.4

**indicates significance at the 0.05 level; *indicates significance at the 0.10 level
Standard errors in parentheses

To better identify the optimal design of the management programs to maximize visitor satisfaction or utility, the CE enables decision makers to generate and evaluate feasible combinations of available options. Five Scenarios were created to identify utility gain or loss resulting from changes in the model attributes. Scenario 1 is the base option with low site development and programs and Scenario 5 includes the most extensive levels of development

and programs. The other three scenarios were added with trip options between these two extreme ones. Table 3 indicates both the SCNHC User and Non-User group least preferred Scenario 1, as the base scenario consisting of the lowest levels of each trip attribute. However, each group most preferred a different Scenario. Those who visited the SCNHC in the past five years preferred Scenario 5 which included the highest levels of each trip attribute, while non-users preferred Scenario 4, with moderate or medium levels of most attributes.

Table 3: Predicted Probabilities of Proposed Scenarios (SCNHC User Vs. Non-User)

	Local Shopping	Tour Programs	Education/ Interpretation	Benefits of Corridor Cruiser	Cultural Experience	User Prob. (%)	Non-User Prob. (%)
<i>S.1</i>	Low	Self-guided tour	Low	Current benefits	Sparse opportunities	8.14%	10.06%
<i>S.2</i>	Low	Self-guided tour	Medium	Current benefits	Some opportunities	15.41%	16.69%
<i>S.3</i>	Medium	Half-day guided tour	Medium	Upgraded benefits	Some opportunities	21.32%	22.52%
<i>S.4</i>	Medium	Half-day guided tour	High	Upgraded benefits	Some opportunities	25.30%	28.56%
<i>S.5</i>	High	One-day guided tour	High	Extensive benefits	Ample opportunities	29.82%	22.16%

CONCLUSION

To reflect heterogeneous preferences, the two segmented groups were identified based on their prior trip experience to SCNHC: those who had visited the SCNHC (SCNHC User) and who had not visited the SCNHC (Non-User) in the past 5 years. The results generally corresponded with our prior expectations as SCNHC Users were more interested in taking heritage and cultural trips to SCNHC than Non-Users under the present conditions. Further, SCNHC Users seemed to be more interested in various programs proposed such as additional opportunities to buy local products, to have education and interpretation materials and sessions, and to experience local communities and cultures than Non-Users.

In conclusion, agencies responsible for the development and management of heritage tourism areas can benefit from a comprehensive assessment of the preferences of visitors, as well as non-visitors they hope get to visit. Information such as attitudes toward and preferences for tourism services and resources provide an understanding of the heritage corridor's competitive advantages, provide a valuable tool to better address shortcomings and guide the corridor's tourism development. As this study showed, users and non-users may have different preferences for the development of development options. As agencies seek to develop programs and services

that will increase total visitation, both groups are important to assess in order to satisfy current visitors so they will be repeat visitors, as well as implement programs and services that offer the best opportunity to convert non-visitors to visitors.

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