

Green Tourism Products, Pro-environmental Tourists and their Perceptions: A Case Study of Chandigarh

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Abstract: *Consumers are becoming more aware of environmental issues however little research exists as to what they know about pro-environmental tourism products and what they look for and expect from tourism businesses. It is believed that the pro-environmental tourist has high levels of environmental awareness and may demand more from businesses in the future. Increasing knowledge of consumers has implications for marketers. This study has explored a number of tourists across Chandigarh with the aim of finding out more about their knowledge, expectations and behaviors with regard to green tourism products. The findings highlight differences between the more environmentally active tourist and the less environmentally active tourist.*

Keywords: *Behavior change, consumption, environmental, sustainable*

I. Introduction and Review of Literature:

Consumer power and their influence is not at all a new phenomenon but increasing concern for the environment has given 'consumer power' even a greater prominence. The idea of the green/ environmentally aware, consumer surfaced a few decades ago and over time has wanted and resurfaced. When the concept first appeared it was defined as an individual who avoids products that are about to endanger the consumer health or otherwise causes significant damages to the environment during use or disposal, manufacture consume a disproportionate amount of energy; cause unnecessary waste; use materials derived from threatened species or environments; involve unnecessary use of – or cruelty to - animals; and adversely affect other countries (Elkington and Hailes 1989). However, in the recent times the environmentally aware consumer has also become more ethically aware and is now challenging businesses to be more ethical as well. This emphasizes the growing movement of the consumers who are affecting the way businesses operate with regard to social as well as environmental considerations, and corporate social responsibility (Smith 2007), and points to the fact that pro-environmental and ethical consumers have higher expectations of products and organisations. Consumers who are pro-environmental can lead to change in the organisations in a number of ways. They can also punish irresponsible behaviour via extreme measures such as boycotts or in their everyday purchasing behaviour (for example, switching to other brands or products) or support environmentally and socially responsible organisations via loyal purchasing and positive promotion (Smith 2007).

Objectives of the Study:

As the research about pro-environmental and ethical consumers has been increasing there has been less of a focus on pro-environmental tourists. Given the impacts that the tourists have on the environment during travel there is a need to improve our understanding of them, as their potential to drive change in the tourism industry remains untapped.

- This study identified group of pro-environmental tourists from general tourism sample with the aim of understanding more about their knowledge, behaviours and expectations with regard to 'green' tourism products.
- The intention of this work is to help marketers develop better promotional strategies to engage pro-environmental tourists.

Characteristics of Pro-environmental Consumers and Pro-environmental Tourists:

There is evidence that the number of pro-environmental consumers is increasing (Cooperative Bank 2008). For instance, work undertaken by *GlobeScan Inc* (Becker 2004) estimates that 22% of consumers in G7 countries are green consumers with 10% of consumers willing to pay a premium for green electricity or other kinds of green products. On the other hand, Vogel in his 2005 study (in Smith 2007) found that up to 90% of the consumer's surveyed considered corporate responsibility in their purchasing and consumption. These examples highlight the huge variation in reported growth which is likely due to various methodological approaches. Some of the researchers claim to measure behavior while others measure attitudes and intentions. Despite of these

discrepancies it would really be difficult to dispute the growth of consumer awareness with regard to the impact of consumption on society and the environment.

Increased interest in ethical and the pro-environmental consumerism is a growth in tourism related research. Tourism is of great interest to those concerned about conservation as tourists are very conscious with regard to the impact their activities have on society and the environment. Despite of various efforts, previous tourism research studies have failed to find consistent links between demographics of tourists and levels of environmental concern. As explained by Lee and Moscardo (2005), it is becoming more important, for marketing purposes if nothing else, to segment consumers according to psychographics, that is, beliefs, opinions and interests (Zografos and Allcroft 2007). This ties in with the finding by Dolnicar and Long (2007) that "socio-demographic information is not highly informative with regard to understanding environmentally responsible tourists" (Dolnicar and Long 2007, p.11). Dolnicar, Crouch and Long (2008) suggested that consumers of various tourism products who are pro-environmental in their behaviour are likely to have an emotional affinity towards nature; demonstrate pro-environmental behaviour in everyday life (e.g. recycle water and waste); campaign on environmental issues; are mindful about the transportation used; are willing to forgo comfort; and have high levels of regional identity. As part of psychographic segmentation, measuring environmental behaviour at home may also prove a more fruitful way of predicting as well as understanding environmental behaviour on holiday. It also seems that those resisting pro-environmental changes are also less willing to forgo comfort for environmental reasons.

Another study of consumer behaviour in the sustainable tourism field was undertaken by Miller (2003) who examined the levels of use of 'green' products, and 'green' product information and also the levels of activism of consumers (whether they watched consumer affairs programmes or bought consumer magazines). Tourist respondents were placed on a Green Consumer Index depending on how much of a green consumer they were. The research aimed to uncover whether consumers who are highly involved in consumer activism and were highly informed about green products were more likely to make environmentally friendly purchase decisions. Results showed that those who scored highly on the green consumer index, and considered to be pro-environmental tourists, were more likely to look for environmental information on their chosen destination. This suggests that pro-environmental tourists may perceive environmentally responsible practices as more valuable than other tourists.

Consumer Choice and Responsible Marketing:

How pro-environmental consumers in general make purchasing choices is very much complicated. Preferences, in many of the cases are on the spot and in the situation where the purchase is made (Niva and Timonen 2001). Generally, there is nothing much consistent about purchases. According to Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) purchases can also occur out of necessity which can be derived from mandated lifestyles; can reflect childhood acquisitions; can result from conformity to group norms; or from recommendations from others. These inconsistencies are even more apparent when it comes to environmental issues relating to products and services. There is a growing interest in the role of marketing for the promotion of sustainable products, and tourism products in particular, to consumers and for further changing organisational practices. Further this growth is evident in the emergence of responsible or sustainable marketing. Sorgem International referred to 4 kinds of strategies used by businesses - (i) a minimalist approach; (ii) a niche strategy with one or more product lines; (iii) an advanced strategy (as used by *The Body Shop*), or (iv) an integrated strategy where the entire mode of production is changed (Becker, 2004).

Sustainable marketing, therefore, is a comprehensive business approach which focuses on more than just advertising and communication. Whilst good practice in sustainable marketing considers the entire product life cycle, disposal, pricing policies, packaging and distribution and marketing communications, however, most of the firms are likely to start at a lower level.

Information can play a vital role in changing the behaviour in general and also pro-environmental behaviour specifically. Green labelling and certification has been espoused as a medium to help consumers separate less environmentally friendly firms from those having a more ethical focus (Cary, Bhaskaran and Polonsky, 2004). Many businesses have jumped on the 'sustainability band wagon' and in doing so have also adopted a range of 'green' strategies in order to promote their products. The strategies range from the use of superficial 'green labelling' using green colour schemes as well as images to the implementation of environmental certification and their logos and marketing advantages these provide (Harris 2007). The array of environmental certifications that have emerged within the tourism industry in the last few decades is substantial (Bendell and Font 2004). However unfortunately green marketing does not ensure the products are produced in a sustainable manner (Harris, 2007). Moreover, it is suggested that not all consumers devote time to reading product labels. Some consumers make informed choices, and these are likely to be the people who already know more about green certification and environmental issues. Others, however, tend to be more reactive and are influenced by branding and packaging (Becker, 2004).

In general, recognition of the logos and symbols was low, and understanding of these logos and symbols, and therefore what the awards and accreditations stand for, was equally low, and in some cases non-existent. When it comes to looking for award and/or accreditation logos it seems that very few respondents consider this to be a part of their tourism product.

II. Methodology

This study is based on the view that there is value in measuring the environmental behaviour of consumers at home as a more beneficial way of predicting and understanding environmental behaviour of tourists (Dolnicar, 2008; Miller 2003). The researchers carried out 150 intercept interviews with a sample of general tourists at Chandigarh main tourist attractions in five locations such as Elante Mall, Sukhna Lake, Rock Garden, Sector 17 and Sector 35.

To identify differences in their environmental focus consumers were asked about their pro-environmental behaviour at home, (Miller 2003). The respondents were categorised into Active (and therefore more likely to be pro-environmental) and Less Active (less likely to be pro-environmental) consumers. Once the level of activism had been established, this was used to check for significant between-groups differences in motivations, behaviours and expectations. Inferential statistical techniques like *t*-tests aided the analysis.

III. Findings and Conclusions:

- Previous studies found that the study of the psychographic characteristics of tourists is important in identifying pro-environmental segments.
- This study identified significant differences between those in the Active group and the Less Active group according to their motivations, knowledge and behaviours. Questions about their motivations for taking a holiday pointed out significant differences between the Active and Less Active group, particularly in the scores for the variables “a unique experience” and “beneficial for health”. The Active group rated both variables significantly higher than the Less Active group.
- These findings are different to previous research of the psychographic characteristic of pro-environmental tourists (Dolnicar et al, 2008) they add value in terms of building a more comprehensive profile.
- The interest in health fits with past work highlighting the values of the environmentally focused consumer, those concerned for human welfare as opposed to meeting hedonic needs, and the role they have in determining more sustainable behaviours (Steg, Dreijerink and Abrahamse, 2005; Thøgersen and Olander, 2002).
- Those in the Active category were significantly more likely to look for environmental information about their holiday. However, nearly one third of all tourists (33%) sought environmental information about tourism products before booking, 27.1% sought this information prior to departure and 43.1% sought the information after arrival at their holiday destination. This suggests that having environmental information available at the destination is advisable, as 44% of those who look for environmental information only do so once they have arrived at their destination. Interestingly, the more pro-environmental tourist uses different information sources when planning a trip and use the Internet and Visitor Information Centres, suggesting they are searching for information both before and during their trip. However, all of the tourists are still making many ‘on the spot’ decisions, which is also evident in the work of Niva and Timonen (2001). There is little evidence in previous work relating to if and how tourists seek information on the environmental focus of different tourism products. This finding provides strong evidence for the importance of providing environmental information to visitors via a range of sources and at various decision stages.

In summary, this study found significant differences between those in the Active group and the Less Active group in a number of areas important to marketers, including their travel motivations, search for and use of information, their knowledge of different pro environmental practices, and their perceptions of the importance of green labeling /certification. With these findings a number of recommendations emerge to support communication strategy development.

IV. Further Research Recommendations:

With these findings a number of recommendations emerge to support promotional strategy development. To begin with, the finding which highlights the value of the Internet (for pre trip) and the VIC (during the trip) as information sources has implications for the type of distribution channel for the promotion of sustainable products. Next, an interesting finding was that the pro-environmental tourist (those with stronger environmental values) seems to be more knowledgeable about the types of pro-environmental practices employed by the sustainably focused business houses.

On the whole, a key issue is whether Business Houses are working to meet the needs and expectations of the pro-environmental segment, which may be moving ahead of product suppliers. The pursuit by industry to find ways to assist businesses to be more proactive in interacting and engaging tourists in their pro-environmental activities is likely to be a long term strategic goal.

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