

THE STUDY OF RESIDENTS' COGNITION ON
ECOTOURISM IN CUC PHUONG
NATIONAL PARK, VIETNAM

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Abstract

This study examines local residents' cognition towards ecotourism in Cuc Phuong National Park, the level of interest in it as a form of leisure and the obstacles involved in undertaking ecotourism activity. Ecotourism helps educate the community to protect and conserve the environment through travel, and also creates and maintains a sustainable environment. The lack of community awareness and positive attitude towards ecotourism and the environment is likely to lead to misrepresentation and abuse of the concept, and ruin and exploit the environment. This study found that there was a low level of awareness and knowledge of ecotourism in the community around Cuc Phuong National Park. Over half of the respondents were not aware of it and the others, even if they were, still possessed limited knowledge about it. While most were aware of its environmental aspects, little or no recognition was given to the other aspects of ecotourism. Furthermore, most respondents also expressed indifference towards ecotourism and were unlikely to take such a trip in the near future.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, national park, local resident, residents' cognition, environmental conservation*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments for the tourism industry. It offers an alternative method of travel and has become an umbrella term for a range of environmentally friendly tourism practices, such as nature based travel and sustainable tourism (Edgell, 2006). Ecotourism has therefore come to signify an attractive investment proposition. The promise of ecotourism is that the influx of foreign tourists who are willing to pay for ecotourism experiences may bring in income to finance the provision and management of national parks to conserve the natural resources. On the other side of the coin is that it also helps to educate the community to protect and conserve the environment through their travel activities, and also to create and maintain a sustainable environment for both residents and tourists, and more importantly, for the next generation. Thus, the community should be aware of and have positive attitudes towards ecotourism. A lack of community awareness and positive attitude towards ecotourism and the environment is likely to lead to determining the impact on the environment, the same way as mass tourism had. Besides a lack of awareness and knowledge, Weaver (2001) argues that misrepresentation of ecotourism is common place and states that a reason for this is “the public’s lack of familiarity with ecotourism criteria”.

There are many definitions of ecotourism, however, there was no consensus on its definition (Lindberg, Enriquez, & Sproule, 1996). Honey (1999) has described ecotourism as a kind of travel to fragile, pristine, protected areas that strives to have low impact and is usually small-scale. Successful ecotourism activity can educate the travelers about environment, provide funds for conservation, directly benefit the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and foster respect for different cultures and for human rights. Attributable to its comprehensive coverage of the various aspects of ecotourism, the definition provided by Honey (1999) is used in this study to assess the residents’ perceptions toward ecotourism.

There are few studies assessing the attitude of the residents and visitors towards ecotourism. These studies have mainly concentrated on the evaluation of ecotourism in different destinations in which achievement of specific conservation and development principles of ecotourism were discussed, while some have emphasized the definitions and/or impacts of ecotourism (Bjork, 2000; Blamey, 1997; Obua & Harding, 1997; Scheyvens, 1999; Sirakaya, Sasidharan, & Sonmez, 1999; Walker, 1996). Others have examined the roles and responsibilities of different players in the planning or promotion of ecotourism destinations (Campbell, 1999; Inskip,

1991; Ross & G, 1999; Sindiga, 1999; Walker, 1996). Except for a few studies that profile and examine the motivations of ecotourists, most studies focus on the supply side of ecotourism (Eagles, 1992; Eagles & Cascagnette, 1995; Wight, 1996). Little attention has been paid to the demand side, which seeks insights of ecotourism from the tourists' perspectives as well as from a community perspective. This study represents one of the initial attempts to examine residents' cognition towards ecotourism travel.

Cuc Phuong National Park is the oldest and most developed of Vietnam's national parks. It is located about 100 km southwest of Hanoi. The total area of the Park is 22,200 hectares. In 1989, a very rare endemic monkey, the *Delacour's Langur*, was rediscovered in Cuc Phuong and became the 'flagship-species' of the Park (Tilo, 1995). The Park is home to diverse fauna, including 71 types of mammal, 319 birds, 33 reptiles, 16 amphibians and almost 2000 plant types, or 68.9% of all Vietnamese flora species (National Parks of Vietnam, 2001). With high level of potential ecotourism resources, Cuc Phuong National Park has become very interesting destination for eco-tourists, with around 60,000 tourists visit annually. However, residents' perception about ecotourism was still quite limited; nobody really understands the substance on ecotourism and the role of ecotourism in National Parks.

The purpose of the study is to examine the resident's cognition towards ecotourism in Cuc Phuong National Park and the level of their interests in it as a form of pleasure travel. Specific objectives of this study are: to assess the awareness and understanding of residents towards ecotourism in Cuc Phuong National Park; to examine the perceptions of residents towards ecotourism travel in terms of the characteristics of ecotourism, residents' interest in it, and its importance; to identify the obstacles faced by residents in taking ecotourism trips in Cuc Phuong National Park.

II. METHOD

A cross-sectional research design was used for this study. A survey questionnaire was designed and translated into Vietnamese to collect data from a random selection of Hanoi (capital of Vietnam) students, their parents and their relatives. Data were collected randomly from three universities in Hanoi which were selected on a systematic stratified basis. To enable comparison between those who had some knowledge about tourism and those who did not, data were collected from travel and tourism students at one of the selected universities. Randomized lists of students were provided by Departments of Student Administration from the three

universities. Students received two questionnaires. They were asked to complete one of the questionnaires and to give the other to an adult relative or a neighbor to complete. The questionnaires were distributed and collected over a two-week period in August 2011.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections. In part I a screening question was used to separate respondents who had heard about ecotourism in Cuc Phuong National Park and those who had not. Respondents who had heard of ecotourism were requested to complete some questions concerning their knowledge and awareness of ecotourism. In part II the qualified respondents were requested to rate the importance of various aspects of ecotourism (using Likert-type scaling) as defined by Honey (1999). Part III was answered by all respondents and it contained questions on the obstacles in taking an ecotourism trip and the respondents' level of interest in joining an eco-tour. Finally in Part IV, demographic information was sought.

In terms of data analysis, descriptive statistics was reported for all items and to test the various hypotheses, Pearsons' correlation, chi-square or the independent samples t-test were used, depending upon the type of measure used for the respective variables being tested.

The following hypotheses were tested.

H1 - Residents who are either (a) working in the tourism industry or (b) studying travel and tourism have a better understanding towards ecotourism than those who do not;

H2 - Residents with higher education level have a better understanding of ecotourism;

H3 - Residents who are aware of ecotourism will have a greater interest in taking an ecotourism trip than those who are not aware of it.

H4 - Residents who either (a) show interest in knowing more about ecotourism or (b) indicate interest in participating in an ecotourism trip will be more likely to take a next ecotourism trip.

III. RESULTS

A total of 281 completed questionnaires were received, representing a return rate of 75%. Some of the main results of the study are presented in Tables 1 to 3. In summary, it was found out that:

Awareness & Knowledge of Ecotourism

Over one third of respondents (35%) had heard of ecotourism in Cuc Phuong National Park, 66% had never taken part in any ecotourism activities while 19 % had had such experience. Of those who were aware of ecotourism, learning about the environment received the largest percentage of responses (47%) followed by building environmental awareness (32%). The main sources of information about ecotourism came from school (24%), local newspapers or magazines (24%), and television (22%).

Interest in Ecotourism and Obstacles

All respondents were asked if they were interested in knowing more about ecotourism. Nearly half of the respondents (48%) gave a neutral response while more than one third (37%) indicated they were interested. Approximately half of the respondents were asked if they would be interested in taking part in ecotourism and they indicated that they were likely to take a next trip in the near future. Fifty seven percent (57%) were either very interested or interested, but 35% gave a neutral response. For respondents who indicated interests in participating in ecotourism, the reasons given were a chance to get close to nature and to understand the natural environment. For respondents who were not interested in participating in ecotourism, reasons given were lack of time, lack of interest, and lack of information.

The five most frequently mentioned obstacles in taking an ecotourism trip were: lack of information about the destinations; high costs; risk on safety; no companions interested in going with the trip; and lack of time.

Table 1. Awareness of Ecotourism Objectives* (n=72)

	Frequency	Percentage of responses	Percentage of respondents
1) Learning about the environment	46	47	64
2) Building environmental awareness	31	32	43
3) Minimizing negative impacts on the destinations visited	15	15	21
4) Traveling to nature-based destinations	5	5	7
5) Providing direct financial benefits for conservation	1	1	1

* Multiple responses permitted

Table 2. Level of Interest in Ecotourism

	Frequency	Percent	Mean*
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Interest in knowing more about ecotourism: (n=81)			3.6
Not very interested	0	0	
Not interested	2	3	
Neutral	39	48	
Interested	30	37	
Very interested	10	12	
Interest in take part in ecotourism: (n=163)			3.6
Not very interested	7	4	
Not interested	7	4	
Neutral	57	35	
Interested	71	44	
Very interested	21	13	

* Based upon a five point scale where 1 = not very interested to 5 = very interested.

Table 3. Main Obstacles in Taking an Ecotourism Trip* (n=163)

	Frequency	Percentage of responses	Percentage of respondents
1) Lack of information about the destinations	79	16	49
2) Tour costs	77	15	47
3) Risk in safety	66	13	41
4) No companions interested in going with the trip	65	13	40
5) No time due to personal, family or work commitments	61	47	37
6) No suitable destinations	55	11	43
7) Transportation options	45	9	28
8) Degree of comfort offered	43	8	26
9) No interest in ecotourism	40	8	25
10) Government visas, requirements and regulations	39	8	24

*Multiple responses permitted.

Relationships between Cognition of Ecotourism and Various Independent Variables

Several hypotheses were tested in this study and the results obtained were mixed and were summarized as follows:

H1a - Residents working in the tourism industry have a better knowledge of ecotourism than those who do not - rejected.

H1b - Residents studying tourism have a better knowledge of ecotourism than those who do not - supported.

H2 - Residents with higher level of education have more knowledge of ecotourism - rejected.

H3 - Residents who are aware of ecotourism will have a greater interest in taking an ecotourism trip than those who are not aware of it - supported ($t=2.165$, $p<.003$).

H4a - Residents who show interest in knowing more about ecotourism will be more likely to take a next ecotourism trip - supported ($r = .67$, $p<.001$).

H4b - Residents who indicate interest in participating in an ecotourism trip will be more likely to take a next ecotourism trip - supported ($r = .64$, $p<.001$).

IV. DISCUSSION

There is a low level of awareness and knowledge of ecotourism among residents in Hanoi capital. More than half of the respondents were not aware of ecotourism in Cuc Phuong National Park and even if they were, they possessed limited knowledge about it. While most were aware of the environmental aspects associated with ecotourism, little or no recognition were made of the financial, cultural, empowerment and human rights aspects of ecotourism mentioned by Honey (1999). Most respondents also demonstrated somewhat indifferent attitudes towards ecotourism. Most had no idea about ecotourism, and fewer than half of the respondents who were likely to take a next ecotourism trip in the near future showed an interest in taking part in an ecotourism trip. However, potential demand for participating in an ecotourism trip may exist with most respondents indicating they have not taken part in any ecotourism activity before.

It was projected that residents working in the tourism industry or studying tourism subjects would have a better knowledge of ecotourism than those who had not, but the study revealed that this was not the case. In addition, it was thought that residents with higher levels of education would have better knowledge of ecotourism, but the findings did not confirm this. This suggests that even though the respondents may have worked or studied in tourism field, their knowledge and information about ecotourism was limited and their knowledge was really no better than that of the general public. Further education on ecotourism for the public and within the industry is obviously needed. Hypotheses were also proposed to test if a relationship exists between awareness and knowledge (cognitive), interest (affective) and the likelihood to go on an ecotourism trip (behavioral).

Although a random sample was used, the sample size was small ($n = 281$) and there is a bias in the profile of respondents with an over representation of female respondents and those in the younger age groups (18-22 years) compared to the profile found in the population census.

The latter bias of younger respondents was given, having regard to the fact that university students were purposely selected for the sample. The rationale for using a student sample was that within the community, they would be expected to have a greater awareness of environmental issues through education and represent the next generation of future pleasure travelers. Thus, the findings may not be representative of the general population and need to be interpreted with caution. Despite the limitations, the study does provide some useful insights on some community opinions towards ecotourism in Cuc Phuong National Park.

V. CONCLUSION

Residents' awareness and knowledge of ecotourism in Cuc Phuong National Park is limited and this lack of knowledge will hinder efforts to promote ecotourism within the community. Unless further and appropriate education is provided, the community will not obtain a proper understanding of ecotourism and misconceptions about this form of tourism is likely to continue. It is likely that similar results would be found in other communities elsewhere around the world and it would be interesting to extend this study to compare community perceptions towards ecotourism with other communities.

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