Tourist Typologies and Segmentation Variables with Regard to Ecotourists

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Abstract:
This is a brief note on ecotourism typologies as reported by different authors at different points of time. As such, this note tries to throw light on the research done so far on segmentation of ecotourists. One important parameter of ecotourist market segmentation that is receiving increased attention is the concept of a hard-to-soft spectrum that allows for identification of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ ideal types based on the characteristics such as environment and ecotourism-related behavior and attitudes. Some empirically derived ecotourist typologies that allow for the identification of hard and soft ideal types at either pole of an ecotourism spectrum have been mentioned. Also a few segmentation variables used to classify ecotourists have also been identified.

Tourist Typologies and Segmentation Variables

Over the years, researchers have developed several tourist typologies in order to provide a better understanding of tourists’ needs and motivations. Present day tourist typologies are mostly based on the motives of the tourist, and can be classified into two main groups: interactive tourist typologies that stress the interplay between tourists and their destinations and tourism environments, and cognitive-normative typologies that consider more the psychological elements attached to the tourists themselves (Raj, 2004). In 1970, Gray (as cited by Raj, 2004) defined two typologies based on the type of travel undertaken. These included “sunlust” and “wanderlust”, the first being travel undertaken for ‘rest and relaxation’ and the second being ‘motivated by the desire to learn’. Many such typologies have been subsequently proposed. Two of the best known and most widely used tourist typologies are those formulated by Cohen (1972) and Plog (1973) (as reported by Raj, 2004). Cohen’s classification of tourists, drifters, explorers, individual mass tourists and organized mass tourists, is one of the basic ways of classifying tourists. Equally famous is Plog’s proposition based on a specific scale using the type/trait personality theory tourists can be classified on the basis of two traits, ‘Psychocentrics’ and ‘Allocentrics’. Pearce undertook one of the earliest comprehensive quantitative studies of tourist roles based on Cohen’s fuzzy-set study and previous typologies (Foo et. al., 2004). He developed 15 tourist roles. Another important typology is the comprehensive classification of leisure tourists devised by Yiannakis and Gibson in 1992. Based on previous research and conceptualizations of Cohen and Pearce, they

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initially identified 13 tourist roles which was later modified include 15 leisure-based tourist roles. Again, in 1977, Smith classified tourist types on the basis of party volumes into the following categories: Explorer, Elite, Off Beat, Unusual, Incipient Mass, Mass and Charter. Jackson and others came up with four tourist types (the explorer, the adventurer, the guided and the groupie) based on Allocentrics-Psychocentrics as one dimension and Introverts-Extroverts as the other dimension (Raj, 2004).

The above typologies are basically conceptual. Besides these, several attempts have been made at creating taxonomies of tourists through empirically derived segments. Thus, market segmentation studies have been an important research area in tourism literature. One important consideration for segmentation studies is: what base, variable or criterion to use for segmenting markets. Over the years, a variety of segmentation bases or variables have been used for tourism market segmentation, which include primarily benefits sought, motivations and activities, demographic, psychographic (e.g., novelty-seeking, sensation-seeking) and other behavioral variables. Apart from these, some product-related variables like destination attractiveness attributes (Cho, 1998), tour selection attributes (Hsu and Lee, 2002), lodging preference attributes (Chen, 2000) as well as variables like purpose of trip (Kaynak and Yavas, 1981), emotions (Bigne’ and Andreu, 2004), tourist information search (Fodness and Murray, 1997), travel attributes, travel choices (Beckens et al., 2003) have also been used to segment residents and visitors.

**Objective:**

The basic objective of this article is to look into the different variables used by scholars for segmentation of the ecotourists. Also, an attempt has been made to identify the typologies of ecotourists that have been developed so far by various researchers.

**Who are Ecotourists?**

Ecotourism has emerged as one of the most widely discussed and debated concepts within the broad tourism sector. In spite of the growth in the use of the term ‘ecotourism’ by academics, governments, industries, host communities and even tourists themselves, there still remains some confusion with regard to a consistent definition (Galley and Clifton, 2004). However, one widely accepted definition is put forward by the International Ecotourism Society in 2002: ‘responsible travel that conserves natural environs and sustains the well-being of local people’ (Kerstetter et al., 2004). Just as there has been confusion regarding a generally accepted and consistent definition of ecotourism, in the same way there is a lack of consensus on what represents the key characteristics of ecotourists. Though ecotourists are generally characterized by their interest in learning about and appreciating natural environments, escaping from the pressures of normal life, being involved in somewhat adventurous activities, maintaining a healthy travel lifestyle and sharing experiences; yet, as observed by Wight (1996, reported in Palacio and McCool, 1997), there is lack of information about the characteristics of ecotourists. In some cases they are classified as ecotourists just because they have been sampled in nature-dominated settings. In the same vein, Blamey and Braithwaite (1997) have noted with regard to the numerous definitions of ecotourism offered in the literature that: “As attractive as these restrictive definitions might be, little is known about the profile of individuals who are interested in such experiences, or currently driving this apparently lucrative
market.” Similarly, Dolnicar (2004) has observed that despite the importance attached to sustainable tourism in the past decades, very few studies have investigated the characteristics of ecotourists or tourists who care about the natural resources in the country visited. Thus, as noted by Kerstetter et al. (2004), a compelling question is: who are ecotourists?

**Typologies of Ecotourists**

As already discussed, various typologies have been developed over the years in order to classify tourists into different types. Similarly attempts, though few (as mentioned in the preceding paragraph), have been made with regard to deriving distinct types of ecotourists. Some of these typologies are theoretical in nature and some have been empirically tested. It has been observed that, ecotourism can be related to Gray’s classification of ‘wanderlust tourism’ and Erik Cohen’s categorization of ‘non-institutionalized tourists’ in which travelers wish to seek different experiences from those that could be found at home and more of an authentic holiday than a typical ‘package deal’ (Galley and Clifton, 2004). Furthermore, Stanley Plog’s classification of allocentrics as ‘adventurous’ tourists that enjoy a sense of ‘travel discover’ also correlates with the concept of ecotourism. Some of the earliest studies on ecotourism attempted to classify ecotourists on the basis of setting, experience and group dynamics. For example, Kusler (1991, as cited in Fennel, 1999) typified Ecotourists as belonging to three main groups, including: Do-it-yourself Ecotourists, Ecotourists on tours, School groups or scientific groups. A variety of techniques are available to identify ecotourists, these may be broadly categorized as tourist typologies that are cognitive-normative and interactional. In a paper on using tourist typologies for ecotourism research, Hvenegaard (2002) has tested the level of congruency among four versions of these tourist typologies (i.e. researcher-based, respondent-based, activity-based and motivation-based), using a case study from a national park in northern Thailand.

Another important parameter of ecotourist market segmentation that is receiving increased attention is the concept of a hard-to-soft spectrum that takes into account an amalgam of associated motivations and behavior. This was apparently first introduced by Laarman and Durst (1987) (as cited by Weaver, 2002). Subsequently, Lindberg identified four categories of ecotourists (as cited in Galley and Clifton, 2003): (1) Hard-core nature tourists, are scientific researchers or members of tours designed for education, removal of litter or similar purposes (2) Dedicated nature tourists are people who take trips specifically to protected areas to understand local, natural and cultural history (3) Mainstream nature tourists are people who visit the Amazon, the Rwanda gorilla park or other destinations primarily to take an unusual trip, and (4) Casual nature tourists are people who partake of nature incidentally as part of a broader trip. Likewise, the Queensland Ecotourism Plan reported: self-reliant, small group and popular ecotourism. In all three studies, the spectrum progresses from strong biocentric (i.e. environment-oriented) to more anthropocentric (i.e. human oriented) tendencies within the ecotourism market. However, these studies have apparently not been supported by any empirical data. Therefore, according to Weaver and Lawton (2002), more indicative are those ecotourist typologies that have been derived through empirical investigation as they not only attest to the heterogeneous nature of the ecotourist market but also allow for the identification of *hard* and *soft* ideal types at either pole of an ecotourism spectrum. Figure1 presents
some of these studies, which represent a diverse array of sampled populations, sample sizes and methodologies.

![Figure 1: EMPIRICALLY DERIVED ECOTOURISM TYPOLOGIES](chart)

Based on an examination of the anecdotal and empirical segmentation literature, a few characteristics that are commonly attributed to the hard and soft ecotourists ‘ideal types’ have been identified (Weaver, 2002) as depicted in Figure 2.

![Figure 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF HARD AND SOFT ECOTOURISM AS IDEAL TYPES](chart)

A study of overnight ecolodge patrons in Lamington National Park, Australia by Weaver and Lawton (2002) supported the existence of distinctive hard and soft ecotourist market segments, but additionally identified a large and distinctive group of ‘structured’ ecotourists who combined hard and soft characteristics. These ‘structured’ ecotourists resemble the ‘harder’ ecotourists in terms of their strong environmental commitment, enhancive sustainability and being physically active whereas they resemble the ‘softer’ ecotourists in the following factors: Multi-purpose trips, short trips, larger groups, services expected and emphasis on interpretation.

**Segmentation Variables Used to Classify Ecotourists:**

It has been generally agreed that ecotourists do not represent one homogeneous group; instead they may be differentiated on the basis of many variables (Fennell, 1999). According to Wearing and Neil (1999), there are two primary groups of characteristics, which will assist in exploring what features distinguish ecotourists: demographic and psychographic characteristics (which include a range of attitudinal and behavioral patterns). A review of literature by Palacio and McCool (1999) reveal that different bases have been used in the studies
on nature-based markets. As cited by them, Pearce and Wilson (1995) and Bradford (1993) segmented wildlife viewing tourists by activities and benefits respectively and McCool and Reilly (1993) found four subgroups of visitors to natural parks in Montana by means of benefit segmentation. In a study of the potential ecotourism market, Blamey and Braithwaite (1997) have used social values to profile ecotourists. The use of social values as a basis for segmenting leisure and travel markets involving social goods has been suggested as an alternative to the more common personal values approach. Four clusters were derived. In a study of the nature-based tourism market in the Fiji islands that sought to document whether there are distinct segments of ecotourists, benefit segmentation was used to derive four distinct clusters. This study by Bricker and Kerstetter (2000) demonstrated that ecotourists are not homogeneous and they do not respond in the same way to a nature tourism experience. Again, in order to develop a profile of a distinct segment of ecotourists – individuals who visited coastal wetlands located in Taiwan, motivations and behavioral variables were used. Three types of tourists were identified. Using a benefit segmentation approach, Palacio and McCool (1999), segmented visitors to Belize, a widely known ecotourism country into four distinct segments. Likewise, behavioral segmentation was used in a study of overnight ecolodge patrons in Lamington National Park, Australia that resulted in three clusters of ecotourists (Weaver and Lawton, 2000). The variables used and the segments derived in the above-mentioned studies have been summarized in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher/Year</th>
<th>Segmentation variables</th>
<th>Derived segments</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Palacio and McCool, 1997</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>Nature Escapist, Ecotourist, Comfortable Naturalist,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passive Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blamey and Braithwaite, 1997</td>
<td>Social values</td>
<td>Ideological Greens, Moral Relativists, Dualists,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Libertarians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerstetter et al., 2004</td>
<td>Motivation and behavior</td>
<td>Experience tourists, Learning tourists, and Ecotourists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricker and Kerstetter, 2000</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>Eco-Family travelers, Culture buffs, Ecotourists,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eclectic travelers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaver and Lawton, 2002</td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>Harder ecotourists, Softer ecotourists and Structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ecotourists</td>
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</tbody>
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**Conclusion**

Not much research has been done so far to identify and segment ecotourists or to distinguish them from other tourist types. However, there are a few empirically derived ecotourist typologies that allow for the identification of hard and soft ideal types at either pole of an ecotourism spectrum. The ‘harder ecotourists’ display characteristics such as strong environmental commitment, enhancive sustainability, specialized trips, long trips, small groups, physically active, physical challenge, few if any services expected, emphasis on personal experience and making own travel arrangements, while, the ‘softer ecotourists’ exhibit characteristics such as moderate environmental commitment, steady state sustainability, multi-purpose trips, short trips, larger groups, physically passive, physical comfort, services expected, emphasis on interpretation and reliance on travel agents and tour operators. To these two groups may be added a third as revealed in a study of overnight ecolodge patrons in Lamington National Park, Australia by Weaver and Lawton (2002). This group which they refer to as ‘structured ecotourists’ resemble the ‘harder’ ecotourists in terms of their strong environmental commitment, enhancive sustainability and being physically active whereas they resemble the ‘softer’ ecotourists in the following factors: Multi-purpose trips, short trips, larger groups, services expected and emphasis on interpretation. As far segmentation variables a concerned, few of the variables used to
classify ecotourists include benefits sought, motivations, social values as well as behavioral variables. Thus, while some attempts have been made to classify ecotourists yet, much remains to be done in terms of the development of more vivid typologies exploring different dimensions of this special category of tourists that we refer as ecotourists.

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References


