



The Consumer Value of Nature-based Tourism: An Examination of National Park Visitors

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Consumer value is a central marketing concept that describes the benefits we obtain from consumption; it describes why we buy and consume products and services (Woodruff, 1997; Woodruff & Gardial, 1996). Therefore, in the current case, it reflects the personal benefits and advantages of nature-based tourism.

Let’s begin with a short, but illustrative story from the past. Back in 1977, the world-famous American writer, Kurt Vonnegut, was on his European promotion tour. While visiting Helsinki, he suffered from an acute burnout caused by the constant hustle and bustle, obtrusive interviews and camera crossfire. To help him recover, his Finnish hosts took him to Koli in North-Karelia, a place renowned for its spectacular scenery and back then, also peacefulness. As Mr. Vonnegut described this, they took him “to the edge of the permafrost”. And indeed, he not only recovered, but he was also very impressed. Later, he often referred to this ad hoc Koli-excursion as the happiest moment of his life. But to the surprise of his hosts, the reason was not the scenery, nor the silence, nor the pristine forests – it was picking frozen blueberries from underneath the first snow and melting them in his mouth! In its shortness and simplicity, this story nicely reveals the nature of consumer value in nature-based tourism; this value, i.e., the benefit derived by tourists, depends on the context and it is experiential, personal and multidimensional. Consequently, this value is often also unpredictable and difficult to manage.

My research focused on the construction of consumer value in a nature-based context. I examined self-organized, do-it-yourself visits to public national parks; that is, people visiting the parks on their own, not assisted by any companies. I selected this setting in order to disclose the visitors’ authentic value perceptions unbiased by the managerial efforts of companies. In the broader marketing framework, the park visits represented a textbook example of the consumer dominant logic (Anker et al., 2015; Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Heimonen et al., 2010; Voima et al., 2011); the visitors used their operant resources – their own

skills and knowledge – to create value in the ecosystemic contexts lacking direct company control. The research was conducted in nine Finnish national parks, both large wilderness parks in Northern Finland and small well-equipped parks in more densely populated southern parts of the country. This purposive selection of different types of destinations aimed to capture as many perspectives and different value types as possible.

The value experienced by consumers can be investigated from two theoretical perspectives. The compositional view regards value as a multidimensional construct that comprises several different value types. This structure is depicted by dismantling the global value perception into different dimensions, such as functional, emotional, social and aesthetic (Sheth et al., 1991; Holbrook 1999). The alternative, dynamic view, for its part, focuses on the means-end construction of value by linking concrete product attributes into the consumers' personally perceived benefits and eventually, to their underlying universal values (Gutman 1982; Woodruff 1997). Thus, while the aforementioned compositional view offered a snapshot-like breakdown of the outcome, the means-end approach examines the hierarchical, step-by-step process that leads to the outcome. The current research applied both of these approaches in order to provide in-depth insight into the consumer value of nature-based tourism.

Experiential consumption is highly context-dependent

The first part of my research project focused on the visitors' park experiences, the most memorable events of their visits. This qualitative and inductive investigation was conducted in the Pallas-Yllästunturi national park in northern Finland. The wilderness huts' guest books served as its source of naturally occurring empirical material that contained authentic visitor experiences. These short narratives were scrutinized using qualitative content analysis and data-driven coding (Schreier, 2012). The examination covered five decades of park experiences, from the 1970s to the 2010s, thus providing a longitudinal perspective.

Five experiential themes surfaced from the examined narratives. The most frequent one was the surrounding nature as such, admiring the sunset and unexpectedly encountering wildlife, for example. Nature was followed by the visitors' own physical accomplishments such as hiking long distances. The third experiential theme comprised self-made experiences like feeling inner peace, cooking a delicious meal or sleeping exceptionally well. And lastly, also the park infrastructure as well as social interaction with other visitors created memorable experiences. The phenomenon that united all these themes was control and in particular, the lack of control. In this natural context, visitor experiences were neither driven and determined by the companies nor by the consumers themselves (cf. Caru & Cova 2003, 2007; the experience continuum model). Instead, they were largely dependent upon emergent and unpredictable contextual factors, such as sudden changes in weather or accidentally bumping into nice people. Therefore, the visitors could anticipate certain types of experiences before their trip, but their ability to predict these and actively contribute to their realization was limited. This randomness was theorized with the Experience Triangle that highlights the relevance of emergent events in experiential consumption; hence, also

the context influences consumer experiences and therefore, the outcome is not determined exclusively within the company – consumer dyad. This slipping of control away from both the companies and consumers to the hands of random environmental factors was observed in an unmanaged natural context, but presumably the finding is applicable also to more managed tourism settings and beyond, basically to all experiential consumption that occurs in wide consumer ecosystems in accordance with the consumer dominant logic.

The social value of tourism is not limited to status and esteem

The second part proceeded from the experiences to their meaning to the visitors; that is, the perceived consumer value of the visits. This was examined in two parks (Pallas-Yllästunturi and Kurjenrahka) using qualitative soft laddering interviews, in which the topics discussed were freely determined by the participants and described in their own words while the interviewer's role was merely to keep the discussion focused and encourage respondent introspection (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988; Reynolds and Phillips, 2009). The transcripts underwent qualitative content analysis taking into account both manifest and latent meanings. The findings were categorized by open coding and compared to extant value theories and typologies using abductive analysis (Rinehart, 2020; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

The perceived value was clearly composed of numerous different elements; thus, it was multidimensional and personal. This implied that the same park offered different people different types of benefits. Visitor A would enjoy the natural beauty while visitor B at the same spot would be so concentrated on a physical challenge that he or she would completely miss the scenery. Visitor C, for his or her part, might appreciate the opportunity of spending time with friends while visitor D would value solitude above all. Hence, different visitors had different value perceptions. And equally well, an individual visitor, a single person, could appreciate several benefits at the same time. For example, submitting a field with friends could simultaneously offer social interaction and physical challenges and once reaching the top, perhaps aesthetic beauty and the self-fulfillment from the accomplishment.

Conceptually, the most interesting finding was the richness of social value. It was not only instrumental and directed at other people as claimed by extant value typologies (Sheth et al., 1991; Holbrook 1999). People did not visit the parks only to show off to others and gain their respect; status seeking was not their primary social value. Instead, the observed social value dimensions were mainly self-oriented and intrinsic based on enjoying the company of other people; thus, conceptualized as Togetherness and Communality. Togetherness was clearly internal in-group interaction, enjoying the company of good friends and family members while Communality reflected the visitors' mental inclusion in a community of like-minded people, albeit total strangers to each other. One interviewee expressed it by saying: "I like the sense of community. In a way, we are all on the same track. I feel I belong to the gang." Communality comprised both a passive feeling membership as well as active socialization with peers. In addition to Togetherness and Communality, this research also disclosed new social value dimensions that were instrumental but at the same time

self-oriented. Some visitors told they had learned new skills from more experienced hikers and the presence of other people also contributed to safety. Although many visitors were trekking on their own in the wilderness, they relied on others for help, as one female solo hiker put it: “In case something happens to me, sooner or later, someone will come by.” Togetherness occurred both in the large wilderness park and the small urban park, but interestingly, Community was found only in the large wilderness park. Presumably, people on a short day visit to the nearby urban park wanted to be on their own or with their friends – just make a quick escape – and therefore, encounters with strangers did not contribute to their perception of value.

Based on these new, self-oriented social value dimensions, I argue for the adoption of a broader, Extended View of Social Value in tourism. This argument is also underpinned by motivation theories (e.g., Crompton, 1979) as well as the basic human needs (Maslow, 1943) and universal values (e.g., Schwartz 1992) that all include self-oriented social value dimensions. Moreover, the current research on co-creation of value in tourism between the tourists themselves is based on social interaction (Rihova et al., 2015). Therefore, the social value of tourism can hardly be limited to showing off and seeking status from others – tourists also enjoy the company of other people. To demonstrate this broader composition of social value, I converted Holbrook’s two-dimensional value matrix into a three-dimensional Value Cube, which depicts intermediary and hybrid value dimensions more precisely.

Tourists’ behavior and decision-making are guided by the universal values

The third phase of this research examined the hierarchical means-end construction of consumer value. Instead of the previously discussed cross-section of value and its multi-dimensional composition (the outcome), the third part investigated how the park visitors create value (a process perspective). Using a two-phase sequential mixed-method strategy, a new hard laddering method – digitally customized Association Pattern Technique (cf. Hofstede et al., 1998) – was developed and piloted. This novel technique allowed examining the dynamic construction of value of close to 1,000 respondents in nine different national parks by requesting the respondents to connect relevant destination attributes and visitor experiences to their personal value perceptions and the underlying universal values. The outcome was means-end chains, i.e., value pathways, from concrete destination elements to more abstract and higher personal outcomes (Gutman, 1982; Woodruff, 1997). This process-based approach not only disclosed what the visitors appreciated but also answered the crucial questions of how they create value and why certain value types are desired. Thus, the outcome was in-depth insight and a more holistic understanding of the visitors’ preferences and decision-making.

Combining the composition of value with its dynamic construction was labelled Value Biangulation (cf. triangulation). It revealed that emotional value dimensions are not only ends in themselves as often claimed (e.g., Holbrook, 1999). Instead, they also function as means to realizing even more abstract universal values. For example, a person may easily recognize that he or she seeks silence in order to experience recreation, but fundamentally,

his or her behavior is guided the universal values that in this case could be spirituality and universalism. Hence, in order to truly understand nature-based tourists, we need to delve beneath the superficial level and identify the ultimate, often subconscious determinants of their decision-making and behavior.

Practical implications for managers of national park as well as nature-based tourism companies

To conclude, the consumer value of nature-based tourism is experiential, personal, context-dependent, and multidimensional. These characteristics were theorized with the Experience Triangle, Extended View of Social Value, Value Cube and Value Biangulation to allow their application in other experiential contexts. As far as the examined tourism setting is concerned, the empirical insight gained is useful to managers of national parks as well as companies that provide commercial nature-based tourism services. Visiting national parks adheres to the consumer dominant logic where the park infrastructure, services and natural resources are independently used by the visitors in their own value creation and the management's role is limited to indirect facilitation of this process. Consequently, park managers often focus on the concrete issues and infrastructure whereas my findings, in contrast, urge them to view their parks more through the eyes of the visitors. I encourage to shift focus from the destination attributes to the visitors' personal outcomes; park infrastructure and services should be regarded as means that facilitate the realization of the visitors' personal ends. Therefore, the management of parks as destinations should be replaced with the management of visitation reflecting a truly customer-oriented approach. In addition, the findings portray the parks as places that offer an abundance of value dimensions to diverse visitors, from absolute solitude to lively social bubbles, from aesthetic beauty to the thrill and sweat of physical challenges and from wandering in pristine wilderness to the ease of using modern recreation facilities. Deeper visitor insight facilitates sustaining the pull of parks and the recognition of broader value opportunities aids attracting new visitor segments.

The findings are also applicable to nature-based tourism beyond the public and free-of-charge national parks. Nature-based tourism companies that offer outdoor experiences for their customers represent a more service dominant logic where companies and their customers co-create value together (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo et al., 2008). Although the companies have more control over the outcome, the randomness of nature and diversity of value dimensions is inescapable also in their business. This should, however, not be considered a threat or something to be minimized, because Mother Nature with all her surprises constitutes the true asset of their business; nature-based tourism has to be based on nature. Instead of trying to standardize the offering and avoid all unplanned incidents, also the customers of companies should become exposed to the randomness, diversity and thrill provided by nature. They should be surprised, amazed and fascinated by the spontaneous events and the process should only be controlled to the extent necessary for technical cus-

tomers' satisfaction. In essence, it is the very nature of nature that makes this type of tourism so fascinating and renders its consumer value so multifaceted.

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