Travel Motivation of Domestic Tourists to the Changbai Mountain Biosphere Reserve in Northeastern China: A Comparative Study

Abstract: This article seeks to develop a fuller understanding of the social and attraction motives of domestic tourists who visit the Changbai Mountain Biosphere Reserve (CMBR) in Northeastern China. To do so, ecotourists are compared to general travelers visiting this area. A questionnaire was employed to collect data on visitor characteristics and motivations, responses to which were then analyzed via descriptive statistics, T-tests and principal component factor analysis. Results showed that 16% of the visitors to this area were classified as ecotourists, while the remainder general travelers. Five motivations displayed significant differences (P<0.05) between these two types of tourists. Three social motives – boosting self-confidence, feeling at home away from home and being together with family – and two attraction motives – indoor sports and viewing unique landscapes of the CMBR (crater lake, waterfall, gorge and hot spring) – were significantly more important for general travelers (P<0.05); while two social motives of experiencing the tranquility of the natural setting and the natural beauty of the landscape were relatively more important for ecotourists (P<0.1). Results suggest that ecotourists have distinct and complicated attraction and social motives compared to general travelers visiting the CMBR. Results have useful implications for researchers interested in tourist motivations and behavior, as well as for managers who wish to focus their marketing strategies more effectively.

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Introduction

The concept of motivation is considered as an element of market segmentation in many empirical studies of tourism (Awaritefe 2004; Card and Kestel 1988; Kozak 2002; Ryan and Glendon 1998), and a number of approaches have been used for understanding tourist motivations (Crompton 1979; Hanqin and Lam 1999; Kerstetter et al. 2004; Plog 1974; Ross and Iso-Ahola 1991; Ryan and Glendon 1998). Researchers note that tourists’ motivations are multiple (Crompton 1979; Mayo and Jarvis 1981) and that people may have different reasons for taking either domestic or international vacations (Kozak 2002). Fodness (1994) observes that effective tourism marketing is impossible without understanding the consumers’ (tourists’) motivations and that a satisfying experience in visiting a particular area can ultimately help entice more tourists to visit that area. Beh and Bruyere (2007) agree that it is first important to identify tourists’ motivations for travel in order to adequately provide an excellent tourism experience for visitors. Pan and Ryan (2007) believe that in order to develop an effective marketing strategy and sustainable management plan for any destination, it is important to explore and identify the motivating factors that lead to the selection of a specific destination to visit. Other scholars have recommended that, in an increasingly saturated marketplace, the successful marketing of national parks and other distinctive ecological destinations should be guided by a thorough analysis of tourist motivations and their relationship to visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Kozak 2001; Yoon and Uysal 2005).

Natural areas and national parks have powerful appeal for tourists, are major foreign currency earners, and make up an important part of a nation’s tourism industry (Uysal et al. 1994). A number of studies focusing on motivations of visitors to national parks and nature areas have been undertaken in western countries. Ferreira and Harmse (2014) found that most visitors wanted to view wildlife (especially the Big Five) in the Kruger National Park of South Africa. Uysal et al. (1994) assessed the travel motives of Australian tourists to U.S. national parks and nature areas and formed five groupings including ‘relaxation/hobbies’, ‘novelty’, ‘enhancement of kinship relationship’, ‘escape’, and ‘prestige’. Tao et al. (2004) analyzed motivations of Asian tourists travelling to Taiwan’s Taroko National Park using a self-defined approach and found that the most significant benefits sought by self-defined ecotourists are ‘learning about nature’ and ‘participating in recreation activities’. Beh and Bruyere (2007) analyzed visitor motivations in three Kenyan national reserves, identifying the three most prominent kinds of tourists as escapers, learners and spiritualists. Pan and Ryan (2007) used factor analysis to reveal five motivational dimensions – ‘relaxation’, ‘social needs’, ‘a sense of belonging’, ‘mastery skills’, and ‘intellectual needs’ – of visitors to the Pirongia Forest Park in New Zealand. Kruger and Saayman (2010) did a comparative study on travel motivations of tourists to Kruger and Tsitsikamma National Parks in South Africa and found that common motives of tourists were ‘escape and relaxation’ as well as ‘knowledge seeking’, ‘nostalgia’ and ‘park attributes’. Despite these efforts, on an overall basis past literature on why visitors travel to national parks and nature areas is still rather limited.

In China, a number of empirical studies on tourist motivations have been conducted since the early 1990s (Chen and Miao 2006; Dong 2011; Huang et al. 2011; Jeffrey and Xie 1994; Lu 1997; Ma et al. 2013; Zhang 2012). Some studies have focused on motivations of visitors to nature reserves (Li 2007), geological parks (Chen and Qiao 2010), world heritage sites (Su et al. 2005), and seismic memorial sites (Tang 2014). However, most previous research findings on tourist motivations are not comparable, reflecting the fact that visitors to different parks have quite different motives due to the attributes of particular destinations, the geographic locations of these parks, types of available activities, marketing strategies, and the complexity of travel motives (Chen and Qiao 2010; Pan and Ryan 2007). While it is true that certain motivations were shared in varying degrees by most tourists to these places – i.e., ‘appreciating natural landscapes’, ‘family and education’, ‘social needs’, and ‘perceived prestige of