



# TOURIST EXPERIENCE AND WETLAND PARKS: A CASE OF ZHEJIANG, CHINA

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**Abstract:** Following an experiential framework, this research aims to disentangle the factors influencing tourist experiences in wetland parks in the context of an emerging economy. Specifically, this study tests the causal relationships among service quality, tourist experience, and revisit intention in relation to three popular wetland parks in Zhejiang, China. Consequently a series of on-site visitor surveys using a structured questionnaire are conducted in three wetland parks, resulting in 267 useful responses. The resultant data reveal five dimensions of service quality and three dimensions of tourist experience. The structural model shows that tourist experience is a mediator between service quality and revisit intention. Apart from related personnel, the service quality factors are only able to influence post-trip behavioral intention through aesthetic experience and action experience. Further, the implications of the findings for experiential marketing and sustainable development are discussed.

**Keywords:** Wetland parks, China, service quality, tourist experience, post-trip behavioral intention. © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

To achieve the conservation and wise use of wetlands, the Chinese government has established 550 wetland protected areas and 100 of them are developed into the experimental units of wetland parks since the early 1990s. By 2010, the total number of national-level wetland parks reached 68, containing 38 national wetland parks and 30

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national urban wetland parks. Majority of the wetland parks are located in the Eastern provinces such as Shangdong, Jiangsu, Hebei and Zhejiang (Wang & Lu, 2009; Wang, Lu, Tang, & Wang, 2010). While most of these parks are established for protecting the wetland ecosystem, some are promoted as wetland ecotourism destinations. These parks encourage awareness of the natural environment through various educational programs and outdoor recreation activities. Indeed, wetland parks have been identified as an alternative travel destination for domestic tourists in general and a major recreational space for urban dwellers in particular. The burgeoning demand on wetland parks has promoted tourism scholars to look at critical issues in service delivery.

Due to the rapid pace of urbanization in China, the number of visits to wetland parks has increased significantly, which could negatively affect wetland resources. It is thus imperative that wetland park operators find the best solutions for enhancing the tourist experience without compromising the viability of natural resources. Although some researchers have studied the development and layout of wetland resources from ecological and landscape planning perspectives, only a few have examined wetland parks from the perspective of tourists' experience. This study aims to understand tourists' experience of wetland parks, and how this experience affects their later behavioral intention. Specifically, the study tests a social-psychological model that examines the causal relationships among the factors affecting the experience, tourist experience, and post-trip behavioral intention of wetland park tourists.

### *Types of Tourist Experience*

The principal theories of consumer experience focus on situational experience, flow experience, binary experience, two-factor experience, and strategic experiential modules. Toffler (1970) divides customer experience into direct and indirect experiences according to different types of situation. In this case, direct experience reflects the customer experience of the real environment. According to Csikszentmihalyim (1988), customers' best experiences are when they have an overall sense of flow, which in turn requires eight elements: clear goals, immediate feedback, the match of individual skills and challenges, an inherent sense of control, loss of self-awareness, changes of time perception, purposive experience, and concentration on activity. From a product-based perspective, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) propose that customers have both functional experience and enjoyable experience, with the two types differing by proportion and weight. Functional customer experience arises from the consumption of a product's function, whereas enjoyable experience derives from the sensations generated when consumers buy products.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) develop a two-function perspective by suggesting that customers can be either actively or passively involved in consumption. They further argue that two environmentally-related

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