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Accidents in the New Zealand adventure tourism industry

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Abstract

The New Zealand adventure tourism industry was surveyed to determine the incidence of client accidents and injuries and to investigate operators' accident investigation and reporting behaviour. The 142 adventure tourism operators who responded to the survey represented a wide and diverse range of adventure activities, including kayaking, white water rafting, mountain recreation, horse riding and guided walks. Businesses surveyed were concentrated in locations acknowledged as main centres of adventure tourism activity. Operators were asked a number of questions regarding their accident notification, investigation and reporting behaviour. Poorest accident reporting performance was found for smaller operators, and among operators from the least regulated sectors of the adventure tourism industry. A very low incidence of client injuries was reported by operators, suggesting accidents and injuries are being seriously under-reported in some sectors. Highest client injury-incidence rates were found for activities that involved the risk of falling from a moving vehicle or animal (cycle tours, quad biking, horse riding and white water rafting). Operators from these sectors frequently reported 'falls from a height' as accidents involving clients. Slips, trips and falls on the level were common across most sectors of the industry. A conceptual model of operators' perceptions of common risk factors for accidents/incidents involving clients is presented. Recommendations for intervention and further research are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Adventure tourism; Accidents; Client injuries; Accident reporting

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1. Introduction

Accidents are acknowledged to be a leading cause of mortality and morbidity among tourists travelling to foreign destinations (Page and Meyer, 1996, 1997; Wilks and Atherton, 1994), being the second largest cause of death among Scottish (Paixao et al., 1991) and United States overseas visitors (Hargarten et al., 1991). They are also the main reason for overseas tourist hospital admissions in Queensland, Australia (Nichol et al., 1996). The potential for events such as accidents to negatively impact on the tourism industry is also well understood (Cliff and Page, 1996; Greenaway, 1996; Wilks et al., 1996), and safety is recognised as a key factor in the selection of tourist destinations (Bovet, 1994; World Tourism Organisation, 1996). This issue was exemplified in a recent survey, reported in the New Zealand press (Bentley and Page, 2001), in which safety concerns were found to be the major hinderance to Japanese overseas travel to New Zealand. New Zealand was ranked behind Hawaii, Australia, Switzerland, Canada, Singapore, Britain and Guam as a safe destination. These perceptions are believed to have been strongly affected by media reports in Japan concerning New Zealand scenic flight crashes in which Japanese tourists were killed (also see Greenaway, 1996; Page, 1997; Page and Meyer, 1997).

Accidents involving tourists have been the subject of relatively few academic publications in either the safety management or tourism literature, despite the obvious scale of the tourism safety problem, and the potential for injuries and fatalities to seriously damage the tourism industry and the economies of countries who rely on tourism (Cliff and Page, 1996). Research that has been undertaken on tourist safety has identified unfamiliarity with foreign marine and road environments as important risk factors for accidents and injuries involving overseas visitors (e.g. Hartung et al., 1990; Nichol et al., 1996; Wilks and Watson, 1998). Little published work has focused on the risk of injury among domestic and international tourists participating in specific recreational activities, particularly those activities which have become collectively known as 'adventure tourism'.

2. Understanding adventure tourism: perception and reality

Adventure tourism is a burgeoning sector of the tourism industry internationally. The adventure tourism sector encompasses a wide range of diverse activities, and may be defined as commercially operated activities involving a combination of adventure and excitement pursued in an outdoor environment. Adventure tourism is also often taken to include more passive activities associated with eco tourism (e.g. safaris and trekking in difficult terrain). As a result adventure tourism incorporates a broad spectrum of activities ranging from high-risk adventure activities (e.g. white water rafting) to low risk ones (e.g. tramping) as illustrated in Table 1.

Haddock and Wisheart (1993, p. 8) define adventure as 'an experience where the outcome is uncertain because key information may be missing, vague or unknown' which can be refined so that 'adventure tourism is a freely chosen recreational

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