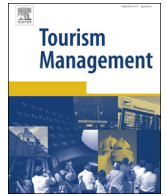




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## Assessing preferences of potential visitors for nature-based experiences in protected areas



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Identifies how to disperse visitors from an iconic natural attraction by designing alternative experiences.
- Integrates potential visitor preferences into the design of nature-based tourism experiences.
- Uses visitors' likelihood of choosing a scenario to assess relative preferences for nature-based tourism experiences.
- Finds the current iconic experience to be potential visitors' least-preferred scenario.
- Compares the relative merits of four measurement approaches for assessing visitor preferences.

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### ABSTRACT

Visitor experiences have been identified as critical for the sustainable management of tourism destinations. However, researchers have given limited attention to how to measure visitor preferences for different, newly proposed experiences, especially in nature-based tourism contexts. This paper aims to capture potential visitors' preferences for nature-based visitor experiences that would alleviate pressure on the iconic summit of Mount Warning, Australia. Findings reveal a preference for passive rather than active experiences. Consistency between the four measurement approaches used was high. Future studies should consider adopting multiple measures to underpin evidence-based management that informs the design of nature-based tourism experiences.

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### 1. Introduction

National parks and other protected areas around the world contribute significantly to the conservation of nature (Eagles, McCool, & Haynes, 2002). At the same time, these assets need to be managed and protected, and important safeguards include building and sustaining societal support for conservation initiatives as well as the support of current and potential visitors (Weaver, 2015). Scholarly discourse reflects substantive debate as to whether to manage protected sites on the basis of what possible

users might prefer or what is best for the site, or both (Eagles & McCool, 2002). Within this debate, providing visitors with engaging experiences in nature has long been a potential strategy for building the societal support vital to achieving conservation goals (Crompton, Fakeye, & Lue, 1992). Moreover, providing experiences in national parks and other protected areas is widely acknowledged to directly and indirectly benefit individuals, communities, and societies (Torland, Weiler, Moyle, & Wolf, 2015).

To achieve conservation goals, national parks that depend heavily on a single visitor experience often seek to provide alternative nature-based visitor experiences both within and outside their boundaries (Hsu & Lin, 2013). A considerable volume of literature focussed on the development of visitor experiences in protected areas reflects the perspective of adjacent communities

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(Strickland-Munro & Moore, 2013), particularly with respect to how to consult and engage these communities as part of sustainable nature-based tourism planning and management (Ratnayake & Kasim, 2012). This research focus is justifiable, as often locals visit parks and form a place attachment, thereby providing the support vital for sustainable management and ongoing protection (Halpenny, 2010). However, empirical studies adopting a local community-oriented approach often downplay, or even outright ignore, the preferences of key stakeholders who do not live adjacent to a specific protected area, including the preferences of domestic and international visitors (Brown & Weber, 2013). The patronage of domestic visitors in particular, including repeat visitors to parks, is integral to developing and maintaining visitor experiences whilst achieving broader park management and conservation goals (Weiler, Moore, & Moyle, 2013).

While the literature examining the planning and design of nature-based tourism experiences predominantly focusses on local community stakeholders (Strickland-Munro, Allison, & Moore, 2010), a growing body of knowledge considers visitor preferences in the design of nature-based tourism experiences (Crilly, Weber, & Taplin, 2012). One challenge is to identify experiences with the potential to attract non-visitors into parks whilst continuing to diversify the portfolio for current market segments. In particular, attention needs to be paid to building a robust process for identifying, measuring, and comparing preferences for different nature-based tourism experiences. Inclusion of potential visitors into the dialogue on design can help increase demand and in turn sustain support for the protection of the national parks and protected areas that host these experiences.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is two-fold. First, the paper identifies and assesses potential visitors' preferences for nature-based experiences. These preferences include the iconic experience of summiting a mountain and eight viable alternative nature-based tourism experiences, nine in total. Nature-based tourism can indeed be a contentious issue, particularly in parochial communities with high levels of place attachment to nature. Therefore, to enhance the validity of the findings, we selected four measurement approaches to assess preferences for nature-based tourism experiences. As such the second key objective of this paper is to examine the benefits and limitations of these four approaches for testing and application in different contexts.

## 2. Literature review

In recognition of the importance of connecting people with nature, the leisure and recreation field contains a distinct and highly evolved body of knowledge on nature-based visitor experiences (Manning, 2001). Seminal work on the visitor experience sought to define nature-based tourism and explore the motivations for an experience in nature as a basis for providing satisfying experiences (Hammit, 1980; Manfredi, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996). Studies on visitor experiences in nature over the past two decades seem to focus on three core issues: why people visit protected areas, factors that influence visitor satisfaction, and the benefits or outcomes people derive from park visitation (Arnberger, Eder, Alex, Sterl, & Burns, 2012).

Leisure and recreation have been the predominant fields for discourse designed to advance the conceptual understanding of visitor preferences for nature-based tourism experiences (Hull, Stewart, & Young, 1992). Initial work occurred in a North American context, leading to a predominantly Western conceptualisation of how visitors engage in nature-based tourism experiences (Manning, 1998). Early studies on the design of visitor experiences were largely atheoretical, relying on management frameworks such as the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) and Limits of

Acceptable Change (LAC) to discern the types of experiences appropriate in natural and protected areas (Boyd & Butler, 1996).

The ROS, LAC, and other management frameworks have been successfully and widely applied in the planning and facilitation of experiences (Stewart, 1992). The ROS in particular was designed to provide park managers with guidance on how to provide a diversity of experiences in nature compatible with the conservation goals or dual mandate of parks (More, 2002). However, early models have been criticised for the selection, development, and restriction of types of visitor experiences to particular areas in parks to manage visitors while they are within park boundaries (Oosterzee, 1984). Existing management models were primarily implemented in a peri-urban park context, leading to issues such as perceived crowding and user displacement (Arnberger & Brandenburg, 2007).

Current policy frameworks also fail to account for the fluidity associated with intergenerational change regarding preferences for nature-based experiences (Moyle, Weiler, & Moore, 2014). Instead, existing management frameworks for visitor experiences are static, leaving managers of conservation estates with limited options for coping with changing trends in recreation activities (Hammit, Cole, & Monz, 2015). A relevant example of evolving trends is serious leisure in parks, with considerable growth in activities such as base jumping and tight-rope walking between mountain peaks (Newsome, 2014). Finally, management frameworks need to consider the highly political environment of the growing discourse on commercialisation as a potential source of revenue for nature conservation, with visitor preferences likely to drive change.

Owing to these limitations, contemporary discourse on how visitors experience nature has adopted multi-disciplinary approaches, integrating theory to further develop and enhance early management models for managing contemporary visitors to parks in 21st century society (Moyle & Weiler, 2016). For instance, drawing on literature from positive psychology, Coghlan, Buckley, and Weaver (2012) developed a framework for measuring awe in tourism experiences, noting that visitors seek profound experiences despite overarching management jurisdictions.

Despite a growing body of empirical work describing shifting trends in modern forms of leisure, attention to non- or infrequent visitors to parks is limited (Kazmierczak, 2013). This oversight is critical, as the broader suite of nature-based experiences does not consider the preferences of potential visitors, even though they are deemed vital for building support for the protection of nature and associated conservation initiatives (Weiler et al., 2013). This paper addresses that omission by surveying potential visitors to protected areas, taking a broad approach that considers anyone from the general population as a potential visitor.

Within the broad research on visitor preferences for nature-based tourism experiences is a body of work that explores mechanisms to take the pressure off iconic natural attractions, such as the peak of a mountain (Loomis & Keske, 2009). In such instances, park management agencies often have a jurisdictional responsibility and authority to set management guidelines that limit development within park boundaries (Robinson & Wallington, 2012). Studies on crowding provide clarity on how to monitor and manage visitor flows at sites of unique natural, cultural, or historical significance (Moyle & Croy, 2007). However, few studies have considered preferences for development options that could reduce the pressure on iconic nature-based experiences. The present study captures the perspectives of potential visitors regarding an *iconic experience*, a critical undertaking for considering and evaluating the sustainability of these types of nature-based experiences.

Although empirical work on visitor engagement with nature is growing, researchers have given less attention to using visitor preferences to drive the design of experiences that appeal to

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