

Tourism Markers for National Parks – The Case of the Netherlands

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In the Dutch nature conservation tradition and the management of National Parks, the focus has mainly been on nature protection, education and research. In other countries the NP's have much more economic value for consumers and entrepreneurs (Van der Windt, 2012). Especially well established parks attract overnight visitors which spend money on accommodation and food in the surroundings of the national Park (Mayer et al, 2010). So tourists who are on holiday and visit a National Park in a particular country, are of economic value for the management of the protected area and local residents and gateway communities (Thomas, Huber & Koontz, 2015; King et al, 2012). In many regions National Parks and other protected areas have become an important attraction and play an important role in destination development (Reinius and Fredman, 2007). Such attractions are very important for the development of a tourism destination and the major motivator for tourists to travel to a certain destination. Effective marketing of the heritage values of the attractions will enhance revenue streams from tourism (King et al, 2012). A technique to build visitor awareness about the heritage values, is to present the tangible and intangible elements of the National Park prominently, consistently and repeatedly throughout the customer journey. This is not only important for the visitor experience but also for building positive beliefs and behaviours among decision makers, local inhabitants and tourism businesses (King et al, 2012).

The role of markers in the customer journey of National Park Visitors

A tourist (and potential visitor of a National Park) takes a customer journey and is confronted with the label NP several times during this journey. According to Egger & Maurer (2015) and ETC & UNWTO (2008), the customer journey is comprised of several phases; the inspiration phase, the planning, information searching before departure, the actual visit and post visit phase. There has to be at least one generating marker in order to become motivated to go on a trip. Markers are also able to manipulate the activity selection of the tourist during the trip (Leiper, 1990). Positive connotation to the label National Park can result in motivation and satisfaction of the tourist. Maps and road signs can be identified as markers, which help finding the nucleus (they help visitors finding what they look for). Souvenirs are considered as markers, since souvenirs help visitors to remember the tourist's experience (Leiper, 1990).

Observations on the customer journey were done in several National Parks in The Netherlands (Hoge Veluwe, Biesbosch, Lauwersmeer and Weerribben Wieden). For each of the different stages of the customer journey the markers were observed

with help of observation sheets. The type of markers, the function and the values which are communicated through the markers were analysed. Besides this a questionnaire was conducted in National Park Lauwersmeer and Weerribben Wieden, asking customers about the role of markers during their visit and their perceptions about the National Park.

Results

Preliminary results suggest that within The Neterland the brand National Park is hardly communicated with international visitors before their trip. No markers about the National Parks were found at the airport of Amsterdam Schiphol or at other major transportation hubs. Information is present on the official websites but is hardly available in English. Visual aids are an important feature on internet sites. Important values on official websites are doing activities while on social media (post trip phase) visitors tend to report back on spending time together with family and friends rather than undertaking activities.

The findings suggest that more systematic marketing is needed in order to make the public and visitors aware of the existence of national parks. More research is needed into the motivations and demands of (inter)national visitors in order to match.



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