

Positioning parks to meet the needs of 21st century society

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Research focus

Most Australian national parks are managed by State governments and thus parks compete for attention with other government and non-government leisure and recreation providers and for funding with other government departments such as health, justice and education (Kaczynski, 2004). As a result, parks must establish and defend a market position through fostering positive images of the benefits they provide to visitors and society, which in turn will contribute to both stakeholder support and loyal visitors who re-visit and recommend parks to others. For parks, the attributes that make up a stakeholder's image are widely understood to be a function of the benefits that a stakeholder perceives those parks can offer.

The construct of positioning, drawn from the marketing literature, has come relatively late to public sector organisations, but is now acknowledged as potentially useful for the sustainable management of national parks. However, the positioning of parks is more complex than for other products and services and its application to park management has received relatively little attention. Poor market positioning, where there is a mismatch between a park agency's or an individual park's projected image and the image held by its stakeholders, can result in poor customer support. Closing this gap by re-positioning is key to societal and political support. Re-positioning, similar to its parent construct of positioning, has received minimal attention in park research. Additionally there is limited evidence of the efficacy of communication interventions to achieve re-positioning. By applying positioning in a park management context, this study contributes to testing and extending this and communication theories.

Aim and methods

The aim of this paper is to describe the benefits of leisure and recreation in parks that their management agencies desire to project. The research reported in this paper is part of a broader research study that will additionally identify and analyse the gap (if one exists) between the image an agency desires to project and perceptions held by its stakeholders and then trial interventions to influence stakeholders' perceptions, with the objective of re-positioning the agency in their minds.

The attributes that agencies desire to project, that is their projected market position, were accessed through semi-structured interviews with senior managers from park management agencies in three Australian states: Parks Victoria, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and the WA Department of Environment and Conservation. The

interviews centred on identifying managers' perceptions of the benefits that each agency desires to project about visiting parks as well the broader benefits of parks to society. Nine senior staff from each of the three agencies (27 in total) were interviewed.

Results

A list of personal or visitor benefits was derived from previous studies. During the interviews, the managers were asked to identify from this list the five benefits of leisure and recreation that each agency most desires to project (Fig. 1). The three agencies were similar in their desire to project experiences designed to attract visitors to parks (such as the opportunity to participate in outdoor activities), foster a connection with nature and encourage social interaction and inclusion (such as to socialise with friends and family). A notable difference was a focus by managers from WA DEC on projecting the benefits associated the preservation of biodiversity and associated ecosystem services, whereas Parks Victoria were more focused on projecting human health benefits.

Outcomes Focused Management (Anderson, Davenport, Leahy & Stein, 2008) was used as the lens to analyse and present the remainder of the interview results. OFM has emerged from a much broader body of knowledge on the benefits of leisure and recreation generally (Driver, 2008). It identifies four different types of benefits personal, economic, environmental and socio-cultural (Manning, 2009). Personal benefits are divided into the categories of psychological and psychophysiological and are much more focused on park visitors themselves. Economic, environmental and socio-cultural benefits relate to the broader community or societal benefits of parks, and are essential for repositioning (Crompton, 2008).

The personal (visitor) benefits that managers of all three agencies indicated a desire to project, obtained through a grounded theory analysis of the interview results, were classified using the definitions of benefits as stipulated in the OFM framework (1) the realisation of satisfying experiences and (2) improvements to desired; and the prevention of an undesired condition(s) (Driver, 2008). Satisfying experiences included the opportunity to access natural experiences; appreciate scenic beauty; be in a comfortable and safe place; challenge; escape the urban environment; experience something new and different; learn about nature, culture and heritage; participate in outdoor recreation activities; reflect on personal values; relax and unwind; seek enjoyment; and socialise with family and friends. Improvements and prevention included almost all of the benefits stipulated in the OFM framework (e.g. a connection to culture and heritage; connection to nature; increased self-confidence; and reduction in stress and anxiety).

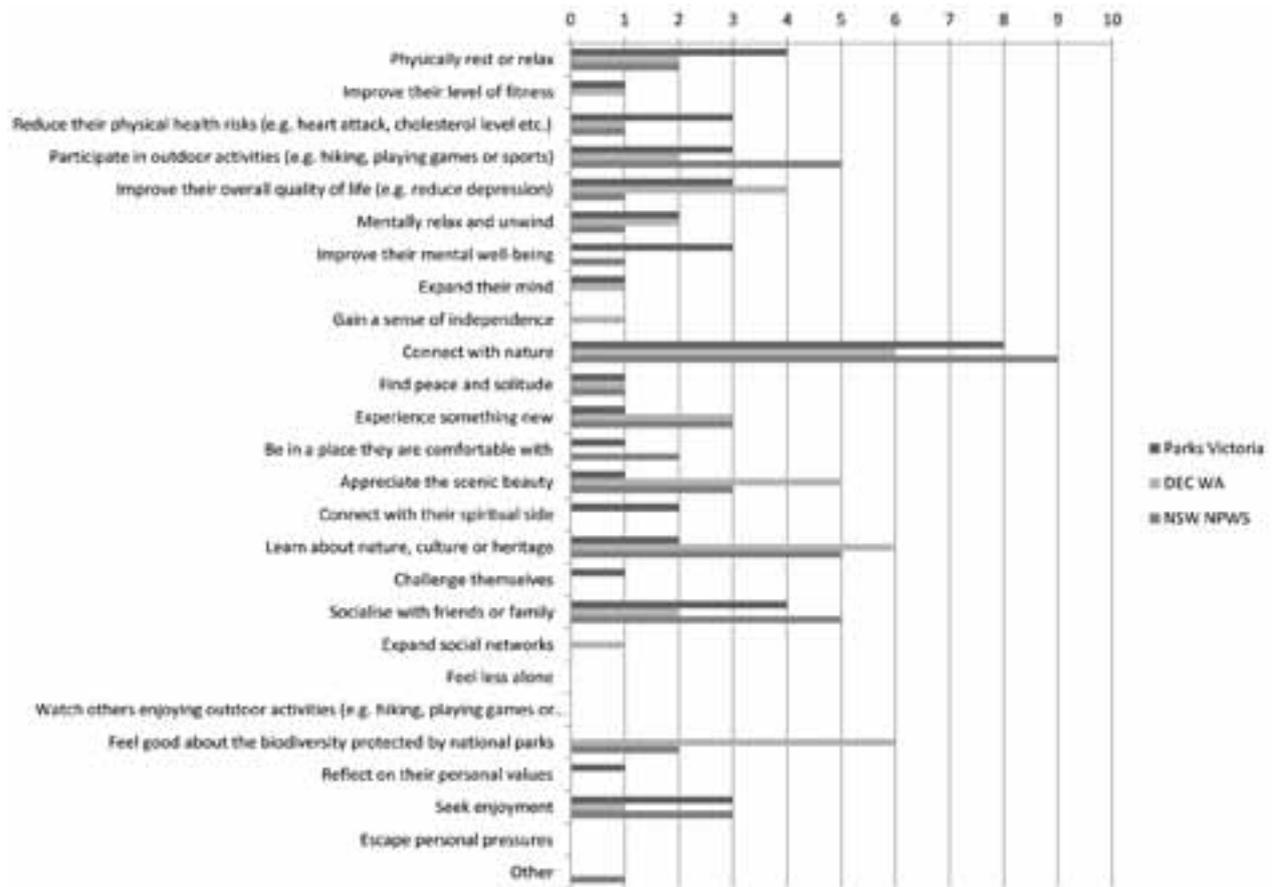


Figure 1. Personal/Visitor Benefits (Desire to Project)

Benefits may also be more broadly accrued by society (Crompton 2009). Analysis of the interviews revealed 12 broader, societal (economic, environmental and socio-cultural) benefits held in common by managers from the 3 agencies: the conservation of culture and heritage; generation of employment; healthier communities; improved flood and fire management; increased business and tourism investment; increased community wellbeing; increased sense of community; protection of biological diversity; provision of clean air and drinking water; provision of green spaces; reduction in the cost of healthcare; and reduction in the effects of climate change.

Discussion and methodological implications/Reflections

Several methodological comments conclude this paper. First, the OFM approach/framework provides a promising

framework for describing the position projected and occupied by park agencies. Many park researchers and managers agree that benefits underpin the experiences of most park visitors even though they are notoriously difficult to describe and more difficult to manage for (McCool, Clark & Stankey, 2007).

Second, there are clearly benefits to individuals accrued through (1) visiting and (2) through wider societal benefits where visits may or may not be part of this benefits accrual. The next stage of this project will analyse both individual and societal benefits and examine positioning (and re-positioning) strategies using real, associative, psychological and competitive approaches (Crompton 2009).

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