

A study of “The impressive experience” in Japanese national parks

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Introduction

The national parks of Japan were established to conserve nature as well as enrich the lives of those who visit these places. National park management has, however, focused mostly on conservation. This may be, in part, because few studies have been conducted that assess the psychological benefits of visiting the parks. Therefore, we conducted a visitor survey in 2010 to explore how visitors use the park to enrich their lives.

Those who visit national parks to experience their beautiful landscapes are sometimes deeply moved by the lush, breathtaking scenery. Such “impressive” experiences of being deeply moved are one reason why people visit national parks. However, very few studies have examined the impressive experience in Europe and the United States because there is not an appropriate noun in English that expresses this concept (Tokaji 2001). In Japan, Nishiyama (1995) indicated that impressive experiences in nature cultivate self-esteem in adolescents, and Oshimi (2009) indicated that sport spectators tend to revisit the stadium after they have had impressive experiences. However, few previous studies have identified or assessed the features and functions of impressive experiences in national park settings. Accordingly, in 2011, we conducted a visitor survey from the viewpoint of “the impressive experience.”

Methodology

Data for this study were collected by a self-administered questionnaire in four major Japanese national parks (Shiretoko, Nikko, Kamikouchi, and Tatyana areas) from July to October 2011. From the 18,800 questionnaires that were distributed at major tourist attractions in each destination, a total of 6,006 responses were obtained yielding a response rate of 31.9%.

Results

Compared with the mean score of strength of impression (significance level 1%), we studied who had a magnificent impression. Results show that “the first-time visitor”, “the under thirties”, “female”, “the people who spend a long time walking in the national park”, “the people who visited national park on a clear day” have a magnificent impression. In addition, because the impact of the weather is very strong, we conducted the same analysis using data only from respondents who visited on a clear and reported the same strength of impression.

Next, we studied the relationship between the strength of impression visitor activity satisfaction. Results show that the satisfaction of “see the scenery” is strongly connected to the greatness of impression (odds ratio 12.9; 99% confidence interval 16.24 to 10.27). The satisfaction of “appre-

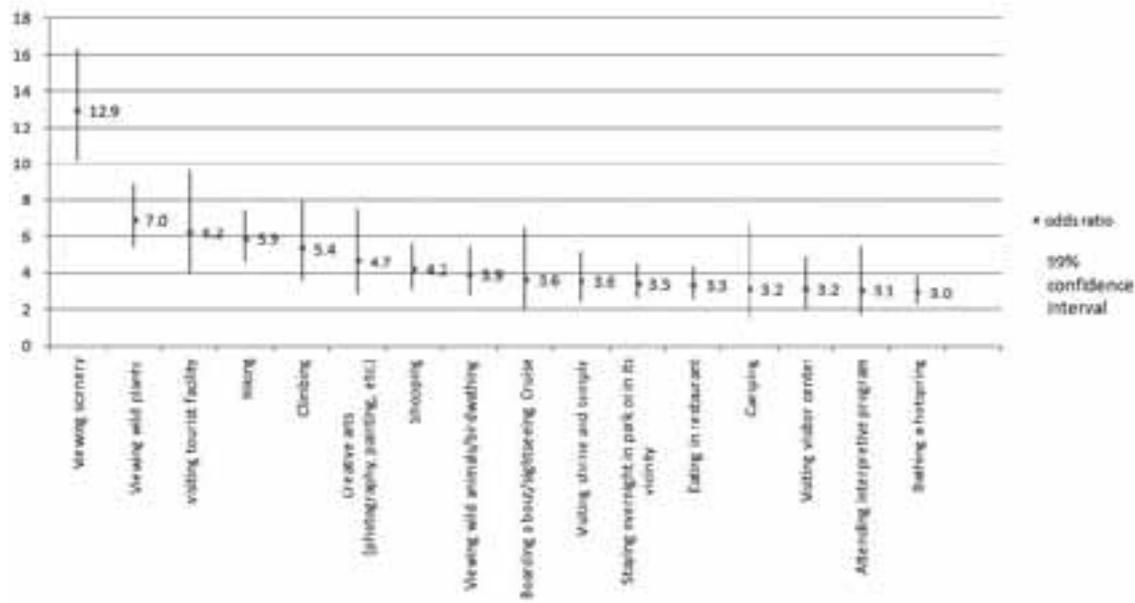
ciate flowers and trees” is also strongly connected with the greatness of impression (odds ratio 6.96; 99% confidence interval 8.88 to 5.45). From these results, the satisfaction of “see the scenery” has a stronger connection with the greatness of impression than the satisfaction associated with any other visitor activity satisfaction (significance level 1%).

We also focused on the moment of impressive experience and studied the relationship between the strength of impression and the element of impression. Results showed that “beauty” is strongly connection with the greatness of impression (odds ratio 11.35; 95% confidence interval 13.50 to 9.55). “Magnificence” has the next strongest connection with the greatness of impression (odds ratio 7.60; 95% confidence interval 8.94 to 6.46). According to these results, “beauty” has a stronger connection with the greatness of impression than any other element (significance level 5%).

In addition, many respondents answered that “magnificence” and “beauty”, as experienced in the national park, could not be experienced through television or the Internet. Compared with the interval estimation of the population rate (significance level 1%), “magnificence” (90.6% of respondents) is higher than “beauty” (81.0% of respondents), and “beauty” is higher than other elements of impression. Thus, in their promotion and advertising of national parks, managers should emphasize the park’s beauty and magnificence and then reiterate that these attributes can be experienced only by visiting the area. Using this strategy, managers will encourage potential visitors, thereby increasing total visitation.

Finally, a correlation analysis was conducted to study the difference between “impressive experience” and “overall satisfaction.” Results showed that “impressive experience” ($r = .479$) was more significantly correlated with “contribution to the richness of life” than “satisfaction” ($r = .399$) (significance level 1%). We believe the purpose of visiting national parks is the “utilization of the richness of life”, so “impressive experience” is an important index to manage national parks from the visitors’ viewpoint. “Impressive experience” ($r = .430$) was also more significantly correlated with “intention to recommend” than “satisfaction” ($r = .364$) (significance level 1%), which indicates the “impressive experience” feature tends to be communicated and shared. We strongly believe that more people visit national parks to add richness to their lives, so word-of-mouth is important to attract potential visitors to national parks. Thus, “impressive experience” is also an important index to manage national parks in order to increase the number of visitors. In regard to “intention to revisit,” there is nothing statistically significant about the correlation coefficient between “impressive experience” and “overall satisfaction.”

Table I. Odds ratio for relation between the strength of impression and the satisfaction of the visitor’s activities.



“Impressive experience” is negatively correlated with “number of visiting times” (significance level 1%), which means the more visits a person makes to a national park the fewer “impressive experiences” they have. “Impressive experience” is not necessarily relevant to analyze characteristics of the high-repeat visitor.

Thus, further research is needed to better understand the structure of the “impressive experience” from the repeat visitors’ viewpoint. Moreover, further research should focus on the features of places where visitors encounter impressive experiences, and then use the results in the planning and management of national parks.

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