

Learning during guided wildlife tours in protected areas and its implications for behavioural change and stewardship

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Introduction

This presentation introduces a model of wildlife tours that examines learning outcomes in the context of stimuli that constrain and provoke guide visitor interaction (GVI), the cues that participants respond to, and, how guides can manage such factors. The model is based on qualitative research on professional and volunteer-based tours for non-government organisations (NGOs), Pacific Whale Foundation (PWF) and Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi (SoTM), in marine and terrestrial settings. The model responds to the research's findings that highlighted the complexity of learning during the tours where access to wildlife is regulated for conservation.

Literature review

How to mediate information for visitors in protected areas to educate and inspire visitors to act beneficially towards phenomena they encounter is a central issue for interpretation research (Knapp, 2007; Weiler & Black, 2015). A benefit of face-to-face interpretation is that it provides interactive opportunities through GVI to respond immediately to visitors' on-site needs (Spring, 2016). Evaluating learning in informal learning environments such as guided tours is fraught with difficulties, and this makes researching the learning outcomes of visitors on such tours especially challenging (Knapp, 2007; Weiler & Black, 2015). Determining what key messages and information can influence visitor behaviour is critical in a free-choice learning environment where learning is not systematically assessed (Falk, 2001; Ham, 2013; Weiler & Black, 2015). Research on GVI during wildlife tours has contributed to models of interpretation that contextualise visitor outcomes in relation to curiosity, affect, follow up opportunities to facilitate behavioural change, and, feedback to management. The approaches advocated in these models have further been elaborated on in respect to the formulation of relevant content through thematic interpretation, specific site-based goals, and/or modelling behaviour (Ham, 2013; Knapp, 2007; Orams, Forestell & Spring, 2014; Weiler & Black, 2015).

The rationale for this research was to explore the relationship between instances of GVI during wildlife tours and the personal insights and outcomes visitors gained from their tours. There have been few empirical investigations of learning and behavioural change in the context of guided tours that include studies of GVI that is independent of the experience of the participants and/or use the experience of both visitors and guides. This constrains a fuller understanding of the effectiveness of the guide as a broker between conservation goals and visitors' needs in protected areas (Spring, 2016).

Model of GVI on Wildlife Tours

Field research on the tours of two NGOs was conducted between 2009 and 2012. PWF whale watch tours operate in the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary (HIHWNMS), Hawaii, USA, and the volunteer-led habitat restoration tours of SoTM are on Tiritiri Matangi Open Scientific Reserve, Auckland, New Zealand. Using narrative methods this research collected data through participation in, and observation of, the tours and via in-

depth semi-structured interviews with visitors and guides. The research found that learning was an important part of the experience sought by the visitors involved in the guided tours studied. GVI plays an important and influential role in shaping visitors' experiences during wildlife tours. The free choice learning environment of these tours is influenced by a wide range of factors such as psychological and physical constraints regarding access and proximity to wildlife that are often beyond a guide's control. These influences are outlined in the proposed Model of Guide Visitor Interaction in Wildlife Tours, whereby the experiences of the visitor are considered in terms of the temporal nature of the wildlife tour (Figure 1).

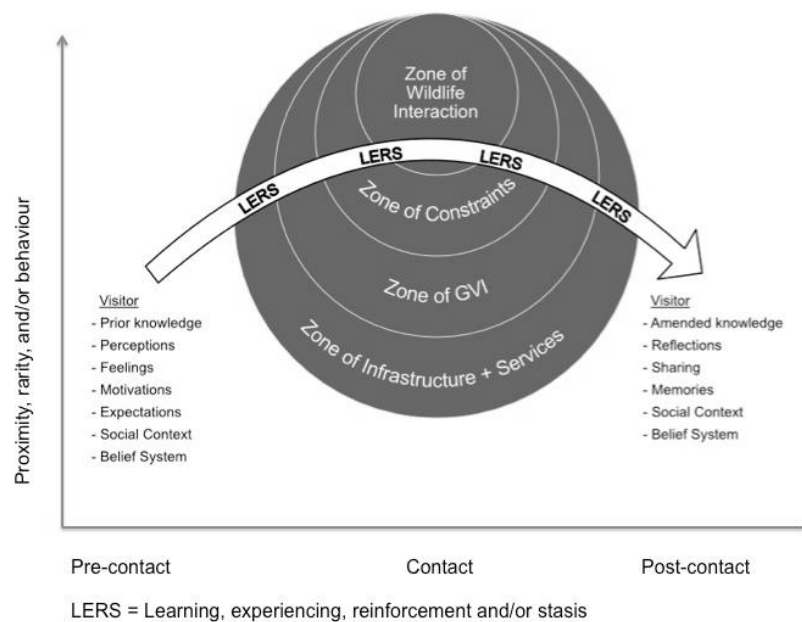


Figure 1: Model of GVI on wildlife tours (Spring, 2016).

Learning in the context of the model refers to the findings on GVI incidents that stimulated questions that visitors did not anticipate they would need to ask or address before the tour. Visitors conceptualised learning on the tours as something that was pleasurable, and involving a range of interaction contexts with place, animals and guides. Learning is connected in the model to experiencing, reinforcement and stasis.

Experiencing connects to the joy and pleasure of the experience in a way that separates out a desired wildlife encounter from learning. Stasis suggests that for some visitors it is possible that the visit does not evoke emotion or provoke thought. Reinforcement as a concept is the boundary between learning, experiencing and stasis. Reinforcement refers to how many visitors appeared to be aware of a demarcation between the extent that learning occurred for them through GVI and the degree to which what they heard was a catalyst for recalling existing knowledge. Reinforcement as an outcome is not necessarily a lesser outcome than learning as it may act as a catalyst for visitors to maintain existing conservation supporting behaviours (Spring, 2016).

The Model of GVI in Wildlife Tours is a tool that can help define the limits and possibilities of how and when to engage visitors undertaking a guided tour to maximise learning opportunities and protect the resources of the site visited. Tour operators are important constituents of the free-choice learning environment that is available for the public in learning about conservation, and together with libraries and museums, they make up the informal infrastructure of learning, outside of schools and universities (Falk, 2001). As a tool, the model aids in planning how to facilitate effective learning outcomes through engaging

visitors at the different temporal stages of the tour through tour operators' own resources and other forms of free-choice education infrastructure.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates the good work of guides that contributes to visitors' learning outcomes despite the challenges inherent in free-choice learning environments that appropriately prioritise conservation of resources over the learning needs of visitors. The Model of GVI on Wildlife Tours seeks to provide greater clarity about what visitors already know, believe and seek to experience on a tour, and how infrastructure and services as well as the regulatory framework of protected areas either facilitate or constrain the overall visitor experience.

References

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