The relationship between stated choice for recreation experience preferences and revealed activity choice

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Introduction

There are two hypothesized relationships between recreation (or tourism) experience preferences and the subsequent choice of recreation activity for participation (Manfredo et al. 1983). The first posits that an activity choice requires a positive predisposition towards that activity and thus a strong correlation between experience preference and activity choice. The second interpretation states that experience preferences are clusters of motivations that represent more general expressions and are related to a range of activities with a common theme (e.g., water based, cultural and historical) rather than any specific activity (Snepenger et al. 2004). When tourists go on a trip, they engage in several activity clusters, each with a common theme throughout that cluster. This study examined the degree to which the tourism experiences people prefer are related to the activities engaged in. Organizations are always trying to better predict activity participation, often through the use of models utilizing stated choice. These models basically posit that what people say they prefer on a trip (a stated choice) is correlated to what actually occurs on the trip (revealed choice). Stated choice models are popular because of the difficulty of predicting participation before it actually occurs (Hunt et al. 2008).

Methods

This study focused on non-resident visitation occurring along the north shore of Lake Superior near Thunder Bay, Ontario Canada. In 2004, data were collected from 464 non-resident visitors to the region using a trip diary questionnaire (Yuan et al. 2004). Visitors were asked the importance of specific experience preferences to their trip (stated choice), and subsequently the activities engaged in (revealed choice). Activity location data were digitized and mapped. The data were then grouped into the three primary target markets that are actively promoted to by the region: Northwestern Ontario (excluding the Thunder Bay region), rest of Canada, and the U.S. Experience preferences were defined by the five dimensions (New/Different Experiences, Risks and Challenges, Socialization with Family and Friends, Understanding First Nations Culture, and Experiencing Tranquility) developed by Payne et al. (2004) in a study of the broader region. Five categories of activities were constructed around similar participation patterns: (1) passive outdoors, (2) adventure outdoors, (3) historical culture, (4) social events, and (5) fishing boating. Principal component analysis was used to construct activity groups and a general linear model was used to identify which groups were significant among the experience dimensions.

Results

The study results suggest that the relationship between experience preference and activity choice is fairly weak when examined at the population level. This finding implies that using stated choice models utilizing broad experience preferences as the primary determinant to activity choice and participation, may not be very appropriate. Instead of any one particular activity driving choice, it may be a cluster of activities that are being influenced by a range of experience preferences. On the other hand, when the population of tourists is divided into more defined market segments, some moderate relationships start appearing for particular segments; it is at this level that marketing campaigns should focus on. Because there were so few significant relationships between experience preference and activity choice, the ability to identify market segments where this relationship holds is important to allow tourism providers the ability to fine tune their identification of the most important target groups. The study has shown the need to understand

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the subtleties of specific market segments to better predict participation. As such, associated promotion and advertising in the region should focus its message and images based on these significant relationships as applied to focused market segments.

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