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The Finnish ecotourism market profile

There is a huge challenge to market ecotourism tours to Finnish tourist. Survey data indicate that a) the knowledge of ecotourism among Finnish people is very low, and b) it seems hard to distinguish a unique ecotourism segment based on demographic data. One could easily be depressed by these results, but our findings do also show that c) a majority of the respondents is prepared to spend “some of their holiday in the next twelve months increasing their understanding and appreciation of nature?”

Key words: ecotourism, ecotourist, marketing, market segmentation

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Introduction

The general ecotourist market profile declares that ecotourists are better educated, wealthier and older than other types of tourists (Saleh & Karwacki, 1996). The potential of demographic segmentation of ecotourists has been questioned, and more advanced segmentation bases have been suggested (Zografos & Allcroft, 2007). Analysis of ecotourism markets has predominantly been carried out in non-Nordic markets. Exceptions are Wurzinger and Johansson (2006) who studied Swedish ecotourists and Björk (1997), who studied Finnish tourists' perception of ecotourism. The potential of demographic segmentation was not explicitly analyzed in these studies. The purpose of this article is to make a contribution to the field of ecotourism marketing by analyzing what Finnish people know about ecotourism, and their readiness to spend a part of their next holiday on an ecotourism trip.

Method

An on-line questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 1000 adult Finns selected from the customer data base of Probic, a customer research company. 244 useable questionnaires were received. The sample statistics correspond well to national statistics. People with a university degree are though slightly overrepresented in the sample. The first part of the questionnaire was used to collect demographic data (age, gender, income, place of residence, and education level). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of one open-ended question. We asked "how would you describe ecotourism?", a question Wurzinger and Johansson (2006) used to measure what Swedish tourists know about ecotourism. The answers were analyzed independently by three researchers. The interpretations were triangulated. We did also ask if the respondents had heard the concept ecotourism before. The respondents' interest to participate in an ecotourism trip was asked in

the third part of the questionnaire. We used the same wording as Blamey and Braithwaite (1997) when they identified potential ecotourists, “would you like to spend some of your holidays in the next twelve months increasing your understanding and appreciation of nature?”.

Results

Ecotourism as a concept and a unique tourism form has been defined in many different ways. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people“ ([http:// www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)) (see Björk, 2000; Fennell 2003 for a review of definitions). Six major dimensions describing the essence of ecotourism can be identified in the literature (based on analysis of existing definitions and principles of ecotourism). These dimensions are “to preserve nature and culture”, “to admire and enjoy”, “tourism based on local peoples’ premises”, “to learn”, “small scale tourism”, and “tourism based on cooperation”. These six dimensions were used to evaluate the answers of each respondent.

A description of ecotourism including none of the six ecotourism dimensions resulted in 0 point. A respondent could at a maximum get 6 points. The knowledge scale used in this study consisted of four grades (Table 1).

Table 1. Knowledge grades

<i>Points</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
5 – 6 dimensions included	Very much knowledge	0,0
3 – 4 dimensions included	Much knowledge	1,6
1 – 2 dimensions included	Little knowledge	69,6
0 dimension included	No knowledge	28,8

The presented results in Table 2 show that the respondents have a weak understanding of what ecotourism is although 75 percent claim that they have heard the concept before. Most people associate ecotourism “to preserve nature and culture” (91 % of those who managed to mention one correct dimension).

Effective marketing must be targeted. Potential ecotourists were compared to those who were not interested in spending some of their next holidays increasing their understanding and appreciation of nature. Our statistical analysis shows that there are no significant differences between these two tourist segments based on a comparison of their demographic characteristics. These results indicate that Finnish ecotourists can be found in all age, gender, income, and education categories.

Discussion

Tourism researchers have tried to identify and describe the ecotourist segment (Eagles, 1992). The “average” ecotourist has been portrayed as a well-educated, elderly and wealthy traveler (Herbig & O’Hara, 1996), but the heterogeneity of this segment has also been underlined (Hvenegaard, 2002). We know the Canadian (Ballantine & Eagles, 1994), American (Wight, 1996) and Australian (Blamey & Braithwaite, 1997) ecotourism markets much better than the Nordic ones based on existing literature.

The aim of this article was to describe the Finnish ecotourism market profile. We conclude this article by highlighting three marketing challenges ecotourism marketing people (i.e. entrepreneurs, marketing people in companies and organizations) are facing based on our findings.

- 1) The general knowledge of what ecotourism is, is in Finland very low.

Marketing challenge

How should ecotourism actors communicate with and convince a market that has little or no knowledge of this specific tourism form?

- 2) A large segment of Finnish people are prepared to spend some time of their holiday on an ecotour.

Marketing challenge

There seems to be a potential to develop ecotourism products in Finland too, but the question is what kind of ecotourism?

- 3) A Finnish ecotourism market segment is hard to identify based on demographic characteristics.

Marketing challenge

How can Finnish ecotourism market segments be identified?

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