

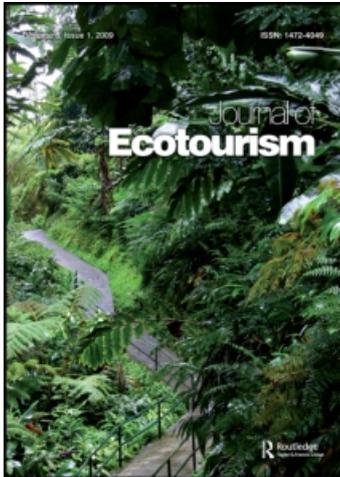
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Ecolodge patrons' characteristics and motivations: a study of Belize

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Starting in the 1980s ecolodges emerged as an increasingly popular accommodation form. Since the ecolodge industry is relatively young, the literature on the subject is limited, yet growing. The purpose of this study was to expand the current literature by determining the demographic characteristics, trip characteristics, and travel motivations of ecolodge patrons in the Cayo District of Belize. The study found that ecolodge patrons were typically highly educated, older adults from the USA who worked full time or were retired and had a very high household annual income. On average, patrons stayed in Belize for 8–11 days and stayed at the ecolodge for three to four nights and travelled with their spouse to learn and explore nature and a new culture. An importance–performance analysis found that performance scores exceeded importance scores for all of 41 ecolodge attributes. This is a very positive finding indicating that the ecolodges are successful in providing a broad suite of hospitality, personal service, and environmental features. As the ecolodge business grows and becomes more competitive, managers must learn about and cater to their market group in order to position themselves favourably in the global marketplace.

Keywords: Belize; ecotourist characteristics; ecolodge; marketing; travel motivation

Introduction

Belize is a small Central American country bordered on the north by Mexico, on the south and west by Guatemala, and on the east by the Caribbean Sea. As of 2003, 54% of the country's land area was included in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) protected area categories I–V. Belize has the longest barrier reef in the western hemisphere and has the largest cave system in Central America. The country has thousands of Mayan archaeological temples and contains one of the largest jaguar reserves in the world (PACT, 2009). These natural and cultural attractions combined with its location close to North America give Belize an advantage in attracting ecotourists.

The Cayo District in western Belize is a favourite destination for nature tourists and ecotourists. Not only does this part of the country have the most extensive number of Mayan archaeological sites, 60% of Cayo District has been set aside as a Wildlife Sanctuary, National Park, or Forest Reserve (Belize Explorer, n.d.). Here, a large number of animal species exist, including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and charismatic species such as the well-known howler monkey and jaguar. The national parks and rainforests provide opportunities for ecotourists to learn about the extensive number of native flowering plants and traditional Mayan rainforest remedies.

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Given its geographical advantage and the presence of lush rainforests and natural wonders; hotels, lodges, restaurants, gift shops, tour companies, campsites, and ecolodge developments have expanded since the late 1980s. In 1998, several of the tourism industry operators in the Cayo District opted to develop a tourism marketing strategy, specifically to promote their natural heritage/ecotourism products in a coordinated way and to encourage the various operators to work together more effectively (Blackstone Corporation Resource Management and Tourism Consultants, 1998). An associate programme aimed at improving the tourism products within the Cayo District and upgrading the infrastructure. More convenient transportation was planned to bring more tourists to the once inaccessible Mayan archaeological sites (Rodriguez, 2004). The erection of visitor centres and museums along with guided tours, as well as vendor booths, were planned.

In 2003, the Belize Tourism Board conducted a 'Visitor Expenditure and Motivation Survey' (VEMS). The purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics of tourists who travel to Belize. The study determined that the average visitor had a median age of 30–39 and stayed for an average of 6.8 nights. Visitors typically stayed in hotels; however, it is important to note that the survey instrument used did not identify ecolodges as a separate accommodation category. The study of group characteristics found that visitors usually travelled with friends or in a group, secondarily with spouse or partner, or alone. Their main source of information about Belize came from friends and relatives, the Internet, and travel/guide books.

As nature-based travel increased in popularity, ecolodges emerged as a new popular accommodation form. These relatively small-scale accommodations often provide interpretive programmes to visitors as well as preserving and promoting natural and cultural heritage. They are also often important in providing local employment and assisting the local economy.

According to Mehta, Beaz, and O'Loughlin (2002), in order for a facility to be an ecolodge, it must embody the main principles of ecotourism: (1) conservation of neighbouring lands; (2) provide benefits to local communities; and (3) provide interpretation for both local populations and guests. For this study, an ecolodge was selected if it followed each of the following three principles:

- (1) Located near or within a natural area;
- (2) Provides jobs to local residents; and
- (3) Provides an educational component, such as an interpretation programme, nature tours, or cultural tours.

Of the 75 accommodation facilities in Belize, 28 nature-based accommodations, ecolodges, or eco-resorts are located in the Cayo District. Ecolodges in this district are concentrated near three towns: Belmopan, San Ignacio, and Benque Viejo del Carmen. These lodges provide an array of prices and services, ranging from basic, through mid-range to luxurious accommodations. They are situated within or near natural landscapes. The ecolodges in this district provide much more than accommodation. There are a variety of lodging styles, dining facilities, amenities, nature trails, organised guided tours, and nature-related activities. Some provide nature centres and other interpretation programmes. The development of amenity features, environmental education programmes and facilities, and specialised nature programmes reveals considerable innovation in this emerging ecolodge industry.

The purpose of this study was to determine the socio-demographic characteristics and travel motivations of ecolodge patrons in the Cayo District of Belize. Few studies, if any, have determined how ecotourists rank the various hospitality, personal service and environmental attributes provided by an ecolodge.

Belize was chosen for this study because of the well-established ecolodge industry. The majority of the ecotourists and operators were English-speaking individuals which made communication and implementation of the study manageable. Belize is a small country with a scale conducive to a comprehensive study in the field on a limited budget.

Literature review

The ecolodge industry emerged in the 1980s and grew rapidly over the next 20 years (Sanders & Halpenny, 2001). With its growth in popularity, there was an increase in literature concerning ecolodges. During the development of this young accommodation phenomenon, the ecolodge literature predominantly focused on the definitions, physical environment, best practices, and sustainability evaluations (Wight, 1997). Sanders and Halpenny (2001) conducted a study on ecolodge economics and finance. Osland and Mackoy (2004) examined performance goals of ecolodges in Costa Rica and Mexico to see how well ecolodges met their goals. Mackoy and Osland (2004) conducted a systematic evaluation of how ecotourists select and evaluate lodging alternatives. Lai and Shafer (2005) examined ecolodge operators to determine how ecotourism is marketed through the Internet.

Few studies profiled the characteristics of ecolodge patrons. Weaver and Lawton (2002) conducted an ecolodge consumer survey at two well-known ecolodges in Lamington National Park in Queensland, Australia. The study found three distinct ecotourist segments on the hard–soft spectrum. ‘Harder’ ecotourists had a strong desire to learn about nature, enjoy visiting the wild and remote destinations, looked for physical and mental challenges, and preferred backpacker accommodations, camping, and recreational vehicles. Demographically, the hard-core ecotourists were much younger, more highly educated, and less likely to be in a high-income bracket than the other ecotourists.

‘Softer’ ecotourists who were less committed to the environment, and enjoyed beach resorts as much as the nature settings, favoured accommodations with a good array of services and facilities. Demographically, these tourists tended to travel with their family, were highly educated, and were usually from a high-income bracket.

‘Structured’ ecotourists were a blend of harder and softer ecotourists who were committed to the environment and yet expected high level of services and facilities. Demographically, older travellers who were within the high-income bracket dominated this group. They were more likely to arrange their travel through travel agents, and also preferred a hard ecotourism experience that was interpreted for them.

Weaver (2002) continued to analyse the data from the Lamington National Park study to determine the hard-core ecotourists perceptions and socio-demographic characteristics. He found that hard-core ecotourists had high levels of environmental commitment and supported for enhanced sustainability, wanted physically active and challenging experiences, travelled in small groups, took longer trips, demanded fewer services, made their own travel arrangements, and were more active in their search for information.

In the 1990s, a consensus emerged in the empirical research of the profile of ecotourists. They typically ranged in age between 35 and 54 years old. The majority of the ecotourists were college or university graduates, likely to be in a high-income bracket, with a preferred trip length of 8–14 days. Ecotourists were more likely to travel as a couple and less likely to be with families. Their major motivations for taking their trips were learning about nature, attractive natural environments, attractive wildlife species as well as parks and protected areas. Hiking and walking were popular activities among ecotourists. Their source of information usually depended on word of mouth and travel brochures (Eagles & Cascagnette, 1995; HLA & ARA Consulting Group Inc., 1995; Sanders & Halpenny, 2001; Wight, 1996b).

Eagles (1992) in a study of Canadian tourists found that ecotourists expressed stronger rankings of travel motivations towards site attractions, than did the average Canadian tourist. These attraction motivations included expressed desires to visit wilderness, lakes and streams, mountains, national and provincial parks, rural areas, and oceanside. Conversely, the ecotourists showed lower rankings for social motivations, such as visiting friends and relatives, entertainment, and being together as a family.

Many other studies profiled ecotourists in general such as Crossley and Lee (1994), Kusler (1991), Lindberg (1991), Meric and Hunt (1998), and Saleh and Karwacki (1996), but none dealt with ecolodge patrons specifically.

In the hospitality industry, tourists' perceptions of hotel service quality and their hotel choice selection factors are often the subjects of investigation (Callan, 1996; Chu & Choi, 1997; Weaver & Heung, 1993). Many hotel corporations use these studies to improve their quality of services to meet customers' demands. Ecolodges are usually individually owned, rather than being part of a chain, and are usually located in or near national parks and protected areas and provide educational programmes. Even though there are some similarities between hotels and ecolodges (they both provide accommodations, amenities, and facilities for tourists), the differences are significant enough that ecolodge patrons are worth of separate study.

Importance–performance analysis (IPA) was originally designed to assist with decision-making in service industries (Chu & Choi, 2000; Dolinsky, 1991; Dolinsky & Caputo, 1991; Guadagnolo, 1985; Hollenhorst, Olson, & Fortney, 1992; Kennedy, 1986; Ortinau, Bush, Bush, & Twible, 1989). The IPA was used in a variety of different fields including recreation (Guadagnolo, 1985; Hollenhorst, Olson, & Fortney, 1992; Kennedy, 1986), accommodation (Chu & Choi, 2000), health care (Dolinsky, 1991; Dolinsky & Caputo, 1991), and education (Ortinau et al., 1989).

The IPA technique has not been applied to ecotourists' perceptions of ecolodge attributes.

The paucity of literature in regards to ecolodge patrons may be due to the relative newness of the industry. The lack of such information is a disadvantage for the young and evolving ecolodge industry, particularly in the tourism-dependent, developing countries. Osland and Mackoy (2004) commented that many studies were conducted to examine the sustainability evaluation of the local communities, but very few were initiated for the 'effectiveness of nature-based tourism for infrastructure providers, such as lodge owners, even though their services and practices are critical components of nature-based tourism' (p. 109). Wood (2002) pointed out that well-documented, nature-based tourism destinations, such as Costa Rica, Ecuador, Belize, South Africa, Kenya, Botswana, and Nepal, have many tour operators and ecolodges that receive nature tourists from around the world, but very little nature-based tourism market research is published. Consequently, this study studied ecolodges and their patrons from a marketing perspective.

Comprehending what tourists seek at ecolodges allows tourism marketers to better identify this target market and tailor the environment, services, and facilities at their properties to the needs of the current and future customers. This study identifies the characteristics and motivations of ecolodge patrons and not only provides lodge owners with critical marketing information, but also expands the current literature on ecolodges.

Methods

The sample population for this research was composed of tourists who stayed at one of six ecolodges in the Cayo District of Belize between February and May 2004. A survey was conducted over a 15-week period at six ecolodges. The ecolodges that catered for less than 20 people and offered fewer than six guest rooms were not considered due to the anticipated low return rate and small sample size. A disproportional stratified sample was used to choose the six ecolodges of varying price levels and services offered in order to get a representative sample.

The survey instrument used in this study was a four-page questionnaire, divided into three sections. The first section consisted of questions on travel experience and travel motivations. This section asked questions about how important 19 attributes were when planning this trip to Belize. The attributes were selected according to previous ecotourist motivation studies (Eagles & Cascagnette, 1995; HLA & ARA Consulting Group Inc., 1995; Wight 1996b). Each of the 19 was rated using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all important), 2 (not important), 3 (important), to 4 (very important). By using an even number of options, a definite opinion from respondents was forced and neutral answers were avoided. To assist with the logic of presentation, the attributes were divided into three groups: (1) attraction motives, (2) social motives, and (3) other motives. Open-ended questions were also used to gauge the tourists' perception of an ecolodge, their single reason for visiting Belize, and their general opinion. The second section consisted of 41 ecolodge attributes chosen from the hotel and ecotourism literature. Each person was asked to evaluate their perception of importance of each attribute when choosing the ecolodge at which they were surveyed. This ranking was done on a five-point Likert scale, with each ecolodge attribute rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all important), 2 (not important), 3 (neutral), 4 (important), to 5 (very important). Next each person was asked to evaluate their perception of the performance of that ecolodge on each of the 41 attributes. This ranking was done on a five-point scale, Likert scale including 1 (poor), 2 (bad), 3 (OK), 4 (good), and 5 (excellent). The third section contained questions on social and demographic information.

The survey instrument was administered by the front-desk staff of the ecolodges, who were briefed by a researcher in advance. The respondents were approached by staff at the front desk during check-in and were given a questionnaire for self-completion. The occupants of each registered room at the ecolodge received a questionnaire. If there were two or more guests in one room or cabin, only one questionnaire was distributed. The guests, sharing the same unit, decided who responded to the questionnaire. On completion of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to put the completed questionnaire in a drop box at the front desk during check out. The respondents who handed in the survey were given a reward of a small, painted rock as a souvenir.

A total of 480 questionnaires were handed out at the six ecolodges. A total of 331 questionnaires were completed. The response rate was relatively high at 69.0%. The response rate from ecolodges varied and appeared to be highly dependent on the enthusiasm and effectiveness of the receptionists who distributed the questionnaires.

After removing the invalid questionnaires (questionnaires from the respondents below 16 years of age were removed), data from both the close-ended and open-ended questions were coded. They were then computed and analysed by using Microsoft Excel 2000 and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Descriptive statistics, including simple frequencies and mean ratings, on the respondents' demographic and trip characteristics were calculated.

Results

The following sections of the paper provide a summary of the data collected from the 331 respondents. First, demographic characteristics will be presented, followed by the trip characteristics. Travel motivations are also explored.

Demographic characteristics

Age group

Table 1 shows that the most frequent age group among the respondents from the sample was 46–55 years old (25.7%), followed by the 36–45 age group (20.5%), and the 56–65 age

Table 1. Age group.

Age group	Total	
	Frequency	%
16–25	46	13.90
26–35	45	13.60
36–45	68	20.50
46–55	85	25.70
56–65	56	16.90
66+	23	6.90
n/a	8	2.40
Total	331	99.90

group (16.9%). The VEMS (Belize Tourism Board, 2003) determined that tourists to Belize had a median age of 30–39. It appears that ecolodge patrons were older than the average tourists visiting Belize. Many studies examining the characteristics of ecotourists have also found that the average ecotourist was older than the average tourist and that the average ecotourist was between the ages of 36 and 55 (Ballantine, 1991; Cascagnette, 1992; Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995; HLA Consultants & ARA Consulting Group Inc., 1995; Wight, 1996a). One study found that ecotourists were middle-aged (Meric & Hunt, 1998); however, this study did not indicate whether the ecotourists studied were older or younger than the average tourist. Some studies found a more even spread (Higham, Carr, & Gale, 2001; Saleh & Karwacki, 1996). Those studies that found that ecotourists were younger usually examined adventure ecotourists (Crossley & Lee, 1994; Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002).

Country of residence

Almost three-quarters of the respondents were from the USA (Table 2). Another 12% were from Canada and 9% were from the European Union. Residents of Belize made up a relatively small portion of the respondents (0.9%). The Tourism Strategy for Belize found that about three-quarters of the tourists to the Cayo district were from the USA (Blackstone Corporation Resource Management and Tourism Consultants, 1998). In the Holden and Sparrowhawk (2002) study of Trekkers in Annapurna, Nepal, ecotourists from the USA made up the largest ecotourism market;

Table 2. Country of residence.

Countries	Total	
	Frequency	%
USA	242	73.10
Canada	40	12.10
European Union	30	9.10
Others	9	2.70
Guatemala	2	0.60
Honduras	0	0.00
Mexico	1	0.30
Belize	3	0.90
n/a	4	1.20
Total	331	100.00

however, this study did not include a category for those residing within the country. Many studies found that the largest group of ecotourists were domestic tourists. For example, Wight (1996a) found that the largest group of ecotourists to Canada are Canadians. Higham et al. (2001) found that the largest group of visitors to New Zealand ecotourism operations were from New Zealand. The heavy emphasis on international travellers within the ecolodge market in Belize may be typical for a developing country.

Education

Table 3 indicates that the majority of the respondents were well educated: 77.4% had a Bachelors degree or above. About 90% of the sample had at least some post-secondary school education. There is agreement in the literature that ecotourists are highly educated, with the majority possessing at least a bachelor's degree (Ballantine, 1991; Cascagnette, 1992; Crossley & Lee, 1994; Eagles, 1992; Fennell, 1990; Higham et al., 2001; Saleh & Karwacki, 1996; Wight, 1996a). This Belizean ecolodge market caters to a highly educated clientele, similar to most other ecotourism markets.

Employment status

A large portion of the respondents from the total sample were employed full-time (46.5%) (Table 4). The second largest group of respondents contained retired visitors (14.2%), and the third largest group were those who were self-employed (13.0%). Overall, 67.7% were employed, whereas 30.5% were not employed. Very few other studies examined the employment status of their respondents. Higham et al. (2001) found that 40% of their sample employed full-time, 21.5% retired, 10% students, and 9.1% were self-employed. Twynam and Robinson (1997) found about 50% of the sample was a white-collar worker, about 25% retired, and about 12% blue collared.

Annual household income

Table 5 indicates that 32% of the respondents had an annual household income of more than US\$100,000. Below this amount, the most frequent categories were US\$30,000–\$50,000 (16.3%), and US\$50,000–\$70,000 (12.4%). There is a general consensus that ecotourists typically have higher annual household incomes than does the average traveller (Ballantine, 1991; Crossley & Lee, 1994; Eagles & Cascagnette, 1995; Meric & Hunt, 1998; Robinson,

Table 3. Education.

Education level	Total	
	Frequency	%
More than high school or 12 years of schooling	16	4.80
Completed high school (secondary school)	8	2.40
Some post-secondary school education	24	7.30
Diploma	23	6.90
Bachelor Degree	137	41.40
Master's or Doctoral Degree	119	36.00
n/a	4	1.20
Total	331	100.00

Table 4. Employment status.

Occupation	Total	
	Frequency	%
Employed full-time	154	46.50
Homemaker	14	4.20
Employed part-time	27	8.20
Not employed	13	3.90
Self-employed	43	13.00
Student	27	8.20
Retired	47	14.20
n/a	6	1.80
Total	331	100.00

Twynam, Haider, & Hunt, 1998). As outlined above, ecotourists are well educated and tend to be employed. Since education is highly correlated to income, one would expect that this group has a high income, which in turn provides the discretionary income for travel.

Trip characteristics

Total trip length in Belize

Table 6 indicates that on average the respondents stayed in Belize for 8–11 days (32.7%), followed by 4–7 days (23.9%), and 12–15 days (22.1%). About 97% of the sample stayed for more than 3 days. A comparison with the visitor data from the VEMS (Belize Tourism Board, 2003) reveals that ecolodge visitors stay in Belize longer than the average visitors. Crossley and Lee (1994), Fennell (1990), and Wight (1996a) found that ecotourists tended to stay at their ecotourism destination for about 8–14 days, which was longer than the general tourist. Palacio and McCool (1997) found that ecotourists in Belize typically stayed for 6.5 days which corresponds to the second largest category found in the present study. Twynam and Robinson (1997) found that ecotourists to Northern Ontario stayed for shorter lengths of time which was probably the result of the majority of visitors residing within driving distance. This long-term stay

Table 5. Annual household income.

Income bracket	Total	
	Frequency	%
<\$10,000	11	3.30
\$10,000–\$30,000	23	6.90
\$30,000–\$50,000	54	16.30
\$50,000–\$70,000	41	12.40
\$70,000–\$90,000	30	9.10
\$90,000–\$100,000	20	6.00
\$100,000–\$120,000	26	7.90
\$120,000–\$140,000	16	4.80
>\$140,000	64	19.30
n/a	46	13.90
Total	331	99.90

Table 6. Average trip length in Belize.

Number of days	Total	
	Frequency	%
1–3	10	3.00
4–7	79	23.90
8–11	108	32.70
12–15	73	22.10
>15	58	17.60
n/a	2	0.60
Total	330	99.90

in Belize is quite positive for the ecolodge industry. Long-term stay typically results in higher economic return to the host community and to the national economy.

Average length of stay at the ecolodge

When asked about the length of stay at the ecolodge, the most frequent answer was three nights (25.1%) (Table 7). About 79% of the sample stayed from two to five nights. The ecolodge stay is relatively long, with stays as long as 8 days reported. The researchers learned from personal conversations with ecolodge clients during the field work that many ecotourists moved from one ecolodge to another during their trip. This finding may show that the coordinated planning effort by the ecotourism destinations in the Cayo District is helping to distribute the tourism impact around the district.

Other types of accommodations used on the trip

When the respondents were asked what other types of accommodations they used during their Belize trip, the majority of the total sample reported hotels/motels/resorts (48.5%) (Table 8). Guest houses (17.2%) and private cottages/cabins (11.0%) were also used often by the respondents. The use of multiple destinations within the country is important. The ecolodge patrons are not solely tied to one accommodation form. They show a propensity to move around the

Table 7. Average length of stay at ecolodge.

Number of nights	Total	
	Frequency	%
1	12	3.60
2	56	16.90
3	83	25.10
4	65	19.60
5	57	17.20
6	15	4.50
7	25	7.60
8	13	3.90
n/a	5	1.50
Total	331	99.90

Table 8. Other types of accommodation used on the trip.

Types of accommodation	Total	
	Frequency	%
Hotel/motel/resort	212	48.50
Guest house	75	17.20
Home of friends/relatives	20	4.60
Campground/trailer park	29	6.60
Cruise ship	3	0.70
Private cottage/cabin	48	11.00
Local village	16	3.70
Other	34	7.80
Total	437	100.10

country, using a diversity of accommodation options. Almost half of the ecolodge patrons used hotels/motels/resorts for other types of accommodations, which suggests that this portion of the respondents could be ‘soft ecotourists’ who enjoy beach resorts as much as the nature setting and favoured accommodations with a good array of services and facilities as found by Weaver and Lawton (2002).

Party composition

A large portion of the respondents travelled with their spouses (35.6%), followed by families with children (16.1%), friends (15.5%), and organised groups (15.2%) (Table 9). The Belize ecolodge market is particularly attractive to married couples. Saleh and Karwacki (1996) and Wight (1996a) stated that ecotourists most often travel as a couple. HLA Consultants and ARA Consulting Group Inc. (1995) found that families were not a big segment of the ecotourism market and that ecotourists tend to travel alone, as a couple, or with a group. The VEMS survey (Belize Tourism Board, 2003) indicated that tourists to Belize most often travel with friends or a group, followed by spouse or partner, alone, and with family, a somewhat different group composition from the ecolodge market. It is also interesting to note how important families with children are to the ecolodge industry in Belize. Saleh and Karwacki (1996) and Twynam and Robinson (1997) found that families make up a sizeable portion of ecotourists; however, neither study distinguishes between adult families and families with children. Crossley and Lee

Table 9. Party composition.

Party composition	Total	
	Frequency	%
Alone	29	8.80
Spouse	117	35.60
Family (adults)	27	8.20
Friends	51	15.50
Organisational group	50	15.20
Family (kids)	53	16.10
Other	2	0.60
Total	329	100.00

(1994) and Wight (1996a) both found that families with children were a common group of ecotourists. The provision of increased levels of service designed for families with children may provide the Belize ecolodges with a competitive advantage.

Major sources of information

When asked about the most important sources of information used for ecolodge selection, 26.9% of the total sample reported the Internet, followed by books or travel-guide books (18.1%), and recommendations from friends and relatives (14.4%) (Table 10). It is noteworthy to observe the importance of the Internet to these tourists. The VEMS survey (Belize Tourism Board, 2003) found that the most often used source of information was friends and relatives followed by the Internet and travel/guide books. In almost all older studies of ecotourists, the Internet did not make the top four information sources used by ecotourists (Ballantine, 1991; Fennell, 1990; Hatch, 1997; Higham et al., 2001; Meric & Hunt, 1998; Saleh and Karwacki, 1996; Twynam & Robinson, 1997). Books or travel guides or recommendation from friends/relatives were common responses in the majority of these studies. When these studies were conducted, the Internet was still a relatively new phenomenon and was not widespread. Now one of the easiest and most affordable promotional methods to reach the global audience is through the Internet. This study shows the emergence of the Internet as a major element for ecolodge selection. With the promotion of many travel services online and Belize Tourism Bureau's active promotion in advertising diverse attractions as a whole, this study shows how the Internet encourages ecolodge selection as well as the movement of the tourists among several different destinations during a trip.

Most important travel motivation factors

The respondents ranked the importance of each of 19 attributes used when planning their trip to Belize trip. This ranking was on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). The most important attraction motives were: wilderness and undisturbed nature (mean = 3.50), tropical forests (mean = 3.47), Mayan archeological sites (mean = 3.32), and barrier reefs (mean = 3.15) (Table 11). Table 12 shows that being together as a family (mean = 2.83) was the most important social motive. Table 13 presents that ecolodge patrons'

Table 10. Major sources of information.

Major sources of information	Total	
	Frequency	%
Internet	129	26.90
Travel guide book	87	18.10
Friends/relatives	69	14.40
Travel agent	59	12.30
Word of mouth	44	9.20
Other	30	6.30
Personal experience	21	4.40
Travel brochure	20	4.20
Magazine articles	10	2.10
Environmental association	8	1.70
TV	3	0.60
Total	480	100.20

Table 11. Travel motivation attributes: attraction motives.

Attraction motives	Total	
	Mean	Stdev
Barrier reefs	3.15	1.05
Birds	2.91	0.90
Mammals	2.88	0.83
Trees and wildflowers	2.95	0.82
Lakes and streams	2.94	0.81
Mayan archeological sites	3.32	0.89
Tropical forests	3.47	0.80
Wilderness and undisturbed nature	3.50	0.76
Photography of landscape and wildlife	2.87	

Table 12. Travel motivation attributes: social motives.

Social motives	Total	
	Mean	Stdev
Being together as a Family	2.83	1.26
Meet people with similar interest	2.54	1.00
Visit friends and relatives	1.80	1.19

important other motives including: learn and explore nature (mean = 3.53), warm climate (mean = 3.27), and be physically active (mean = 3.20). The overall top three travel motivation attributes were learn and explore nature (mean = 3.53), wilderness and undisturbed nature (mean = 3.50), and tropical forests (mean = 3.47). Overall, the social motive means were ranked lower than the attraction and other motives. This finding is very similar to that of Eagles (1992) findings in regards to ecotourism travel motivations when choosing a trip.

Single most important reason for travelling to Belize

When the patrons were asked to answer the open-ended question, ‘What is the single most important reason for traveling to Belize’, the most frequent response from the total sample was explore a

Table 13. Travel motivation attributes: other motives.

Other motives	Total	
	Mean	Stdev
Learn and explore nature	3.53	0.76
Have fun and be entertained	3.09	0.94
Go to places where one feels safe	3.12	0.92
Feel at home away from home	2.59	1.03
Warm climate	3.27	0.88
See maximum in time available	2.95	0.95
Be physically active	3.20	0.82

new country or culture (14.9%), followed by tropical rainforest/nature/wildlife (12.4%) and social reasons (11.1%) (Table 14).

Importance and performance of ecolodge attributes

Respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of each of 41 ecolodge attributes when selecting the lodge. This was measured by a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unimportant), 2 (unimportant), 3 (neutral), 4 (important) to 5 (very important). The 41 items presented to the respondents had been compiled from both hotel and ecotourism literature. To the knowledge of the authors, this is the first time that ecotourists' desired ecolodge attributes have been studied using both ecotourism and hotel characteristics.

The mean importance was 3.62, with 13 items receiving an importance rating above 4.0 (Table 15). The five highest rated attributes were, in order: (1) friendliness of staff (4.40), (2) scenery (4.40), (3) value for money (4.38), (4) decent sanitary condition (4.38), and (5) quality of the environment or landscape (4.36). Three of these highest-ranked importance values for attributes are concerned with service features: staff friendliness, value for money, and facility sanitation. Two are environmental features: scenery and quality of the environment. This reveals the unique positioning of ecolodges. The clients expect the institutions to cater to standard hospitality service features, as well as provide quality environmental features. The five attributes ranked lowest included: (1) business facilities and conference rooms (1.66), (2) availability of horseback riding (2.06), (3) availability of research facilities (2.22), (4) availability of onsite entertainment (2.34), and (5) availability of sales and rental services for recreation equipment (2.74). The clients place low importance on facilities for business, entertainment, and recreational equipment. They also do not see a need for research or horseback riding.

Respondents were also asked to evaluate the performance of the ecolodge for each of the 41 attributes. This was measured by a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (poor), 2 (bad), 3 (OK), 4 (good) to 5 (excellent). The mean performance ranking was 4.20, with 30 attributes ranked 4 or above. The five highest ranked attributes for performance were: (1) friendliness of staff (4.78), 2) scenery (4.71), 3) quality of the environment or landscape (4.69), (4) decent sanitary condition

Table 14. Common responses: single most important reason to travel to Belize.

Common responses	Total	
	Frequency	%
Explore different culture and countries	47	14.90
Tropical rainforest/nature/wildlife	39	12.40
Other	37	11.70
Social reason	35	11.10
Water activities	25	7.90
Mayan culture	22	7.00
Combination of experiences	21	6.70
Warm climate	20	6.30
Beach/barrier reef	18	5.70
Business, research, school field trips	16	5.10
Birding	12	3.80
Non-touristy places	10	3.20
Same language (English-speaking)	9	2.90
Caves	4	1.30
Total	315	100.00

Table 15. Importance – performance rating of ecolodge attributes.

Attribute	Importance rating	Performance rating	Gap
A variety of food selections	3.35	4.18	0.83
A variety of lodging styles	3.06	4.04	0.98
Authentic design, appropriate to setting	3.84	4.50	0.66
Availability of a particular habitat or species	3.39	4.10	0.71
Availability of horse-back riding facilities	2.06	3.59	1.53
Availability of library and information facilities	2.75	3.68	0.93
Availability of Mayan cultural trips	3.95	4.56	0.61
Availability of onsite entertainment	2.34	3.31	0.97
Availability of research facilities	2.22	3.20	0.98
Availability of river trips (canoeing /boating/kayaking)	3.60	4.38	0.78
Availability of sales and rentals for recreational equipment	2.74	3.61	0.87
Availability of security personnel	3.22	4.03	0.81
Availability of trail hiking facilities	3.83	4.15	0.32
Availability of trees and wildflowers	4.11	4.59	0.48
Availability of wildlife	4.10	4.20	0.10
Benefit local communities through provision of jobs	3.41	4.18	0.77
Bird-watching facilities and tours	3.34	4.14	0.80
Business facilities and conference rooms	1.66	2.52	0.86
Cleanliness	4.25	4.60	0.35
Comfort of bed	3.98	4.06	0.08
Convenient location, easy accessibility	3.42	3.87	0.45
Decent sanitary condition	4.38	4.62	0.24
Design sensitive to natural and cultural environment with minimal negative impact	4.20	4.51	0.31
Dining and bar services	3.75	4.33	0.58
Efficient reservation	3.88	4.32	0.44
Friendliness of staff	4.40	4.78	0.38
Guided wildlife tours	3.74	4.24	0.50
High-quality food	3.88	4.32	0.44
Knowledgeable guides	4.14	4.57	0.43
Local food, produced with local ingredients	3.85	4.28	0.43
Meets its energy needs through renewable energy resources	3.57	3.98	0.41
Nature Interpretation Center or Conservation Education Programs	3.32	3.91	0.59
Price	4.02	4.07	0.05
Private sleeping room, private washroom	4.05	4.40	0.35
Quality of the environment or landscape	4.36	4.69	0.33
Recycling of glass, paper and plastic	3.80	3.94	0.14
Reputation of lodge	3.84	4.42	0.58
Scenery	4.40	4.71	0.31
Staff provide efficient services	4.23	4.62	0.39
Uses alternative, sustainable means of water acquisition and reduces water consumption	3.67	4.21	0.54
Value for money	4.38	4.40	0.02
Mean	3.62	4.20	0.54

(4.62), and (5) staff provide efficient services (4.62). Three of these highly performing attributes deal with service issues: staff friendliness, sanitation, and staff efficiency. Two are concerned with environmental attributes: scenery and quality of the environment. These ecolodges performed well on both these service and environment attributes. The five attributes that were ranked

poorest by the clients in terms of performance were: (1) business facilities and conference rooms (2.52), (2) research facilities (3.2), (3) onsite entertainment (3.31), (4) horseback riding (3.59), and (5) recreation equipment (3.61). Not only did the clients indicate that these five attributes were not very important, they also indicate that the ecolodges performed relatively poorly in their provision of these attributes.

The difference between the value given to importance and the one given to performance is known as the importance–performance gap or IP gap. This value is an indication of the relative difference between how important an attribute is and how well the ecolodge performs with this attribute. In this study, all of the IP gaps were positive.

To assist with interpretation, it is useful to graph IP data, where the importance scores are plotted on the vertical axis and the performance scores are plotted on the horizontal axis (Figure 1). Cross-hairs are placed onto the graph to create four quadrants. These quadrants

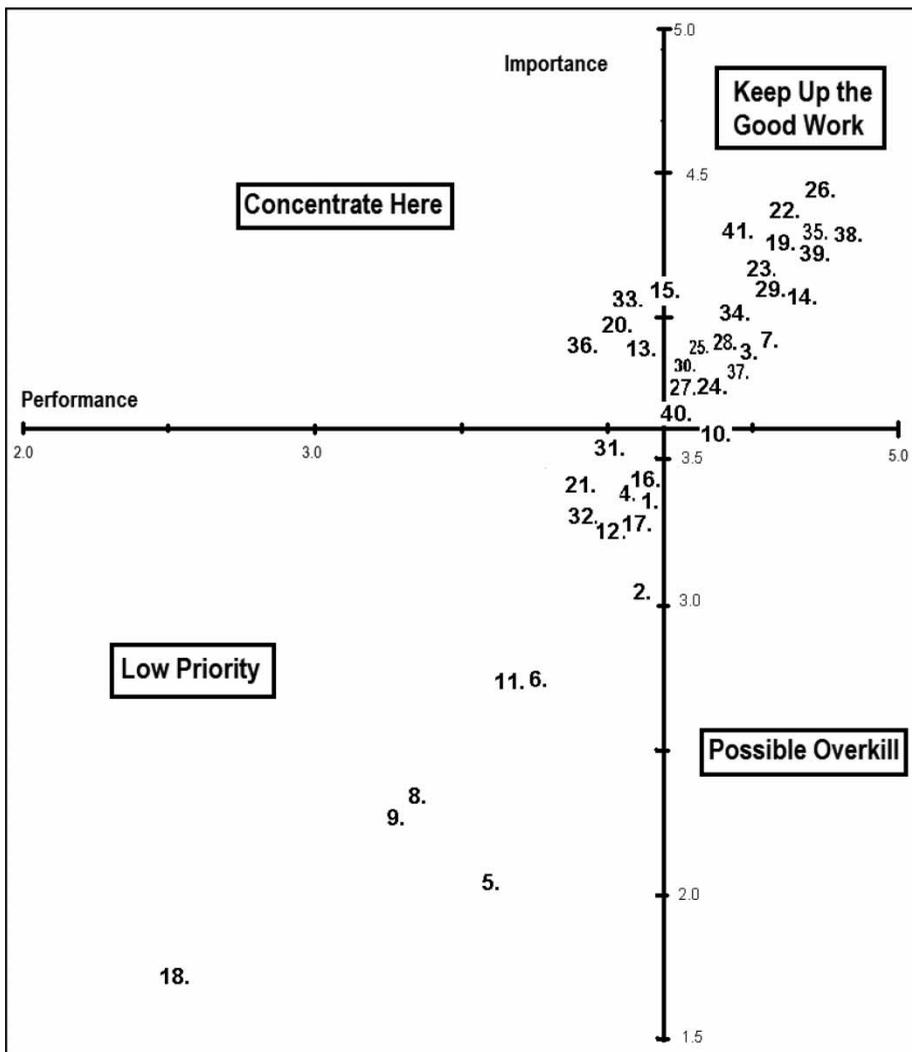


Figure 1. Ecolodge patrons’ importance and performance attribute ranking.

provide the ability to prioritise a large amount of data. The quadrant that has low importance and low performance is the 'Low Importance' area. The attributes that fall into this quadrant are given low importance for management action. The quadrant that has low importance and high performance is an area of 'Possible Overkill'. The attributes falling into this quadrant are not sufficiently important to be given more management attention. In fact, management resources might productively be removed from these attributes and placed elsewhere. One quadrant has high importance and high performance. This is known as the 'Keep up the Good Work' quadrant. Managers can be satisfied that their programmes are providing high performance for these highly ranked attributes. The most important quadrant is that which has high importance but low performance. This quadrant is known as 'Concentrate Here', and managers should place more emphasis on improving the importance of those attributes.

Figure 1 shows each of the 41 attributes placed onto an IP graph. The numbers on the graph correspond to the attribute numbers shown on the first column in Table 15. The cross-point coordinates are 4.20 and 3.62. This was determined by the average of all importance items (3.62) and the average of the performance items (4.20). Figure 1 reveals that a very large number of attributes are important with high performance, and therefore occur in the 'Keep up the good work' quadrant. This is a positive finding for the ecolodge owners and managers. Significantly, there are virtually no attributes in the 'Possible Overkill' quadrant. Attribute 10, availability of river trips, is marginally inside this quadrant. Many attributes are in the 'Low Priority' quadrant, with attribute 18, business facilities, given very low priority. The most important quadrant for management is that which involves high priority, but not quite high enough performance. This is the 'Concentrate Here' quadrant. This quadrant contains following attributes: availability of trail hiking facilities, comfort of bed, and recycling of glass, paper, and plastic. The managers should consider placing more emphasis on these three features. The fourth attribute in this important quadrant is price. This attribute has the lowest positive gap of all attributes (0.05). This data point reveals that the clients have mild concern about the price. The ecolodges have two possible responses to this concern. One would be to lower the price. The other is to better explain the main features provided by the ecolodge for this price.

'What is an ecolodge?' Ideas through the eyes of the patron

In order to understand the concept of ecolodge from the ecotourists' perspective, an open-ended question asked the respondents to use their own words to describe an ecolodge. Thirty-two percent of the respondents from the total sample provided answers such as 'hotels in the jungle', 'environmentally friendly', or 'green hotels' (Table 16). Thirteen percent of the total sample had a clear concept of the theoretical definition of an ecolodge and provided an answer, which included educational, environmental, and community elements. Eleven percent of the total sample was able to point out two important ecolodge elements: educational programmes and operate and design with minimal negative environmental impact. Other respondents described their definition of an ecolodge with one single aspect. Most of these answers revealed only one of the four concepts that are commonly used in the literature:

- (1) educational programmes;
- (2) operate or design with minimal negative impact on the environment;
- (3) conservation; and
- (4) contribution to local communities.

These data revealed that the ecolodge patrons did not have an idea of the purpose and function of ecolodges, similar to that portrayed in the literature. This suggested that ecolodge marketing has a major task in explaining the roles and operational objectives of these unique facilities.

Table 16. Ecolodge patrons' perception of an ecolodge.

Common responses	Total	
	Frequency	%
Education	17	7.00
Minimal environmental impact	84	34.60
Located in or near national park, conservation area, or nature	13	5.30
Benefit local communities	12	4.90
Education and minimal environmental impact	21	8.60
All of the above	26	10.70
Others	70	28.80
Total	243	99.90

Summary and discussion of the findings

This study showed that 73.3% of ecolodge patrons who responded to the survey were from the USA, 12% from Canada, and 9% from European Union Countries. The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 36 and 55, highly educated (77.4% had at least a Bachelor's degree), worked full-time or were retired, and almost one-fifth of the respondents had an annual household income over US\$140,000. In terms of trip characteristics, the majority of the respondents stayed in Belize 8–11 days, with stays at any one ecolodge of three to four nights. Vacation nights not spent at the ecolodge were most often spent at another ecolodge or at motel/hotel/resort or guest houses. Most respondents travelled with their spouses and their travel motivation to Belize was usually to *learn and explore nature* or *explore a new country or culture*. The Internet, travel guide books, and recommendations from friends and relatives were the three most important sources of information that influence respondents' decision-making process for the ecolodge categories. These results were a contrast to older studies (HLA Consultants & ARA Consulting Group Inc., 1995; Wight, 1996a) whose findings indicate that word of mouth and travel brochures were more influential than the Internet as sources of information that influence ecotourists' decision-making process. This indicates that there has been a change in marketing approaches with the rapid advancement of Internet technology in the past decade.

The five highest ranked attributes for importance were, in order: (1) friendliness of staff (4.40), (2) scenery (4.40), (3) value for money (4.38), (4) decent sanitary condition (4.38), and (5) quality of the environment or landscape (4.36). It is important to remember that there were 13 items with an importance rating of four or above, which means that a large number of attributes are important to ecolodge patrons. The five highest ranked attributes for performance were: (1) friendliness of staff (4.78), (2) scenery (4.71), (3) quality of the environment or landscape (4.69), (4) decent sanitary condition (4.62), and (5) staff provide efficient services (4.62). There is much similarity between what ecolodge patrons rank as important and the performance of the ecolodges on these attributes.

All the IP gaps were positive for the Belize ecolodges studied. This indicates that the ecolodges were performing above what their clients were indicating as important on all 41 attributes. No studies could be found that provided an IP analysis of ecolodge patrons, but two studied park visitors. Stevcore (1997) analysed visitors to 44 Ontario Provincial Parks. The IP analysis found that for 18 out of 25 attributes, the park visitors indicated a negative gap, meaning that the park services were performing at a lower ranking than their importance. Wade and Eagles (2003) studied visitors to Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. IP analysis found that 11 out of 12 attributes had a negative gap. Given the lack of any negative gaps in this study, the IP analysis for

Belize ecolodges shows a remarkably high level of accomplishment using this type of measurement instrument. These ecolodges are performing remarkably well on a wide suite of service and environmental attraction attributes.

Eagles (1992) found that the motivations of ecotourists varied greatly from average Canadian travellers. Eagles found that the average Canadian traveller was motivated by social reasons, whereas the ecotourist was motivated by the attraction. This current study found that ecolodge patrons were also motivated more by attraction motives than by social motives. This is important because social motives can be fulfilled at a very large number of tourism destinations, but the attraction motives can only be fulfilled in Belize or nearby countries with similar scenery, and quality of the natural environment.

Respondents showed little agreement on the definition of 'ecolodges', when asked to describe the term in their own words. This suggests that ecolodge marketing has a major task in explaining the roles and operational objectives of these unique facilities. The ecolodge patrons do not necessarily agree with the concept of ecolodges as proposed by the literature.

This study shows that these ecolodges in Belize are successful in the provision of a wide range of social, physical, and environmental attributes. Ecotourists' perception of importance on ecolodges can be expected to change as the experience of the patrons' increases and the ecolodge programmes mature. Immediately, the Belize ecolodges should work to improve their programmes dealing with the availability of trail hiking facilities, the comfort of their beds, the recycling of glass, paper and plastic, and the explanation of the services provided for the price.

Ecolodge establishments have become a popular accommodation form for ecotourists. This relatively new accommodation concept has some similarity to mainstream hotels. They both provide accommodation, amenities, food, and facilities for tourists and their level of amenity standards vary. Nonetheless, the main difference between hotels and ecolodge accommodations is that the latter provides environmental features and educational programmes to tourists that hotels do not offer. This study shows Belize ecolodges are largely successful in their experimentation with a new form of accommodation that provides facilities and programmes with unique nature-tourism attributes. They have extended their accommodation preferences to include not only service quality, but the surrounding natural environment, sustainable design, and wildlife availability. Since ecolodge establishments are still an immature industry, there is a relative lack of investigation on their offerings, facilities, and programmes. This study was an initial attempt to investigate ecolodges from a marketing perspective; it explored the patrons' perspectives of ecolodges and provided marketing information for ecolodges in Belize. This study provided insight into the characteristics and motivations of ecolodge patrons in Belize and showed the importance of collecting such information. However, much research is still needed to have a full understanding of ecolodge patrons. Many more studies are needed to validate the results of this study in other countries.

Undoubtedly, these types of unique 'eco' establishments have attracted attention and business. Ecolodges will continue to operate, grow, and attract tourists from a larger market. As ecotourism and ecolodge establishments continue to bloom, the ecolodge market will become increasingly competitive. The ability to offer unique products and provide an extension of the ecotourism experience will help ecolodges to compete against each other and against other forms of accommodation and service facilities. Ecolodge operators should continue to concentrate on learning about their patrons and catering to their motivations to achieve a competitive advantage in the global ecotourist industry.

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