

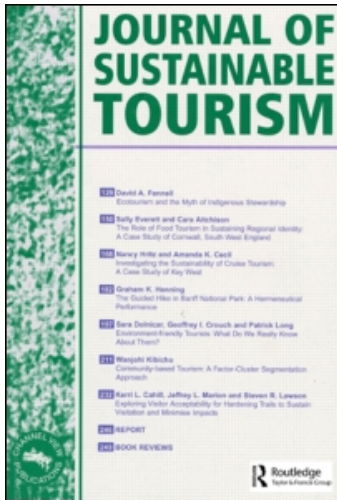
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A Comparison of Ecolodge Patrons' Characteristics and Motivations Based on Price Levels: A Case Study of Belize

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Ecolodges are an increasingly popular accommodation form. This study determined the demographic and trip characteristics, as well as the travel motivations of ecolodge patrons at three different price levels: budget, mid-price and upscale. Six ecolodges were studied in the Cayo District of Belize. Of 480 questionnaires distributed at the ecolodges, 331 valid surveys were returned (68.9% response rate). The clients of the Belizean ecolodges had some demographic characteristics similar to those of ecotourists found in other studies: middle-aged, highly educated, and employed with high levels of income. This study found consistency amongst the three groups in the most important travel attraction motives, with tropical forests and wilderness/undisturbed nature ranked highest by all groups. The study also showed consistency amongst the three groups with regards to travel social motives, with learn and explore nature the top-ranked social motive by all groups. The study found significant differences amongst the price levels on many variables, including: age, country of residence, education, employment status, income, party composition, trip length, length of stay at the ecolodge and level of ecolodge experience. There were important differences found in travel motivations and the importance of ecolodge attributes. The mid-price group was the hardest to please; they wanted a lower price, yet desired the quality, services and programmes of the upscale group.

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Keywords: Belize, ecolodge, ecotourism, motivations, travel characteristics

Introduction

An ecolodge is a nature-dependent tourist lodge that attempts to meet the philosophy and principles of ecotourism (Hawkins *et al.*, 1995), including environmentally responsible principles of design, construction and operations (Pigram, 2003). A survey of 26 ecolodges in 12 countries by Russell *et al.* (1995) found that ecolodges were small scale business located in isolated natural settings, with facilities designed with a local or exotic quality. Food, comfort, relaxation and experiences involving learning and interacting with nature were emphasised. The ecolodge industry emerged in the 1980s and grew rapidly over the following decades (Sanders & Halpenny, 2001); however, there was a relatively slow increase in the literature concerning ecolodges. The scope of the ecolodging literature predominantly focused on definitions, the physical environment, best practices and sustainability evaluations (Wight, 1997). Studies

also examined ecolodge economics and finance (Sanders & Halpenny, 2001), goals (Osland & Mackoy, 2004), selection and evaluation of lodging alternatives (Mackoy & Osland, 2004), planning (Barany *et al.*, 2001) and marketing (Lai & Shafer, 2005). Few studies profiled the characteristics of ecolodge patrons. This is a disadvantage because without knowledge of the client base, ecolodge managers may fail to meet the needs of their clients, ultimately compromising the sustainability of their business.

Hotels are often classified with corporate affiliations and star ratings. These classifications are signals of hotel quality, and indicators of price (Israeli, 2002). Schelling (1960) and Ingram (1996) found that corporate affiliations and branding are a form of credible commitment to service quality because patrons expect the same service products in various locations. Israeli (2002) demonstrated that the star-rating system is a good indicator of price. Hotel studies of tourists patronising hotels at different star-rating levels (Griffin *et al.*, 1996; Chu & Choi, 1997; Qu *et al.*, 2000) found that tourists staying at different hotel categories have different expectations about services and service quality.

Currently, ecolodge establishments do not have corporate affiliations or star-rating systems. Given the lack of an accepted classification system, price must become the indicator of ecolodge service quality, since the customers typically associate price with hotel star ratings (Israeli, 2002). Using Wight's (1997) definition of fixed-roof ecotourism accommodations into three categories, the authors created three categories of ecolodges based on price; budget, mid-price and upscale (Table 1).

The purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics and travel motivations of a sample of ecolodge patrons at six ecolodges in the Cayo District of Belize. Also, this study compared travel characteristics and motivations amongst the three price groups.

Literature Review

Few studies have profiled the characteristics of ecolodge patrons. Weaver and Lawton's (2002) ecolodge consumer survey at two well-known ecolodges in Lamington National Park in Queensland, Australia, revealed three distinct ecotourist segments on the hard-soft spectrum. 'Harder' ecotourists had a strong desire to learn about nature, enjoy visiting 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 nature settings, favoured accommodations with a good array of services and facilities. Demographically, these tourists tend to travel with their family, were highly educated and were usually from a high-income bracket.

'Structured' ecotourists were a blend of harder ecotourists and softer ecotourists who were committed to the environment and yet expected high level of services and facilities. Demographically, structured ecotourists were older travellers who were within the high-income bracket. They were more likely

Table 1 Classification of ecolodge market segments

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Price range</i>
Upscale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have highest room rates of all categories. ● Provide full, high-quality amenities, including spacious rooms, bathrooms, bar and fine cuisines, gift shops and/or a conference centre. ● Include education component, such as bird-watching or wildlife viewing facilities; equipment rentals; licensed guides; a library; a complete trail system; organised ecotourism tours; on-site ecotourism/adventure activities. Some lodges have their own interpretation centre, farm or garden. 	Greater than \$100 USD per person per night.
Mid-price	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have medium prices. ● Provide full service, but with fewer amenities than upscale ecolodges. Have reduced food and beverage, bar and meeting facilities. Less luxurious than upscale ecolodges. ● Have an education component that usually includes a library, a trail system and organised ecotourism or nature tours and shared equipments for wildlife viewing. Some lodges may include an interpretation centre. 	Between \$ 40 USD and \$100 USD per person per night.
Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are the cheapest among all categories. ● Provide simple lodging with basic utilities, such as running water, showers, bathrooms and electricity. ● May include education component, such as a trail system and a basic library. 	Less than \$40 USD per person per night.

to arrange their travel through travel agents, and preferred a hard ecotourism experience that was interpreted for them.

Weaver (2002) studied the perceptions and socio-demographic characteristics of hard-core ecotourists in Lamington National Park. He found that hard-core ecotourists had high levels of environmental commitment and supported 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.

Though few studies identified segments of ecolodge patrons, several studies identified segments of ecotourists. Kusler (1991) identified three types of ecotourists: do-it-yourselfers, group-tour ecotourists and scientific or school groups. Wight (1996) classified ecotourists as general-interest consumers and experienced ecotourists. Lindberg (1991) separated dedicated ecotourists from casual ecotourists. Twynam and Robinson (1997) classified ecotourists as enthusiasts, adventurers, naturalists, vacationers and urbanists. Robinson *et al.* (1998) divided the ecotourism market into six segments: (1) enthusiasts, (2) weekend warriors, (3) environmental friendly tourists, (4) escapists, (5) naturalists and (6) adventure naturalists. Palacio and McCool (1997) separated ecotourists into four categories: (1) nature escapists, (2) ecotourists, (3) comfortable naturalists and (4) passive players, often accompanying categories (1)–(3).

In terms of accommodation price levels, most studies suggest that ecotourists prefer modest, less luxurious accommodations (Pearce & Wilson, 1995). HLA and ARA Consulting (1995) found through a focus group that 56% of the ecotourists preferred middle-range levels of luxury. A smaller group wanted the basic budget level. Only 6% of the ecotourists wanted a luxury type of accommodation. Although many studies suggested that the majority of the ecotourists prefer the mid-range level of accommodations (HLA & ARA Consulting, 1995; Pearce & Wilson, 1995), a range of price levels does exist. This suggests that the market is not fully represented in the literature. There is a lack of investigation of the differences among tourists patronising different price categories of accommodation.

The relative paucity of literature in regards to ecolodge patrons may be due to the newness of the industry. The lack of such information is a disadvantage for the young and evolving ecolodge industry, particularly in 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 available in the published literature. Consequently, this study is an attempt to study ecolodges and their patrons from a marketing perspective. Comprehending what tourists seek at ecolodges would allow tourism marketers and ecolodge managers to better identify this target market and tailor the environment, services and facilities to the needs of patrons.

Methods

The Cayo district in western Belize (Figure 1) is a favourite destination for ecotourists and the chosen site for this investigation. Belize was chosen because it has a well-established ecolodge industry (Palacio & McCool, 1997). The majority of the ecotourists and operators were English-speaking, making communication and implementation of the study manageable for English-speaking researchers.

This District has a commitment to conservation and ecotourism with over 60% of the area being set aside as some type of protected area, such as a Wildlife Sanctuary, National Park or Forest Reserve (Belize Explorer, 2004; PACT, 2008). This large amount of natural area provides a readily available base for the development of an ecotourism industry.

The 28 ecolodges in the Cayo District of Belize range in price and services. All the ecolodges are situated within or near natural landscapes. There are a variety of lodging styles, dining facilities, amenities, nature trails, organised guided tours, nature-related activities, nature centres and other interpretation programmes. The development of amenity features, environmental education programmes and facilities and specialised nature programmes reveals innovation in the emerging ecolodge industry in this District.



Figure 1 Geographic location of Belize. From 'About Belize', by the Belize government (www.belize.gov.bz/belize/welcomes.html)

The sample population in this research was composed of tourists who stayed at one of six ecolodges in the Cayo District of Belize between February and May 2004, over a 15-week period. A disproportional, stratified sample was used to choose ecolodges of varying price levels and services offered.

All ecolodges in the Cayo District were classified as budget, mid-price or up-scale based on the established criteria. Two ecolodges were randomly selected from each of the three ecolodge price categories and then contacted for involvement. Five of the six ecolodges agreed to cooperate. One ecolodge from the budget category refused to participate, and another budget ecolodge could not be found as a replacement. One extra mid-priced ecolodge was included when two mid-price ecolodge owners expressed concern that their low occupancy rates during the collection period might create problems in obtaining sufficient responses.

For this study, 80 surveys were distributed to each of the six ecolodges. The goal was to give a survey form to each party upon check-in, until the 80 surveys had been distributed. Upon check-in, each client was told by the front desk staff that the survey asked for information about their characteristics and travel motivations. One survey was given per room. Guests sharing the same unit decided who responded to the questionnaire. On completion of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to place the completed questionnaire into 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 by the receptionists.

The survey instrument was a four-page questionnaire, divided into three sections. The first and last sections consisted of questions on travel characteristics and demographics. The questions on travel motivation attributes used a 4-point scale from not at all important, to very important using the approach of the Canadian Tourism Attitude and Motivation Study (Burak Jacobson Inc., 1985) and Eagles (1992). The second section consisted of 41 ecolodge attributes for which the tourists were asked to evaluate their perception of importance and performance of each attribute. The attributes were chosen using both hotel (Atkinson, 1988; Callan & Kyndt, 2001; Callan & Bowman, 2000; Chu & Choi,

2000; LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1996; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Wilensky & Buttle, 1988) and ecotourism (Eagles, 1992; Hawkins *et al.*, 1995; Mehta *et al.*, 2002; World Tourism Organization, 2002) literature. Each attribute was ranked on a 5-point Likert scale for both importance and performance.

Of the 480 questionnaires handed out at the six ecolodges, 333 were returned. After removing questionnaires from two respondents under 18 years of age, the valid responses totalled 331 (68.9% response rate). The sample consisted of 72 responses from the budget ecolodge (response rate of 90%), 129 responses from the three mid-price ecolodges (response rate of 53.8%) and 130 responses (response rate of 81.3%) from the two upscale ecolodges. The variable response rate appeared to be partially dependent on the enthusiasm of the receptionists who administered the questionnaires.

After this, data from both the close-ended questions and open-ended questions were coded. They were then computed and analysed by using Microsoft Excel 2000 and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including simple frequencies and mean ratings, on the respondents' demographic and trip characteristics were computed. To determine if the apparent differences between the three price groups were statistically significant, a chi-squared test or an ANOVA test was conducted using SPSS. Chi-square tests were used for categorical data and *f*-tests (ANOVA) were used for continuous data. The authors chose a significance level of 0.05. Any ANOVA test that revealed a statistically significant difference was further analysed using a Duncan's post hoc test to examine where the difference had occurred.

Results

Demographic characteristics

The following section reports the demographic statistics of the respondents from the three price categories. The six variables discussed include: (1) age, (2) country of residence, (3) education, (4) employment status, (5) annual household income and (6) party composition.

Age group

The upscale and mid-price categories were middle-aged, with half their population in the 36–55 age category (Table 2). Other studies have shown that ecotourists tend to be in this age category (HLA & ARA, 1995; Meric & Hunt, 1998; Wight, 1996). The youngest age group favoured the budget ecolodges with slightly less than half of their population in the 16–35-year-old category. The age differences amongst price categories are significant ($p < 0.05$). These data reveal that age is an important influence on the price category chosen. Since younger people have less disposable income, they appear to be willing to accept basic services. This finding shows that the budget ecolodge sector provides services to the younger age group not often found in studies of ecotourists.

Country of residence

The United States was the predominate market for all price categories (Table 3). However, the budget sector had the most diverse market of the three ecolodge categories, with Canada and the European Union also important

Table 2 Age group

Age group	Upscale		Mid-price		Budget	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
16–25	19	14.6	9	7.0	18	25.0
26–35	12	9.2	17	13.2	16	22.1
36–45	28	21.5	28	21.7	12	16.7
46–55	35	26.9	37	28.7	13	18.1
56–65	21	16.2	24	18.6	11	15.3
66+	10	7.7	11	8.5	2	2.8
n/a	5	3.8	3	2.3	0	0.0
Total	130	99.9	129	100.0	72	100.0

Chi-square (df = 12) = 25.083, $p = 0.014$.

Table 3 Country of residence

Countries	Upscale		Mid-price		Budget	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
United States	107	82.3	97	75.2	38	52.8
Canada	9	6.9	20	15.5	11	15.3
European Union	8	6.2	9	7.0	13	18.1
Others	1	0.8	1	0.8	7	9.7
Guatemala	2	1.5	0	0.0	0	0.0
Honduras	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Mexico	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4
Belize	1	0.8	0	0.0	2	2.8
n/a	2	1.5	2	1.6	0	0.0
Total	130	100.0	129	100.1	72	100.1

Chi-square (df = 14) = 47.008, $p < 0.00$.

sources of clients ($p < 0.05$). The reason for this later finding is unknown. We speculate that the strong American dollar existing during the study period made it easier for the citizens of that country to afford the more expensive facilities and conversely encouraged citizens of other countries towards more modestly priced facilities.

Education

All of the price categories attracted a highly educated clientele. This finding is very similar to that of many other studies that showed that ecotourists are a highly educated group (HLA & ARA, 1995; Meric & Hunt, 1998; Wight, 1996). Of the three ecotour categories, the upscale group was the best educated: 83.1%

Table 4 Education

<i>Education level</i>	<i>Upscale</i>		<i>Mid-price</i>		<i>Budget</i>	
	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
Less than 12 years of schooling	9	6.9	2	1.6	5	6.9
Completed secondary school)	2	1.5	1	0.8	5	6.9
Some post-secondary school education	5	3.8	13	10.1	6	8.3
Diploma	5	3.8	11	8.5	7	9.7
Bachelor degree	52	40.0	53	41.1	32	44.4
Master's or doctoral degree	56	43.1	47	36.4	16	22.2
n/a	1	0.8	2	1.6	1	1.4
Total	130	99.9	129	100.0	72	100.0
Chi-square (df = 12) = 25.548, $p = <0.00$.						

Table 5 Employment status

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Upscale</i>		<i>Mid-price</i>		<i>Budget</i>	
	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
Employed full-time	65	50.0	66	51.2	23	31.9
Homemaker	9	6.9	4	3.1	1	1.4
Employed part-time	8	6.2	10	7.8	9	12.5
Not employed	1	0.8	1	0.8	11	15.3
Self-employed	13	10.0	15	11.6	15	20.8
Student	12	9.2	6	4.7	9	12.5
Retired	19	14.6	24	18.6	4	5.6
n/a	3	2.3	3	2.3	0	0.0
Total	130	100.0	129	100.1	72	100.0
Chi-square (df = 14) = 26.245, $p = <0.00$.						

with a Bachelor's degree or above, compared to 77.5% of the mid-price group and 66.7% of the budget group ($p < 0.05$) (Table 4). It is interesting to note that the largest education group to visit the upscale ecolodges had a Master's or Doctoral degree (43.1%).

Employment status

For all three categories, the largest employment group was that of full-time employment (Table 5). This was also found by Lawton (2001) in a study of ecolodge patrons in Australia. However, there were significant differences

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Table 6 Annual household income

Income bracket	Upscale		Mid-price		Budget	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
<\$10,000	2	1.5	1	0.8	8	11.1
\$10,000–\$30,000	0	0.0	6	4.7	17	23.6
\$30,000–\$50,000	15	11.5	18	14.0	21	29.2
\$50,000–\$70,000	15	11.5	20	15.5	6	8.3
\$70,000–\$90,000	8	6.2	19	14.7	3	4.2
\$90,000–\$100,000	7	5.4	10	7.8	3	4.2
\$100,000–\$120,000	15	11.5	8	6.2	3	4.2
\$120,000–\$140,000	11	8.5	4	3.1	1	1.4
>\$140,000	37	28.5	20	15.5	7	9.7
n/a	20	15.4	23	17.8	3	4.2
Total	130	100.0	129	100.1	72	100.1
Chi-square (df = 18) = 102.720, $p = <0.00$.						

amongst the groups. The budget ecolodge patrons were less likely to be employed full-time, and much more likely to be employed part-time, not employed, self-employed or a student ($p < 0.05$). The mid-priced attracted higher numbers of retirees.

Annual household income (US dollars)

The price paid was directly correlated with annual household income. Those with the highest income stayed in the more expensive ecolodges, while those with the lowest stayed in the budget establishments ($p < 0.05$) (Table 6). Over one-quarter of the upscale group had an annual household income of more than \$140,000 USD¹ (Table 6). It is reasonable to conclude that disposable income is a primary factor that determines how much an ecotourist is able to spend for ecolodge quality and services. It is important to note that the income level corresponds well to the age of the ecolodge clients. The younger people have lower incomes. Even though these younger clients have high levels of education, they are not yet well enough established in their careers to have high incomes. The finding of a market for relatively low-income people travelling internationally for an ecotourism experience and staying at budget ecolodges is new to the literature.

Party composition

There were significant differences in the party composition amongst the three groups. The most frequent party composition for the two more expensive groups was married couples (34.1% for the upscale group and 45.7% for the mid-price group) (Table 7). The most frequent for the budget group was a person travelling alone (31.0%). Having the second most frequent category for the upscale group being families with children (21.7%) was surprising, given the higher cost of

Table 7 Party composition

Party composition	Upscale		Mid-price		Budget	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Alone	4	3.1	3	2.3	22	31.0
Spouse	44	34.1	59	45.7	14	19.7
Family (adults)	14	10.9	10	7.8	3	4.2
Friends	21	16.3	19	14.7	11	15.5
Organised group	18	14.0	20	15.5	12	16.9
Family (kids)	28	21.7	16	12.4	9	12.7
Other	0	0.0	2	1.6	0	0.0
Total	129	100.1	129	100.0	71	100.0
Chi-square (df = 12) = 69.486, $p < 0.00$.						

this travel choice. The finding of families with children in all price levels and especially in the upscale ecolodges was unexpected. This suggests that a new market is emerging, with ecolodge facilities providing a range of facilities, attractions and services attractive to parents who wish to expose their children to nature-based travel.

The budget group is more likely to travel alone or with an organised group, whereas the mid-price group is more likely to travel with a spouse or with an organised group. The upscale group is most likely to travel with friends and family, both adults and children ($p < 0.05$).

Travel characteristics

This section of the paper reports the travel characteristics and motivations of each of the three ecolodge categories. Six variables are examined (1) trip length, (2) length of ecolodge stay, (3) other accommodations, (4) travel motivation, (5) important ecolodge attributes and (6) past experience with nature-based accommodations.

Trip length in Belize

The research found quite different overall trip lengths amongst the three groups. The most frequent total trip lengths for the upscale group were 4–7 days (31.0%) and 8–11 days (31.0%) (Table 7). The most frequent stay length for mid-price group was 8–11 days (43.3%), whereas the most frequent for the budget group was 12–15 days (38.9%) (Table 8). Those who stayed in less expensive accommodations stayed longer in the country ($p < 0.05$). It appears that the budget ecotourists stay in the country for long periods, all the while being judicious in their daily spending. The wealthy ecotourists visit the country for shorter periods, but spend larger amounts of money each day. This shows a quite different travel style; long and judicious for budget clients compared to short and intense for upscale clients.

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Table 8 Average trip length

Number of days	Upscale		Mid-price		Budget	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1–3	5	3.9	2	1.6	3	4.2
4–7	40	31.0	24	18.6	15	20.8
8–11	40	31.0	56	43.4	12	16.7
12–15	30	23.3	30	23.3	14	19.4
>15	13	10.1	17	13.2	28	38.9
n/a	1	0.8	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	129	100.1	129	100.1	72	100.0
Chi-square (df = 10) = 42.763, $p = <0.00$.						

Table 9 Average length of stay at the ecolodge

Number of nights	Upscale		Mid-price		Budget	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1	4	3.10	3	2.30	5	6.90
2	21	16.20	15	11.60	20	27.80
3	40	30.80	24	18.60	19	26.40
4	32	24.60	25	19.40	8	11.10
5	15	11.50	37	28.70	5	6.90
6	4	3.10	11	8.50	0	0.00
7	11	8.50	7	5.40	7	9.70
8	2	1.50	5	3.90	6	8.30
n/a	1	0.80	2	1.60	2	2.80
Total	130	100.10	129	100.00	72	99.90
Chi-square (df = 16) = 51.488, $p = <0.00$.						

Average length of stay at the ecolodge

Each of the groups show quite different stay length patterns at the ecolodges. The budget group were more likely to stay for two to three nights and seven to eight nights, than the other two groups ($p < 0.05$) (Table 9). This may suggest two different travel patterns for budget ecolodge patrons: both a short-stay pattern and a long-stay pattern. The mid-price group was more likely to stay five nights than the other two groups. The upscale group was more likely to stay three and four nights than the other groups. As will be noted later, the clients typically used several accommodation forms during their Belize trip with the ecolodge stay being only a portion of their trip.

Table 10 Other types of accommodation used on the trip

<i>Types of accommodation</i>	<i>Upscale</i>		<i>Mid-price</i>		<i>Budget</i>	
	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
Hotel/motel/resort	87	60.4	88	58.3	37	26.4
Guest house	13	9.0	24	15.9	38	27.1
Home of friends/relatives	4	2.8	4	2.6	12	8.6
Campground/trailer park	2	1.4	2	1.3	25	17.9
Cruise ship	3	2.1	0	0.0	0	0.0
Private cottage/cabin	9	6.3	17	11.3	20	14.3
Local village	4	2.8	4	2.6	8	5.7
Other	22	15.3	12	7.9	0	0.0
Total	144	100.1	151	99.9	140	100.0

Chi-square (df = 14) = 115.67, $p < 0.01$.

Other types of accommodations used on the trip

The ecolodge visit was usually part of a longer trip. More than half of the respondents from the mid-price and upscale categories also used hotels, motels or resorts (60.3% for the upscale; 58.3% for the mid-price), compared with 26.4% of the budget group (Table 10). The budget group stayed at a wider variety of accommodations, such as guest houses (27.1%) and campgrounds (17.9%). A portion of the clients from the upscale category used other types of accommodations (15.8%), such as sailboats, timeshares and rental condominiums. The upscale group was more likely to stay in more expensive accommodations, such as cruise ships and hotels/motels/resorts, whereas the budget group was more likely to stay in less expensive accommodations, such as a campground, guest house, local village or with friends and relatives ($p < 0.05$). These data show that ecolodges are competing with a wide variety of accommodation forms for the travel market. The people visiting these lodges are not fully committed to this specific accommodation form; other forms are widely used.

Travel motivation attributes

The respondents ranked the importance of 19 motivation attributes used when planning their Belize trip. This ranking was on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important) (Table 11).

The three price categories ranked their top four attraction motives similarly. The top four were: (1) wilderness and undisturbed nature, (2) tropical forests, (3) Mayan archaeological sites and (4) warm climate. All were ranked in the range of 3.20–3.61 on the 4-point scale. The top social motive for all three groups was to learn and explore nature. There was similarity in the ranking of the top social motives; however, there was more variation than with the attraction motives. This ranking of a travel motivation attributes is quite similar to Eagles' (1992) finding of the travel motives of Canadian ecotourists.

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Table 11 Travel motivation attributes

<i>Attraction motives</i>	<i>Upscale</i>		<i>Mid-price</i>		<i>Budget</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>
Tropical forests	3.46	0.89	3.51	0.71	3.47	0.80
Wilderness and undisturbed nature	3.42	0.86	3.61	0.55	3.49	0.76
Mayan archeological sites*	3.20 ^a	0.96	3.50 ^b	0.77	3.31 ^a	0.89
Warm climate*	3.09 ^a	0.95	3.45 ^b	0.76	3.27 ^{ab}	0.88
Barrier reefs*	3.07 ^{ab}	1.14	3.32 ^a	0.89	3.15 ^b	1.05
Trees and wildflowers	2.95	0.83	2.91	0.77	2.95	0.82
Birds	2.94	0.96	2.94	0.86	2.91	0.90
Lakes and streams	2.90	0.81	2.85	0.76	2.93	0.82
Mammals	2.87	0.85	2.88	0.79	2.88	0.83
Photography of landscape and wildlife	2.75	0.95	2.99	0.88	2.86	0.94
<i>Social motives</i>						
Learn and explore nature	3.47	0.85	3.63	0.58	3.53	0.76
Go to places where one feels safe	3.09	0.96	3.17	0.88	3.12	0.93
Be physically active*	3.08 ^a	0.92	3.40 ^b	0.67	3.20 ^a	0.82
Have fun and be entertained	3.06	0.96	3.07	0.97	3.08	0.95
Being together as a family*	2.92 ^a	1.26	3.00 ^a	1.17	2.83 ^b	1.26
See maximum in time available*	2.87 ^a	0.99	3.15 ^b	0.86	2.95 ^a	0.95
Feel at home away from home	2.51	1.08	2.65	1.00	2.59	1.03
Meet people with similar interest*	2.35 ^a	0.91	2.52 ^a	0.96	2.54 ^b	0.99
Visit friends and relatives*	1.92 ^a	1.25	1.57 ^b	1.04	1.80 ^a	1.19

*Significant at the 5% level.

^aStatistically significant difference from b.

^{ab}No statistically significant difference from a or b.

However, there were several motives that were stronger for one group and these deserve discussion. The presence of barrier reefs, Mayan archeological sites and warm climate were more important to the mid-price group. Being together as a family was more important to the upscale and mid-price groups. Meeting people with similar interests was more important to the budget group, possibly due to the fact that many of the budget patrons travelled alone. Visiting friends and relatives was more important to the budget and upscale groups. Seeing the most in the time available and being physically active were more important to the mid-price group.

Table 12 Comparison of the important ecologue attributes across the three ecologue categories

<i>Ecologue attributes</i>		<i>Upscale</i>		<i>Mid-price</i>		<i>Budget</i>	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>
1**	A variety of food selections*	3.57 ^a	1.02	3.45 ^a	0.99	2.75 ^b	1.28
2	A variety of lodging styles	3.09	1.10	3.17	1.04	2.82	1.23
3**	Authentic design, appropriate to setting*	3.96 ^a	0.93	3.89 ^a	0.90	3.54 ^b	1.23
4	Availability of a particular habitat or species	3.48	1.24	3.46	1.18	3.09	1.22
5**	Availability of horseback riding facilities	2.37 ^a	1.38	1.92 ^b	1.21	1.73 ^b	1.04
6**	Availability of library and information facilities	2.55 ^a	1.24	2.68 ^a	1.22	3.22 ^b	1.25
7**	Availability of Mayan cultural trips*	4.02 ^a	1.13	4.07 ^a	1.17	3.62 ^b	1.18
8	Availability of onsite entertainment	2.38	1.26	2.21	1.20	2.51	1.28
9**	Availability of research facilities	2.16 ^a	1.23	2.08 ^a	1.08	2.59 ^b	1.16
10	Availability of river trips (canoeing /boating/ kayaking)	3.59	1.15	3.73	1.23	3.37	1.29
11	Availability of sales and rental services for recreational equipment	2.68	1.23	2.74	1.38	2.82	1.23
12	Availability of security personnel	3.35	1.19	3.02	1.31	3.37	1.30
13	Availability of trail hiking facilities	3.96	1.00	3.75	1.13	3.72	0.98
14	Availability of trees and wildflowers	4.22	0.95	4.00	1.04	4.09	0.94
15	Availability of wildlife	4.19	0.94	4.04	0.92	4.06	0.95
16**	Benefit local communities through provision of jobs	3.61 ^a	1.33	3.40 ^{a,b}	1.38	3.02 ^b	1.23
17**	Bird-watching facilities and tours	3.54 ^a	1.27	3.31 ^{a,b}	1.33	3.01 ^b	1.25
18	Business facilities and conference rooms	1.59	1.09	1.69	1.02	1.73	1.18
19**	Cleanliness*	4.35 ^a	0.85	4.28 ^a	0.85	3.99 ^b	0.85
20**	Comfort of bed*	4.22 ^a	0.85	4.08 ^a	0.90	3.31 ^b	1.24

(Continued)

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Table 12 Continued

<i>Ecodge attributes</i>		<i>Upscale</i>		<i>Mid-price</i>		<i>Budget</i>	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Stdev</i>
21**	Convenient location, easy accessibility	3.27 ^a	1.02	3.39 ^a	1.10	3.76 ^b	0.92
22**	Decent sanitary condition*	4.52 ^a	0.77	4.41 ^a	0.80	4.04 ^b	0.82
23	Design sensitive to natural and cultural environment with minimal negative impact	4.25	0.93	4.19	0.86	4.12	1.06
24**	Dining and bar services*	3.95 ^a	0.85	3.85 ^a	0.93	3.18 ^b	1.14
25**	Efficient reservation*	3.91 ^a	0.96	4.14 ^a	0.90	3.30 ^b	1.25
26	Friendliness of staff	4.46	0.82	4.41	0.74	4.25	0.98
27**	Guided wildlife tours*	3.89 ^a	1.10	4.05 ^a	4.47	2.88 ^b	1.20
28**	High quality food*	4.01 ^a	0.84	3.99 ^a	0.80	3.44 ^b	1.12
29**	Knowledgeable guides*	4.37 ^a	0.84	4.31 ^a	0.85	3.41 ^b	1.31
30**	Local food, produced with local ingredients*	3.86 ^a	0.97	4.03 ^a	0.93	3.50 ^b	1.13
31	Meets its energy needs through renewable energy resources	3.59	1.09	3.53	1.09	3.62	1.17
32**	Nature interpretation center or conservation education programmes	3.41 ^{ab}	1.17	3.10 ^a	1.03	3.55 ^b	1.09
33**	Price	3.82 ^a	0.94	4.06 ^a	0.78	4.32 ^b	0.92
34**	Private sleeping room; private washroom*	4.41 ^a	0.88	4.30 ^a	0.96	2.93 ^b	1.34
35**	Quality of the environment or landscape	4.57 ^a	0.79	4.27 ^b	0.85	4.10 ^b	0.89
36	Recycling of glass, paper and plastic	3.83	1.22	3.85	1.07	3.65	1.27
37**	Reputation of lodge*	3.93 ^a	1.04	3.92 ^a	0.97	3.56 ^b	1.27
38**	Scenery	4.53 ^a	0.69	4.38 ^{ab}	0.77	4.22 ^b	0.92
39**	Staff provide efficient services*	4.27 ^a	0.89	4.34 ^a	0.73	3.94 ^b	0.97
40	Uses alternative, sustainable means of water acquisition and reduces water consumption	3.60	1.19	3.68	1.05	3.76	1.22

(Continued)

Table 12 Continued

Ecolodge attributes		Upscale		Mid-price		Budget	
		Mean	Stdev	Mean	Stdev	Mean	Stdev
41	Value for money	4.29	0.82	4.48	0.64	4.38	0.86
**	Overall mean importance	3.70 ^a	1.25	3.65 ^a	1.09	3.42 ^b	1.13

**Statistically significant at the 5% level.

^aStatistically significant difference from b.

^{a,b}No statistically significant difference from a or b.

Ecolodge choice attributes

Each ecolodge patron ranked the importance of each of 41 ecolodge attributes when selecting the ecolodge being visited (Table 12). The *quality of the environment or landscape* (4.57) was rated highest at the upscale segment, whereas *value for money* was the top attribute for both the mid-price (4.48) and budget (4.38) groups.

Over all attributes, the upscale has a mean importance of 3.70, the mid-price a mean importance of 3.65 and the budget a mean importance of 3.42. The mean importance for the upscale group and the mid-price group were statistically the same whereas the budget group's mean importance was statistically lower (<0.05).

Many attributes were more important to the upscale and mid-price group than to the budget group (see * items in Table 12) including: a variety of food selections, availability of Mayan cultural trips, cleanliness, comfort of bed, sanitary condition, dining and bar services, efficient reservation, guided wildlife tourism, high quality food, knowledgeable guides, local food produced with local ingredients, private sleeping room with private washroom, and reputation of the lodge. The upscale group indicated that the availability of horseback riding facilities was more important to it than for the other two groups. The upscale group placed increased importance on providing benefit to the local community, scenery and bird watching facilities and tours. The budget group placed higher importance on the availability of library, information and research facilities, convenient location and price. The budget group placed higher importance on facilities, such as having a nature interpretation centre or a conservation education programme.

Interestingly, the mid-price group considered a wider range of attributes important for their ecolodge selection when compared to the other two groups. This finding reveals that the mid-price group considered many attributes important during their ecolodge visit; the upscale group placed higher importance on the lodge settings and the budget group considered value and price their crucial selection factors.

Past experience with nature-based accommodations

When asked about their level of experience with nature-based accommodation, the budget group were most familiar (59.7%), followed by the upscale (51.5%) and mid-price groups (41.1%) ($p < 0.05$) (Table 13). These data reveal that when exposed to a novel accommodation format, those with least

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Table 13 Past experience with nature-based accommodations

<i>Past experience with nature-based accommodations</i>	<i>Upscale</i>		<i>Mid-price</i>		<i>Budget</i>	
	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	67	51.5	53	41.1	43	59.7
No	57	43.8	74	57.4	29	40.3
n/a	6	4.5	2	1.6	0	00.0
Total	130	99.8	129	100.1	72	100.0
Chi-square (df = 4) = 11.913, $p = <0.05$.						

experience chose the mid-priced product. The novice user may feel that the budget accommodation will not provide a sufficient level of services, while the upscale services may not be worth the money. This finding needs to be further investigated.

Discussion

There are many notable differences that provide ecolodge managers with valuable information to successfully run their business. Table 14 outlines a profile of patrons at each of the three price levels. Income is one area that should be noted. The budget ecolodges provided important opportunities for the younger-aged, lower-income, eclectically employed travellers. We conclude that the budget ecolodges provided an ecotour experience for a group of younger, well-educated travellers that were either not employed, self-employed or part-time employed with low incomes. This group has some similarities to backpackers; young, preference for lower priced accommodations and an emphasis on meeting similar people (Sorensen, 2003).

Also, it is important to note that the mid-priced group ranked several attraction and social motives higher than the other groups. The mid-priced group also ranked in importance several attributes as high as the upscale group. This implies that the mid-priced group is the hardest to satisfy. They expect almost as much as the upscale group for a much lower price.

Individuals patronising budget ecolodges were more likely to have prior experience with nature-based accommodation or ecolodges (60% were familiar). The mid-price and upscale patrons had less prior experience with ecolodges. The research indicates that individuals with little or no familiarity with a product or service wish to pay a lower price than those who are informed (Rao & Sieben, 1992). As familiarity increases, an individual's acceptable range of price increases so that their upper and lower limits fit with the market value of the product or service (Rao & Sieben, 1992). We found that when an individual was unfamiliar with a product or service they were more likely to choose the mid-priced item. Lower price typically signals poorer quality. Higher price may mean unnecessary services. So, possibly, the people with the least experience with ecolodges therefore choose the middle price.

This study found consistency amongst the three groups in travel attraction motives, with tropical forests and wilderness/undisturbed nature ranked

Table 14 Summary

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Budget</i>	<i>Mid-price</i>	<i>Upscale</i>
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16–35 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 36–55 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 36–55
Residence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USA (52.8%) • Canada (15.3%) • Europe (18.1%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USA (75.2%) • Canada (15.5%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USA (82.3%)
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Least educated • 66.6% Bachelors degree or above 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle educated • 77.5% Bachelors degree or above 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most educated • 83.1% Bachelors degree or above
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed full-time (31.9%) • Part-time (12.5%) • Not employed (15.3%) • Self-employed (20.8%) • Student (12.5%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed full-time (51.2%) • Retired (18.6%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed full-time (50.0%) • Homemaker (6.9%)
Income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <10,000–50,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30,000–100,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100,000–>140,000
Party composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most likely: Alone • More likely: Alone or organised group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most likely: Spouse • More likely: Spouse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most likely: Spouse • More likely: Family (adult & children) and friends
Trip length	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • >15 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8–11 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4–7 days
Ecolodge stay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2–3 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4–5 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3–4 days
Other Accommodations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most likely: Guest House • More Likely: Friends and relatives, campsite, private cottage, local village 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most likely: Hotel/motel/resort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most likely: Hotel/motel/resort • More likely: Cruise ship, sailboat, time-share, condominium
Travel motive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet people with similar interests • Visiting friends and relatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barrier reefs • Mayan archeological sites • Warm climate • Being together as a family • Visiting friends and relatives • Seeing as much as possible • Being physically active 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being together as a family
Importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top: Value for money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top: Value for money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top: Quality of environment
Past experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes (51.5%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No (57.4%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes (59.7%)
Weaver's classification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft

highest by all groups. This indicates that ecolodge patrons, regardless of their price category, were travelling for similar reasons. The study found an identical ranking of the top two attraction motives as found in Eagles' (1992) study of three Canadian ecotourist populations.

This research found that the clients of the Belizean ecolodges had some demographic characteristics similar to those of ecotourists, as found in other studies. They were middle-aged, highly educated, employed, with high levels of income. Also, there was similarity of top-ranked travel attraction and social motives to a 1992 study of Canadian ecotourists travelling domestically and internationally. When utilising Ballantine and Eagles' (1994) definitional criteria of ecotourists (highly ranked attraction motive of wilderness/undisturbed nature, highly ranked social motive of learning about nature and one-third of the travel time in ecotourism), and the similarities found between ecolodge patrons and ecotourists, these ecolodge patrons can be defined as ecotourists.

This study found utilisation of budget, mid-priced and luxury types of accommodation, thus contradicting other studies that suggested the majority of ecotourists prefer the mid-range level of accommodations (HLA & ARA Consulting, 1995; Pearce & Wilson, 1995).

The ecolodge phenomenon is growing and with growth comes increased competition. One response to this competition is an increase in specialisation and product differentiation. However, ecolodge marketing is challenging because ecolodge branding is an immature phenomenon, and nature tourists place low importance on reputation.

The hotel industry has conducted many studies examining the characteristics of guests staying at different 'star' rated hotels. However, since the ecolodge industry is relatively new, and does not have universally rated ranking systems, there is confusion in the market on how ecolodge patrons could assess value, that is, services provided according to different prices charged. This study shows that there are differences amongst the social characteristics and travel motives of the clients who chose the three price levels of ecolodges. This information could be used to develop a star system, or more likely a green leaf system, to assist both suppliers and clients in better organising this developing accommodation phenomenon.

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Note

1. Comparison to literature needed. Several studies found that ecotourists have higher incomes; however, I am not sure that fits with our findings (HLA & ARA, 1995; Meric & Hunt, 1998; Wight, 1996).

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