ENHANCING MARINE INTERPRETATION THROUGH BETTER UNDERSTANDING VISITORS

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Abstract: According to Lane (1991) ecologically sustainable tourism is tourism that provides visitors to a destination with "an in-depth understanding and knowledge of the area, its landscapes and peoples" (p. 2). Such an understanding should result in tourists who are concerned about and protective of the destination area. Hall and McArthur (1993) make a similar argument.

We argue that by providing high-quality experiences which satisfy visitor expectations, motivations, and needs, we can modify and influence the behaviour of visitors in such a way as to ensure that the values of the heritage resource are maintained (Hall and McArthur, 1993, p. 13).

This quote suggests at least two ways in which interpretation contributes to visitor management. The first is the encouragement of positive conservation attitudes which should result in support for management activities and a desire to behave in ways which will minimize impacts. Interpretation also provides the information on appropriate behaviours and can ease congestion and assist in the management of use density by providing information on alternative sites and activities. The second important function of interpretation referred to in the quote is the enhancement of visitor experiences. For managers enhanced experiences contribute to conservation support, while for tourism operators enhanced experiences are central to the success of their product. Clearly there is value in improving the quality of interpretation for both managers and tour operators in coastal and marine settings.

This paper provides a review of key principles for ensuring effective interpretation derived from research and theory in persuasive communication and tourism. The aim is to provide background information for a workshop on designing marine interpretation.

Keywords: interpretation, mindfulness, sustainable tourism

Introduction

Tourism has attracted much criticism, mostly concerned with the negative consequences of tourism for the places and people who act as hosts. Jafari (1990) in his history of research into tourism notes that the predominance of a "reactionary platform" which refers to a large and vocal group of writers and researchers who have focused attention on the negative social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts of tourism. This criticism of tourism has not come only from within the world of academic researchers and cultural commentators but also from communities, various interest groups within communities and from the world of government and policy makers. The results for travelers have ranged from suffering the hostility of angry residents to the loss of opportunities when communities chose not to develop facilities or infrastructure to allow tourism.

Certainly the present tourism world, like the rest of the worlds in which we live, is changing at an ever accelerating pace. More and more people can and do travel including large numbers of people from the rapidly developing Asia Pacific rim region. Further, all travelers are becoming more sophisticated, older, wiser, stronger and more concerned with travel as an integral part of their lives. In more technical terms we see increasing differentiation in travelers, more and varied market segments and a move away from mass tourism back to independent, individual travelers. Urry (1995) outlines this change in a broader social context and suggests that correspondingly there is a greater differentiation of travel products. There are also new frontiers, new places to travel with the opening of Eastern Europe and the development of tourism in more remote and harsh places such as Antarctica. Although we should note that as some places become more open to travel others are closed. Some of these places are closed because of hostility, such as in the Middle East, but others have been closed, or restricted, because of fears of destruction by tourism.

In addition to new travelers and new places to travel there are also new ways to travel. Technology has had a remarkable impact on tourism, allowing for easier and more interesting transport options and for development in a variety of places. Technology though can also work against tourism offering better leisure experiences that people can have in their own homes. This new reality, virtual reality, could give the phrase arm chair traveler a whole new meaning (Shafer and Moeller, 1989). Indeed in a popular Arnold Schwarzenegger film, Total Recall, the plot revolves around the ability to buy a holiday experience which is implanted in your brain. In this Total Recall vision of the future travelers can go nowhere to have great experiences. For those of us who earn our living from tourism, it was heartening to note, that these implanted holidays had the potential to go horribly wrong!

What then is the essential element in tourism? The answer is a simple one—we can’t have tourism without an experience. Even in the Total Recall world the traveler bought an experience. The challenge for marine tourism is to ensure that travel experiences offered are rewarding and sustainable for both the destination and its guests. The core of this paper will be concerned with proposing some principles for ensuring that the marine tourism industry of the future has these rewarding and sustainable travel experiences. In particular the paper will discuss key
principles for making the travel experience rewarding for visitors through the provision of effective interpretation.

Creating Mindful Marine Visitors

To be successful sustainable travel experiences must produce visitors who are mindful of where they are and what they are doing. The use of the word mindful is a deliberate one as this label has been used by Ellen Langer (1989), professor of psychology at Harvard University, in a number of settings to propose a series of principles for the improvement of human experience. This work begins with the assumption that in any given situation humans can be either mindful or mindless. Mindless individuals operate according to pre-existing routines and pay only minimal attention to the world around them. A classic example of mindless behaviour is that of colleague who drives the same route everyday to his office. One day he is asked to take his infant son to daycare on his way to work. He leaves home happily, arrives at his office, reaches into the back of the car for his briefcase and comes face to face with his son, still in the car. Once he started on the routine drive to work he forgot to change the pattern and go to the child care centre. A tourism example is that of travelers on an organized two-week guided tour of Europe. Everyday has the same routine: breakfast, on the bus, drive to a church or museum, short visit back on the bus. After a few days the participants quickly learn the routine and find it difficult to remember where they are, where they’ve been or what they’ve seen. Langer has demonstrated that people can act mindlessly in all spheres of life including in business, in health care, and in education. The contrasting state of mindfulness is based on people developing their own routines for behavior, paying attention to the world around them and learning from their experiences.

Table 1 summarises the key features of this mindfulness/mindlessness distinction. This table lists the conditions that contribute to mindlessness including lack of control, routine and repetition, and the dismissal of an activity or information as irrelevant or unimportant. The outcomes of mindlessness are also listed and these include poor memory of events, limited ability to respond to problems, and feelings of helplessness and dissatisfaction. Mindful people, however, are open to learning and have good recall of places and events, they are able to anticipate problems and change their behavior to respond to the requirements of the setting, they feel in control and thus are more likely to be happy and satisfied with their experiences and to gain a feeling of personal achievement.

Interpretation Principles to Encourage Mindfulness

So how can we ensure that marine interpretation encourages mindfulness? The next step then is to consider some principles to help those who manage destinations and their attractions in this task of creating mindful activities for guests. The five key elements necessary for a mindful experience are variety, control, personal relevance, interaction or participation and clear structures for information (Moscardo, 1996).

Variety

In a study of visitors to Singapore, Lew (1987) found that what visitors actually did was often not well matched with what they wanted or expected to do. He further demonstrated that this mismatch was correlated with dissatisfaction with the travel experience. This story clearly warns us not to mistake quantity with quality. Lew’s results also highlight the point that visitors to a region can only choose from the activities that are available. Marine tourism managers and operators need to carefully consider the range and quality of the activities that they make available for their guests. Destinations must provide a variety of activities from which guests can choose. Activities can be varied according to:

- where they are conducted (interpretive talks on the boat are very different than those given on the beach),
- when they are conducted (beach walks at night are very different to those conducted in the day),
- the level of physical effort required,
- the level of mental effort required (an interactive activity where visitors have to answer questions is a different experience to sitting listening to a marine biology talk),
- who they are with, and
- the themes they pursue (a fishy, glass bottom boat tour of a reef is different to a tour of the same area which concentrates on corals and sponges).

These are just a few of the dimensions that can be varied to provide a range of interpretive activities. Individual activities also need to provide variety and this can be provided using many of the same dimensions listed above. A guide in charge of a beach tour can change the pace of the tour, ask questions instead of only answering them, focus the tour on different features of the beach, or focus on different members of the group. The guide could get the group to do things, touch things, smell things, as well as look at things.

Control

To make the most of the varied and quality activities that a destination can offer the guest has to know what the
activities are and how to get to them. Weary travelers are not mindful travelers and nothing is more tiring than being lost or spending large amounts of time seeking basic information. Tourists need good information and good maps. Questions that need to be asked include, is there are a uniform system of signs, who monitors the information given to guests, and how easy is it to find out if baby would be better in a backpack or stroller for a reef trip? Information gives guests the power to exercise choice and control.

Personal Relevance

To provide activities which guests will see as personally relevant requires action on several fronts. In the first instance we must better understand guests and their goals and motives and this means high quality, systematic and on-going market research into visitors. It is not good enough to simply monitor numbers of visitors, where they are from and where they go. It is essential to know why they have come and what they are seeking. Tourists come to destinations with different motives or goals for their travel experience. Some may wish to enjoy time with their families, while others may see their travel as providing a sense of self development and achievement. A better understanding of visitor motives in general will assist greatly in the design and development of interpretive activities. The provision of a wide variety of activities is another way to encourage personal relevance as it allows visitors to find activities which match their personal interests.

Interaction/Participation

Opportunities for interaction or participation also encourage visitors to be mindful. Getting involved in an activity, rather than observing someone else, encourages a sense of control as most activities require decisions and choices. Getting involved can also build personal connections. Marine interpreters can encourage visitor participation in a number of ways. They can ask the visitors questions and give them the clues to help them find the answers. Visitors can be asked to assist in the preparation of interpretive activities or in aspects of marine research. Interactive marine interpretation can also be developed with the assistance of computer technology. Interactive marine information programs allow visitors to pursue their own interests. Participation can also be done with the simplest of tools. A popular exhibit in an Australian Maritime museum consists of a pin board, desk, some note paper and a sign asking visitor to write their experiences of being seasick. This simple idea is built upon personal experience and the exhibit is virtually recreated every day by the visitors. The key to interaction is allowing the visitors to have some input into the interpretive activity.

Clear, Organised Structures

Even the most mindful marine visitor will not be able to gain an understanding of their environment if they cannot understand the information being provided. Much research evidence supports the need to have a clear structure or organisation to the information presented (Moscardo, 1996). Using themes and telling stories are much more effective than listing facts. Anecdotes work better than abstract principles and metaphors and analogies work better than statistics. Rand (1990) provides us with some examples of metaphors and analogies for marine interpretation including “Like vultures, scavenging hagfish keep order on the floor” and “Orcas are the wolves of the sea.” Anecdotes, metaphors and stories bring the information back to the personal experience of the visitor. According to Wurman,

Facts are only meaningful when they relate to a concept that you can grasp. If I say an acre is 43,560 square feet, that is factual, but it doesn’t tell you what an acre is. On the other hand, if I tell you that an acre is about the size of an American football field without the end zones, it is not as accurate, but I have made it understandable. (1989: 172)

Summary

Marine interpreters can play a critical role in achieving sustainability. Interpretation provides an opportunity “to make people aware of the importance of building bonds between nature and culture, between the past and the future, and between different cultures” (von Droste Silk and Rossler 1992). For many people the interpretation they encounter when they are at leisure may offer their only opportunity to learn about their bonds to their environment, history and culture. Just as sustainability is concerned with the quality of life on this planet, so too should marine interpreters be concerned with the quality of the experiences they provide.

References


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WORKSHOP ON MARINE TOURISM AND MARINE PROTECTED AREAS: UNDERSTANDING THE LINKAGE AND OPTIMISING THE BENEFITS

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Abstract: not available

Background

IUCN, The World Conservation Union, is the oldest international conservation organization (established 1948) and is a unique membership union of over 70 governments, 120 government agencies and 600 NGOs from around the world. In addition, IUCN consists of a global system of offices and programs and a series of global conservation networks involving thousands of experts in the IUCN Commissions, e.g., on species survival and on protected areas.

The Marine and Coastal Programme of IUCN provides leadership for the World Conservation Union on marine and coastal issues by serving as a focal point and hub for the Union on marine and coastal issues, by catalyzing interaction and coordination on marine and coastal issues, and by operationalizing the IUCN role on marine and coastal issues. The conservation of the marine and coastal environment through sustainable development in partnership with the private sector is one of the priority themes for the IUCN Marine and Coastal Programme and the tourism sector is a primary focus of this effort.

The Marine and Coastal Programme of IUCN is beginning a project which seeks to document and demonstrate the links between marine tourism and marine biodiversity conservation, especially the linkage between marine tourism and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). The project will compile case studies, distill out the lessons learned and the approaches which optimise the benefits of the interaction of marine tourism and marine biodiversity conservation. This information will be compiled and put to work in demonstration projects as a means to foster and expand the knowledge and experience in linking marine tourism and marine biodiversity conservation for the benefit of both. The geographic and thematic focus project will be on several developing country areas, especially those with coral reefs and small islands.

CMT '96 Workshop Purpose

The Marine and Coastal Programme of IUCN convened an informal Workshop on Marine Tourism and Marine Protected Areas at CMT '96 in order to assist with the development of global efforts towards the conservation of marine biodiversity in partnership with the tourism sector. The specific aims of the workshop were:

To initiate development of an informal network on the links between marine tourism and marine biodiversity conservation which involves both the tourism industry and conservation sectors.

To begin to identify the most useful outputs of the project by considering the following kinds of questions:

- What are the critical issues of the linkage between tourism and MPAs for the various parties, i.e., the tourism industry, local communities, and MPA planners/managers?
- What kind of information and materials would best assist these groups to optimise the benefits and minimise the problems of this interaction?
- How can tourism contribute to the sustainability of MPAs (financial and ecological) and vice-versa?
- Are there examples of beneficial interaction, or of non-beneficial interaction, between marine tourism and marine biodiversity conservation which would serve as good case studies?
- Is it more important to focus on the interaction between marine tourism and marine biodiversity conservation inside MPAs or outside MPAs?

Results of Workshop Discussions

Overview

The three-hour workshop was attended by over 50 participants of the CMT conference. After an introduction to the IUCN Marine and Coastal Programme and the upcoming project on tourism and Marine Protected Areas, the bulk of the workshop time was spent identifying key issues within the nexus of MPAs and tourism and possible approaches to addressing these issues. Below is a synthesis of the discussions.

Economic Aspects of MPAs and the Link Between MPAs and Tourism

The need to understand the economic aspects of the MPA and tourism linkage was identified as particularly important as a basis for optimising the interaction. The primary issues discussed were the need to understand:

- the added value that legal conservation status gives to an area,
• the gains and losses among various stakeholders resulting from the MPA and the tourism,
• who receives the gains and losses and what is the overall net benefit,
• how assets are distributed or re-distributed among stakeholders, and
• how stakeholders that gain can contribute towards supporting the MPA, e.g., training of park personnel.

However it was noted that economic and environmental analysis must be appropriate to the local context and that in general there was a need for greater economic literacy and understanding of economic analysis techniques amongst those dealing with MPAs.

MPA/Tourism Design and Planning

The need to evaluate whether tourism is appropriate in each MPA was stressed, i.e., to determine whether tourism was a legitimate, priority activity which was compatible with the other values of the MPA. This depends to a large extent on the kinds of MPA, the kind of tourism and interactions involved. If tourism was to be integrated into the design and plans for an MPA, then serious planning, which involved all stakeholders was required. When planning for tourism operations in relation to MPAs, it was noted that it is critical to fully consider the social, cultural, economic, and other trade-offs that will result and that this need to be based on a full understanding of how tourism works in general and in the specific context under evaluation.

Zoning is a particularly important tourism management planning tool, e.g., buffer zones to focus tourism away from core biodiversity areas, with a variety of variables in zoning that create options for MPA design and planning, e.g., zone separation, number of zone types, degrees of use in each zone. It is important that the target of the tourist activities is clear, e.g., recreational divers, beach tourists, etc. Based on this, an understanding of potential tourism impacts and management planning needs can be developed and to be applied to each MPA, perhaps in relation to existing MPA classifications by IUCN.

MPA/Tourism Management and Operations

A critical need was identified for a process to identify and work with local stakeholders, including local tourist operators, to ensure community involvement in management and operations. On a functional level, the need is for the MPA managers to get to know the tourist operators, work directly with them and integrate them into the MPA management. In this respect, it is important to know who the management bodies and what the management jurisdictions are that influence the tourism sector in that location. An important issue is also the fact that the MPA is, or often becomes, a tourism attraction. This creates a challenge for managing the protected area values, but also an opportunity and mechanism for managing existing tourism in the area inside and outside the MPA. There may be a need to identify alternatives or set up additional attractions to reduce pressure on the MPA itself when the MPA is created or when pressure become to great. Overall, this calls for appropriate decision making tools for planning and operations, tools which should be practical and locally applicable. Management oriented research and monitoring is crucial to understanding some of these issues and providing options and management information, e.g., by monitoring effects of tourism on resources.

Communications and Information

There is a need to ensure that existing information is known, circulated and used. However, this much be done in the context of optimising the use of existing networks, information sources and communications channels. There are numerous global, regional and national groups relevant to marine tourism and conservation, e.g., World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC), The Ecotourism Society, Caribbean Tourism Association (CTA). There are numerous major sources of information on tourism information, e.g., University of Hawaii Travel Industry Management library. It would be useful to develop and circulate an ongoing bibliography on marine tourism and conservation. In particular, the need for case histories of MPAs and MPA systems which successfully integrate tourism was noted. There are several communications networks to facilitate interaction and dialogue on marine tourism and conservation, e.g., T3-Net, the proposed Coastal Marine Tourism list server.

Workshop Outputs and Suggestions

Overall Workshop Outputs

• The initial identification of critical issues which need to be addressed regarding the links between tourism and MPAs and marine biodiversity conservation.
• The beginning of the development of a network of professionals on the links between tourism and MPAs and marine biodiversity conservation.

Workshop Suggestions

The workshop suggested that IUCN would be well placed to develop a Network on the links between tourism and marine biodiversity conservation and facilitate interaction and communications of Network members. In particular, IUCN could perhaps serve as a clearinghouse for information and facilitate or undertaken development of a bibliography on these issues and that interested individuals could send relevant documents to IUCN to begin a bibliographic database.