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Robert D. Mackoy

*Butler University*, [rmackoy@butler.edu](mailto:rmackoy@butler.edu)

Gregory E. Osland

*Butler University*, [gosland@butler.edu](mailto:gosland@butler.edu)

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# Lodge Selection and Satisfaction: Attributes valued by ecotourists

**Robert D. Mackoy  
and  
Gregory E. Osland**

## **Abstract**

*Although the ecotourism literature is growing rapidly, few researchers have systematically examined how ecotourists select and evaluate lodging alternatives.*

*Understanding lodging attributes of importance to ecotourists is the first step in modelling lodge selection and satisfaction processes of interest to both managers and researchers. We report on the results of two studies designed to gather such attributes. Study 1 uses e-mail survey responses from dedicated birders, while Study 2 uses data from on-site interviews with visitors at ecolodges in Mexico, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. The two most-commonly mentioned attributes in both studies were "proximity to natural areas" and "cost." These and numerous other attributes are described. We close by discussing implications of our findings and offering suggestions for future research.*

*Dr. Robert D. Mackoy is Associate Professor of Marketing, College of Business Administration, Butler University, Indianapolis, USA.  
Dr. Gregory E. Osland is Associate Professor of Marketing and International Management, College of Business Administration, Butler University Indianapolis, USA.*

Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing categories of international tourism, attracting the attention of governments, the tourism industry, and the popular press. At the same time, there has been a rise in the number of academic articles and new journals devoted to ecotourism. Much of the academic emphasis to date has been on defining the term "ecotourism," and discussing the topic's domain, philosophical underpinnings, economic and social impacts, and policy implications (Boo, 1990; Fennell, 1999; Sirakaya & Sasidharan, 1999). More recently, researchers have begun to investigate ecotourists themselves, identifying their demographic, psychographic, motivational, and value-related characteristics. Some have focused on information sources used during trip planning, while others have used this information to discover relevant segments or "clusters" of ecotourists (Keng & Cheng, 1999; Weaver & Lawton, 2002). Ecotourist spending habits and specific trip behaviours also have been documented (Tian-Cole, Crompton & Wilson, 2002).

Few studies, however, have focused on the infrastructure necessary to support ecotourism, such as transportation and ecolodges. These infrastructure factors are critical to the continued growth and ultimate success of the industry. Yet, given the generally agreed-upon goals of ecotourism, traditional mass consumption-oriented ideals of infrastructure development may not be applicable. For example, Palacio and McCool (1997) note that ecotourists require

*somewhat different facilities because of their different rates of recreation activity participation... (p. 241).*

Likewise, although ecotourists stay in a variety of lodging types, ecolodges are specifically designed to attract and serve ecotourists. Weaver and Lawton (2002) even state that

*...ecolodges are probably the most distinctive component of the ecotourism industry and one that most attempts to embody the criteria and ideals of the sector... (p. 271).*

Therefore, new models need to be constructed to help infrastructure managers design and develop infrastructure elements and business strategies which are consistent with the goals of ecotourism and those willing to invest in the effort. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the development of such models for researchers and ecolodge managers by identifying the specific attributes of lodging alternatives which ecotourists value and upon which their ultimate satisfaction is based. Although ecotourists are the

information, managers must rely on guess-work.

This paper is organised as follows. First, we briefly review relevant literature and discuss the role of attributes in relevant consumer models. Next, an overview of two studies is presented. Then, detailed descriptions of each study, including methods and results, are provided. Finally, we discuss the results and their implications for future work.

### **Literature review**

Although previous researchers have not focused on lodging attributes important to ecotourists, many have addressed issues which are relevant to this topic. A few studies have dealt

lodging desires of ecotourists (Boo, 1990), though little empirical evidence exists to address this issue. In one study (Meric & Hunt, 1998), ecotourist accommodation preferences were for cabins (61%), campgrounds (55%), hotels/motels (44%), and bed-and-breakfast inns (43%). Eagles (1992) found that Canadian ecotourists travelling in groups were more likely to be motivated by budget accommodations than were the general population of Canadian tourists. Haig and McIntyre (2002) found that "access to place" was perceived as the most important advantage of participation in "commercially organized ecotourism" tours which included overnight stays in ecolodges.

Some have commented on the apparent inconsistency between the ecotourists' higher mean income and their desire to lodge inexpensively (Eagles, 1992; Ross, 1992). However, this tendency appears not to be universal among ecotourists (Silverberg, Backman & Backman, 1994). To our knowledge, no one has addressed explicitly the relationship between the perceived costs of lodging and other lodging attributes important to ecotourists.

While lodging-specific attributes have not been studied, the importance of attributes in other tourism contexts has been recognised. Examples of attribute-specific models of service quality (Saunders & Graham, 1992), satisfaction (Heide, Gronhaug & Engset, 1999), or both (Ekinci, 2002; Oh, 1999) appear in the hospitality literature. In fact, Tian-Cole, Crompton and Wilson (2002) have used attribute-level data to model the relationship between service quality and satisfaction within an ecotourism context, though they did not include lodging attributes in their analysis. Diamantis (1998) has attempted to construct means-end chains linking ecotourist values with their associated

### **The attributes of ecolodges valued by ecotourists are an important organiser of ecotourism infrastructure research.**

focus of much recent inquiry, no systematic approach to uncovering salient attributes of their lodging preferences has appeared in the literature. The dearth of attribute-specific research on ecotourists has implications for both academic researchers and managers. For the former, pre-choice process models, both compensatory and noncompensatory, as well as attitude models are built on some understanding of salient attributes. Likewise, most post-choice process models, such as satisfaction formation and judgments of perceived quality, rely on identified attributes of importance to consumers. For the latter, knowledge of salient attributes, their relative importance and their interrelationships, allow managers to design products and services which will be attractive to and which will ultimately satisfy consumers' needs and wants. Without such

explicitly with overnight lodgers in or near natural areas. Most notably, articles have appeared on guests at state park inns (Gladwell, 1990), ecolodges in Australia (Weaver & Lawton, 2002), and ecotourists visiting North Carolina (Meric & Hunt, 1998). Gladwell (1990) examined psychographic, information source, and sociodemographic characteristics of overnight guests at Indiana state park inns. She identified three clusters based on an analysis of the psychographic data: knowledgeable travellers, budget-conscious travellers, and travel planners. Although she explicitly recognised the need of managers to market to potential customers, she did not attempt to identify the attributes of state park inns which appealed to the guests, choosing instead to focus on identifying different groups of consumers. There has also been some speculation about the

attributes and consequences, again, though, without a lodging focus. Eugenio-Martin developed a framework to analyse the relative importance of various attributes tourists use when choosing destinations (Eugenio-Martin, 2003). Finally, most researchers studying destination image have relied on attribute-specific methodologies (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). The role of attributes in consumer modelling is discussed below.

Just as it is important to differentiate between those who have and have not visited a tourism destination when one is analysing destination "image" (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003), it is important to make a similar distinction when analysing the relative importance of lodging

trips are planned logically has a large impact on choosing among lodging alternatives, and should therefore also affect the marketing decisions of lodging managers.

### **Attributes in consumer-oriented models**

Throughout this paper, the term "model" is used in its most general sense to refer to any statement about the relationships among two or more constructs. Thus, a model may range from purely conceptual to highly quantitative, from simple to complex. Models are representations of reality which are useful to both managers and researchers seeking to understand potentially causal relationships.

examined from the perspective of the ecotourist if one wants to understand how ecotourists make decisions. Management expertise, or experience related to other types of tourists, though valuable for some purposes, cannot substitute for knowledge gained directly from ecotourists using good qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. It is generally considered good practice to uncover salient attributes using open-ended questions and qualitative methodologies first, though it is common for modelers to move too quickly to structured, quantitative methods. For example, such shortcomings of highly structured research in a tourism context are noted by Echtner and Ritchie (2003):

*...unless considerable effort is expended in the initial design stages, attribute lists may be incomplete.... Ideally, to combat this problem, fairly extensive research should be conducted in the primary stages of scale construction ...only a few of the researchers to date...have used consumers (and even then only to a limited extent) to identify and generate the lists of destination image attributes (p. 46).*

### **Models of attributes which rely on pre-specified lists may underestimate the range of important issues which affect lodging choice.**

attributes. For example, one criticism of traditional satisfaction models is that expectations regarding the attributes of new or previously inexperienced services are not meaningful (Halstead, Harman & Schmidt, 1994), or that some key attributes may only become salient during the experience. In either case, models which rely on pre-specified attributes are likely to lack validity. The study reported here collects data both from people actually experiencing ecolodges, as well as from people who are potential users.

One other topic related to ecotourists' lodging choices is how they plan their trips. The importance of "planning orientation" has long been recognised as an important variable in classifying vacation consumers (Gladwell, 1990; Keng & Cheng, 1999; Perreault, Darden & Darden, 1977). When and how

Virtually all models of consumer decision-making and attitudes are based upon the notion of salient attributes, i.e., those attributes of the specific target service or product that are important to the individual consumer. Standard compensatory choice (decision) models and multi-attribute attitude models, in which consumers implicitly make trade-offs among salient attributes, yield overall scores which are based on the summation of individual attribute-level scores. Non-compensatory decision models utilise individual attribute level ratings to make comparisons among choice alternatives. Therefore, an understanding of how ecotourists select among specific lodging alternatives depends on developing an understanding of the attributes that are relevant to ecotourists.

Attributes must be identified and

Failure to correctly identify attributes results in models that are seriously flawed and that ultimately yield ineffective strategies. Such mis-specified models will lack explanatory and predictive ability. If during model development, a respondent is presented with a reasonable but incomplete list of potential attributes, neither the respondent nor the modeler will be aware there is a problem. A model developed using an incomplete list of attributes will still provide some explanatory power, but the relative strength of each attribute will be mis-specified.

### **General method**

Two studies were conducted to

determine the lodging attributes important to ecotourists. Given that those who are actually on an ecotourism trip may focus on different attributes than those thinking about or planning such a trip, two separate studies were conducted. Study 1 addressed ecotourists who were at home, thinking about or planning a trip, while Study 2 addressed ecotourists actually in the context of an ecotourism trip.

The two studies were primarily exploratory, qualitative efforts which utilised open-ended questions. This type of research design is appropriate during early stages of research when investigators are (1) exploring the subject domain, (2) unsure about the vocabulary and conceptualisations of key populations, and (3) beginning to develop key research questions to be addressed in valid quantitative work (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Such qualitative work has contributed to tourism research over the past 30 years, and in fact appears to be increasingly common in leading tourism journals over the past 15 years (Riley & Love, 2000).

Samples in each of these studies may be categorised as convenience samples, and we can make no formal claims regarding the degree to which they are or are not representative of the population of ecotourists. However, during the exploratory stages of research, the goal is to understand the relevant range of concepts, vocabulary, and concerns rather than to determine their relative frequencies in the population. For this purpose, convenience sampling is an acceptable means of selecting respondents.

It appears that, broadly speaking, ecotourists fall into one of two categories: independent travellers or group travellers. The planning involved in an ecotourism trip may be involved and lengthy, and the decision to travel with a group may be made at any point in the process. Generally, once

the decision to travel as part of a group is made, subsequent decisions are dominated by the tour operator. While it may be true that group travellers do not make decisions about specific lodging options, lodging attributes still may be important to group travellers, especially during satisfaction formation. Therefore, both independent and group travellers are included in these studies.

Most of the respondents in both studies could be called avid birders, and thus in terms of evolving taxonomies of ecotourists, are best classified as "dedicated ecotourists" (Weaver & Lawton, 2002). Dedicated ecotourists have been characterised as travelling specifically and primarily to engage in sustainable, nature-based tourism. While different researchers have used different terms to distinguish between "degrees" of ecotourism activity and commitment, many claim that such a distinction is useful. For example, Palacio and McCool (1997) label "casual ecotourists" as "comfortable naturalists," and "dedicated ecotourists" simply as "ecotourists." They base this distinction largely on the latter group's high rating of "understanding the natural world," "learning more about nature," and "being in a natural setting" as expected benefits of their trip to Belize. Managerially-oriented authors, too, make similar distinctions. For example, Pratt (2002), distinguishes between the comfort level demands of "hard" versus "soft" ecotourism clients (p. 130). Though the formal methods of arriving at such classifications were not applied here, we would tend to agree that our respondents exhibited several of these characteristics. In fact, in Study 1, respondents were selected from the membership listing of the American Birding Association, an organisation of dedicated birders.

Finally, note that Study 1 focuses

on individuals at what may be considered a pre-consumption context, while respondents in Study 2 are in a post-choice context. Note also that these distinctions are at least somewhat artificial, as someone sitting at home contemplating an ecotourism trip may consider attributes which are salient because of previous experiences (i.e., post-consumption). Likewise, someone actually on a trip may recall salient pre-choice attributes when asked to reflect on ecotourism attributes. The use of two different methodologies capturing the thoughts of ecotourists at two points in time enhances the likelihood that the full range of attributes will be discovered (Hyde & Lawson, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Given that attribute-specific models are utilised in both contexts, together these studies provide a complete, though preliminary, picture of lodging attributes relevant to dedicated ecotourists.

## **Study 1**

### *Method*

The sample for Study 1 was drawn from the membership roster of the American Birding Association (ABA). The ABA has a membership of about 22,000; it targets field birders and seeks to increase their knowledge, skills, and enjoyment of birding (American Birding Association, 2003). Their members can be categorised as "dedicated ecotourists." This is consistent with the findings of Weaver and Lawton (2002) who determined that their "harder" ecotourist cluster was more likely to bird watch than were either of the other clusters they identified, and with other studies finding that birding is the most frequent ecotourism activity (Cordell, Herbert, & Pandolfi, 1999; Sekercioglu, 2003).

The authors sent e-mail messages to 909 members of the American Birding Association (ABA) for

whom e-mail addresses were available and who resided in the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, New Jersey, and Florida. Based on anecdotal evidence and the experience of one of the coauthors, we believed birders from these states were more likely to travel outside their local area to bird. In addition, these states are dispersed geographically across the United States. Given that the qualitative research design called for a convenience sample, our sampling methodology appears to be appropriate.

The e-mail message, in part, asked the following:

*When you travel to a distant birding destination, what are some of the factors you consider as you make your choice of lodging? Please list as many factors as you can think of.*

The e-mails were sent out during a 4-day period in May of 2001, and responses were received over the next six weeks. No follow-up e-mails were distributed. In all, 107 responded to the e-mail request. Of these, 93 provided at least one attribute; the remainder either did not take overnight birding trips or stated they could not contribute to our research question.

Given the open-ended nature of the question posed, responses varied widely. Some simply listed the attributes while others provided explanations of the attributes, or even the reasoning behind each attribute. Some responses were only a line or two long while others were multiple pages of single-spaced text. A standard content analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1989) was used to analyse responses and determine absolute frequencies. Attributes were identified and coded independently by two trained coders. These coders agreed on the coding of 89% of the attributes identified. Disagreements were resolved by the lead author.

## Results

Over 50 attributes were identified by respondents, while twenty-six of these unique attributes were mentioned by at least two people each. The complete list of these multiple-mention attributes, along with the frequency with which each was mentioned, appears in Table 1. The relative frequencies are provided for comparison with Study 2 and are not meant to reflect statistically valid estimates of the importance of attributes among the population of dedicated ecotourists.

Note that "proximity to birds" and "cost" were by far the two most-frequently mentioned attributes considered by our sample. The next four attributes - "food nearby," "clean," "safe," and "good guides" - were each mentioned by between one-fifth and one-third of our sample. The remaining attributes, each

mentioned by 15% or fewer of our sample, are shown in the table. However, this simple listing, while interesting, hides the complexity and variance in the qualitative data. Below we present some relevant results for selected attributes to provide a sense of the variety and richness contained in verbatim quotes of our respondents.

### \* Attributes in general

Several respondents indicated that their personal lodging requirements are the same regardless of the time frame or destination country. The following quote is fairly typical:

*Its [sic] been about six years since I was in Mexico but the criteria for lodging remains the same everywhere.*

Numerous other respondents made similar comments regarding the generalisability of

**Table 1: Attributes Considered when Selecting an Ec lodge.  
(Study 1: Internet Survey)**

Attribute	Percentage of Those Responding*
Near birds/Location	70% (75)
Reasonable/Low Cost	55% (59)
- low price	18% (19)
- good value	15% (16)
Food nearby	32% (34)
Clean	30% (32)
Safe	23% (25)
Good Guide/Staff	23% (25)
Primitive OK	15% (16)
Comfort	14% (15)
Early Breakfast	15% (16)
Bed	13% (14)
Natural Setting Around Lodge	13% (14)
Bath	12% (13)
Good Reputation/Recommendation	12% (13)
Potable water	11% (12)
Not noisy	10% (11)
Birders Welcome Attitude	9% (10)
Climate Control	7% (7)
Hot shower	6% (6)
Motor Home	4% (4)
Electricity	4% (4)
Kitchen	3% (3)
Laundry	3% (3)
Refrigerator	3% (3)
Phone/TV/Radio	3% (3)
Shopping	2% (2)
Pool	2% (2)
<b>(* Base: 107)</b>	

their attribute preferences. Thus, it appears that for many individuals, the list of important lodging attributes is relatively constant over time and in different contexts.

The major exception to the notion of a stable list of attributes appears to be when a dedicated birder is travelling with others who may be less interested in birding. Many noted or implied that requirements are different when travelling with a nonbirder. In those cases, respondents noted that the immediate area needs to offer attractions such as a beach or shopping opportunities as well as proximity to birding.

*Sometimes, my family travels with me and not all of them are birders. Then I must have close access to pools, museums and beaches etc. to keep them happy.*

#### \* Proximity to birds

The most common attribute, and the one identified as most important by a plurality of respondents, is proximity to birds:

*When I stay at a destination, I look for a comfortable place where I can walk immediately into forest or jungle. I don't want to drive several hours.*

Some noted that the lodge does not need to be in or near the primary birding area of the region, but that some natural area immediately around the lodge is enough:

*Pleasant surroundings. A big plus for those with gardens, feeders, ponds, trails, or otherwise nice birding areas in the premises.*

*I always like the places I stay to have some good birding at or very nearby the hotel, so that if I wish to bird during quiet time, I can do so on my own.*

Apparently, these respondents

want to be able to bird from the moment they walk out the door. Some even mentioned their desire to bird around the lodge property just before or after meals or when their non-birding partner is reading or resting.

#### \* Price

Probably the most complexity hidden in the list of attributes is associated with "cost." Nearly 55% mentioned "price" as an attribute; over two-thirds of these chose to elaborate on their response, enabling the researchers to identify two distinct price-sensitive groups. Some (18%) of our respondents seemed to be price-sensitive in a traditional sense; that is, they seemed to prefer not spending more than is necessary due to limited financial resources or personal preference:

*I am a graduate student and of necessity travel cheaply.*

However, some were very explicit that their preference for low cost lodging was due to the fact that they spent very little time in their accommodation:

*...I use the Lonely Planet Guides and stay in very cheap places because I spend so little time in the room.*

A distinctly different group of respondents (15%) mentioned "price" or "cost" in the context of seeking value; that is, these people are conscious of price but are willing to pay more if they think it is "worth it."

*Price is always a factor, but I will pay for convenience and a few amenities (hot showers, first floor room, drive-up parking, that sort of thing).*

#### \* Proximity and price tradeoffs

One respondent seems to have successfully articulated the sentiment of a large minority of our sample:

*The actual accommodations are*

*not that important - I have stayed in ratty cabins to luxury resorts. The luxury is nice of course, but not as important to me as proximity to or access to different birding habitats. The more different habitats the better, to get a wider variety of species. Trails or accessibility to birding locations is also important.... Locations with a variety of birds on the grounds can also be attractive. Bird feeders, hummingbird feeders, is a plus.*

#### \* Breakfasts

Numerous respondents commented on breakfasts. Because birders are eager to start in the morning, they generally eat an early breakfast. Many complained that often no breakfast is available early enough to meet their needs. Some noted that many lodges advertised a "complimentary breakfast," but that it often began too late to be of value to birders:

*My experience is that complimentary breakfasts are often available at a time after I want to be heading for the field. I usually bring breakfast and lunch food with me to save time as well as money.*

On the other hand, lodges which went out of their way to accommodate the early breakfast requirements of birders received special praise from a few of our respondents, as this example illustrates:

*One thing I would consider is the hours that breakfast is available...once, I told them I had to be up by 5. They sent someone in just to prepare a hot breakfast for me. It was fabulous.*

#### \* Noise

Since birders often want to sleep early, a few of our respondents commented on noise levels in some lodging options and ways of coping with noise:

...at places other than ecolodges, the emphasis is on loud music, and no conception of personal/audio space. Obviously, at places where proprietors and/or patrons stay up all night partying, is totally out of synch with a birder's desire for quiet surroundings where they can awake early and refreshed.

*I look for a cheap, clean room with an air conditioner to drown out the noise.*

*\* Birder-friendly*

Many of our respondents mentioned that it was a real plus if a lodge was known to be "birder-friendly."

*...specifically invite birders. Then I know I'll find kindred souls with tips on recent sightings, hot spots, etc.*

*\* Guides*

Numerous respondents mentioned availability of guides as a desirable attribute.

*...offer guides who are familiar with the birds in the area. This is nice as they help you see birds that you could miss on your own.*

*\* Planning patterns*

While most of the Study 1 respondents seemed to plan their own trips, including choice of lodging, there appears to be at least three types of ecotourists who do not select their lodging in advance. These three types - tour-based ecotourists, "partial planners," and "non-planners" - are briefly described below.

*- Tour-based ecotourists*

Some of our respondents noted that they do not make lodging decisions because they typically go on organised tours.

*...We now go with birding tours. We let them do the planning and we just study and*

*look at the birds. Why, you may ask? Reason is we spent too much time finding a place to spend the night and looking for clean places to eat at. I like to bird.*

*When I travel to foreign places, I essentially always go with a tour group and use whatever lodging they have arranged.*

*- Partial planners*

A few respondents plan parts of their trips in detail but prefer to remain flexible for some other decisions.

*I used Edward's before and I have now gone through Howell's bird location book and marked the species that I have not seen on each page. I then added up the number for each location and made an [sic] excel sheet. I then prioritized the list by location that has the most new species. This is how I decide where the next trip will be.... We typically fly into Mexico City, rent a vehicle and wander around with no advance reservations. We either set up our tent or stay at some Mexican-owned lodging near the local birding hotspot.*

These respondents seem to represent a small group of birders who focus their efforts exclusively on the core activity of birding, and are spontaneous in their decision-making with the other aspects of the trip.

*- Non-planners*

Two respondents appeared to be spontaneous with regard to most or all aspects of their trips.

*To be flexible we have not reserved rooms in advance. We tend to stay at smaller towns; the rates are cheaper.*

*...most of the time, one must simply take a chance. I've never run into a place too primitive or unclean for me to handle.*

## **Study 2**

### **Method**

The principal investigator visited ecolodges in Mexico, Costa Rica and Ecuador between November, 2001, and June, 2003. The subtropics and tropics of Latin America are one of the most significant ecotourism destinations in the world (World Tourism Organisation, 2002). As part of a multi-faceted study of ecotourism, he spoke with 35 ecotourists, some of whom were travelling independently (23) and some of whom were members of organised tour groups (12). Likewise, the principal investigator spent time travelling independently and as a member of an ecotour group. Twenty interviews were conducted in Mexico, fourteen at three different ecolodges and six on a multi-day backpacking trip. In Costa Rica, eight interviews were conducted at four different ecolodges. Finally, seven interviews were completed with guests at three ecolodges in Ecuador.

Typically, the principal investigator would approach other ecotourists during evening "down time" after dinner and ask about a range of topics, including how they selected the ecolodge in which they were staying. These qualitative interviews lasted from 30 minutes to several hours, depending on the situation and the level of detail provided in response to a loosely-structured set of open-ended questions. Because the principal investigator travelled, hiked, ate, and birded with the respondents, he was technically a participant observer, and thus was in an excellent position to avoid the barriers which often arise between traditional interviewer and interviewee. Participant observation is a standard qualitative data-gathering technique (Jorgensen, 1989) which has been successfully utilised in tourism research (Bowen, 2002). At one point during each encounter, the principal investigator asked the

subject for his or her “story” about how they “...came to be staying at this particular ecolodge.” The principal investigator took notes and probed for additional information, including relevant ecolodge attributes. The focus here is on the attributes of ecolodges mentioned by respondents.

### Results

Respondents identified 20 unique ecolodge attributes they considered during their choice process. The complete list of attributes, along with the frequency with which each was mentioned, appears in Table 2. The relative frequencies are provided for comparison with Study 1 (see Discussion section) and are not meant to be statistically valid parameter estimates.

Note that proximity to the natural area and price were the two most-frequently mentioned attributes. The next six attributes - “near good birding,” “remote,” “nice atmosphere/people,” “good reputation,” “special accommodations for birders,” and “birding hikes” - were mentioned by two or more respondents. The remaining attributes in Table 2 were mentioned by one respondent each.

While the listing of attribute frequencies is instructive, a closer look at respondents’ responses can provide additional insights into how ecolodge attributes are processed. Despite the question wording, which focused on pre-choice processes, a majority of respondents also offered comments about post-choice processes, such as how ecolodge attributes influenced judgments about their ecolodge experience (e.g., their level of satisfaction with the lodge). Following are some verbatim quotations which illustrate each type of processing.

#### \* *Ecolodge attributes important in pre-choice processes*

Several of the attributes which were important to Study 1 respondents are also evident here. Though nominally similar, unique aspects of these attributes were mentioned by Study 2 respondents. As might be expected, perceptions of ecolodge attributes did apparently have the power to attract independent travellers to a specific ecolodge, but played no role in ecolodge selection for group tour participants.

#### - Location

Again, proximity to natural phenomena dominated ecotourists’ listing of important attributes:

*I came here because it is the best location to see the hawk migration.*

Such a response is similar to those observed in Study 1. In addition, in this study, another dimension of location surfaces:

proximity of the lodge to the ecotourists’ residence was also mentioned. For example:

*I chose this lodge because it takes two hours to get here - and what a beautiful cloud forest.*

Further, note that this location issue was described in terms of time rather than distance, perhaps reflecting a more salient metric from the tourist’s perspective.

#### - Price

Again, price is the second most frequently mentioned attribute. Here, however, the relationship of price sensitivity to competition is much more explicit than it was in Study 1:

*My wife and I chose this lodge over the other one [in the area] because this one was more affordable. They gave me a 30% discount as a researcher.*

*I only considered ecolodges that had internet sites, so that I*

**Table 2: Attributes Considered when Selecting an Ecolodge. (Study 2: In-Person Survey)**

Attribute	Percentage of Those Responding*
Near natural area/Location	31% (11)
Low/moderate price	26% (9)
Near good birding	17% (6)
Nice atmosphere/people	14% (5)
Remote/few other tourists/small lodge	14% (5)
Birding hikes/guides	11% (4)
Good reputation/word of mouth recommendation	11% (4)
Proximity to home of in-country visitors	11% (4)
Special accommodation for birders	9% (3)
Offered transportation from/to airport	6% (2)
Good publicity (Lonely Planet, Birding)	6% (2)
Interesting history	3% (1)
Meals on site	3% (1)
Gardens around lodge	3% (1)
Boat trip offered by ecolodge	3% (1)
Canopy tour available	3% (1)
More in common with others	3% (1)
Minimal impact (grounds, roads, trash)	3% (1)
Liked jungle/ecolodge idea	3% (1)
Sign on road	3% (1)
Only option in area	3% (1)
On the internet	3% (1)

(\* Base: 35)

*could more easily compare prices.*

In addition to illustrating competitive aspects of pricing, both these respondents indicated they had actively negotiated for the lower rates. Based on discussion with ecotourists, as well as lodge managers, this practice appears to vary by country, being most common in Ecuador and least common in Costa Rica.

- *Atmosphere*

Attributes related to atmosphere at the ecolodge seemed to be more salient to these respondents compared with Study 1 respondents, perhaps because interviews were conducted on-site.

*I prefer a small lodge without a lot of tourists in the area, or at the hotel itself.*

\* *Ec lodge attributes important in post-choice processes*

As mentioned, we found that perceptions of attribute-level performance influenced post-choice judgments of satisfaction and service quality for both independent and tour group ecotourists.

- *Location*

Proximity to natural phenomena appears to be important in post-choice judgment formation. For example, one subject noted:

*The rain forest around the lodge has such amazing biodiversity. My favorite part is discovering new birds, reptiles, insects, and plants everyday.*

Another commented:

*This lodge is even better than I expected. In one day I saw twenty species of hummingbirds from the porch.*

Significantly, the subject has

framed this response in terms of actual experience compared with expectations. This explicit comparison, termed “disconfirmation” in the post-choice process literature, is the key driver of satisfaction formation (for a review, see Szymanski & Henard, 2001).

- *Guides*

The quality of guides available at an ecolodge had the power to disappoint or, as this quotation illustrates, delight visitors:

*The bird guide at this lodge is incredible. He grew up in the jungle and can identify the calls and song of birds better than anyone I have ever been around, anywhere.*

Interestingly, this respondent did not mention quality of the guides as a reason for selecting this lodge.

- *Atmosphere*

Though respondents may mention atmosphere as a reason for selecting a lodge, actually experiencing the atmosphere seems to make the concept more tangible:

*I enjoy the friendly, warm atmosphere here. Having the owner greeting and mingling with the guests makes the whole experience seem more personal and homey.*

Note that the subject provides managerially-relevant details of the specific attributes which comprise the more general attribute of “atmosphere.”

- *Noise*

Once again, a subject was surprised by the importance of an unconsidered attribute, this time with the consequence of disappointing or even angering the respondent:

*The owners call this an ecolodge, and it is located in a*

*nice natural area. But I didn't get to sleep until 3:00 a.m. because of the disco party on the veranda. This was one of the worst places I've ever stayed at.*

\* *Differences found between independent travellers and group ecotour participants*

As expected, there was a clear difference in responses between independent travellers and those on organised tours. In discussions with organised ecotour group members, not one mentioned anything about ecolodges when asked to describe how they selected the particular tour they were on. This is not to say that choice of ecolodge is irrelevant to group members or tour companies in the long run. Individual motivations for going with a particular group had to do with the tour operator's reputation for “knowing how to find birds,” “being experts on this part of the world,” and for “planning good trips.” An important source of this reputation is word-of-mouth recommendations or previous experience with a tour operator. A poor experience at an ecolodge may translate into poor word-of-mouth for both the operator as well as the ecolodge. Likewise, a poor experience would tend to reduce the likelihood of choosing the same tour operator in the future. We found clear evidence that a negative experience at an ecolodge could lead to a decrease in level of satisfaction with an organised group trip. For example, one group member said that one of the things he disliked most about his group tour experience so far was the

*...lack of hot water for a shower at one of the places we stayed.*

Thus, ecotour group members generally are not attracted to an ecolodge (or a tour operator) because of the attributes of the ecolodge. However, attribute-specific perceptions of the ecolodge can influence the level of

satisfaction or perceptions of service quality of the lodge, and thereby affect ecotour group members' evaluation of the tour itself.

\* *Differences found between ecotourists visiting Mexico, Costa Rica, and Ecuador*

Examination of the attribute lists revealed no differences which appeared to be related to country-of-destination, with two minor exceptions. First, visitors in Costa Rica and Ecuador, but not Mexico, mentioned the attribute "offered transportation from/to airport." This may be related to the relatively few subjects who were driving rental vehicles in these two countries compared to the subjects in Mexico. Second, the attribute "proximity to home of in-country visitors" was mentioned in Mexico, but not in Ecuador or Costa Rica, perhaps reflecting a more vibrant domestic segment of ecotourists in that country.

### **Comparison of Study 1 and Study 2 results**

In comparing the results of the two studies, the list of attributes generated are strikingly similar, especially for the most frequently mentioned attributes. Location-related attributes clearly dominated each list. Price-related attributes were mentioned next most often in both studies. Numerous other attributes appear on each list, such as guides, reputation/recommendation, and a birder orientation.

There are also notable differences between the lists. First, the Study 1 list contains numerous "generic" lodging attributes: clean, safe, good food, bath, bed, etc. This type of attribute is almost completely missing from the Study 2 list. On the other hand, the Study 2 list contains attributes not appearing on the Study 1 list, mostly related to the social environment: nice atmosphere/people and few other tourists/remote/small lodge. In

addition, the study 2 list contains two other proximity-related issues not found in Study 1: proximity to home of in-country visitors and transportation to/from airport.

Finally, as noted, the descriptions of attributes offered in Study 2 were more detailed, and explicitly included statements about the post-choice relevance of numerous attributes. The difference is likely due, at least in part, to key differences between the methodologies used in the two studies. Specifically, in Study 2, respondents were actually visiting an ecolodge so it is not surprising their descriptions of salient attributes were especially vivid. In addition, when necessary, the interviewer probed for clarification in Study 2 leading to even greater detail in recorded responses.

### **Discussion**

In both samples, location near natural areas seems to be the attribute most salient to our respondents. This finding is consistent with previous research (Haig & McIntyre, 2002), and has important managerial implications. For existing ecolodges, there appears to be nothing the managers can do about this important attribute. However, such a conclusion would be only partially warranted. For one thing, managers can decide how prominently to promote the location of their ecolodge. If a lodge is well-situated, then it is important to herald this fact. If a lodge is not near a natural area, the manager can still attract the type of guests represented here by arranging for convenient transportation to the natural areas early in the morning, and by making an effort to create natural areas (e.g., gardens) immediately around the ecolodge. For the manager deciding on the site for a new ecolodge, every effort should be made to locate near an attractive natural area, assuming the lodge will target the "dedicated" ecotourists represented here.

In both samples, the second most frequently mentioned attribute is price. Large proportions of the respondents in both of our studies seem to be price sensitive. This is consistent with the findings of other studies of ecotourists (Pearce & Wilson, 1995; Silverberg & Backman, 1996). Despite the generally higher reported income of ecotourists, it is hypothesised that dedicated ecotourists would rather take more or longer trips than their non-ecotourist counterparts, and they would prefer to spend more time engaged in their preferred activity; thus they appear to be cost-conscious, especially in terms of their per day expenditures. For managers, this means that price can offer a competitive advantage for the dedicated ecotourist market segment. However, among those providing enough information to allow classification as "low cost" versus "value" seekers, understanding the reasons behind price-sensitivity appears to be of critical importance to decision makers, as "low cost" seekers and "value" seekers may represent two distinct sub-segments. The "low cost" seekers want "bare bones" accommodations at the lowest possible price. "Value" seekers seem to want amenities at a reasonable price. Further research should address this issue, including segmentation analysis and the price-amenity trade-offs sought by value seekers, as this issue may drive decisions ranging from facility design to marketing communications. Further examination of the role of price negotiation behaviour in this context is also warranted.

This evidence also seems to support those who have noted that ecotourists are not inherently homogeneous, highlighting the need to segment this group formally. We concur with others that there is a need for "more discerning methods of segmentation" (Keng & Cheng, 1999, p. 389). It is likely that different segments will value at

least slightly different sets of lodging attributes. Further, it is possible that not only the attributes themselves differ from one segment to another, but when the attributes are processed may also differ. Researchers and managers should understand at what point in the consumers' decision-making process lodging attributes become relevant. For example, if one considers the often-made distinction between dedicated and casual ecotourists, we would expect that dedicated ecotourists are less likely to return to a previously-visited ecolodge. This is because dedicated birders often keep "life lists" of species observed, and many of these birders are on a quest to see as many species of birds in the world as possible.

that independent ecotourists utilise a compensatory decision-making model for selecting ecolodges, i.e., they make tradeoffs among attributes. For example, we found that some tourists will pay more for selected amenities. Such compensatory decision making is common when consumers are highly involved with a service or product. For most respondents in these studies, multiple attributes were relevant, though only a few attributes seemed to dominate the decision process. In a few cases, however, non-compensatory models were apparent. For example, a German couple travelling in Mexico selected an ecolodge based on a sign on the road. They stated they enjoyed "...the adventure of not planning..." the specifics of their

differences involving use of the terms "ecotourist" and "ecolodge." In Study 1, although the request specified that we were conducting research pertaining to "ecotourism," only 3 of the 107 U.S. respondents mentioned "ecotourism" in their responses. We suspect this may be because there is a cultural bias against, or simple unfamiliarity with, these terms among United States residents. Many of the respondents in Study 2 were not from the U.S., and among this group there was a higher level of comfort and familiarity with these terms. For the ecolodge manager, the implications are that it may be unwise to rely on these terms when marketing to U.S. residents.

Finally, though demand for ecolodge services from tour group members should be considered "derived demand" - that is, the demand results only because of demand for a specific tour - managers of ecolodges nonetheless need to focus on satisfying group members. More exactly, they need to attract tour group business, and work to satisfy both the tour operator and the group ecotourist. Thus, future research should address the role attributes play in decision processes of tour operators. What ecolodge attributes are salient to these intermediaries? To what extent are these attributes consistent with those sought by ecotourists? Though not addressed in the present studies, similar work is required with regard to travel agents.

Once the relevant universe of lodging attributes has been identified for a given segment, managers and researchers generally want to be able to quantify the importance level of attributes, and/or to group related attributes in some meaningful way. Results of such efforts allow managers to make reasonable resource allocation and marketing decisions, and allow researchers to begin to understand mental processes

**For dedicated "birders" selecting a lodge is a late decision in the total travel decision set.**

Once they have visited an area and seen the species they hoped to see, they have little reason to return. Therefore, dedicated birders are likely to first select an ecological zone, then a specific area, then a lodge. Lodge attributes enter their decision-process rather late. On the other hand, casual ecotourists are more likely to want to return to a specific lodge given their satisfaction with previous experiences there. Casual ecotourists consider the entirety of their trip and their expectations about a variety of activities and experiences. Thus, ecolodge attributes are more likely to enter their decision process earlier.

How ecotourists process attribute information may be as important to segmentation decisions as when they process the information. Most of the evidence collected here indicates

trip. Future researchers need to sort out the relative frequency of, and conditions under which, each type of process occurs.

Other possible segmentation bases exist. For example, it is important to recognise that ecotourism is a global phenomenon and that significant culturally-related factors may also influence ecolodge attribute preferences. Qualitative work similar to that reported here should be conducted with additional groups of non-U.S. ecotourists to uncover potentially significant cultural differences which influence the relative importance of ecolodge attributes. For example, interviews with ecolodge managers and observations of ecotourists suggested that European and Australian ecotourists in Latin America were more price sensitive than were North American ecotourists. We also found potential culture-based

used by ecotourists. Our contribution to this research stream has been the systematic identification of the range of attributes relevant to ecotourists as they select and evaluate lodging alternatives. These attributes can be used to help model ecotourist behaviour and to help market ecotourists.

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