

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

SATISFACTION WITH THE ECOTOURISM EXPERIENCE IN THE PROTECTED NATURAL AREA EL VERDE CAMACHO, SINALOA, MEXICO

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nature tourism is a type of tourism that depends on environmental conditions and natural resources. Ecotourism is part of this range of tourist offerings where the main reason for traveling is to experience and connect with nature, as well as to conserve and appreciate the natural environment. For this reason, protected natural areas (PNAs) are ideal settings for ecotourism, as they promote the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources, as well as the enjoyment of nature. In this sense, it is necessary to have products and services that generate satisfaction for a market segment that enjoys such experiences, which means that specialized services must meet customer expectations to generate satisfaction. There are different attributes that help to determine the level of tourist satisfaction, including quality, competitiveness, company performance, product or service price, resource management, site cleanliness, infrastructure, landscape, and site conservation, among others. All of this must meet the needs of tourists in such a way as to generate satisfaction and loyalty, as well as encourage recommendations and repeat visits. Satisfaction with ecotourism experiences is multifactorial; it is also a tool for decision-making that considers tourists' perceptions and opinions. On the other hand, Mexico has 226 protected natural areas divided into seven conservation categories, one of which is sanctuaries dedicated to protecting habitats, species of flora and fauna with restricted distribution, and unique and fragile geographical formations. In this regard, this research was conducted in the El Verde Camacho Sanctuary, located in Sinaloa, Mexico, which in 1986 was declared a reserve and refuge for the olive ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). The study area offers ecotourism services under the responsibility of the El Verde Camacho Ecotourism Cooperative, which works under conservation and sustainable use of natural resources schemes.

2. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to evaluate the level of satisfaction with the ecotourism experience in the El Verde Camacho Sanctuary protected natural area in Sinaloa, Mexico.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology is quantitative and cross-sectional; a survey of ecotourists' perceptions of seven dimensions of satisfaction was conducted from October to December 2022, as this is the peak season for activities related to the release of olive ridley sea turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), the main ecotourism attraction. The representative sample consists of 282 ecotourists, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used, as respondents were selected based on certain pre-established criteria, including proximity and accessibility. The Ecotourist Satisfaction Index was calculated following the methodology of the Ministry of Tourism and the Center for Tourism Studies (2013) and has a scale from 0 to 10. The interpretation of the index satisfaction level is defined based on the following ranges: 9.1 to 10: high level; 8.1 to 9.0: medium-high level; 7.1 to 8.0: medium-low level; 6.1 to 7.0: low level; and 5.1 to 6.0: very low level.

4. RESULTS

The profile of ecotourists visiting El Verde Camacho Sanctuary indicates that 56% are female, 41% are male, and 3% are LGBTQ+. It also shows that 5% are foreign visitors and 95% are from Mexico (mainly from the south-central, northeast, and northwest regions). In terms of age, 82% of ecotourists are between 18 and 25 years old, visiting the site with friends (85%), for the first time (84%), and on a school trip (82%). Regarding the Satisfaction Index, the results show that of the seven dimensions analyzed, those with the highest satisfaction index are Quality of Services and Tourist Service (hospitality), each with a score of 9.9 and a high level of satisfaction. On the other hand, Conservation of the Protected Area obtained an index of 9.8 (high level), followed by Cleanliness of the Site and Diversity of Activities, both with an index of 9.7 (high level); also, Price-Service Ratio obtained an index of 9.5 and Site Safety obtained an index of 9.3, both with a high level of satisfaction. Related to the above, within the qualitative evaluation, of the seven dimensions of analysis, 96% of respondents perceive the quality of services to be excellent. On the other hand, tourist service (hospitality) was rated as excellent by 94% of respondents, while 6% rated it as good. Likewise, 89% of ecotourists rated the cleanliness of the site and the diversity of activities as excellent, while 11% rated them as good. The price-service ratio was rated as excellent by 81% of ecotourists and as good by 19%. Finally, in the analysis by dimension, 77% of respondents rated the safety of the site as excellent, 20% as good, and 3% as poor. Regarding expectations of the site, 61% of ecotourists indicated that it was excellent and that it improved upon their arrival at the destination, by 12 percentage points, reaching 73% of the perception as excellent. The above results show that ecotourists have a high level of satisfaction with the destination studied, leading 100% of them to state that they would recommend the ecotourism destination.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Ecotourists visiting the El Verde Camacho Sanctuary are predominantly female, mostly young people between the ages of 18 and 25 who arrive on school trips. In terms of tour-

ist satisfaction, all dimensions scored above 9.0, indicating a high level of satisfaction according to the methodology used; overall satisfaction scored 9.7 (high level). Therefore, the ecotourists surveyed perceive that each of the satisfaction dimensions included in the study meets their expectations of the destination, the activities carried out, and the services consumed, a situation that is verified upon arrival and with the enjoyment of the experience, leading to a 100% recommendation of the destination. It is concluded that the SEVC provides a highly satisfying experience. However, there is an opportunity for planning aimed at improving existing products and services to achieve total excellence. Once consolidated, it also gives way to the offer of new services in accordance with the profile of ecotourists, as specific needs can be identified by age group, gender, and companion. Therefore, value-added services are a way to enhance satisfaction, quality, and competitiveness, allowing the destination to evolve and achieve a place in the collective imagination of ecotourists. Knowing the satisfaction of ecotourists is a key element in decision-making, especially when it comes to destinations within protected natural areas, since the management and planning of ecotourism involves compliance with and enforcement of conservation and management regulations, which, in the case of experience with nature, takes on a nuance of interaction between visitor and destination.