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Towards a classification of Ecotourists in Fiji

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Abstract

Ecotourism has gained increasing attention as a form of sustainable tourism over the last decades. Based on a case study of Fiji's ecotourism resort Matava on Kadavu Island, this paper examines the sociodemographic profile and experiences of ecolodge visitors. Data was collected through face to face interviews of guests of the resort and from TripAdvisor.com online reviews. While there are many studies that have examined tourist profiles and experiences, few studies are available on ecotourists in the Pacific Islands context. This paper partly confirms past research on ecotourists' sociodemographic characteristics; i.e. that they tend to be highly educated, middle aged to older travelers, and of high income classes. The majority of the interviewed guests can be classified as *hardcore* and *dedicated* ecotourists as proposed by Lindberg and align with Mowforth's classification of the *smooth ecotourist*' which mainly refers to middle-age to older travelers who like organized tours and travel experiences. Moreover, this study discusses preferred activities and experiences of ecotourists in a remote island resort. Ecotourists' participation in particular ecolodge offerings such as nature based activities, socializations with local people, staff and other guests and cultural engagements showed to be of great importance but simultaneously their activities and local engagement are confined by the enclavic nature of a remote island resort.

Introduction

The tourism industry in Fiji is the largest contributor of the country's Gross Domestic Product and has boasted high levels of tourist arrivals of more than 840,000 visitors in 2017 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In order to manage negative impacts of tourism development, the government over the last two decades, in

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collaboration with non-governmental organizations, formulated tourism sustainable growth plans and policies through the Tourism Development Plan 1998-2005 and Tourism Development Plan 2005-2016. These plans encouraged and promoted ecotourism initiatives that strive to maximize positive environmental and socio-economic impacts and minimized negative impacts for the host community. Although the Tourism Development Plan 2017 – 2028 is not officially published yet, through consultations with stakeholders, the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism (MITT) have stressed the need for more sustainable tourism practices through small micro tourism businesses that promote sustainable development and eco practices. According to the UN Pacific Strategy 2018-2022, the government of Fiji recognizes that ecotourism has the potential not only to provide quality employment, income and business opportunities for local people, but also to act as a catalyst for the preservation of the natural environment and indigenous culture. These plans have ultimately led to the rise in the eco-tourist market in Fiji (Tourism Development Plan, 2005-2016).

Ecotourism represents a small but growing segment of the global tourism market (TIES, 2006), with growth rates that exceed those of traditional tourism and now 35% of tourists are more likely to book an 'eco' holiday (GlobalData, 2017). Since the 1990s, ecotourism has globally increased 10% to 34% per year in demand (Mastny, 2001) which is faster than tourism industry as a whole (UNWTO press release, 2004). With the global increase in demand in ecotourism, Fiji has also reported an increase in demand of ecotourism products or activities and this can be witnessed in the rise of ecotourism businesses, from nature based activities to cultural forms of tourism (Tourism Development Plan 2005-2016). This has made the country become a hot destination for green travelers as well (Blue and Green Tomorrow Report, 2014). Like any service industry, it is relevant for ecotourism businesses in Fiji to focus on the characteristics of ecotourists in order to capitalize on this market and compete with other eco destinations.

This research focuses only on eco-lodges, as opposed to other ecotourism activities such as village visits, visiting eco-parks and similar experiences. Lai and Shafer (2005) indicate, that ecolodges are a sizeable sector in ecotourism that encompass accommodation and other ecotourism experiences like cultural visits, nature treks and tours.

The research design of this study is based on a case study of an eco-resort in Fiji, Matava Fiji's Premier Eco Resort (MFPER) aimed at gaining a deeper insight of ecotourists characteristics in order to gauge customer expectations and behaviors (Lee, 2011).

Research Objectives

The research aims to determine the demographic and trip characteristics of tourists staying in ecolodges and develop a classification of ecotourists based on their ecolodge experiences in the context of Fiji.

Literature Review

Ecotourism

Kiper (2013), referred to ecotourism as a sub-component of sustainable tourism and its main aim is the sustainable use of natural resources, whilst ensuring economic returns to the local community through careful management and planning of eco-tourist destinations and venues. Moreover, ecotourism is globally regarded as a key strategy in response to travelers' demand for authentic experience involving nature and culture (Lu and Stepchenkova, 2011). Laarman and Durst (1987) state that ecotourism combines education, recreation and adventure and that the traveler is drawn to a destination due to interests in the destination's natural attractions and history. Accot (1998) positioned his definition on differentiating between "deep" and "shallow" ecotourism. Deep ecotourism is concerned with small scale development and community involvement whether through decision making processes or showcasing cultural identities and traditions. Tourism experiences here are based on intrinsic value and learning. However, shallow ecotourism is characterized by large scale development and nature is seen to be exploited for maximizing benefits to people.

Researchers and academics are steering away from identifying ecotourism as only nature-based, and are including learning experiences and cultural tourism as important factors that comprise the ecotourism experience (Laarman and Durst, 1993; Goodwin, 1996; Ziffer, 1989; Wallace and Pearce, 1996; Honey, 2008). Fennell

(2007) further emphasized that ecotourism should be ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive and locally-oriented.

Wallace and Pierce (1996) outline three key pillars of this form of tourism: 1) Environment - low impact tourism and implementation of conservation practices of flora and fauna of natural areas. 2) Development - local and indigenous participation and sustainable socio-economic returns or benefit to the local people. 3) Experience - opportunities for learning and meaningful encounters between tourists, and the environment or local people. ***Ecotourism in the Fijian Context***

Ecotourism has become popular in Fiji and tourism development plans and strategies were geared towards positioning Fiji as an ecotourism destination (Seroma, 1993; Bricker, 2003; TDP 2007-2016). As reported in the Tourism Development Plan 2007-2016, in the year 2003, there were approximately 170 ecotour/nature based activities and tour products in Fiji and with increasing demand for these activities, one of the strategies developed to strengthen this market is the encouragement of the inclusion of the 'eco' component in accommodation facilities and local participation of indigenous people. Development of ecotourism in Fiji also falls along the continuum of deep and shallow ecotourism and can be evidenced in the major hotels who have adopted ecotourism practices and other small ecotourism hotels located in remote parts of Fiji.

Thaman (1994) argues that the idealized Western view of ecotourism does not work in the Pacific Islands, where residents rely heavily on sustainable utilization of natural resources to meet their needs, earn their living and maintain cultural integrity. In Fiji, most rural communities rely on their natural resources such as the sea for their food and livelihood, the forests and surrounding environment for foraging and subsistence living. Conservation and reservation practices on these natural resources do affect the local communities' livelihood.

Eco-oriented Hotel/ Accommodation

Eco-friendly or eco- oriented hotels refer to accommodation or lodging establishments that have made a commitment to various ecologically sound practices such as saving water, saving energy, waste reduction programs and local involvement (Manaktola, 2007). An Ecolodge is defined by Russell, et al. (1995), as a "Nature dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of

ecotourism". This definition only highlights one aspect of ecotourism, which is nature-based and downplays the importance of the learning and experiential aspects of ecotourism. On the other hand, The Ecotourism Society (1996) describes these accommodation types as accommodation that promote a participatory and learning experience whilst at the same time being developed according to the natural environment in which they exist.

Despite the fact that ecolodges are an integral part of the ecotourism sector, empirical research on this is limited (Fennell, 2015). Wight (1995), based his research on ecolodges, and Laarman and Durst 1987 identified ecotourists as soft and hard ecotourists. They further developed a useful accommodation spectrum and ecolodge development along a soft and hard ecotourism continuum. Russell, et al., (1995) conducted a survey of ecolodges across nine regions of the world and determined that most of these resorts were close to natural attractions or in natural attractions and are small scale with local ownership.

Given the popularity of the eco-oriented initiatives in the accommodation sector, many chain affiliated hotels have adapted green and ecotourism initiatives to conserve and preserve natural resources, reduce solid and water waste, recycle and reuse materials, educate people on these initiatives, inclusion of organic food in hotel menus and to be involved in community activities (Rahman, 2012). Basically eco-friendly hotels, eco lodges or eco resorts benefit from cost savings, competitive advantage and enhanced consumer and employee satisfaction and loyalty.

The Eco-tourist

The eco-tourist can not only be identified through demographic (age, income, education, gender) attributes alone, it is vital that this study looks at the different tourist typologies in order to have an in-depth view of the travel motivations of the eco-tourists and who they are. There are various typologies that refer to different types of ecotourism experiences, activities and tourists. One in particular, (Laarman, 1987) focus on the level of interest and physical rigor in order to differentiate between hard and soft nature tourists. Soft nature tourists are those who have some or general idea on the activities they are participating in, whereas hard nature tourists are those who are well versed with what constitutes eco-related activities. At the same time, Lindberg (1991, pp 4) put forward four types of ecotourists and they are; "1.) Hardcore ecotourists who tend to be researchers,

educators, or environmental activists; 2.) Dedicated ecotourists who are those that take trips to protected or conserved areas in order to learn and understand the local community, culture and environment; 3.) Mainstream ecotourists who especially go to certain destinations for the sole purpose of taking an unusual vacation or trip; 4) casual ecotourists who undertake eco-tourist activities as part of their bigger itinerary”.

On the other hand, an ecotourism continuum typology proposed by (Acott, 1998) refers to varying roles from eco-centrism to anthropocentrism. Ballantine and Eagles (1994) proposed that ecotourists have intention to learn about undisturbed nature, and culture of the destination and commit a certain amount of their leisure time to doing this.

Apart from these typologies, Mowforth (1993) developed a classification of ecotourists based on three themes: 1.) the rough eco-tourist refers to young to middle-age travelers on a low budget, are independent and arrange travel on their own, travel individually or in small groups and are into nature and sporting activities, 2.) the smooth eco-tourist relates to middle-age to old travelers, likes an organized tour and travel experience, on a high budget and are mainly into nature based tours, group tours, and so on, 3.) the specialist eco-tourist; these are seasoned travelers and can either be young or old, likes to travel individually, very independent travelers whose budgets range from mid to high range and their interests in tourism can be research, scientific, or personal hobbies.

According to Lindberg (2000), a primary recreational interest within the baby boomers generation is ecotourism. With the baby boomer generation (1946-1964) entering retirement now, they tend to have disposable income and leisure time and at the same time tend to be environmentally conscious and have active lifestyles. The CREST (2013) report, also highlighted that Gen-Xers (1961-1981) are also inclined towards green and responsible travel and are environmentally conscious and at the same time, the Gen-Yers (1980s-2001), are techno savvy and like to embrace environmental and social injustices.

Siderelis and Moore (1998) also raised, that most ecotourists plan to take a number of recreational trips per season or year. Frequent or repeat visits to remote and exotic locations or eco-tourist destinations have been made possible in recent

decades by technological changes, most especially in communication technologies as highlighted by Norman and Law (2013).

In today's digital era, more and more travelers rely on online reviews on properties or destinations to assist them with their decision on where to travel. As discussed above, ecotourists are motivated to travelled to exotic, undisturbed locations, and to them, reliable source of information are online reviews of such destinations.

Research Methods

In order to collect rich qualitative data and strengthen data analysis, this single case study triangulates the following research methods: semi-structured interviews, focus groups and use of secondary data (documents and online reviews from TripAdvisor). Denzin's triangulation involves the general process of taking multiple perspectives on the same thing, or issue of study, using a different view, different perspective to answer a research question (Schostak, 2006).

This research used a semi-structured design for interviewing hotel guests. The following issues were covered in the interview guide; demographic section, destination choice section, accommodation section (Matava Experience) which includes, eco related activities/ initiatives section. In the demographics section, the following questions were based on country of origin, age, education and work. The first author³ planned to have repeat visits to the island in order to observe tourists and the resort as an 'eco' accommodation and conduct these interviews, but due to budget constraints and time limitations was only able to visit the resort once for a 6 night visit. The researcher used an interview guide to direct the interview conducted with guests.

The research at the resort was conducted from the 1st May, 2017 to the 7th May, 2017. Consent was sought first from the resort management to conduct interviews and research on the resort and consent was also sought from each guest

³ The research is based on the first author's Master thesis titled 'Determining Tourist Satisfaction Attributes of Ecotourism: A Case Study Of Matava Eco Resort', conducted at the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, The University of the South Pacific.

interviewed. The resort has the capacity to accommodate up to 22 guests at a time but there were a total of eleven guests at the resort during this time and the researcher interviewed them all. Second, the researcher also asked all the interviewees first for approval to interview before conducting the interview. The fact that the researcher was conducting research on the premises was made known to all guests and staff on the first night during the kava ceremony, where everyone introduced themselves. This also gave the researcher an opportunity to conduct a focus group discussion with eleven guests. The researcher was able to learn where each guests was from, the duration of their stay, and more importantly about their planned or conducted activities and experiences during their stay. At the same time, the researcher was able to informally introduce the research to the group.

In addition to interview and focus group data, the researcher collected online reviews from TripAdvisor, which dates back four years, that is, 2014 – 2017, for analysis. Online reviews on TripAdvisor.com for Matava Resort total 229 reviews and date back to 2009. TripAdvisor reports that 178 of these reviews had overall excellent ratings, 28 reviews rated very good, 9 rated average, 7 rated poor and 4 rated terrible. The site also reported the following traveler types; 14 families, 109 couples, 21 travelled solo, 3 business travelers and 61 were traveling with friends. The resort has undergone major renovations and changes in management in 2014. Therefore this research will only be focusing on reviews that date back to 2014 so as to keep these data valid and current. There are a total of 77 reviews that date back to 2014. Data collected on the sociodemographic of tourists was mostly quantitative. This was analyzed and organized these data in an excel sheet and grouped under the following categories; age group, gender, country of origin, traveler type and contributor level (for only TripAdvisor.com reviewers).

Research Results

Description of Matava's Eco-tourists

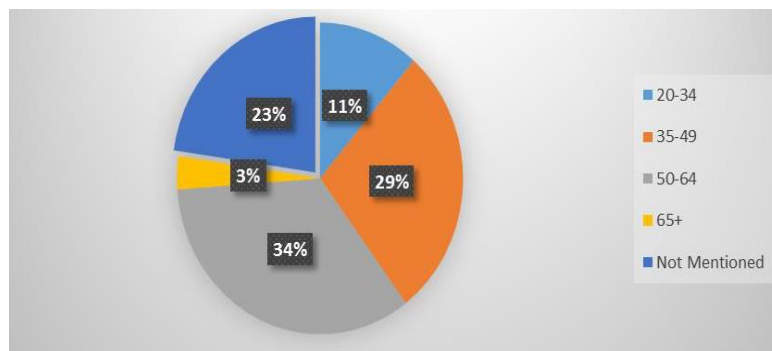
This section outlines the sociodemographic characteristics of ecotourists that visit Matava Resort from the period 2014 – 2017. The data was collected from online reviews from TripAdvisor.com and from interviewed guests. The sociodemographic

data of this study consists of the following categories: Age group, gender, country of origin, traveler type and contributor level. The age group category has five groupings: 20 years to 34 years, 35 years to 49 years, 50 years to 64 years and 65+ years and the last group is N/M which stands for age is not mentioned. Gender is divided into three groups: Male, Female and Not Mentioned. Country of Origin is divided into eight categories and they are Australia, New Zealand, United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark, India, Fiji and Not Mentioned. The traveler types of the guests were arranged into four groups and they are, couple, family, traveling with friends and traveling solo. Date of Stay categories lists all the months of the year for the three years of study which is from 2014 to 2017. Contributor level basically refers to online reviewers' contributor level on TripAdvisor, which is indicative of the type of traveler they are, whether they are seasoned travelers according to their contributor level or beginners. The contributor levels ranges from level 1 to level 6.

Age Group

The five age groups of the guests who stayed at the resort during the period of 2014 till 2017 are shown in Figure 1. There were 77 online reviews of guest that stayed from 2014 to 2017 and 11 guests that were interviewed, therefore the total number of guests these data was collected from is 88.

Figure 1: Age Groups of Matava Ecotourists (n=88)



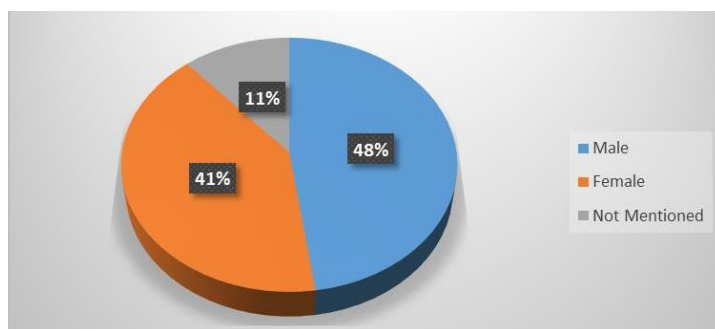
The majority of guests were above the age of 50 years old. Data was collected from a total of 88 guests within the study period. A total of 30 guests (34%), were above the age of 50, 25 guests (29%) were between the age of 35 years

to 49 years and 10 guests (10%) fall in the 20years to 34 years category. On the other hand, about 20 respondents (26% of guests) did not mention their age.

Gender

The data collected here were from both online reviews and interviewed guests. Majority of guests during the period of study were males at 42 while 36 reviewers were females. Only 10 reviewers did not mention their gender on TripAdvisor.com.

Figure 2: Matava Resort Gender Distribution (n=88)



Country of Origin

The majority of guests who stayed at Matava resort between 2014 to 2017 were from the United States of America, second to this at 19% were guests from Australia, 18% of guests were from New Zealand and 8% were from the United Kingdom. The remaining percentage of guests were divided between Canada, Fiji and other counties.

Figure 3: Country of Origin for Guests of Matava Resort (n=88)

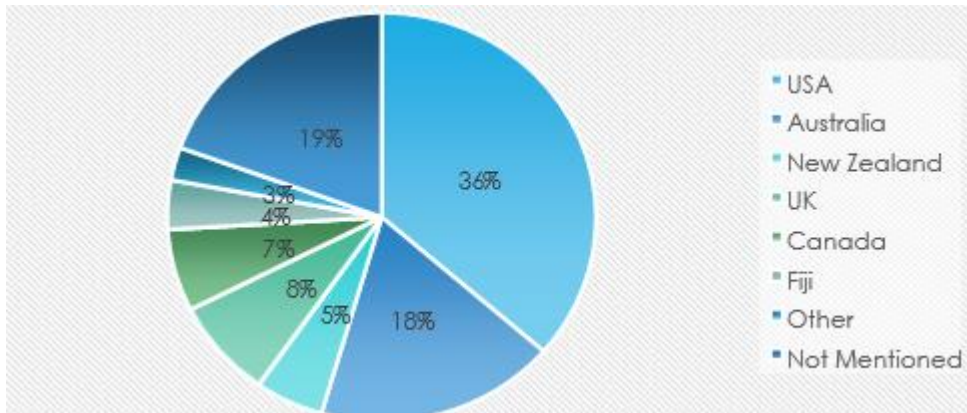
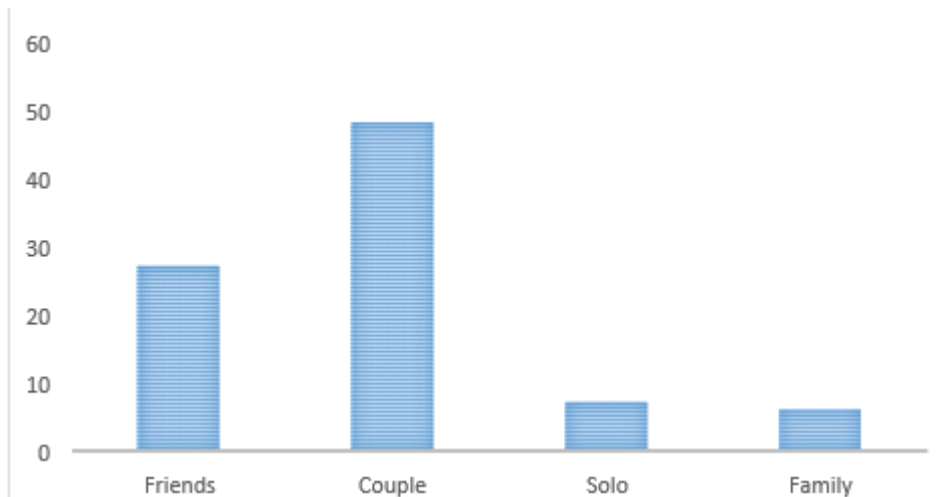


Figure 4: Guests' Traveler Type Category (n=88)

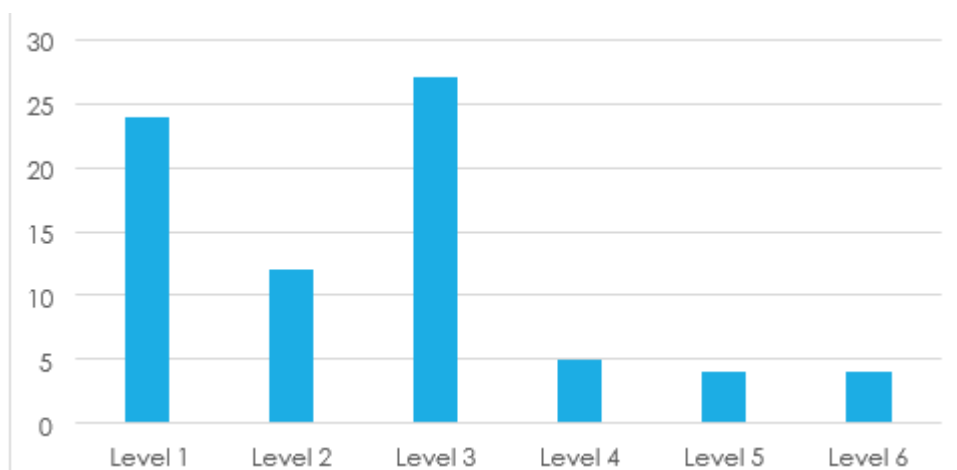


The traveler type of guests in Matava consists of traveling solo, with family, couple, and with friends. A total of 48 guests out of the 88 guests (online reviewers and interviewed guests) traveled to the resort as couples, about 27 travelled with friends, while only 6 guests traveled as a family and 7 travelled solo.

Contributor Level

Data collected for Contributor Level relates to online reviewers only, therefore the sample here is 77. TripAdvisor.com contributor level refers to online reviewers' level or category of contributions or reviews posted on the online community, level 1 being the lowest category to level 6 being the highest category. For example, high contributor level means that the user has commented on a high number of properties of TripAdvisor.com. This is also an indication of how much of a seasoned traveler each user is.

Figure 5: Reviewer Contributor Level



More than 27 out of 77 reviewers are level 3 contributors, this means that they have been contributing to TripAdvisor for other properties as well. Secondly, 24 out of 77 reviewers are level 1 contributors and about 13 out of 77 reviewers are level 2 contributors. The rest of 13 reviewers are distributed between level 4, level 5 and level 6 contributors.

Profiles of Interviewees

Although analysis of interview data and online review have been integrated in each demographic item above (except for Contributor Level), a brief discussion on demographic profile of interviewees is still warranted here as there is some information captured during this process that is not captured for reviews. There were

a total of 11 guests at the resort, the majority were females (8) and only 3 were male. All 11 guests reached tertiary level education. Four guests were from the United States of America, 3 of the guests were from the United Kingdom, and 2 guests were from Australia and the same number of guests were from France. All of the guests reviewed TripAdvisor comments before making the decision to visit Matava. A total of 6 guests out of 11 guests came to Matava resort because it was a dive resort, 4 guests wanted to visit the resort as it is away from the normal tourist route, 2 guests were returning guests. A total of 6 guests were aged 50 and above and they were high income earners, 3 guests were between 40years to 50years and are also high income earners whilst only 2 guests were between the age 20years to 30years and were also high income earners. All of the guests were seasoned travelers and normally travel to similar resort types for holidays. They were all aware of the remoteness of the resort.

Matava resort only offers stays at the resort for a period of 5 to 7 days. This is due to available flights to Kadavu Island from the mainland, Viti Levu. Flights to and from Kadavu Islands are only on Mondays and Fridays. Therefore, the resort offers packaged deals that include accommodation and meals for a period no less than 5 days to all guests.

Guests' experiences

Table 1: Summary of Guest Experiences at Matava Resort

	Guest Experiences	Total Number of Responses	No of Positive Responses	No. of Negative Responses
<u>Category 1</u>	<u>Ecotourism Experiences</u>			
	Spa	6	4	2
	Solar Power Experience	14	10	4
	Organic Garden Tour	8	8	
	Knowledge of eco-resort	15	15	
	Herbal Farm Tour	2	2	
	Culture /Cultural Events/Local People Engagement/Cultural Cuisine	54	53	1
	Organic Food/Food Quality Experience	112	80	32
	Transportation Experience	30	32	
	Remoteness Experience	33	32	1

	Guest Experiences	Total Number of Responses	No of Positive Responses	No. of Negative Responses
	Total	274	236	7
Category 2	Nature based Experiences	0		
Nature based attraction experience	Weather / Views/ Ocean Views	38	35	3
	Nature based attractions	0		
	Waterfall	11	11	
	Marine Life	23	23	
	Flora and Fauna	4	4	
	Beach	22	11	11
Nature based activities experience	Trekking	8	8	
	Swimming	2		2
	Diving	59	49	10
	Fishing	5	5	
	Kayaking	9	9	
	Picnic	5	5	
	Snorkeling	29	26	3
	Birdwatching	4	4	
	Adventure Experience	15	15	
	Total Reviews on Nature	234	205	29

The above lists the summary of all the data collected on guests' experiences on the activities and offerings of the resort. The data are organized into 2 categories namely; Ecotourism Experience, and Nature-based Experience.

Category 1 – Ecotourism Experiences received the highest number of reviews with a total number of 234, whereby 205 reviews were favorable and 29 reviews were unfavorable. The highest number of data coded under this category was towards the Food Experience, which includes Organic Food and Food Quality experiences with a total of 112 responses. The majority of these responses were favorable responses (80 responses). Guests indicated their satisfaction on their Food experiences as in the following areas, freshness of ingredients, organic food and inclusion of cultural cuisine.

'The food is mostly fresh local fare and beautifully prepared. The fish is either caught by local or visiting fishermen and the fruit and vegetables picked from the resort's own garden.' (Interviewed guest, Jeff, May, 2017)

'We had delicious lovo on the last night of our stay, we took part in the preparation of earth oven for our food and the lovo and salad was delicious and fulfilling'. (Interviewed guest, Claire, May, 2017)

The food is all organic and delicious, so fresh, soups and salads were good (Interviewed guest, Kelly, May, 2017)

On the other hand, a smaller number of responses directed at the Food Experiences were unfavorable (32 responses). Guests were also not happy when their expectations (what was promised) of their purchased package were not met or delivered.

We did not have the culturally themed meal we were promised in the package. But if you think 'Eco' in the title makes it likely you'll get great fruit platters and inventive salads, you'll be disappointed. The meals are stodgy, aimed at filling hungry divers who like Grandma's comfort food more than tantalizing with the exotic and the local. (Interviewed Guest, Karen, May, 2018)

At the same time, some guests were also not happy with the prices of the food package.

However, this place is very overpriced considering how mediocre the service and food are. For one breakfast, we had eggs and bread - nothing more. For one lunch, we had boiled chicken with mayo and bread - nothing more. (TripAdvisor review, April, 2016)

The second highest number of responses in category 1, were coded under the Culture Experience with a total of 54 responses, of which 53 were favorable and

only 1 was unfavorable. Majority of guests were quite happy with meeting the local people and experiencing local culture through the resort.

If you really want to experience the real Fijian culture, traditions and people, you cannot do any better than Matava! (Jeff, May, 2017)

On the other hand, most guests were not happy with not meeting local people or visiting the nearby village easily. The nearest village is about an hour walk from the resort.

Really disappointed that we were unable to visit the village and meet local people and see some local entertainment. The resort is quite removed from the nearest village (TripAdvisor.com online review by Olly1967, March, 2017)

About 30 responses were coded under the Transportation and Remoteness experiences, the majority of guests found these two attributes to be satisfactory.

From the moment we stepped out of the plane in Nadi and we felt the ocean breeze we knew it was going to be great. We loaded our gear and bags on a smaller plane and head out to Kadavu on a short 50 min flight, the view of the Astrolabe reef and the coast like on the island was magical. Landing on the shortest beach strip ever was also a once on a life time view, there were greater and transported to the cove where a small panga was picking us up. We had to crawl on the muddy beach with your luggage, which was no big deal since you get right on the boat and you can wash it off. Then if you think this was not adventurous, this is where it really starts. The boat ride, is about another hour, and the breeze, the waves hitting the reef and then islands ahoy make an unforgettable scene where you can experience nature at its fullest. (Liane, May, 2017)

However majority of negative responses were directed at the flight schedules and delays under guest transportation and remoteness experience.

Flight delays cut our visit short and that was a definite regret after experiencing the seclusion and

hospitality of the place (TripAdvisor.com online review by Ben C, April, 2017)

The second highest category of data collected is under the Nature-based Experiences category. This category is divided into two groups; nature-based attractions and nature-based activities. The highest number of coded responses were towards the nature-based activities, specifically the diving activity. A total of 59 responses were coded under the Diving Experience, of which 49 responses were favorable and 10 responses were unfavorable. Since this is a diving resorts, majority of guest experiences under resort activities were directed under the diving conditions and the natural environment.

A wonderful experience, incredible diving. Yes, we saw beautiful pristine reefs with huge schools of fish of every color & shape, Giant manta rays four abreast sweeping over the reef top & sea snakes, Sharks & turtles (Interviewed guest, Karen, May 2017)

However, majority of negative comments coded under this category were directed under diving services and equipment.

Received no briefing from dive center, not enough equipment for diving, multiple tanks leaking, lack of information on dive plan, so disappointed as our packaged includes a dive plan (TripAdvisor.com online review, by Richard M, February, 2017)

A total of 29 responses were coded under the Snorkeling experience, whereby 26 responses were favorable experiences and 3 were negative experiences. Generally, guests were quite happy and satisfied with their snorkeling experience.

Snorkeled at the beach opposite the island, I have to say, just as good as snorkeling at the Great Barrier Reef. (Interviewed Guest, Kate, May, 2017)

However, as the result of bad weather, most guests were not happy with their snorkeling experience.

Although the weather for some days was not in our favor and the surface seemed daunting, it was still ok but fewer fish on the reef though. (TripAdvisor.com online review, Ceerash, November, 2017)

Research Discussion

Ecotourists' Sociodemographic Profiles

Sociodemographic profiles of interviewees and reviewers in this study represent information of the type of ecotourists that frequent Matava Resort. The age and also income profile of both interviewees and reviewers in this case study is in accordance with the findings of previous studies (Mowforth, 1993; Lindberg, 1991). Majority of guests at Matava for both interviewees and reviewers were above 50 years of age. The study was not able to determine income of guests that posted online reviews, but from the results of the interviewees, all of the interviewed guests were highly educated and were high income earners. Majority of the interviewees fall under Mowforth's (1993), classification of '*the smooth eco-tourist*', which mainly refer to middle-age to older travelers who like organized tours and travel experiences. In addition, these guests are normally on a high budget who are into nature and cultural activities. At the same time, there were also some guests who fall under Mowforth's classification of '*the specialist eco-tourist*' which refer to seasoned travelers who can be either young or old, who like to travel individually, and normally have high travel budgets.

Lindberg (1991) distinguished between hardcore eco-tourists, mainstream eco-tourists, dedicated eco-tourists and casual eco-tourists. The majority of guests Matava fall under two of the four categories, that is *hardcore* and *dedicated* ecotourists as more than 50% of guests are professionals, researchers, educators and interested to understand the local community, culture and environment. The reviewers profile do support that eco-tourists are middle aged to old travelers as a total of 60% fall in these two age categories. Results also show that these guests fall into the category of middle to high income.

According to the Figure 1 on the combined results of online reviews and interview data, more than 35% of guests were above the age of 50 years, 29% fall within the 35 years to 49 years category and 11% fall within the 20 years to 34 years

group. The 50-65 years old group are the baby boomers category and are entering retirement now. Lindberg (2000) discussed that one primary motivation within the baby boomers generation for leisure travel or recreational activities is ecotourism due to their active lifestyle. The second category Gen-Xers, as discussed in the literature review, are more inclined towards green and responsible travel as they tend to be environmentally conscious. The last age group, can be referred to as Gen-Yers, who are techno savvy and are motivated to travel to remote locations as they tend to embrace and environmental injustices. Basically, different generations of guests are motivated by different forces for their choice of holiday or recreation activities.

The current trip profile in Figure 4 gives an indication of the nature of travel of ecotourists. In this study, about 50% of reviewers travelled as couples, and 35% travelled as friends. With regard to interviewees, there were 3 couples, and 4 sisters who were aged 45- 55years. The study showed that all were adults and they did not have any kids with them. This is largely due to the fact that the resort is not family friendly and only caters to couples and adult travelers.

Status of originating countries in this study depicted in Figure 3, reflects existing literature on ecotourists' long-haul travel discussed in the literature review. Norman and Law (2013) claim that ecotourists are motivated to travel to remote and exotic locations to participate in eco-tourist activities. Majority of both reviewers (36%) and interviewees (36%) were from the United States of America whereas 27% of interviewees and 8% of reviewers were from the United Kingdom. Australia ranked the third highest originating country in this study at 18%. This shows that the majority of guests at Matava resort chose the resort based on its remote location, natural attractions and eco-oriented activities. On the other hand, Australia is the largest tourist generating country for Fiji, but there are more tourists coming from the US and the UK for the past three years to Matava Resort.

Lastly, Figure 5 shows guests' Contributor Level for those who posted online reviews on TripAdvisor.com. This will only be discussed with reviewers as this is a TripAdvisor.com demographic profile feature. This TripAdvisor.com feature shows how much a traveler has posted online reviews on TripAdvisor. This study shows that the majority of reviewers were Level 3 contributor, in that they have been contributing to other similar properties as well. This feature is an indication of how

much reviewers have travelled and at level 3, they have commented on other properties as well. This supports the previous literature findings that ecotourists tend to travel more than normal tourists in a year for leisure purposes in eco-tourist destinations (CMIGreen Traveler Study Report, 2010; Norman and Law, 2013).

Ecotourists' Experiences

From the table 1, we can surmise that the majority of guests had favorable experiences with ecotourism offerings of the resort, especially with the local cuisine, organic food offerings and nature- and culture-based activities. Ecotourists' participation in particular ecolodge offerings such as nature based activities, socializations with local people, staff and other guests and cultural engagements is also in accordance to previous literature (CMI Green Traveler Study Report, 2010; Lindberg, 1991; Norman and Law, 2013; Mowforth, 1993).

In relation to food offerings, Matava guests expected all meals to be sourced locally only. Some guests shared their dissatisfaction with the inclusion of ingredients that were not locally sourced. Another issue was that all the meals need to be consumed at the resort and since there are no other neighboring restaurants or places to eat, guests have to rely on the resort for their daily meals.

The majority of guests at Matava stated that they were eager to experience the local culture, meeting local people and they reported positive experience during their stay at Matava Resort. In addition to this, guests really appreciated the feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world and the majority of responses highlighted the remoteness of the resort. While the experience of local culture and local food was important for Matava guests, they practically hardly ventured out of the hotel environment. Food had to be consumed within the hotel premises and cultural tours were organized through the hotel. In addition to the cultural and culinary experiences stated above, Matava visitors primarily engage in nature-based activities such as diving and snorkeling.

It has been argued that ecotourism is more than just nature- and culture based tourism and that ecotourists engage in sensitive and non-invasive forms of travel and locally and educational oriented experiences (Laarman and Durst, 1993; Goodwin, 1996; Ziffer, 1999; Wallace and Pearce, 1996; Honey, 2008; Fennel, 2007). Tourists at Matava resort as described in this article do meet many of these criteria

but stronger engagement with local communities is confined by the somewhat enclavic nature of the remote resort.

Conclusions

Summary

Fiji's annual Visitor Arrival number reached a new high of over 840,000 in 2017. Over the past decade, also alternative forms of travel such as ecotourism have received increasing attention in Fiji. This is also demonstrated by the increase in the number of ecolodges in the country. The objective of this study was to determine the socio-demographic and trip characteristics of tourists staying in ecolodges. A case study on Matava Fiji's Premier Ecotourism Resort was employed to achieve the research objectives.

The study examined sociodemographic profiles and experiences of ecotourists staying at Matava resort. The research findings were then compared to ecotourists characteristics in the broader literature, by highlighting similarities and differences. Matava guests engage and want to experience local food, culture, and the natural environment but most of their movements and engagement are directed by the opportunities which are offered by the resort. Moreover, the study supports Lindberg's (2001) theories that the majority of the age group of ecotourists in Matava Resort, were above the age of 50 years old, tend to travel far, travelled as couples and as part of the group, high income earners and take many trips to similar resorts within a year. Additionally, these tourists were found to travel more frequently and they tend to travel very far from their own countries to similar, remote locations.

Study Limitation and Future research

By using online reviews from TripAdvisor as a data source, the study has little control of what information is collected. For example, most reviewers do not provide complete user profiles. Another drawback on using online reviews is the verification of authenticity of each review. The researcher cannot validate that the reviews are authentic and can only assume they are. Also, the reviews content is the opinions of each reviewer and can be subjective to their own ideals and values and is not objective or follow a set of criteria. Additionally, there were more online reviews as compared to interview data collected. This needs to be addressed in

future research, sufficient number of interviews need to be conducted in order to get enough data comparable to online reviews. This will somewhat counter the above shortcomings of relying on online reviews.

Study Implications

This study provides an insight into Fiji's eco-tourism market and is also relevant to Fiji's eco-tourism stakeholders. The study provides stakeholders with demographic analysis of guests of ecolodges or ecotourism establishments. These attributes can then be enhanced or removed, depending on their impacts. According to Ellis (2003), understanding the demographics of ecotourists and the multifaceted and dynamic nature of potential customers is important for catering to the needs of all population segments. The study also provides insight into the preferred activities for ecotourists in an island nation. Furthermore, given that 7 out of the top 10 "Things to Do in Fiji" are all eco-related (TripAdvisor, 2016), this study will assist stakeholders in aligning their business strategies to capture a larger market share. Theoretical implication of this study is the contribution to the extant knowledge of the interrelationships of *the eco-tourist*, ecotourism experiences and ecotourism (specifically, eco-lodges) in an island nation and in the context of the South Pacific region. It is suggested that ecotourism ventures should increase awareness of ecotourism offerings and favorable accommodation experiences to reinforce visitor positive environmental attitudes, to further future ecotourism experiences.

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