

## UNDERSTANDING GREEN MOTIVATION IN HOTEL CHOICE: THE CASE STUDY OF A VIETNAMESE ECO-RESORT

Pascal Languillon  
Auckland University of Technology  
New Zealand Tourism Research Institute  
Auckland, New Zealand  
e-mail: planguil@aut.ac.nz

Simon Milne  
Auckland University of Technology  
New Zealand Tourism Research Institute  
Auckland, New Zealand  
e-mail: smilne@aut.ac.nz

and

Kenneth F. Hyde  
Auckland University of Technology  
School of Business  
Auckland, New Zealand  
e-mail: khyde@aut.ac.nz

### ABSTRACT

This paper takes an in-depth case study approach to investigate how the environmental and social policy of an eco-luxury resort impacts the travel decisions of its clients. Results reveal that the natural design of the resort has a major influence on travellers' decision to patronize it, but that all other aspects of the environmental and social policy of the resort have little influence. These results provide marketers and destination managers with insights on how to best appeal to 'green travellers'.

**Key Words:** Green behaviour, travel motivation, eco-friendly hotel, ecotourist, green marketing, Vietnam.

### INTRODUCTION

At a time when many hotels are embracing sustainability principles and attempting to stimulate demand through green marketing, little is known about the influence of green factors on tourists' buying decision processes (Dolnicar, Crouch, & Long, 2008). A number of studies have attempted to profile ecotourists and green travellers (CMIGreen, 2009; Eagles & Cascagnette, 1995; Han, Hsu, Lee, & Sheu, 2010; Kerstetter, Hou, & Lin, 2004), their focus being on market segmentation, based on geographic, demographic and behavioural characteristics. Recent studies have tried to assess who the 'green tourist' is (Andereck, 2009; Bergin-Seers & Mair, 2009; CMIGreen, 2009; Yabuta & Scott, 2010). Bergin-Seers and Mair (2009, p. 117) contend that "green tourists exist, even though they may be inconsistent in their behaviour", arguing that they are

"tourists who are influenced by their environmental beliefs and practices; who are interested in being environmentally friendly on holiday; at times select holidays by considering environmental issues; and are potentially willing to pay extra for products and services provided by environmentally friendly tourism operators" (p.117).

While the concepts of 'green traveller' and 'ecotourist' have to be used circumspectly, and the results of market segmentation studies should be taken with caution, the fact that a considerable number of people are now concerned about sustainability within the context of travel and tourism cannot be disputed (CMIGreen, 2009; Mehmetoglu, 2010). Luxury hotels, which used to be synonymous with conspicuous consumption, are now embracing the 'green wave' and developing comprehensive environmental and social policies (Languillon, Zei, & Kate, 2009). Common corporate sustainability initiatives include the reduction of energy consumption and carbon emissions, the minimization of waste and water usage, and the conservation of surrounding ecosystems (Bohdanowicz, 2006;

Erdogan & Baris, 2007; Mensah, 2006; Ryan & Stewart, 2009). Despite hotels' growing financial investments in designing sustainable policies and green marketing, little is known about the impacts of these green efforts on sales. The great majority of green consumer behaviour studies have focused on intentions and 'willingness to buy' rather than on real-life observed behaviours (Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010). Unfortunately, because of a phenomenon called 'social desirability bias', respondents in these studies may consciously and/or subconsciously overestimate the importance of environmental responsibility in their future behaviours in order to portray themselves in a favourable light (Chung & Monroe, 2003). Pike (2008) notes that too much marketing research has focused on data in the form of participants stating what they say they might do in the future rather than analysing what people actually do. This paper takes a different approach and examines the influence of environmental and social responsibility as a tourist motivator through an in-depth qualitative interpretive study of an eco-resort in Vietnam.

### THE CASE STUDY

This exploratory study focused on clients staying at a renowned resort in Vietnam operated by a luxury hotel management and development company which has for the past 15 years based its marketing on the idea of "intelligent luxury". This company presents the image of exclusive eco-resorts generally located in pristine and secluded locations which attempt to integrate luxury and environmental responsibility. The company is widely praised for its social and environmental ethos (Conde Nast Traveler, 2008; World Travel Awards, 2009). Within the brand portfolio, this resort is a beach resort which provides an excellent example of a fine architectural integration into the natural environment. There are a great number of sustainable initiatives at this resort, including a no plastic bottles policy, an organic garden and a social welfare program for the staff. The building process for the resort was as eco-friendly as possible, with no plastic, chemicals, or paint used during its construction. Another example of the eco-friendly policy is the presence of AI fresco bathrooms and open-air living rooms, which add to the feeling of being at one with nature, but also provide natural ventilation obviating the need for air conditioning, and providing energy and cost savings for the resort. This resort hence provides a very good example of an eco-luxury hotel catering to luxury travellers with 'an environmental conscience', and thus a good fit for this study.

The objectives of the study were: 1) to assess client awareness of sustainable practices at the resort; 2) to assess if the green image of the resort was a factor influencing purchase; 3) to assess client perceptions of the importance of sustainable practices in a luxury resort. Ninety one clients were interviewed at the resort during May and June 2011. Interview duration ranged from 20 to 90 minutes. Participants interviewed were from 16 different nationalities and 75% were first-time clients. Interviews were organized in three distinct phases: questions in the first phase asked respondents to recollect memories of their vacation decision making process (e.g. why they chose to stay at this particular hotel over competitors); in the second phase respondents were asked to describe if and how they felt this resort was being eco-friendly and how this affected their overall experience; the final phase revolved around questions about their future intentions to patronize green hotels.

Primary motivators to patronize this resort were the natural design, the privacy, the service, and the peacefulness of the setting. The study participants had very little awareness of the environmental and social policy of the resort at the time that they booked their stay. For 38 % of the study participants, this lack of awareness was because the stay at the resort was part of a package organized by a tour operator and participants had thus not seen much marketing material. Interestingly, even those who had booked their stay directly on the resort's website had not paid attention to information about sustainability at the resort. For instance, just a few interviewed clients knew before they arrived at the resort that it had its own organic garden and that most of its food was sustainably produced.

Once at the resort, the great majority of clients considered that the resort was 'eco-friendly' or 'doing its best to be eco-friendly' and said that they enjoyed this aspect of their holiday, even though for most this was just an 'added bonus' and not a primary motivator. When asked what made them believe that the resort was eco-friendly, the environmental integration and natural look of the resort were again overwhelmingly the most popular answers. Some participants also cited the organic food or the *no plastic bottles* policy. Participants considered the natural design to be the most important characteristic of an eco-resort. Other sustainable initiatives such as waste, energy and water management and benefits to the local community were seldom mentioned. The study participants generally deemed that the environmental and social policy was not a priority for them when choosing a hotel, but many said that they were looking for a 'natural resort'.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this in-depth qualitative study of green motivation in hotel choice radically differed from those of the many 'willingness to buy green' studies found in the academic literature which tend to overemphasize the importance of green factors in purchasing behaviours (Young, et al., 2010). Analysing real-life behaviours of travellers staying at a leading eco-luxury resort, this study showed that the environmental and social policy of the resort had very little influence on intentions to patronize it, whereas the natural design of the resort was a major drawcard. This study tends to show that the eco-friendly attributes of a resort that help to positively shape the guest experience (e.g. a natural look, a clean environment, fresh natural food, etc.) play an important role in travellers' decision making process. On the contrary, the eco-friendly attributes of a resort that provide benefits for the wider community and for the planet (e.g. carbon offsetting scheme, water management, energy management, local charities etc.) but that do not provide direct benefits to guests have very little influence on travellers' hotel choice.

The understanding of what is an eco-friendly resort depends on personal perspective: while academics and practitioners emphasize a set of measurable environmental and social criteria, travellers focus on pleasure and measure the success of an eco-friendly resort by how it can help them reconnect with nature. For this reason, marketers of eco-friendly resorts will get better results by emphasizing how guests will feel rather than detailing the technical aspects of their green policies.

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