

Assessment of Visitor Satisfaction in Mole National Park, Ghana

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Abstract

Arrivals to Mole National Park (MNP), the largest in Ghana were projected by management to reach 100,000 guests by the close of 2010. As at the end of December 2008, the park recorded only 16, 807 guest arrivals, the highest so far in its existence. By the close of year 2010, only 14,336 tourist arrivals were recorded registering a drop, hence an illusion in attaining the 2010 set target and even subsequent years to come. This therefore gave a clue that revenue generated is not always enough to support park administration and community development. This paper explores the underlying reasons accounting for this trend by finding out tourists' preferences in the park, the category of people who patronized the park most and sourcing guest views on what can be done to make the park more attractive. A five month period was used to elicit information from 498 tourists who visited the Park employing questionnaire administration and interview schedules. The results analyzed revealed that student groups in second cycle and tertiary institutions patronized the park most on the domestic front, whilst on the foreign front, all guests contacted were educated above high school level and many of them (57%) were on holiday in Ghana. The driving force (motivation) behind these visits was to see animals in the wild. The most preferred wildlife species visitors came to view were elephants, monkeys, lions, buffalo and birds respectively. The recommendation is made that the road linking major cities and towns to the Park which is "rough and rugged" be rehabilitated if government needs to improve tourists' inflow to the park.

Keywords: Mole National Park, visitor satisfaction, domestic tourism, wildlife, tourist preference

INTRODUCTION

Natural resources such as lakes, rivers, waterfalls, hot springs and geysers, wildlife, forests, minerals (gold, manganese, bauxite, diamond, iron ore etc.) including mountains/hills have economic values. For instance, forests and wildlife are protected areas created not only for animals but with an aim of preserving the environmental, social, cultural and historic values therein (Child, 2004). Hence the use of natural areas for tourism and recreation purposes is

known as ecotourism and these areas include lagoons, wetlands, forest reserves, mountainous areas and places of complex rock formations (Higgins, 1996).

Many national parks allow tourists an opportunity to enjoy and appreciate majestic parks rich in wildlife (Amboseli National Park in Kenya) sparkling lakes (the scenic Lake District National Park in England) and waterfalls (Iguacu falls which lies between Brazil and Argentina) including other areas

of scenic wonders. Other parks offer opportunities for boating (Banff National Park in Canada), hiking (Stolby National Park in Russia) and other forms of recreational activities for the amusement and satisfaction of tourists such as knowledge seeking, nature experience and photography (Martinnette and Melville, 2010).

Mole National Park, the largest and oldest national park located in Damongo, in the West Gonja District capital in the northern region of Ghana is one of long good standing. Gazetted in 1971, this National Park has a rich faunal base and common species include kob (*kobus kob*), baboon (*papiocynocephalus*), elephant (*Loxodonta Africana*), waterbuck (*kobus defassa*), hartebeest (*Acelaphus buselephus*), and buffalo (*syncerus caffer*) including unique floristic species. These species therefore offer guests the necessary recreation and amusement when visiting this park in Ghana. Nature tourism is a growing segment of the tourism market with countries like Costa Rica, South Africa and Kenya reaping enormously from the sub-sector. Very little attention has been given to tourist satisfaction in nature-based setting in Africa, with the exceptions of a few studies focusing on national parks (Tonge & More, 2007; Hwang, Lee & Chen, 2005; Akama & Kieti, 2003). In this wise, an attempt at finding out tourist/visitor satisfaction in this park is worth the while. In a related development Burns (2004) noted that concepts of quality as perceived by visitors including levels of satisfaction have rarely been applied in nature research.

Annual arrivals to Mole National Park were projected to reach 100,000 by the close of 2010 with the aid of private sector participation (MNP, Strategic Plan, 2001). Unfortunately, the park only recorded 16,807 visitors by the close of December 2008, the highest so far recorded in the history of the park. This brings to bare the fact that attaining the set target is a "mirage" even in years ahead to come taking into

consideration the unfolding trend of events with regard to arrivals. It is worthy of note that visitor satisfaction influences guest inflow to attractions areas basically in two main ways: first by way of repeat visits and secondly through positive word of mouth advertisement of the facility to friends and other potential tourists. Tourism in "difficult areas", i.e. areas presumed to be very distant and with rugged terrain tend to also make the journey laborious, hence compromising satisfactions levels of guests. These situations further attest to the fact that revenue generated within facilities of such "standing" may be on the low side hence making park administration and community development problematic. In the light of these developments, it therefore merits research to unearth the underpinnings to these unfortunate phenomena.

Study objectives

The study sought to assess the level of satisfaction among visitors who patronized the park whilst seeking specifically to:

- ✚ Determine nationality and occupation of guests who visited the facility
- ✚ Find out visitor-motivation to the park
- ✚ Ascertain if their expectations are met
- ✚ Solicit views on what can be done to make the park more viable/recreation worthy

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourists motivation refers to reasons that make people travel (Ryan, 1991) and often times constitutes escape, relaxation, health, religious activities, strengthening of family bonds, prestige, social interaction, sexual opportunity, educational attainment, self fulfillment, wish fulfillment, playing and shopping (Cohen, 1972). Various facilities therefore serve as visitor attractions which

motivate guests to want to move and these include a locality's climate and scenic beauty as well as distinctive cultural patterns, friendliness of local residents including special events and retail outlets (Inskeep, 1991). A visitor/tourist attraction is a vital component of any country's tourism industry, as they stimulate travel to destinations (Cooper et al., 2005) and engender customer satisfaction (Gunn, 1994). Indeed they have been cited as providing "*the raison d'être*" for tourism and for the majority of tourists, the attractions at a destination is the motivation for engaging in vacation (Boniface & Cooper, 2001). Many different attractions may induce tourists to visit particular areas or spend their holidays in specific regions. These attractions have been classified in a variety of ways. First, distinction is usually made between natural features such as landforms, flora and fauna including man-made objects such as historic buildings, monuments, and archaeological sites.

A second category embraces man and his culture expressed through language, music, folklore, and dances (Mackinnon et al, 1986; Pearce, 1989). The uniqueness of flora as tourist attraction has been confirmed by Sheila (1993). According to her, the objective for establishing Beza Mahofaly and Andahalela Project in 1977 was to protect riverine and spiny bush forest in south-western Madagascar to enhance ecotourism. Tourists are usually attracted to national parks by the beauty and diversity of the vegetation (Sayer et al, 1992). Although wildlife serves as a major tourist attraction, Mackinnon et al (1986) found that the reliability of locating them is important. He explained that it is not enough for tourists to know they have the chance to see a tiger or a lion, but there must be an assurance that they will see tigers or lions before they can visit a national park in their numbers. Hoff & Overgaard (1974) noted that the animals in

Mole National Park are shy and this makes viewing difficult. This implies that it is not only the animal numbers that matter but the ability of the animal to endure human presence. Senior & Okunnolifa (1983) identified landforms in and around parks as one of the attractions of tourists from Europe and North America to East Africa. For example, the interior of East Africa, particularly in the Mt. Kenya, Mt. Elgon and Mt. Kilimanjaro areas are of scenic interest. Their research findings indicated that more adventurous tourists enjoy excellent walking and rock climbing as a form of recreation. Studies also conducted by Eshun (1987) on tourist attractions at Shai Hills Game Production Reserve in Ghana showed that mountain climbing is as adventurous as it is daring and fascinating.

Waterfalls, caves, scarps, and crater lakes have also been identified as other landforms or geological features that are of touristic interest especially when they are within vicinities of parks (Mackinnon et al, 1986; Eshun, 1987; Lokko, 1996).

Categorization of visitor attractions

Some authors have proffered varied listing of attraction types and a more comprehensive one emerged from England's most visited attractions which identified visitor attractions into three distinct groupings with each possessing some sub-groupings (Dewhurst, 1996).

According to him visitor attractions are classified according to whether they are built specifically or are natural (Fyall et al 2001). Table 1 shows category visitor attractions and their sub-groupings according to Dewhurst (1996) which draws vacationing and ultimately some levels of satisfaction. This attraction under study is best sub-categorized in the table under "environmental".

Table 1: Category of visitor attractions

Attraction Category	Attraction type	Constituent attraction
Historico-cultural	Religious site	<i>Abbey cathedrals, chapels, priories</i>
	Museums and galleries	<i>Art galleries, open air museums</i>
	Historic sites	<i>Castles, landmarks, monuments, palaces</i>
	Interpretive heritage sites	<i>Interpretive centres, heritage sites</i>
	Multi-faceted historic sites	<i>Castles, docklands, historic houses, palaces</i>
Environmental	Animal attractions	<i>Safari parks, wildlife parks, zoos, rare breed farms, nature centres, aquaria</i>
	Parks and gardens	<i>Botanic gardens, outdoor activity parks, public parks</i>
	Country parks	<i>Country parks, reservoirs</i>
Entertainment	Leisure and recreation complexes	<i>Leisure centres, leisure pools, recreation centres, water parks</i>
	Amusement parks	<i>Pleasure beaches, pleasure parks</i>
	Theme parks	<i>Indoor parks, outdoor parks, beach resorts</i>
	Themed retail outlets	<i>Antique centres, garden centres, retail and leisure parks</i>
	Workplace industrial visit centres	<i>Craft workshops, factory shops</i>
Miscellaneous		<i>Arboretums, piers, themed transport</i>

Source: Dewhurst, (1996)

Assessing Visitor Satisfaction

Satisfaction is a vital element in the survival of any tourism attraction/facility or destination (Neal & Gursoy, 2008, Gursoy et al, 2007; 2003), as it plays a significant role in the tourist deciding whether to recommend a place to others or to revisit the sites (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). It is common knowledge that if consumers are not happy with the performance of one or more components of the destination, it will likely affect how their overall satisfaction will be (Pizam, Neumann & Reichel, 1978). The general consensus is that a visitor's overall satisfaction is a multidimensional construct based on the interaction between tourists and the elements at the tourism site. Some

schools of thought posited that when examining tourists overall satisfaction, it is crucial to take into consideration elements related to both the attraction and the services provided therein (Whipple & Tach, 1988; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Thus, measuring satisfaction in tourism has two purposes: providing information about customer needs and how prepared the organization or product is currently at meeting these needs and also to provide a platform for organizations to communicate with their customers and source their likes, dislikes and overall satisfaction (Banyai, 2012).

Neumann (1995) contributes to the debate by noting that measuring consumer satisfaction is also a means to measure

November 30, 2011 was the period of data collection. The months of September, October and November were considered vital because it is the period of the dry season when animal viewing is best because the animals tended to agglomerate around water bodies. The dry season also witnesses huge visitor inflow because they are pre-informed that the best period to see animals in the wild is the dry season. During the five month period, a total of 498 tourists were encountered (accidentally) and who had time to respond to the questionnaire.

Out of this figure, 154 visitors representing 31% were Ghanaians and the remaining (344) which constituted 69% were non-Ghanaians (foreigners). Other methods that were employed were interviews to source information from park officials on the peak season of visits, the most frequent visitor(s) to the park, frequency of in-service training for staff and marketing strategies adopted to make the park more appealing. Secondary data sourced from park administration include records of visits obtained for the past ten years running.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The findings and discussions of this study were based more on the non-Ghanaian vacationer because they patronized the park more and paid higher to access the facility than their local counterparts. In this regard, their views were seen as more relevant in drawing more foreigners.

Occupation of Guests

Close to half of respondents (48%) were students who visited the park during the five month period of the study, this was followed by teachers (15%), tour operators accounted for 12% and retirees 10%. All retirees who came on visit to the park were foreigners. A further probe revealed that most of them have reached the “empty nest” stage in life and so have ample time to travel. Others constituted drivers (7%), volunteers (5%) and conservationists (3%). On how their journey was organized to the park, 91% indicated they came on group tour whilst 9% arrived individually. The latter were basically conservationist working with NGO’s. Students and teachers often preferred group tours because it created room for education, socialization and an opportunity to admire nature collectively. In this regard most students, teachers and drivers came together in one school bus. Some foreigners also made use of organized/packaged tours that are often characterized by the use of tourist coaches.

Nationality of Guests

Again, results from the study (see Table 2) also revealed the nationality of visitors to the park as follows: Ghanaians 31%, Americans 25%, Britons 20%, the Dutch 12%, Germans, 5%, the French 4% and ‘others’ which had a percentage each or less and these represented amongst others the Swiss, Canadians, Italians and Nigerians.

Table 2: Visitor Nationality

Nationality/Origin of visitors	Number of guests	Expressed as Percent (%)
Ghanaian	154	31
Americans	125	25
Britons	100	20
Dutch	60	12
Germans	25	5
French	20	4
Others	14	3
Total	498	100

Source; Fieldwork 2011

It therefore stands clear over the five month period of data collection that foreigners outstripped domestic visitors by two thirds. Records from the park administration have also proven that over the years, international arrivals to the facility have always been greater than domestic except in 2001 and 2011 when nationals (arrivals) outweighed foreign. The park administration attributed the decline in 2001 to the 9/11 attacks in the USA because the threat of Al-Qaida scared travel by air in the latter part of that year. The increase in domestic visits in 2011 was also attributed to better

marketing strategies to reach domestic guests. Techniques used were rigorous local radio adverts and availing of flyers for

guest to pick home to their peers. The proportion of foreign guests to the park in 2011 fell below that of the 2009 records probably due to the debt crisis in Europe which in a way negatively impacted on ability to travel for purposes tourism. Table 3 below shows both foreign and domestic arrivals to the park from 1997 to 2011.

Table 3: Domestic and Foreign arrivals to MNP

Year	Domestic Arrivals	% of total arrivals	Foreign Arrivals	% of total arrivals	Total Arrivals
1997	1,978	42%	2,759	58%	4,737
1998	1,708	30%	3,896	70%	5,604
1999	1,591	31%	3,502	69%	5,093
2000	1,876	35%	3,549	65%	5,425
2001	2,918	51%	2,836	49%	5,754
2002	1,957	27%	5,338	73%	7,295
2003	3,441	44%	4,463	56%	7,904
2004	4,130	40%	6,297	60%	10,427
2005	5,414	43%	7,108	57%	12,522
2006	5,117	40%	7,617	60%	12,734
2007	5,512	40%	8,222	60%	13,734
2008	8,048	48%	8,759	52%	16,807
2009	6,890	47%	7,870	53%	14,760
2010	6,141	43%	8,195	57%	14,336
2011	7,883	54%	6,816	46%	14,699

Source: Mole National Administration (2012)

Purpose of visit, information search and nights spent in MNP

The study found out that majority of non-Ghanaians (57%) came to the country because they were on vacation (holiday) and chose to visit MNP while 33% indicated they were in Ghana on leisure basis. Close to 6% were on research work with 4% assigning voluntary work as their reason for visiting the park. On information search about the park, 70% of these foreign guests got to hear/know about MNP from friends and relatives, 23% from their travel/tour

guides and 7% from Ghanaian Missions abroad. By implication, word of mouth publicity is the most potent tool in “wooing” more international guests to the facility. The study also brought to light the fact that quite a substantial number of foreigners (42%) made return trips (day tripping) to Tamale or elsewhere after accessing the resource, 31% passed a night while 17% and 6% spent two and three nights respectively at the Mole Motel. About 4% spent four or more nights for research purposes. Those foreigners who made return trips assigned reasons that there aren’t many activities of

interest to be engaged in after viewing the animals. All visitors on the domestic front are day trippers (excursionists) as they never spent the night in park. Again 91% of foreign visitors were first timers with only 9% being repeat visitors; hence the park administration has a great task of making the facility more appealing to attract repeat visitors and enticing all visitors to spend at least a night in the Park.

Motivation to visiting MNP and animal species preferred

On the foreign front, the main driving force behind visits by guests to the park is that majority of the visitors (72%) came to view wildlife; others came to experience the wilderness (12%) whilst 10% indicated relaxation/leisure as purpose for their vacation. A few came for research work (3%) and less than a percentage came for voluntary work. The most preferred animal species visitors came into the park to view were elephants (100%), monkeys (70%), lions (62%) buffalos (55%) and birds (41%). Others were warthogs (38%), Kobs (33%) and bush bucks (25%). The animal preference list exhibited by guests clearly draws attention to a fact brought to the fore by ICUN, (1990) that elephants,, monkeys and some bird species as well as leopards and lions are the most endangered in the world, hence their preference by tourists.

Every guest who came to MNP was interested in seeing elephants in the wild. Aside from natural attractions in the park, other cultural features visitors listed which were of interest to them within the park vicinity were the Mognori Ecovillage which showcases village tours and dance performances by the village cultural troupes. Others mentioned by tourists included caves in the park whilst some took the opportunity to visit the Larabanga Mosque and the mystic stone.

Visitor opinion on level of satisfaction

Responses from guests indicate that 20% of visitors were extremely satisfied with their visit to the park because they saw elephants (most preferred) and other animals. According to Mackinnon et al (1986) they found that the reliability of locating animals in national parks is important. They explained that it is not enough for tourists to know they have the chance to see a tiger or a lion, but there must be an assurance that they will see tigers or lions before they can visit a national park in their numbers and indeed when visiting MNP, visitors are assured of seeing these preferred species mentioned at the appropriate time between early morning and 11am before the elephants disperse from the watering points into the bush. A further 61% of tourists who visited Mole were satisfied while few were neutral (15%), which is, they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. This goes to confirm the assertion that satisfaction is a vital element in the survival of any tourism attraction/facility or destination (Gursoy et al, 2007; 2003; Neal & Gursoy, 2008), as it plays a significant role in the tourist deciding whether to recommend a place to others or to revisit the sites (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000).

About 4% however registered dissatisfaction because they did not see elephants. This according to park administration was due to the fact that at the time of day of visit, the animals had left their watering points and moved further afar into the bush. Some who saw elephants indicated they were asked to stay about 50metres away from them and this did not auger well for proper viewing, hence their dissatisfaction.

Issues of concern raised by visitors

Table 4 below shows the facilities, infrastructure, services and issues to which visitors expressed concern and indicated they were in bad state. To the respondents, these areas of concern needed urgent attention/improvement by management.

Every visitor was asked to identify the most pressing according to his/ her priority.

Table 4: Issues of concern

Concerns	Number of tourists	Percentage
Bad road to the park	241	70
Inadequate variety in menu at the restaurant	34	10
Expensive accommodation	28	8
Lack of transport options	21	6
Lack of first aid on safari trips	10	3
Poor signage	7	2
Unfriendly staff	3	1
Total	344	100

Source: Field work, 2012

Majority of the visitors (70%) complained of the bad nature of the road which leads to the park from major junctions (Sawla to Ffulso) and further complained it culminated in long travel hours. Others also identified lack of variety in the restaurant (10%), expensive accommodation (8%), lack of transportation options to the park (6%), unavailability of first aid on safari vehicles (4%), poor signage in the park (3%) and unfriendly staff behaviour (1%) as issues of concern that needed serious tackling at the management level. This seems to be consistent with the assertion that measuring satisfaction in tourism has two purposes: providing information about customer needs and how prepared the organization or product is currently at meeting these needs and also to provide a platform for organizations to communicate with their customers and source their likes, dislikes and overall satisfaction (Banyai, 2012). A few tourists interviewed mentioned that when they return on repeat visits, it would be impressive to see an improvement in the road network.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper identified student groups (both foreign and domestic) as the “chief” patrons of the park and during the five month period, two thirds of visitors contacted were foreigners and the general statistics from park administration indicate foreign visitors

dominated most of the time. The most potent source of information about the park is through word of mouth (friends and relatives). The purpose of visit by many guests (57%) was for holiday whilst the most preferred animal species was the elephant. About 81% were satisfied with their visit to the park with majority 70% expressing concern about the poor nature of the road connecting the two major junctions to the park which makes travel laborious. An implication for policy formulation is that if government needs to develop tourism infrastructure to Ghana’s largest park and other parks, road network improvement to and within sites must be made a priority.

Based on the above it is therefore prudent for tarring of the road from Sawla to Ffulso and to the park to make travel less tiresome. Since food is a basic necessity in every destination, the menu at the only restaurant should be expanded to give variety to guests whilst effective marketing through the media be carried out to reach more to the Ghanaian traveller in order to boost domestic tourism receipts to the park.

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