



The characteristics, length of stay and motivation of foreign tourists who visit Simien Mountains National Park, World Heritage Site, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Travel and tourism is a growing industry which generated 10.2% of global GDP and 292 million jobs in 2016, equivalent to 1 in 10 jobs in the global economy. Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) is by far one of the most outstanding natural areas and thus one among the few natural heritage sites of the world. The purpose of this study was to identify characteristics of SMNP visitors' i.e. reasons for visiting, sources of information, length of stay, perception/image about SMNP and intention to revisit the SMNP. Management challenges include the fact that the numbers of visitors are increasing, expectations of what a recreational experience offers differ, and resources to develop sites are very limited along with the need to balance these multiple objectives while maintaining a positive tourism experience. A key to addressing these needs is an improved understanding of tourist characteristics. A cross-sectional study and survey research design was used to describe characteristics of visitors in the SMNP. The findings of this study will benefit the local communities, park tourism management, policy makers and service providers. The astonishing nature of landscape and scenery take the lion's share of visitor's motivation to visit the Simien Mountains National Park for tourism.

Keywords: Visitor characteristics, Semien Mountain National Park, length of stay, motivation, image

Introduction

The tourism sector is considered as a first world industry and major employer. The World Travel and Tourism Organization (WTTC) trends indicate that travel and tourism is a growing industry which generates 10.2% of global GDP and 292 million jobs in 2016, equivalent to 1 in 10 jobs in the global economy (WTTC, 2016). The sector accounted for 6.6% of total global exports and almost 30% of total global service exports (WTTC, 2017). This international travel and tourism council pointed out that travel and tourism is a growing industry which generated 5.8% of Ethiopian GDP and 1.7 million jobs in 2017, equivalent to 5% of total employment. Natural



based tourism has also become the fastest growing segment of the tourism market (Nyaupane, Morais and Graefe, 2004). The country's outstanding natural resources and the unique cultural heritage resulted in Ethiopia winning the World Best Tourist Destination in 2015 (Gidey, 2017). Among Ethiopia's resources, the Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) is by far one of the most outstanding natural areas and thus one of the few natural heritages of the world (IUCN, 1978) which has huge value to attract visitors from all over the globe. One may stumble to find the right word or expression to describe the emotional, psychological and spiritual experiences and impressions he or she encounters in this area, or about what really continuously feeds this area with such unbelievable and hypnotizing charisma and grace (Degsew, Silesh and Endalkachew, 2016).

What is more, informing the visitor that this area is endowed with rich biodiversity, endemic wild species, as well as unique and stunning bio-physical features may not even scratch the surface of the real formation of this spectacular gift of nature (Hurni, 1986, Puff and Nemomsa, 2001). It is in particular, the stunning nature of the bio-physical features of the park which is astonishing and forms the lion's share that contributes to the international significance of the park (Scott, 1955; Messerli, and Aern, 1978; Hurni, 1993; Briggs, 1998 and Wetzel, 1999). As a result of this and many more reasons, the SMNP has been declared to be one of the primary Heritage Sites of the world since 1978 (Ashine, 1982). This unique natural feature is home and shelter to a number of endemic and threatened species of animals, especially mammals, i.e. *Walia ibex*, *Ethiopian wolf*, *Gelada baboon* and *Menilek's Bushbuck* (Nevergelt, 1998; Endalkachew, 1999). These precious animals are known as flagship species of the country. The park also has abodes for 182 bird species of which 6 are endemic (Tilahun, Edwards, and Gebregziabher, 1996; Hurni, 1986).

The SMNP is part of the Afro-alpine centre of plant diversity, with about 550 higher plant species of which 12% are endemic species (Puff and Nemomissa, 2005; Puff and Nemomissa, 2002). Topographical ruggedness with steep escarpments, rolling hills in the highlands and flat terraces dissected by rivers in the lowlands are the peculiar characteristics of the park (Messerli, and Aern, 1978; Hurni, 1986; Hurni, 1993; Wetzel, 1999). It is composed of a vast undulating plateau dissected by forested rocky valleys, and dominated by the rugged peaks of the mountains, including Ras Dejen, the highest peak (4,543 m abs) in Ethiopia situated to the east of the park (Hurni, 1986; Wetzel, 1999). This topographic scenery is the spectacular feature of the park (Scott, 1955). The climate of the park drops below 0°C in some months and the mountains are covered by snow lasting usually for a couple of days (Hurni, 1982; Puff and Nemomissa, 2005). This along with cultural features is attracting many tourists from all over the world.

The tourism industry is one of the major sources of income in the world today and an important export industry and chief foreign exchange earner in many countries like the United States of America, United Kingdom, Germany, China, and Australia, while African countries like Kenya and Zimbabwe have approximately 80% of tourists coming into their countries primarily for wildlife viewing (Duglas, 2008). Wildlife tourism via the establishment of national parks which combine conservation with tourism has been recommended as a means of economic development for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, especially for rural, economically depressed areas (Melita and Mendlinger, 2013). Not only the developed countries but also the less developed and non-developed ones, understand the profits generated from tourism and are thus putting greater effort into attracting as many tourists as possible (Tabaku and Cerri, 2016).

More and more people have the desire and means to travel and the World Tourism Organization is predicting over 1500 million international arrivals by 2020, more than double the



current level. Forecasts to the year 2020 predict growth in tourism in all regions of the world, with the strongest relative growth occurring in parts of the developing world (WTTC, 2016). Tourism makes a significant contribution to the SMNP communities and creates the opportunity to improve the quality of life for citizens, the economic viability of the area and the image of Ethiopia in the eyes of both residents and tourists (Degisew, Silesh and Endalkachew, 2016).

Tourism generates park revenues as well as profitable domestic industries such as hotels, lodges, restaurants, transport services, souvenirs, and other related services (EWCA, 2013; WTTC, 2017). However, revenue generation is affected by the length of stay, an important determinant of tourists' overall expenditure and consumption of local resources. The number of possible experiences that can be undertaken by tourists depends on their length of stay (Meneses, Moniz and Vieira, 2008).

Earlier studies on the length of stay at the tourist's destination, indicated that length of stay, sources of information, destination preferences, image, intention to revisit, and related factors were affected by socio-demographic factors and the nationality of the tourist (Meneses, Moniz and Vieira, 2008; Martinez-Garcia and Raya, 2008). Tourists who stay at their destination longer, visit more attractions with diversified tourism resources and generate more business for the destination than those who stay for a shorter time (Endalkachew, Aschalew and Mulugeta; 2015). Age and income were also shown to affect the length of stay significantly in different tourist destinations (Ting, Lin, Huang and Yang, 2017).

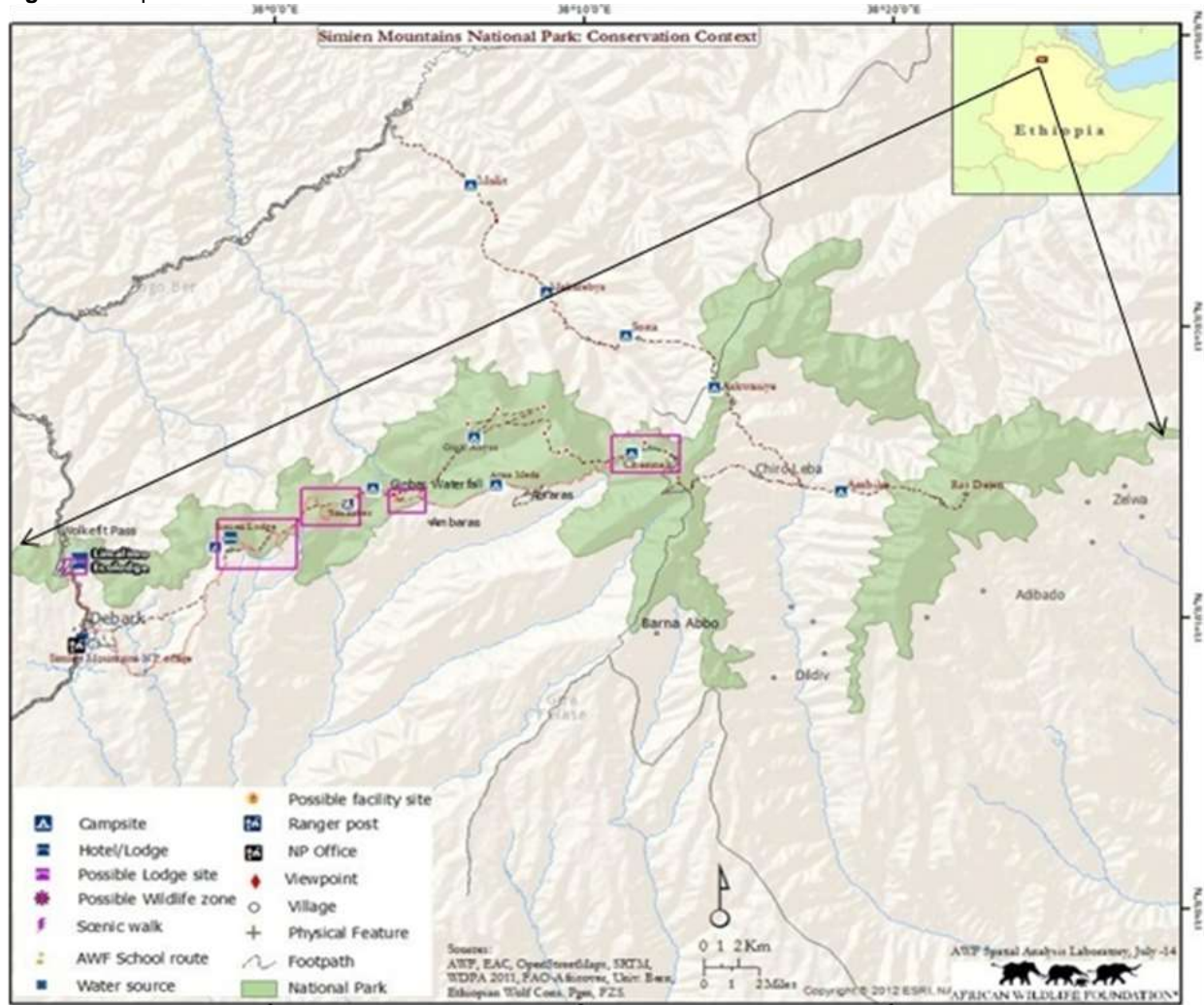
Visitors to the Simien Mountains National Park have been increasing since 1999 and there are now some 26,000 arrivals per annum, with most of the visitors coming in the drier months, November – May (SMNP office annual report, 2016). As a result SMNP management is becoming an increasingly multifaceted problem. Management challenges include the fact that the numbers of visitors are increasing, expectations of a recreational experience differ and resources to develop sites are very limited along with the need to balance these multiple objectives while maintaining a positive tourism experience. A key to addressing these needs is an improved understanding of tourist characteristics. The purpose of this study was to identify characteristics of SMNP visitors' i.e. reasons for visiting, sources of information, length of stay, perception/image about SMNP and intention to revisit the SMNP. Furthermore the findings of this study will benefit the local communities, park tourism management, policy makers and service providers.

Methods and materials

Description of the study area

The Simien Mountains National park is found in the northern highlands of Amhara National Regional State, 122 km North east of Gondar city. The park extends from 37°51'26.36"E to 38°29'27.59" E longitudes and from 13°06'44.09" N to 13°23'07.85" N latitude.

Figure 1: Map of SMNP - Simien Mountains National Park



Simien Source: EWCA

The park was established in 1969 (Negarit Gazeta, Addis Ababa, 31 October, 1969) and in 1978 it was registered as a World Heritage Site due to its grand scenery, and rare and endemic mammal species along with the ancient traditional living style of the people living in this remote area. The park lies within five woredas (districts): Debarq, Adi Arkay, Beyeda, Janamora, and Tselemt, bordering 38 Kebeles of these woredas.

Research design

A cross-sectional study and survey research design was used to describe characteristics of visitors in the SMNP. A questionnaire-based survey was designed in order to address the objectives of this study. There were four sections to the survey. The first section asked visitors about their travel characteristics. This included questions such as first trip to the region, primary purpose of the trip, day or overnight trip, length of stay, and traveling party size. The second section asked visitors about the planning process of their trip. This included questions about the planning process before the trip, information they found while on the trip. The third section of the



survey asked visitors about their perception of the SMNP. This included questions about their perception, expectations and intention.

Population of the study: The target population considered in this study was 4767 foreign tourists and foreign residents who visited SMNP.

Sample and Sampling Techniques: both probability and non-probability sampling methods were employed. Of the fifteen campsites the researcher selected three camp sites i.e. Buiet Ras, Sankaber, Gich, and Chenek using a non-probability sampling technique, because these three sites are frequently visited by tourists. While, in selecting respondents, simple random sampling technique was used in all three sites.

Sample size determination: According to SMNP office annual report (2016) on average 4767 foreign tourists visited the park between the months of October-December from 2012 to 2016, the peak season for the area. In order to determine the sample size of this study, Yemane (1967) formula was used.

$$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$$

Where, n = Sample size

N = Total population

e = Level of precision

$$n = 4767 / (1 + 4767(0.05)^2) = 369.032; \quad \text{Therefore, 370 respondents were taken.}$$

Data collection tools and procedures

Primary data were collected through the survey of foreign tourists who visited SMNP in the year of 2017. Initially, ethical approval was obtained and respondents were free to withdraw at any time and they were not given any incentive to participate. Researchers used self-administered structured questionnaires for quantitative aspects of the research. For the qualitative aspects of the study, data was collected using open-ended questions, which were attached with the close-ended questionnaire. This helped to triangulate data which was not addressed by the close-ended questionnaire. In order to check validity of the questionnaire being used in this study, a pilot test was carried out on 5% (19 visitors) to evaluate the questionnaire format and to avoid ambiguity of chosen variables for the survey. After getting feedback from the pilot survey, the questionnaire was revised accordingly.

Methods of data analysis: Descriptive statistical tools such as frequency distribution, percentages, tables, and graphs were utilized. Statistical package for social science (SPSS) version 20 was used to analyze the quantitative data. The qualitative data generated from open-ended questions were categorized in themes in accordance with the research objectives to triangulate quantitative information.

Result and Discussion

Out of the 370 questionnaires distributed to tourists who visited and returned SMNP, 90 questionnaires were not returned due to different reasons. In addition, 12 questionnaires were not appropriately filled by the respondents. Therefore, the analysis was made on 268 questionnaires, which accounted for a response rate of 72.43%.



Demographic profiles of respondents

The demographic profile of respondents is shown in table 1. The characteristics used for study were gender, age, nationality, educational background. The gender distribution of the respondents was quite comparable, with 59.0 % male respondents and 40.29 % female respondents. Male visitors exceeded female by ten percent, this perhaps reflecting that tourism activities in mountain destinations are of a more physical nature. The dominant age group of the respondents were above 60 years old (31.3%), followed by 51-60 years old (18.8%). About 12.7% of the respondents were 41-50 years old, 15.7% respondents between 34 and 40 years old, and 20.9% respondents under 31_40 years old. The age group of above 50 years accounted for over half of the total visitors (50.1%). This age group may have different responsibilities at home allowing them to stay for more days. Earlier studies in different tourist destinations revealed that age and income significantly affect the length of stay (Ting et al. 2017).

Table 1. Demographic information

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender			Education		
Male	160	59.7	Above degree	67	25
Female	108	40.3	Degree	125	46.6
Total	268	100	Diploma	76	28.4
Age			Total	268	100
18 – 30	56	20.9	Nationality		
31 – 40	42	15.7	France	56	20.9
41 – 50	34	12.7	Germany	42	15.7
51 – 60	52	19.4	UK	40	14.92
Above 60	84	31.3	USA	29	10.82
Total	268	100	Netherlands	24	8.95
			Others	77	28.71
			Total	268	100

Source: Own survey data (2017)

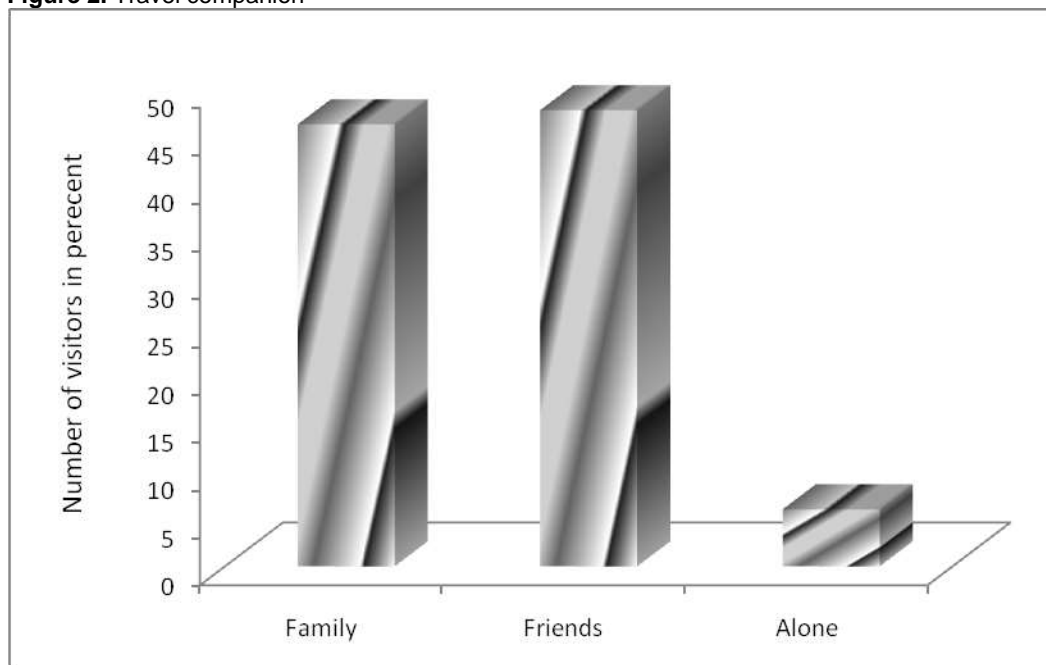
The top five overseas countries with the proportionally largest number of tourists visiting SMNP were France, Germany, UK, USA and the Netherlands. Tourists from France accounted for the majority of the response rate (20.86%), followed by Germany (15.67%), UK (14.92%), USA (10.82%) and The Netherlands (8.95%). The visitors that come from these countries may have disposable income and paid holiday weeks, and may continue to contribute to park tourism development either by promoting with word of mouth or revisiting the park sometime in future. The remaining 28.71% respondent tourists were from Italy, Israel, Belgium, Poland, China, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Spain, and Austria. All the visitors that visited the national park were from developed countries and the qualitative information collected from them shows that almost all were satisfied by their stay. This demonstrates that the park will have more tourists in the near future since visitors promote the park with word of mouth to their friend and relatives. Word of mouth is a kind of advertising and it is the unpaid spread of a positive marketing message from person to person through directly using the human voice, or it can be transmitted via any communicative means such as through the internet or via text message (Sarin, 2014).

Like other demographic factors, educational attainment also has an impact upon consumer choice. It is worth mentioning that the education level of tourists was relatively high, with 46.6% having university degrees and 25% having a post-education degree and the rest having diploma. This figure encourages the conclusion that the tourism activity in SMNP was predominantly nature based (ecotourism) because education is positively related to the participation in nature based ecotourism destinations (Rest, 2003). However, these kinds of ecotourism ventures could be characterized by high environmental considerations, increased control and involvement of the local residents, as well as significant benefits for the host community (WWF-International, 2001).

Travel companion

Trekking with travel companions helps travelers to save money by sharing expenses, particularly to avoid the single supplement levied by guide service, scout service, and other tent and trekking equipment rents. Figure 2 represents the identity of travel companions of tourists who visited SMNP. Among the total respondents, 46.27% were accompanied by family members and a relatively high 47.76% of visitors came with friends. Only a small number of 5.97% of tourists were travelling to SMNP alone. Visitors who came to the park alone stayed in the park less than one day or not more than 48 hours due to the costly nature of trekking in the SMNP, requiring tourists to be accompanied by a scout, guide, mule/horse, porter and others service providers. These travelers are day trip visitors or excursionist, and make little economical contribution to the park communities.

Figure 2. Travel companion



Source: Own survey data (2017)

Tourist motivation for visiting SMNP

Visitor's choices, perception and motivation toward Simien Mountains National Park tourism products were greatly influenced by lifestyle. As (table 1) shows the majority of SMNP visitors live in Western Europe (mainland France), others live in United State of America. Table 2



represents aspects of decision making to visit SMNP by tourists. Tourists also narrated their feelings and described reasons for visiting the SMNP. A large number of tourists (64.18%) visited the study area to satisfy their inherent desire for mountain scenery and landscape. This is because many scholars have described the stunning nature of the bio-physical features of the park and the astonishing nature of the mountains. This extraordinary landscape and scenery take the lion's share in contributing to the international significance of the park that could attract visitors from all over the world (Scott, 1955; Messerli, and Aern 1978; Hurni, 1993; Briggs, 1998 and Wetzel, 1999). Although this area is endowed with a rich biodiversity and endemic wild species (Puff and Nemomissa, 2005; Puff and Nemomissa, 2002, Tilahun, Edwards, andGebregziabher, 1996; Hurni, 1986) 35.82% of the respondents visited the area to view wildlife. The result shows the natural beauty of the park landscape and scenery are more attractive than the rich and unique biodiversity of the park. Undeniably, the visitor's perception is determined by the overall quality of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose and relative alternatives (Aaker, 1991).

Table 2: Reasons for visiting SMNP

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Reasons to visit		
Scenery/Landscape	172	64.18
Wildlife	96	35.82
Total	268	100

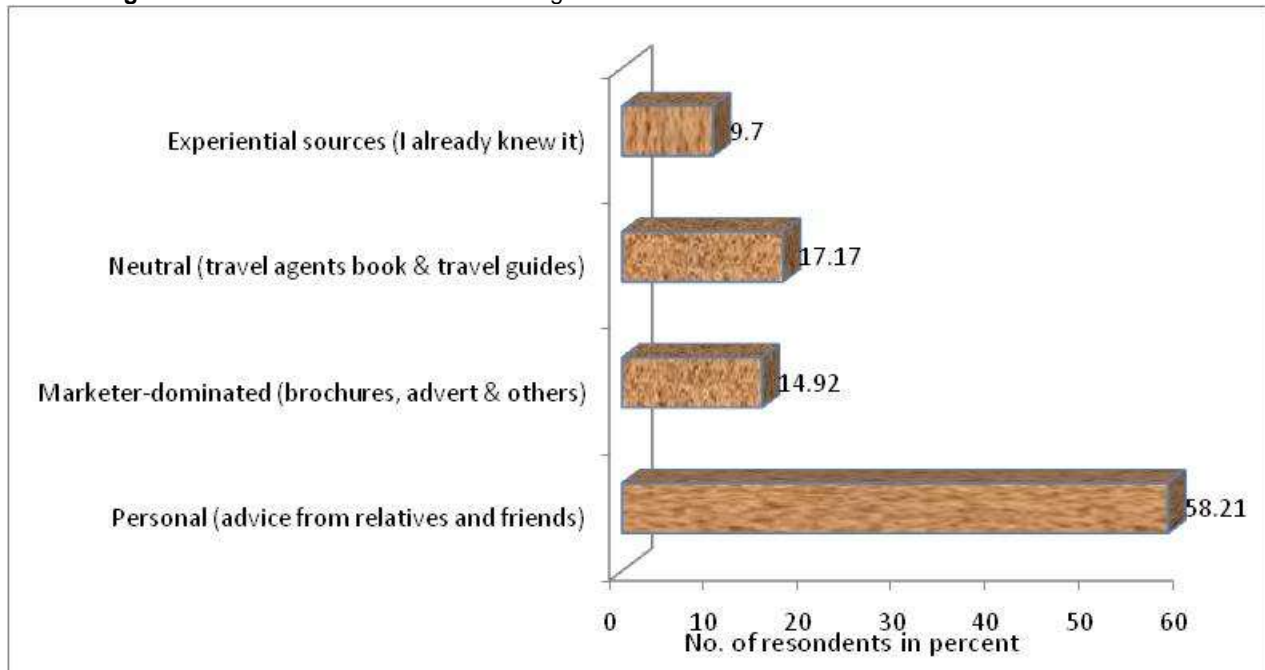
Source: Own survey data (2017)

Sources of information

Providing appropriate and stimulating information before and during a trip can be one of the most impactful and effective strategies for destinations to attract and extend the length of stay of visitors. Searching for information on destinations has become one of the most popular issues in tourism research (Chen & Gursoy, 2000). The questionnaire was developed according to Crotts (1999) where sources of visitors information could be categorised into four basic groups i.e. (i) personal (advice from relatives and friends), (ii) marketer-dominated (e.g. brochures, advertisements), (iii) neutral (e.g. travel agents and travel guides), and (v) experiential sources (e.g., past visits). In this regard the visitors were asked if they saw any advertisements and information before they came to the park and if they did see any advertisements where they saw them (figure 3).

Of the total 268 survey participants, the majority, 58.21%, were informed about SMNP through personal word of mouth from either friends or relatives. Information from word of mouth from friends and relatives can have a direct influence on the way that visitors spend their time, where they go, the services they use, and ultimately the amount of cash they leave in the community because this is firsthand information and trust worthy. Word of mouth is one of the most credible forms of advertising because people who don't stand to gain personally by promoting something put their reputations on the line every time they make a recommendation. Word of mouth marketing, which encompasses a variety of subcategories, including buzz, blog, viral, grassroots, brand advocates, cause influencers and social media marketing, as well as ambassador programs, work with consumer generated media and more, can be highly valued by product, social media and performance marketers (Sarin and Pal, 2014).

Figure 3. Sources of information for visiting SMNP



Source: Own survey data (2017)

The neutral category also contributed to 17.17% of tourists as a source of information about the SMNP, and 14.92% of the respondents used marketer-dominated sources of information, including websites, advertisements, brochures and maps to visit SMNP. Brochures remain the most widespread sources of information for visitors (Middleton, Fyall and Morgan, 2009). Many developing countries fail to provide web sites, brochures, maps, and information outlets that can positively influence visitor decisions and behavior (Andereck, 2005). While only 9.7% of the respondents had a previous visit experience, this may be the result of previous satisfaction, because satisfaction is a significant determinant of repeat visits. Similarly, previous studies have also suggested that when tourists' holiday expectations are met or exceeded, they are more likely to return to a destination in the future (Som et al., 2012).

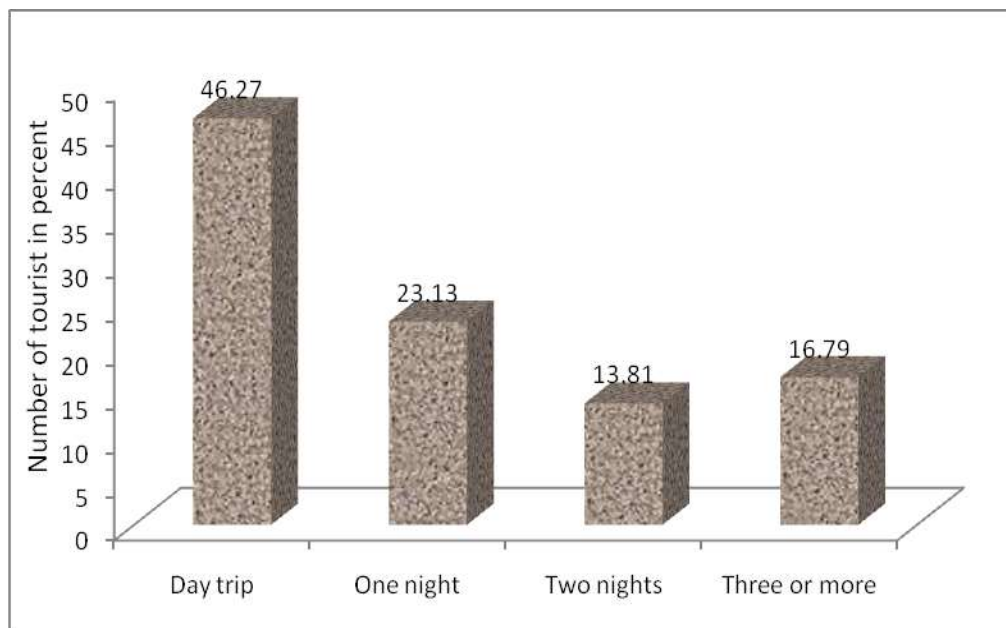
Length of stay

Length of stay is an important determinant of overall tourists' expenditure and consumption of local resources as the number of possible experiences that can be undertaken by tourists depends on their length of stay (Gokovali et al. 2007). To examine these important determinants, visitors were asked how many nights they had stayed in the area. Figure 4 shows that for the majority 186 (69.4%) of the respondents the length of stay was less than or equal to one day. In this case visitors did not hire horses for both riding and loading their luggage, cooking equipment, tents and other mountain trekking gear because such types of visit generally use four wheel drive vehicles to cover some of the most the spectacular landscapes and Gelada baboon habitats of Buyit Ras, Chilkuanit, Shankabe, Jinbar water fall and Chennek view-points.

This result implies that benefits from tourism activities in the study area were limited. However, only 45 (16.79%) respondents length of stay was three or more days. Those tourists bring relatively high economic benefits to the local communities who live in and around the national park, because they hire horses/mules and other trekking equipment, and employ porters,

scouts, cooks, and local guides. Their stays may cover most parts of the national park's spectacular mountain scenery including the highest peak of Ethiopia, Ras Dejen. Tourist visits, particularly longer stays, bring higher tourism income (Ting et al., 2017). Similar studies in other countries confirm that tourist length of stay is affected by socio-demographic factors and the nationality of the tourists (Meneses, Moniz and Vieira, 2008; Martinez-Garcia and Raya, 2008).

Figure 4. Tourists length of stay in SMNP

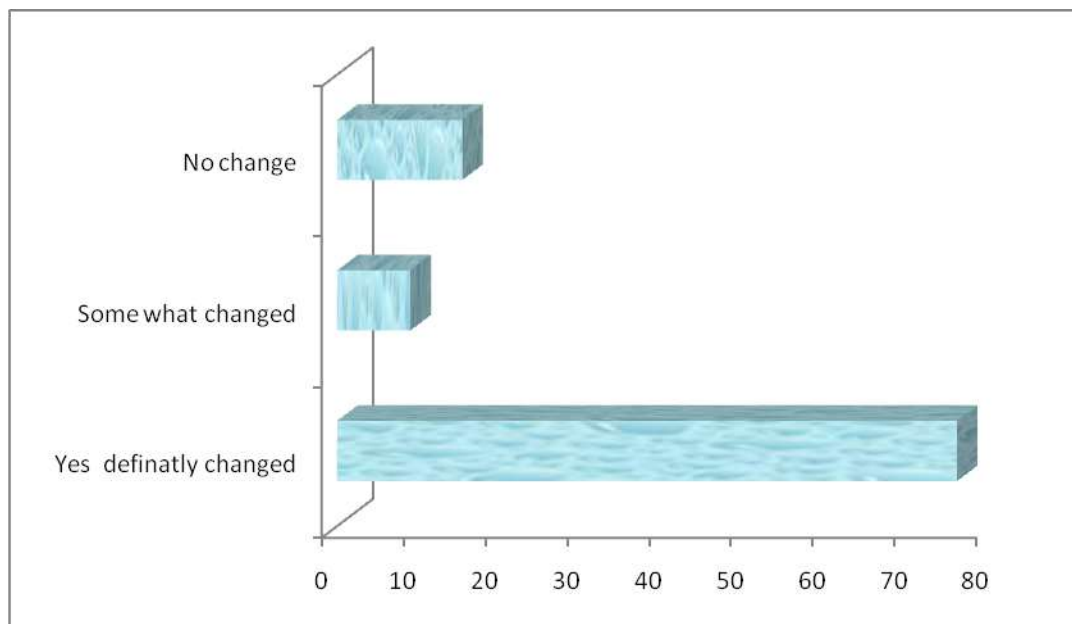


Source: Own survey data (2017)

VisitorOpinion on image of the SMNP

Following the state of emergency and the perceptions of political instability, safety is a prerequisite for tourist visitation in Ethiopia (Nafbek, 2018). To understand tourists' differences in perceptions, images and motivations toward a destination is essential to comprehend and predict tourism demand and its impact on the tourism location. As is well known, safety is among the top concerns of every tourist destination, especially if it is burdened with a history of political instability. Questions were included about whether visitors' opinion/image had changed or not about SMNP after their visit. The questions of image perceived by visitors was determined through a list of five attributes i.e. safety, security, facility, natural attractions, cultural attractions including the life of the local people, and feelings about the destination. The result shown in figure 5 reveal that the majority 227 (84.75%) of the respondents reflected that their opinion/ image were definitely or somewhat changed regarding the main attributes of the SMNP such as safety, security, facilities, and natural and cultural attractions. This shows that Ethiopia and particularly SMNP has just managed to overcome decades of bad publicity caused by past and present famines and violent regime changes and perceived political instability. Also, the destination's perceived image post-visit, influences tourist satisfaction and intention to repeat the visit in the future.

Figure 5. Visitor perception after visit



Source: Own survey data (2017)

In contrast, relatively few 40 (15.30%) of the respondents had not changed in their opinion. According to Nafbek (2018), not only is their image not changed but also the current violent protests, social unrest, civil war, terrorist actions, the perceived violations of human rights, or even the mere threat of these activities can all serve to cause tourists to alter their travel behaviors. Other issues that many tour operators cite as important factors in relation to the decline in tourism include the substandard services and poor quality accommodations, inadequate maintenance given to tourism infrastructure and destinations in general, and the lack of positive communication between tour operators and government agencies.

Tourists' intention to revisit

Table 3 shows that tourists' have intentions to revisit the SMNP. Of the total 268 visitors, 197 (73.5%) of the respondents had an interest to revisit SMNP. Tourist repeat visitation is the most commonly employed intentional behavioral measure, in addition to the willingness to recommend the holiday or its components to others. The main reason for their repeat visitation was that SMNP is one of the most outstanding natural areas in Africa and thus one amongst the few natural heritage areas of the world (IUCN, 1978).

However, in reality there has been an increasing demand for natural areas as destination sites, whereas there has been a marked decline in the quality and quantity of natural areas due to the increase in tourism. Only 71 (26.5%) of the respondents did not have an interest to return to the SMNP. Some of these respondents suggested that they were too old and would soon be unable to undertake treks into the Simien Mountains.



Table 3. Tourist's intention to revisit SMNP

Do you have intended to visit SMNP again?	Response	Frequency	Percentage
	Yes	197	73.5
	No	71	26.5
	Total	268	100

Source: Own survey data (2017)

Conclusion

The five major nationalities of tourists visiting Simien Mountains National Park came from France (20.86%), Germany (15.67%), UK (14.92%), USA (10.82%) and The Netherlands (8.95%). Visitors from those countries have had long periods of experience in travel and tourism, and will therefore contribute to livelihood improvement and conservation efforts. A large number of respondents was informed about SMNP through personal word of mouth from either friends or relatives. This is why the majority of park visitors were accompanied by family members or/and friends. In tourism marketing, word of mouth is one of the most credible forms of advertising because people who don't stand to gain personally by promoting something put their reputations on the line every time they make a recommendation.

From the results we can conclude that most tourists were motivated to visit the park to satisfy their inherent desire for beautiful mountain scenery and somewhat unique natural landscapes. The wildlife and mountains scenery as tourism resources, the stunning nature of the physical features and the astonishing nature of the mountains take the lion's share to motivate and attract visitors from all over the world. Visitor length of stay in the park was short, and less than or equal to one day, and this result implies that benefits from tourism activities in the study area were limited. After a visit, 85% of the respondents reflected that their opinion/ image was definitely or somewhat changed regarding the main attributes of the SMNP such as safety, security, facilities, and natural and cultural attractions. Based on this visitors opinions we can say that Ethiopia has just managed to overcome decades of bad publicity caused by famines and violent regime changes.

Almost three quarters of the respondents stated that they would like to revisit the Simein Mountains National Park. From this result we can conclude that most tourists are satisfied by the overall service levels and products available at the park, and such tourists will also be willing to recommend the park to their family and friends via word of mouth.

Recommendations

Tourist facilities and product diversification and quality should be improved in the destination so as to enhance the number of major visitors from France, Germany, UK, USA and The Netherlands. Since the astonishing nature of landscape scenery takes the lion's share of visitor's motivation to visit the park, the park management staff should give special attention to environmental conservation and landscape management efficiency and excellence. The national park management marketing and promotion section should give special attention to other promotional channels to attract more tourists. To enhance tourist length of stay in the Simien Mountains National Park, tourism facilities, amenities and other tourism product diversification should be greatly improved. Further study should be conducted on the determinating factors affecting visitors' length of stay as this is important for the parks sustainability and is also an important foreign exchange provider for Ethiopia.



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