



# A survey of visitor satisfaction at Victoria Falls Rainforest

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## Abstract

The study investigated the level of visitor satisfaction at the ecological Victoria Falls rainforest. Ten anchor elements drawn from literature were used to measure visitor satisfaction level. A questionnaire survey was purposively administered on 300 tourists at the protected area's main exit point. Findings demonstrated that high levels of visitor satisfaction exist particularly in leisure, educational and repeat visitors. Satisfaction ratings were high on most variables. Visitors were mostly impressed by easy air connectivity to the Victoria Falls, an expansive range of activities in the rainforest, good quality of services and facilities, and an efficient and hospitable staff. Results further showed that the majority of visitors were keen to return to the rainforest in the medium to long term, ready to recommend the rainforest to others back home, and had an improved post visit image not only of Victoria Falls but also of destination Zimbabwe as a whole. On the flip side, a few international visitors had a dim view on numerous road blocks along the highway to Victoria Falls, vendor menace in the CBD, and steep rainforest entrance fees. Findings have implications in that they directly speak to pertinent policy issues critical to the success and development of the tourism industry, which are, the need for policy congruency between and within government departments and ministries, review of the tourism pricing model, and capacitating of the tourism police service to deal with the vendor menace.

**Key words:** Victoria Falls rainforest, visitor satisfaction, Zimbabwe tourism industry, tourism operators, recreational tourism.

## Introduction

Victoria Falls is Zimbabwe's most treasured rainforest, and one of the few naturally forested areas on Zimbabwe's tourism furniture that stood distinctively as Zimbabwe's tourism architecture. The main objective of the study was to analyse visitors' level of satisfaction at the Victoria Falls rainforest. The findings of this study could be useful on obtaining the best level of satisfaction and point out on areas that may need to be improved, and also could be equally useful for decision makers of other national recreational sites in Zimbabwe as they try to understand what visitors prefer in the rainforest tourist attraction. Over the past decades, the literature, Sharpley, (2010); Grundey, (2008), Bramwell and Lane, (2011) has dedicated extensive discussion to the subject of sustainable development, a goal which has also emerged as a major objective for the contemporary tourism industry. Noble and Johnson (2011) posited that such heightened interest in sustainable development created a need for the development of objective scientific methodologies for assessing tourism sustainability.



Collins *et al*, (2013) documented that demand has always been on the rise for nature based tourism in general and rainforest in particular. Nature-based sites in lower, middle, upper middle and high income countries alike have experienced intensive tourist flows with potentially adverse effects on the rainforest. The comprehension of the level of visitor satisfaction to rainforest tourism is critical if we are to correctly manage nature based recreation. Recreational tourism offers participants a sense of escape and freedom. Connell, (2009) bemoans that despite its popularity, however, recreational as a type of tourism has largely escaped documentation especially in the context of low income countries like Zimbabwe.

### **Structure of the paper**

The paper begins with a survey of the literature on rainforest or nature based tourism, visitor satisfaction, Zimbabwe tourism industry brief, and customer satisfaction conceptual model. Next, the study area, and methodology are presented and followed by a presentation and discussion of findings regarding the level of visitor satisfaction at the Victoria Falls rainforest. The study is concluded by a presentation of the study's conclusions and practical implications.

### **Study rationale and theoretical contribution**

The study sought to analyse and contribute to the limited available data on the subject, and to demonstrate the importance of investigating both the level of visitor satisfaction and the range of facilities within a rainforest in promoting sustainable development. Ten anchor elements were employed against which the level of visitor satisfaction was examined. The study is pioneering in that it is one of the few studies based on two month-long field observations on tourists and the range of activities at the rainforest, yielding field based findings in addition to practical applications for rainforest management. It is the writer's strong conviction that studies on rainforest's range of facilities in general and level of visitors' satisfaction in particular are necessary for the future planning and management of nature-based tourism in Victoria Falls and other places outside Zimbabwe.

Despite the concentration of tourism phenomena in Victoria Falls, no empirical work has been done to capture tourist views on their level of satisfaction. Further, there has been no attempt to study the ecologically protected area of the rainforest which is a hotspot for tourism and gauge the level of visitor satisfaction. This could help tourism planning to diversify activities at the rainforest. The study probed variables directly or indirectly impinging on visitor satisfaction level with their touristic experience at the rainforest.

It is envisaged that measuring visitor satisfaction level at the Victoria Falls rainforest will ultimately help rainforest authorities to strengthen its image, enhance clientele loyalty and fortify emotional connections between visitors and tourist attraction centres in Victoria Falls. Such assessments for this important rainforest have not been done before, and are therefore critical for drafting practical and effective strategic service delivery charters for the tourist site. These are critical aspects that are conspicuously absent in the current tourism literature discourse. It is envisaged that the results of this study will help tourist attraction managers to shape tourist products, improve quality of services and develop tourist attraction specific marketing strategies.

This study therefore, focuses on one of the four cardinal categories of tourist attractions, that is, natural attraction (Swarbrooke, 1996). This study adds to the body of knowledge on visitor satisfaction with tourist attractions by firstly reviewing the existing research on visitor satisfaction in ecologically protected areas. The current study will therefore contribute to the perception of visitors and quality and features of the attraction product literature. In



Zimbabwe, studies on tourist attractions have been predominantly in the area of geographical sciences.

### **Study context**

The study concerns visitors' attractions as the primary aim of tourist trips and the primary component of the tourism system. The central issue addressed in the study can be formulated as : what are the features of rainforest attraction and variables that determine the visitor's satisfaction. Nowacki (2013) highlighted that visitor satisfaction is determined by two broad variables: subject-related (visitor features) and object- related (attraction features). Subject related features are gender, age, education, distance from the place of residence, acquaintance with attraction and the frequency of visiting similar attractions. Attraction features are exhibitions containing vivid interpretations, shows and authenticity.

Visitor attractions are one of the primary components of the tourism system, as well as the major power attracting visitors to tourist destinations. Their satisfaction with visiting attractions will therefore constitute an important factor determining satisfaction with the stay in a tourist destination. Visitor satisfaction is also an important factor behind the success of an attraction on the tourism market. The need for this study resulted from the fact that the literature provides no comprehensive study which analyse determinants of visitor satisfaction in an ecologically sensitive rainforest in the context of Zimbabwe. Despite the ever increasing importance of destinations' environmental resources, there appears to be little theoretical and applied research explicitly focusing on visitor satisfaction at tourist attraction resources. This research therefore attempts to address this gap in the literature. It is envisaged that the findings will challenge Zimbabwe policy makers, who have been positioning Victoria Falls as a premier tourist destination to rethink on their marketing strategies.

### **Literature review**

World over national parks were established primarily to conserve and enhance national scenery, wildlife and cultural heritage. With the passage of time, education, recreation and local poverty reduction were added as additional aims of national parks (Liu *et al*, 2013; & Hein, 2011). Increasing interests in nature based tourism from academics and conservationists made it one of the largest and fastest growing segments of tourism in the last decade hence the importance of properly managing such tourism resources.

Despite the intensive development of research on tourism, recreation and leisure, only a handful of studies have dealt with the issue of visitor satisfaction in an ecological tourist set up. A visitor attraction is a designated, permanent resource, controlled and managed for their value and for the entertainment, recreation and education of their visitors (Halloway, *et al*, 1988). Major visitor attractions play a deciding role in determining the tourist attractiveness of whole regions, being the central element of advertising campaigns and key drivers for the region's economic growth. Middleton (1996:261) proffered a revised and more comprehensive narrative of an attraction as a "designated permanent resource which is controlled and managed for the enjoyment, amusement, entertainment and education of the visiting public". This was a follow up on Dean MacCannell (1976:41) 's definition: "an empirical relationship between a tourist, a sight, and a marker ( a piece of information about a sight)". A visitor attraction can therefore be also regarded as a tourism resource.

Countries worldwide usually tend to promote their tourism resources ostensibly to improve economic developments and reduce inequalities in income distribution by securing employment opportunities in a particular area (Mbaiwa, 2005; Nistoreanu, *et al*, 2011). Bornhorst (2010) posits that a tourist destination should offer a range of activities that visitors



are willing to enjoy their experience, such activities in return will enhance resident's well being and allow the destination to operate in a sustainable manner.

### **Zimbabwe and its tourism industry**

Zimbabwe is one of the least developed countries as per the United Nation's economic indexation. Zimbabwe of late has been recognised for its lack lustre living conditions, its continuous political and economic turbulent terrain, and endemic high level of corruption. However, it is also known for its high literacy rate, sound human resource capital base, has a population of about 14 million according to the latest 2012 census figures. Zimbabwe's economy is entirely dependent upon agriculture. Mining and tourism also contribute meaningfully to the economy. Since attaining independence from Britain in 1980, the tourism industry at its peak has been contributing some 15 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), and employing in excess of 200 000 people. Zimbabwe has a variegated tapestry of tourist attraction resource base. The most visited tourist area in Zimbabwe is Victoria Falls, which in tourism parlance has been re-christened as the Mecca of Zimbabwe's tourism industry by the measure of the number of visitors. It is home to one of the seven wonders of the world, the falls, and the rainforest hence it is deemed a flag ship of Zimbabwe's tourism industry.

Tourism is one of world's largest industries, accounting for 11 per cent of GDP annually (Roe and Urguhart, 2001). Its rapid growth represents a great economic opportunity for a developing country like Zimbabwe, but one that must be pursued with care. Tourism has the potential to become destructive if it over-exploits or degrades the resources upon which it solely depends. Zimbabwe is particularly vulnerable since it relies upon the fragile natural resources. Tourism in Zimbabwe largely hinges on wildlife. The key drivers in Zimbabwe's tourism sector are the Victoria Falls, Hwange and Gonarezhou national parks, Great Zimbabwe monuments, Lake Kariba, and The Eastern Highlands. The Victoria Falls is the epicentre of tourism in Zimbabwe –with the falls and rainforest arguable the unique selling points.

Tourism is a challenging industry due to its volatile nature and susceptibility to a wide range of influences. The sector is very client driven, and requires a lot of marketing and capital to establish a loyal clientele. Okeller *et al*, (2005) posited that access and quality of a destination make tourism an extremely fragile industry. The level of tourist satisfaction is heavily influenced by access and quality, which later on affect the prospect of repeat visits. The quality of wildlife viewing, accommodation, food and personal interactions during the points of interface determine to a larger extent the level of visitor satisfaction. Visitors with a satisfying experience may become repeat customers or recommend the area to future clients. Such word of mouth marketing may be powerful and cheaper in the long haul than any other marketing strategies (Dharmaratne, *et al*, 2000).

Since the early 1980s, tourism has received considerable attention in the economic development strategy of Zimbabwe. The number of tourist arrivals has been increasing steadily. Continuous developments in the tourism and travel industry have increased competitiveness among overseas tourist destinations. As a result of the increase in tourism demand for package holidays over the past decades, destinations have also become more important than individual attractions. It has also been realised that travel agents sell destinations rather than countries. Therefore, tourist satisfaction with a destination, rather than with a facility, might create repeat visits. This highlights the importance of destination management in directing tourism supply and ensuring that the needs of tourists are met (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000).



## **Travel motivation and Zimbabwe brand image**

Motivation is considered to be one of the fundamental components of tourism studies, as motivation initiates certain important activities like why tourists travel, where to travel and overall satisfaction of the travel (Devasa, 2010). Hsu (2009) highlighted seven socio-psychological push motivations in a desire to travel to a particular destination; that is, escape, self-exploration, relaxation, prestige, progression, kinship-enhancement and social interaction, and two pull motivations (uniqueness and education). In spite of possessing a wealth of natural resources, Zimbabwe's tourism sector suffers a negative image due to its political and economic reasons. Bon *et al* (2005) indicated that image influences the destination selection process since a favourable image stands a greater chance to be selected by consumers. Hall and O'Sullivan (1996) cited in Seddighi (2001) support three elements which aid in the long term survival of a destination, which are; word of mouth reporting, image making of media, and policies and interest of destination government. Images are formed with or without actual visitation which can be vague or clear but in any case indicates positive or negative feeling about the place (Gunn, 1988). Generally, the formation of destination image in consumer's mind could be influenced by three sources of information. Firstly, personal experience, which includes personal likes and dislikes, secondly, extrinsic elements, which are socially conditioned- the experience of others and thirdly the supply side communication network (Hsu, 2009).

## **Destination and environmental resources**

Tourism destination supply encompasses a multi-dimensional concept that includes not only tourism economic goods, such as overnight stays and entertainment, but also environmental attractions that serve as a resource base for tourism development and, in many cases are a primary attraction for potential tourism demand. These primary destination environmental supply features include climate, nature, culture and traditional architecture. When tourism is well planned, it can generate benefits at the destination by increasing tourist receipts, government revenue, and employment. For more successful tourism development, it is crucial to attract tourists and to recommend the destination for others to revisit (Chen and Tsai, 2007).

## **Tourism and information**

Providing visitors with information is a common activity in tourism. The scenarios that call for information provision in tourism range from basic safety messages and simple directions through to complex explanations of the cultural or evolutionary history of a place. Giving visitors knowledge is particularly important for phenomena such as guided tours, visitor information centres and visitor education programs in national parks and other protected areas (Khuong and Luan, 2015). For many visitors the information they encounter while at a leisure facility may offer the only opportunity to learn about their bonds to the environment, or to their history and culture. Interpretation can also enhance the quality of the experience for visitors and encourage continued visitor interest in the activity hence their satisfaction. Tourist's enjoyment comes from a good match between what the visitor wants and what the destination offers (Naidoo *et al*, 2011). One way to encourage such a match is to provide visitors not only with good but complete information about the available options so that they can make the best choices about what they do and where they can go so that they can judiciously use their leisure time.

## **Determinants of visitor satisfaction**

Visitor comfort is a concern usually given serious consideration by tourism staff, but often neglected by interpreters. In many tourism and recreation settings communication or



interpretation is either an important component of the experience or is the experience. For example, in guided walks and tours, self-guided trails, eco-tours, self-guided trails, fauna sanctuaries and zoos, interpretation and education are a major component of the experience offered. The three core elements of tourist interpretation are the rainforest walk, with information signs, a rainforest information centre, and a staff of trained guides who provide both tours and on the spot commentaries.

It is generally believed that a deciding factor for the success of tourism attractions is the satisfaction of visitors (Middleton, 1996; Swarbrooke, 1995, Prentice, 1993). Another key factor for visitor satisfaction is the attentiveness of visitors and what is learned during the visit (Moscardo, 1996, 1999). Quality is yet another factor that affects satisfaction through perception of gained benefits. Visitor's future intentions towards the attraction regarding their willingness to visit again are equally important like visitor satisfaction. Quality does affect satisfaction, which later on affects intentions to return to a tourist attraction on the part of customers.

Tomas, *et al.*, (2002) proposed a model interpreting the quality, satisfaction, benefits and behavioural intentions. They expounded that the quality of product is made up of educational factors, exhibitions of animals, general information, staff, comfort, detailed information, and quality of infrastructure. Benefits include factors like introspection, knowledge, spending time with family, escape, watching animals and spending time with friends. These researchers demonstrated the relation between the quality of product, and behavioural intentions, benefits and satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction is a key indicator of a destination's real performance and competitiveness. Customer satisfaction reflects the destination's performance, and improvement in customer satisfaction leads to higher competitiveness (Huang and Sarigollu, 2008; Oh and Parks, 1997; Alegre and Garau, 2011). Previous empirical research has demonstrated that customer satisfaction is a function of both expectations related to certain resources and judgment of performance of these resources (Tribe and Smith, 1998; Martha and Jammy, 1997). Thus far, no studies have captured Victoria Falls rainforest tourism performance and competitiveness from the perspective of visitors' satisfaction level.

Nowacki (2013) outlined the principal visitor satisfaction indicators as experiences, loyalty towards attractions, revisit intentions, word of mouth and willingness to pay. Key determinants of visitor satisfaction are attraction features, which include various forms of activity for visitors, like catering, entertainment, activities for children, special events-fairs, concerts, performances, high quality of environment like cleanliness, aesthetics, and quality of service, amenities-safe car park, clean toilets, and information. Driver *et al.*, (1991); Roggenback *et al.*, (1990); Haggard and Willies, (1991) further posited that people engage in recreational tourism in order to fulfil the desire to go out, for family bonding, learning, doing exercises, closeness to nature, improving knowledge, self-presentation, to escape from physical stressors, and for learning similar values. The quality of experiences, word of mouth, behavioural intentions, re-visit intentions, willingness to pay, sources of information, and service and infrastructure quality are critical in determining the level of visitor satisfaction.

### **Tourism satisfaction: Conceptual framework**

There are two dominant approaches that can be used to explain the tourist's decision making and behavioural processes. Satisfaction can therefore be explained in three different ways. First, as a post-consumption evaluation of a chosen alternative cause of action to determine if it meets or exceeds expectations (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993). It can also be explained as an emotional response derived from a consumption experience

(Spreng, Mackenzie and Olshavsky, 1996). Most recently, satisfaction was defined as an individual's cognitive-affective state derived from a consumer experience (Bosque and Martin, 2008). Tourism satisfaction therefore directly contributes to both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Hedonic wellbeing is achieved when an individual experiences temporary or momentary satisfaction through fulfilment of pleasures arising from subjective needs. Eudaimonic wellbeing is self-actualisation through satisfaction of long term and deeply held values and needs (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Tourists value a trip experience that satisfies both their eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing.

Tourism satisfaction is determined by both cognitive parameters, that is, (predetermined expectations and disconfirmation), and emotional experiences (Oliver, 1993; Yu and Dean, 2001). Cognitive parameters are those that influence satisfaction during and after consumptive experiences and help form future intentions. They include variables that influence tourist destination image and expectations like print and electronic media, internet, film documentaries, and word of mouth publicity by people, of the destination and factors directly influencing disconfirmation, that is, attractions, services and facilities (Chen and Tsai, 2007; Okello *et al*, 2005).

Chen and Tsau (2007) documented that tourism satisfaction is directly influenced by destination image, trip quality, and perceived value. The cognitive-affective model demonstrated that satisfaction is influenced by an individual's cognitive judgements and emotions arising from a consumptive experience (Jun, Hyun, Gentry and Song, 2001; Oliver, 1994, 1993, 1980; Mano and Oliver, 1993). Bosque and Morth (2008) further support that tourism satisfaction consists of attitudes and prior beliefs, post-experience assessments, and future behavioural intentions. Image has a significant role in tourism satisfaction through influencing expectations and loyalty.

Cognitive contributes to the formation of emotions, which in turn influence tourism satisfaction during the stay. Therefore, positive and negative emotions are also important in tourism satisfaction because the perceived enjoyment is based on tourists' own experiences. Bosque and Martin, (2008) argued that tourists trust their emotions more than cognitive judgements in satisfaction formation.

For any business to be successful in today's increasingly competitive market place, it must provide a product that satisfies customer needs (Parasuraman, Bery and Zeithaml, 1996; Peteson and Wilson, 1992). Consumer satisfaction is of paramount importance to service based businesses like tourist attractions as a strong link obtains between consumer satisfaction and service provider profitability (Matear, Osborne, Garret and Gray, 2002; Oliver, 1994; Otto and Brent Ritchie, 1996; Pearce and Moscardo, 1998; Sparks, 2000). Bolton and Drew, (1994); and Hill, (1996) opined that many tourist attractions are now competing with a wider range of businesses than ever before and so must ensure that they provide and maintain high levels of visitor satisfaction.

A sound understanding of the factors that influence visitor satisfaction in the rainforest context would allow tourism operators to develop a strategies toolbox with a view of maximising both visitor satisfaction and entity profitability. While many tourism studies have considered factors influencing visitor satisfaction, no comprehensive frameworks have been developed to include all identified influencing factors. Major influencing factors identified in earlier studies include: situational variables like weather (Sparks, 2000), behaviour of other visitors (Brady and Cronin, 2001), service performance (Bramwell, 1998), and quality of service (Haber and Lerner, 1999), and the individual characteristics of the visitors such as origin (Pearce and Moscardo, 1998), and age and gender (Sparks, 2000).



Visitor characteristics are traditionally employed to segment markets and developing marketing strategies and on that strength it is critical that tourism operators comprehend the correlation between visitor characteristics and level of satisfaction with touristic experience.

Considering the important contribution of natural attractions to the tourism industry, very few studies specifically measuring satisfaction in the ecologically fragile rainforest have been conducted in Zimbabwe. Within Zimbabwe few studies have partially sought to address this issue. Most of these studies have examined visitor satisfaction in national parks. Visitor satisfaction can be defined as a consumer's fulfilment response and the consumer judgment as to whether a product/service provided a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment (Oliver, 1997). Life satisfaction is influenced by four main components of life: leisure, health, family and work (Fernandez *et al*, 2001). Satisfaction with leisure, health, family and work determines satisfaction with life, satisfaction with life directly leads to individual wellbeing. Tourism satisfaction is a key determinant of a person's quality of life through linkages between life satisfaction and individual wellbeing. Tourism satisfaction is determined by both cognitive parameters-predetermined expectations and disconfirmation, and emotional experiences (Oliver, 1993; Yu and Dean, 2001).

### **Review of studies on visitor attractions**

Macro studies on visitor attractions in the past were conducted with a view of developing a typology of attractions or assessing the attractiveness of a site, tourism region, country or even international region. In addition, such studies on natural attractions were also carried out in order to assess and improve the attraction product. The level of satisfaction and especially the experiences gained by visiting attractions, constitute the final product of visitor attractions (Middleton, 1996; Smith, 1994). Satisfaction is both the reason why people visit attractions and the determinants of the quality of the visit, as well as the attraction quality, that is, the performance of attraction providers in terms of providing service to their visitors. Hill and Alexander, (2003:11) aptly captured it by saying " ... customer satisfaction is a measure of how your organisation's total product performs in relation to a set of customer requirements". Satisfaction is the result of comparing customer expectations with the actual perception of product attributes. Satisfaction takes place when the expectations are met or exceeded (Crompton and Love, 1995). In tourism literature, satisfaction tends to be viewed as the attitude resulting after a particular experience (Pearce, 2005), and as the emotional state emerging as a result of experiencing a product (Crompton and Love, 1995). The nature of satisfaction from visiting attractions is fundamentally distinct from that resulting from the consumption of other physical goods. Visitors endorse attraction products for their symbolical and emotional value, which concerns the subjective meanings attributed to an attraction. In this context, the visitors are not passive recipients of external stimuli, but co-originators of their own experience, who actually construct and interpret meanings (Colton, 1987; Wang, 1999; Vitterso *et al*, 2000). Visitors experience the attraction as a whole rather than a sum of its individual attributes.

### **Study site**

Based on annual reports from the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority and Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, the numbers of visitors to the protected area of the rain forest has been increasing in recent years. This shows the huge demand for nature-based tourism and therefore need for facilities and infrastructures to support this increasing demand. Victoria Falls rainforest is located in the northwest of Zimbabwe, in the resort town of Victoria Falls. It is still regarded as a virgin rainforest and has attracted a wide range of visitors. Victoria Falls are allocated in the resort town of Victoria Falls on the borders of Zimbabwe and Zambia. The destination is endowed with Victoria Falls national park, Hwange national park, the rainforest, Victoria Falls international airport and top of





Zimbabwean accommodation stock. The above makes Victoria Falls a key destination in Zimbabwe. The Falls and rainforest are both internationally well known and are protected by UNESCO.

### **Ecological management of the rainforest**

This entails proper management of the rainforest with minimum negative effect on flora and fauna, and the quality of the physical environment, such as water, purity and natural scenery. The day to day ecological management of the rainforest is superintended Zimparks. Waste disposal, urban encroachment into the rainforest, lack of zoning and poor infrastructure have been noted in the literature as major threats to the wellbeing of rainforest ecosystems. Recreational facilities entail the quality of facilities and number of washrooms, availability of stoves, shelter and picnic areas, safety nets or guard rails and the cleanliness of the rainforest.

As a result of the recent rise in demand for nature-based and recreational tourism, many sites are experiencing increased influx of tourists that have the potential to adversely impact on visitors` level of satisfaction. Such areas are ordinarily ecologically sensitive, and visitor-control measures are needed to guarantee sustainable development. The study identifies the ensuing core features of ecotourism as natural attractions, educational experiences and planning and management that maximise the likelihood of outcomes that are environmentally and socio-economically sustainable (Weaver, 2010; Uriely and Shan, 2008; Weaver and Lawton, 2007).

Recreational tourism within the nature based tourism is concerned primarily with the direct enjoyment of a relatively undisturbed phenomenon of nature. Participants hope to get in touch with nature, escape the stress of daily life, and enjoy views of natural landscapes and wildlife (Connell, 2009). Recreational tourism requires a minimal level of physical ability to participate. It is a non-consumptive, non-consuming leisure activity in which resources are neither captured nor harvested. In this way, it is consistent with increased public concern for environmentalism, ecotourism, nature tourism, and low impact leisure. Recreational tourism has long been a pastime in western affluent societies. With increased income and mobility, growing numbers of recreational tourists have had considerable impact on tourism in some places. Nevertheless, understanding visitor`s level of satisfaction at the rainforest is precisely the point of departure of the present study.

### **Methodology**

National park managers need to consider both protection priorities and visitor satisfaction, so appropriate methods must be developed that should be able to study the multi-dimensionality of the rainforest, hence a survey design was used. (Turner, 2013). Attributes used to measure the visitor satisfaction level were: access, purpose of visit, willingness to pay, willingness to return, recommendation to others, image, sources of information, range of activities, quality of service and facilities, friendliness of staff and their efficiency. The survey was conducted at Victoria Falls rainforest`s main exit gate from September to October 2017. In-depth personal interviews with rainforest visitors were considered appropriate. The target population included both local and foreign visitors. A purposive sampling method was used where a visitor aged over 18 years old was intercepted when passing the interviewer, then asked about their interest and time to fill in the survey. The study location was chosen to ensure that the visitors had visited the Victoria Falls rainforest and that they were walking toward an exit from the rainforest. This approach was taken because the experience of the respondents from the rainforest and its existing conditions could help them to respond more accurately. The data collection was carried out continuously from 10AM-5PM local time. The Mitchell and Carson CV method was applied to



estimate the sample size (Mitchell & Carson, 1989). Mitchell and Carson suggested considering a co-efficient of variation of 2.0 when determining sample size (Mitchell & Carson, 1989). Therefore, using their formula and tolerating the disparity of 20 per cent between the time population mean and samples estimate, the mean sample size of 500 was estimated (Mitchell & Carson, 1989). Considering this and my budget, a sample size of 300 respondents was determined for this study. Surveys were conducted on a weekly basis on a different day each week. Half the sampling days were week days and the other half were weekends, in order to account for varying levels of crowding and differing numbers of visitors.

Only those visitors who had been at the rainforest were included in the survey in order to ensure more relevant and reliable data on the level of visitor satisfaction. A questionnaire containing scales for the measurements of motivation, image, quality, access, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions was used in the study. The questionnaire also included questions on frequency of visiting, composition of the group of visitors, interest in the theme of the attraction, and a socio-demographic profile. The assessment scale of an attraction product quality consisted of 10 factors, as outlined above, that is, quality of services, sources of information, willingness to pay etcetera. The scale was developed on the basis of the work of Vitterso *et al* (2000).

Initially, tourist lodges and hotels were earmarked as alternative sites for interviews but they turned out to be unreliable upon realising that tourists spend very little time in hotels and once there, they preferred to rest than go for an interview, and also at the airport tourists would be very busy with formalities hence this strategy was abandoned in favour of interviewing at the rainforest`s main exit gate. This study was done during the peak tourist season. Questionnaire surveys covered the visitor`s background and their assessment of the rainforest. They were asked about their duration of stay in the rainforest, purpose of the visit, whether they were travelling alone or with a tour company, and other tourist attractions visited in the Victoria Falls. They were asked whether past travelling experiences had influenced their rainforest attraction expectations, and what activities they were hoping to engage in. Concerning physical features and amenities visitors were asked about specific physical attractions and activities, as primary attractions that they ranked high and satisfied with. On satisfaction, visitors were asked to rank level of satisfaction on a 10 point continuum scale from zero-not satisfied at all-to ten-highly satisfied, and to offer reasons for their ranking. Visitors were asked whether they would become repeat visitors, and if so, which specific aspects of the rainforest would they prioritise on the repeat visit. Visitors were also asked, would they recommend acquaintances to visit the rainforest, and if so, which aspects would they highly recommend. Questionnaires were face-validated by researchers in tourism. The questions on the questionnaire focused on indicators that reveal the level of satisfaction derived by tourist from the rainforest.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Respondents` demographics***

There were more male respondents than female, who were below 40 years indicating that a younger generation is more fascinated with the rainforest. Most visitors had some tertiary education hence were more enlightened about the rainforest. Visitors had travelled for purposes of relaxation about 70 per cent, business 20 per cent, fun and rejuvenation restoration and adventure 10 per cent.

The study findings are presented below alongside the discussion following the ten themed anchor elements embedded in the questionnaire survey.



### ***Access to Victoria Falls***

Most respondents were highly satisfied on the rainforest access variable. The resort town of Victoria Falls was favourable rated as highly accessible by air transport that is mostly used by international visitors and was comparable to regional standards. The recent refurbishment and subsequent upgrading of the Victoria Falls airport to an international airport status was a game changer. The inadequacy of direct flights for international visitors had been a cause of major concern for quite some time. The implication of this finding is that aviation authorities should maintain the ante to lure more airlines to ply the Victoria Falls International airport to consolidate the influx of visitors without hassles. On the downside, concern was raised mainly by those visitors who use road surface transport, on what they opined as too many police check points or road blocks along the highway, which they said were greatly inconveniencing them. Too many stoppages ate into the visitors' tight schedules. On the aspect of road blocks along the highway, it is high time a common ground is reached between the two line ministries of Tourism and Hospitality Industry and Home Affairs for the benefit of the country. A mutually beneficial policy position must be arrived at that sought to strike a balance between satisfying the security and safety needs of the country and at the same time without undermining the free movement of visitors. Co-ordination between these two ministries is needed to ensure that visitors can travel in Zimbabwe with minimum inconvenience. Victoria Falls is well connected regarding air transport, and road transport. The present transport facilities to access the rainforest satisfied both domestic and international tourists hence they got high approval ratings. This finding validates what was established by Pizman *et al* (1978) in which they stressed that the easy to reach desired goods, services, activities and destinations by the availability, affordability and convenience of transport facilities, information or geographic distribution of activities and destination cause satisfaction among customers. Visitors are wholly satisfied by tourist destinations with easy access.

### ***Purpose of visit to the rainforest***

Results showed that visitors came to the rainforest for a variety of reasons chief of which were: recreational purpose, relaxation, to see the falls, educational purposes, to reconnect with friends and relatives, view wildlife, and business purposes. In the whole, respondents revealed that Victoria Falls rainforest is a composite attraction that caters for a wide array of customers' needs hence most visitors' level of satisfaction was high against the backdrop that their varied expectations were met by their stay and experiences at the rainforest. The implication drawn is that destination authorities should bear in mind that visitors come to the rainforest for different purposes or reasons hence should tailor make their products and marketing strategies so that they address the specific needs and expectations of customers. Customers' needs are varied hence service providers should work on diversifying their product offering in order to capture a wider clientele base. Most of the visitors were on business, leisure and education tours over anchored by wildlife viewing. This lends credence to a widely held perspective that tourism in Victoria Falls is largely wildlife based. A majority of visitors identified flora and fauna as their primary attraction to the area, with the big five as the most highly sought after species. Physical features played a role in influencing visitors' decisions to visit, however, the rainforest and the Falls were the primary reason of the visit and visitors had no misgivings.

### ***Willingness to pay rainforest entrance fees***

Visitors lauded what they referred to as fair entrance charges but mostly international visitors felt charges were a bit on the high side. The entrance fees for the three market segments were as follows: International visitors paid \$30, regional customers \$14, and locals \$7. This is mostly because of the deliberate pricing regime that sort of favour locals at the expense of

international visitors. Such an exclusionist pricing model seem retrogressive despite its noble intention to affording locals an opportunity to also enjoy or partake in tourism activities. This should call for an urgent review of or an outright revision of this punitive pricing system to see if it is still relevant given the resentment and negative reviews it has generated from the revered international client. Since the pricing model is being frowned upon by customers who are regarded as cash cows, it makes business sense to annul the pricing model in favour of international best pricing models like one tier model that has been adopted by first world countries. The economic and tourism system wide financial benefits of one tier model far outweighs the obtaining pricing system used in the rainforest. In fact, it is contradictory to the industry's drive to lure the high spending international visitor who has the spending clout that can drastically transform the sector into a billion dollar industry. The local market is largely dormant hence rainforest managers should actually be incentivising the international market instead of scaring them away. This is not without grave consequences in the long term especially on the perception aspect of the country. This reinforce the misconception that destination Zimbabwe is very expensive. The finding is in line with Hellstrand (2010)'s contention that customers would switch to other companies or tourist attraction centres if they perceive a poor price perception. Indeed entrance fees are a mechanism to manage or control congestion however, the charges have to be reasonable and informed by market sentiments.

### ***Intention to return***

Notwithstanding some few misgivings arising from the incessant pestering of vendors, the majority of visitors affirmed that they would return to the rainforest in the medium to long term. Majority of visitors were satisfied by the rainforest and expressed no reservations for not coming back in the company of family members, business associates and other acquaintances. Such positive future intentions to return were akin to rainforest destination endorsement and it implied that service providers should up their game to guarantee the contentment of visitors. Repeat purchase is vital for the success of any business entity. Without repeat custom enterprises usually go under. What is critical is for rainforest authorities to conduct post visit market research with the view of improving on areas where customers raise complaints. Chances are high that repeat visitors will also recommend the rainforest to first time visitors which is good will that service providers should ride on. The finding dovetails with what was established by Khuong and Luan (2015) wherein that customer satisfaction impacts positively on the choice of destination, and the decision to return by tourists. This is also supported by the research findings of Yooshik and Muzaffer (2003), and Kozak and Rimmington, (2000). The implication on the issue of vendor menace is that collaboration is needed between rainforest authorities, local council and the Zimbabwe Republic Police to re-activate and capacitate the tourism police service.

### ***Word of mouth recommendation to friends and relatives***

Visitors indicated that they will definitely recommend friends, work associates and relatives to visit the rainforest in future. Such unequivocal forthrightness showed that the rainforest was highly rated by visitors. Normally, customers only recommend a product that would have met or exceeded their expectations. The level of visitor satisfaction was therefore high hence the reason why visitors were confident to recommend the attraction to friends. Visitors were convinced that basing on their experiences at the rainforest their friends will not be disappointed. The logical implication of this finding is that customer recommendations and positive testimonials are key to the success of organisations/businesses. Visitors should be delighted so much that they become destination brand ambassadors which, is arguably a much more cost effective marketing initiative at a time when most organisations' marketing efforts are harm strung by budgetary constraints.

### ***Image of destination Victoria Falls***

Ninety five per cent of the visitors had a favourable image of the resort town of Victoria Falls whilst five per cent had a dim view of the same. Image is the sum total of all the salient features of an attraction or destination hence it can make or break a destination. Despite the fact that the image of an attraction tend to be overshadowed by the image of the country at large, Victoria Falls rainforest proved to be an exception. Overall, Zimbabwe has had a bad international market perception but visitors at the rainforest had a positive image of the rainforest. This implies that destination managers must seize and capitalise on marketing the unique selling points of the rainforest to influence the overall image of the country. Actually, the positives noted at the rain forest should be galvanised to project a favourable image of destination Zimbabwe on the global arena. This can also be used to deconstruct the well entrenched negative perception of the country especially in western markets. This finding also revealed that despite having a negative country perception individual attractions can be appealing and have a positive image largely due to their geographical location and uniqueness to different market segments. This finding is consistent with what was arrived at by Rajesh (2013) in which he posited that a positive image of the destination result in visitor loyalty and satisfaction.

Whilst is the general view of tourism players that the negative image formed on Zimbabwe over the last two decades is far too prominent to be eradicated in a short time with the current product unless major changes are introduced, it is incumbent upon players to have a multi-sectoral approach and start by projecting the image of individual attractions like the rainforest before rolling out a national marketing strategy. The starting point should really be redefining the destination's brand image by carefully upgrading the facilities to match international standard. Zimbabwe needs to appear in the mass media with positive information to help change global attitude towards it. The results of this study suggest that visitors have moderate to high level of satisfaction with the present rainforest product, continuous improvement and international bench marking will eventually succeed in attracting more foreign visitors in Victoria Falls.

Perception of quality and satisfaction of visitors are correlated. High value given to efforts of the service provider by visitors has a positive relation with their satisfaction in visiting the rainforest. Effect of satisfaction and benefits gained from visiting impact on intentions to further visits, recommending the rainforest to friends and paying for admission. These results conform to findings by Tomas, Scott and Crompton (2000) as well as Baker and Crompton (2000).

### ***Rainforest sources of information***

Visitors revealed that they got to know about the rainforest through magazines, television adverts, internet, friends, work associates, tour operators, travel agents, and documentaries. The above showed that rainforest service providers have invested heavily in information dissemination which is key in creating awareness in the global tourism market place. Some visitors stressed the need to have well informed tour guides on the ground, who would explain a lot more during the tour of the rainforest. Rainforest authorities should make a mental note of this. Such results are consistent with Reynisdottir *et al*, (2008); Hearne & Salinas, (2002); Lindberg & Veisten, (2012); and Moscardo, (1998), in which it was confirmed that interpretation and information provision is favoured upon by visitors. This is an area that destination authorities collectively need to introspect and take corrective measures particularly having well conversant tour guides on the ground. Also the use of the digital marketing initiatives in this day and age of information and communication technologies (ICTs) revolution, rainforest providers can only ignore harnessing the ICTs at their own peril. Literature abound with successful businesses that have upped their digital



foot print in the cyberspace hence it is the way to go for local tourism service providers. Gone are days when visitors outside Zimbabwe had a misconception that Victoria Falls was part of or an extension of South Africa. This in itself was evidence that there was constipation in the information dissemination and publicity pipeline.

### ***Range of activities in the rainforest***

The range of activities within the rainforest were quite expansive and most of the customers were satisfied going by what they experienced. However, visitors bemoaned insufficient time to fully engage in all the activities on offer in the rain forest, hence in future there is need for proper planning, formal engagement with visitors as soon as they confirm the trip, and working hand in gloves with tour organisations so that visitors are fully aware of the activities they can engage in. This would enable the visitors to plan the itinerary from an informed perspective. The tour guides becomes hand at this point in advising customers appropriately. Visitors were particularly satisfied by bird watching, elephant rides, and helicopter flights, scenic viewing, photographing, and tour walks, and vowed to return to indulge in these activities in future.

### ***Quality of services and facilities***

These passed the test as most of the visitors were satisfied. The general cleanliness of facilities such as guest and rest rooms, foot paths, the airport, the town, and the environment won the hearts of visitors although the aspect of vendor menace in the central business district kept cropping up. A well kept environment resonated well with eco-tourists. It showed that service providers were able to balance between environmental conservation needs and the commercial imperatives of their businesses. Visitors were impressed by the state of the art accommodation facilities available and which they said were on par with international standards especially the restaurants. There was no excessive crowding in the rainforest, availability of all types of food in the hotels and restaurants, hand craft and entertainment spots within the rainforest's shouting distance. Findings reinforce the narrative proffered by Soutar (2001) that the quality of service drastically improve customer satisfaction. This is also supported by Loomis & Santiago, (2013) who established that the quantity and quality of facilities such as washrooms, camping and picnic areas can affect experiences and satisfaction among visitors.

### ***Friendliness and efficiency of staff***

The majority of visitors contented that the staff right from the airport, hotels, taxis, rainforest to tour guides were efficient and very courteous. Visitors were therefore satisfied by the manner in which they were served during the tour of the rainforest. This finding sits in well with what has already been documented on Zimbabwe as having a very hospitable people. Zimbabwe as a country is rated highly and has had global accolades for having the most hospitable people who can converse and relate well with visitors from different cultural backgrounds. Such a positive human resource capital base is the icing on the cake or one of the strength of Zimbabwe's tourism sector. Most of the visitors travelled independently whilst a significantly small share travelled as part of group tours. The former were very flexible, outgoing and liked to venture into the unknown whereas the latter were a lot more conservative and figuratively required hand holding throughout the tour of the rainforest. The implication to rainforest and tour operating companies is that they should be alive to the different needs and expectations of these different customer segments. This finding is consistent with what was established by Valle *et al* (2011) that visitors are keen to travel to destination which are consistently courteous and provide essential information relating to the destination.



## Conclusion and practical implications

The study's overall conclusion is that the level of visitor satisfaction was above ninety per cent. Rainforest activities like foot safaris, drive safaris, avitourism (bird watching), elephant rides, and camping out went far in determining the level of satisfaction derived by tourists at the rainforest. The likelihood of another visit or invitation of others stood at ninety eight per cent which was a strong affirmation of the level of satisfaction. The major reasons for repeat visit cited were the image of the destination, variety of activities, adventure tours, and coming in company with the family and friends.

Overall visitors' satisfaction with the rainforest experience was high. Ratings on individual components of the experience, such as service, value for money, efficiency of staff, friendliness of staff and information on the rainforest were similarly high. Visitors indicated that they would be more than satisfied if urban encroachment is prevented, given the rate at which infrastructural development is taking place in the resort town, a clean environment, and scheduled waste management, provision of enough trash collection bins along the trails, and the provision of education and enforcement programs through rainforest guides are maintained.

For many tourist areas, as highlighted by Reynisdottir *et al*, (2008) charging visitors an entry fee is rather a norm than an exception which is believed to be the only sustainable approach to self-financing, other than relying upon government budget allocations. This is the reality for the rainforest which no longer get any budgetary support from government. Rainforest authorities must ride on the good quality of accommodation, facilities and recreational activities, unspoiled nature, and overall cleanliness of the rainforest and friendliness of the locals to further market the tourism facility to western and new Asian market. Proper investment in more supporting tourism related resources, such as, nature-based accommodation and tourism products, would help 'sell' more natural resources to potential visitors, increasing their overall satisfaction and destination performance. This research offered an informed argument for Zimbabwe's tourism policy makers and practitioners to present a solid case in easing the doing of business in Zimbabwe especially attending to too many police spot checks along the highways to tourist resort centres.

The results have shown that visitor satisfaction was dependent upon tourist attractions, accommodation features and an expansive array of activities. The study recommends a very strong collaboration and engagement between travel agents and protected area authorities in ensuring that tourism satisfaction is maintained in this area. Visitors come with expectations influenced by information sources such as internet, wildlife documentaries, feature films and word of mouth information; hence destination authorities must heavily invest in these media. Ensuring that quality of the trip and perceived value exceed such expectations is one way of achieving visitor satisfaction as advocated by Bosque and Martin (2008).

A key consideration for managers is to be aware that achieving the dual role of conservation and tourism requires visitor satisfaction. Therefore, authorities need to make sure that visitors are satisfied with the rainforest experience so that they become ambassadors. Improving overall visitor satisfaction requires money. Presently, the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority has set on a path to commercialisation as it is no longer getting budgetary support from central government. Finding strategies for multiple revenue streams can improve the protection, maintenance and upgrades of the rainforest. Visitor satisfaction can help the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority to be financially self-sufficient, which is beneficial for the long term sustainability of the rainforest.



Zimbabwe's tourism vision involves making the sector a primary source of national revenue and a major contributor to the socio-economic development of the nation. The tourism sector has huge potential for contributing numerous financial benefits directly or indirectly. It helps generate growth and development for a nation, job opportunities, foreign exchange earnings, and government revenue. Such a vision can only be realised if the level of visitor satisfaction is high on the Zimbabwean tourism product.

The results of this study can contribute to make better informed decisions for two levels of managers and regional planners. Firstly, rainforest managers need to more robustly comprehend how nature-based tourism can educate a broader and more socio-economically diverse base of prospective visitors. The future of the rainforest is dependent upon visitors' satisfaction with all of its features. From the visitors' perspective, better rainforest conservation, will improve their aesthetic appreciation and enhance their experience and satisfaction from the rainforest as was proved by Loomis and Santiago, (2013) and Kaffashi *et al*, (2015).

Efficient visitor management based on the findings of this study can increase the level of visitor satisfaction as was evidenced by lack of congestion in the rainforest park. Victoria Falls rainforest is perceived and advertised as a site whose major attraction is the rainforest. The number of visitors will impact on the quality of the tourist experience and the economic stability of the site. The research recommendations therefore address three areas of management activity: information, infrastructure, visitor regulation and control. Implementation of the study recommendations will require efficient visitor management, sustainable planning and ongoing monitoring of tourists' satisfaction. Improvement in visitor satisfaction will result in increased positive post purchase behaviour, including word of mouth and thus providing monetary benefits to the tourism industry.

### **Future research directions**

A similar study is recommended to be undertaken in other ecological tourist centres like Manapools and Chirinda Safari area, using a different methodological approach in order to compare results regarding the level of visitor satisfaction in such areas.

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