Evaluating tourists' expectations and experiences visiting the Royal Natal National park and Game Reserves in Southern Drakensberg, KwaZulu- Natal

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Abstract

This article is based on evaluating tourists' expectations and experiences at the Royal Natal National Park in the Southern Drakensberg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The targeted population were the guests that visited the park during July to December 2017. Evaluating the expectations and experiences at this destination hopefully assisted relevant stakeholders in seeing how popular the destination was and what any shortfalls in expectations were. The aim of the study was to thus assess tourists' expectations and experiences. Customer expectation, experience and satisfaction is an affective variable in every service sector. Employees of the Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserve in their interaction with tourists help create breath-taking experiences for all who visit the reserve. Expectations and experiences of tourists has paramount significance at the given destination and indeed any destination. Therefore, it was the key purpose to evaluate the employees offerings of quality service to meet the expectations of guests and to ascertain if they indeed offer service that will benefit and affect the formation of the tourist experience positively. Service quality is at its optimum if it has 'positive' impacts on a desired destination. The destination may directly or indirectly affect expectation, experience and the satisfaction of tourists. The expectancy theory was used during the investigation. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for this study. Questionnaires were distributed to 130 tourists using a convenience sampling approach and in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty tourists. Using the descriptive analysis, the survey findings indicated that Royal Natal National Park meets its customers' expectations and offers a quality experience as a take home. An overwhelming 95% of tourists indicated that they would recommend the Royal Natal National Park to their friends, families and colleagues. Tourists thus had a generally positive image towards the destination and for most respondents, expectations were fortunately met.

Keywords: Customer satisfaction, customer expectation, tourist experience, tourist destination, quality customer service.

Introduction

The Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves is well known for its aesthetic beauty. The park was established in 1916, but only received its current name in 1947 after the British Royal family visited there in May that year. The Royal Natal National Park is part of the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site covering 242,813 hectares in KwaZulu Natal and Lesotho. The park is classified in three demarcations, the Thendele Resort, Mahai camp site and Rugged Glen stables and campsite. The Amphitheatre and the beautiful hiking trails that lead to the waterfall, draws tourist's attention and gives magnificent scenery to the park. Today, Royal Natal National Park is managed by KZN Wildlife, the provincial conservation body of KwaZulu-Natal.

The theme of this study was based on evaluating the expectations and service experience of tourists visiting the Royal Natal National Park. Tourists usually have initial expectations of a service before they consume it. Expectations are formed through information derived from

advertisements and word of mouth perceptions from other consumers during a past experience. Bosque et al. (2006) suggest that expectations are formed through past experiences, the tourists' level of previous satisfaction with the service, communication from the service provider such as a promise and the tourists' perceived image of the service. According to Sadeh, et al. (2012), expectations are what people anticipate regarding their experience. Experience is the perceived impressions that are left in tourists' minds after they depart a destination. This experience impression can be influenced by the costs and benefits tourist perceived from traveling, and also from the service that they received when they are at the destination. Customer experience is a judgement that a product or service provides a pleasurable level of consumption and related fulfilment. Customer expectations and experiences are some of the main antecedents of customer satisfaction generally (Luo & Qu, 2016). Expectations are thus related to the performance of a product or service as anticipated by the consumers. Evaluating the expectations and experiences is important so as to paint a picture of how popular a destination is. The objectives of the study were: (a) to evaluate the expectations of guests towards the service quality that is being offered at the Royal Natal National Park (b) to evaluate guests' experiences at the park and (c) to find out if guest will recommend the Royal Natal National Park to their friends, relatives and colleagues.

Literature Review

A number of researchers agree that the concepts (expectations and experiences) are multidimensional, although it seems that there has been no consensus regarding the number and the nature of the dimensions. Customer expectations and experiences are often measured using a SERVQUAL survey instrument, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988). The SERVQUAL instrument consists of 22 items which measure five service quality dimensions, namely, tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of employees), reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence), and empathy (caring and individualized attention the firm provides its customers). Nicolaides and Surujlal (2012), in a study conducted in the same province as the current one, ascertained that policy and managerial implications for a destinations core attractions and tourism support services in general, require careful consideration. These are viewed as basic in extending the length of stay, increasing tourist satisfaction and in enhancing the destination loyalty of tourists.

Perceived experiences value and service delivery at tourist destinations

The park has maintained a popular standard of service delivery for a long time. The SERVQUAL model was used to measure customer's perceptions on the 'expected' service. Customer expectations and customer experiences are leading components in the system of external relations of each organisation. Employees of the Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserve in their interaction with tourists help to create a breath-taking experience for tourists visiting the establishment. Service quality has aroused considerable interest and debate among researchers and tourism products are perceived as being intangible, so that tourists purchase services and take home 'experiences'.

Boshoff and Du Plessis (2014: 75), concur that perception is the process of receiving, organising and assigning meaning to information or stimuli detected by a customer's five senses. Brink and Brendt (2012: 59), also harmonize with this by stating that perception is the result of a number of observations by the customer. The reliability dimension of service quality refers to the ability of service organisations to perform service dependently and accurately, and thus reflects the consistency and dependability of an organisations performance (Roderques, Bonar & Sacchi, 2011: 633). Wilson (2013) argues that reliability means that the

organisation delivers on its promises about service delivery, service provision and problem resolution. Even though unreliable service providers are extremely frustrating for customers, a disturbing number of organisations still fail to keep their promises regarding service delivery. In many instances, the customer is ready to spend money regarding service delivery (Batesan & Hoffman, 2011: 335). Experience is the perceived impression left in tourists' minds (Kim, 2014; Tung & Ritchie, 2011); the impression can be influenced by the costs and benefits tourist perceived they obtained from their travels. Therefore, the benefits may to an extent also affect the formation of the tourist experience.

Tourist expectations in relation to perceived experience

Customer expectation is an affective variable in the service sector (Sadeh, et al., 2012). The study of the levels of expectations and satisfaction has paramount significance in so far as sustained development of tourism at the given destination is concerned (Lather, Singh & Singh, 2012). The perception is that tourists usually have initial expectations of a service before they consume it. Expectations are formed through information from advertisements and word of mouth perceived from other consumers during past experience at a destination. Bosque et al. (2006) suggest that expectations are formed through past experience. Expectations are always changing because consumers are aware of alternative service providers in the ever-growing tourism industry. The tourists' expectations directly influence their satisfaction levels with the services rendered.

The expectations regarding the destination can be the basis for perceived value, determined by the assessment of the money paid and the service delivered. Scholars believe that tourist expectations directly affect the perceived value experience and satisfaction (Song et al., 2011). Expectations are what tourist anticipate regarding their experience. The investigation for this study was assessed on the quality of service determined by tourist expectations and experiences received at the Royal Natal Park, and whether it was negative or positive. In other words, tourist satisfaction was directly influenced by perceived experienced value either positive or negative (Song et al., 2011).

Nicolaides (2006) posits that an enterprise seeking to gain customers' loyalty needs to instil values of workplace harmony and also nurture a strong shared vision amongst all employees, and in this regard the manager should facilitate a strong work ethic for the good of the destination whilst simultaneously caring for the individual employee and reflecting this in all actions. This will have a positive spinoff effect on tourists.

Determining a tourist experience as either positive or negative can be easier for a tourist than determining it as being either authentic or memorable. A positive tourist experience is one which results from the impression associated with fulfilment or satisfaction and which has a positive influence on tourists' lives (Jung, 2015). A negative tourism experience is one which results from disappointment or dissatisfaction and which has a negative influence on tourists' lives. Therefore, positive and negative touristic experiences have broader meanings than satisfied and dissatisfied tourist experiences, the latter only indicate whether tourists' expectations are met or not (Crotts & Magnini, 2010).

Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is "a customer's perspective based on the expectations and subsequent post purchase experiences" (Hoffman, 2013). In other words, it is an evaluation of products or services quality level that meets or exceeds the customers' expectations. Customer loyalty and customer satisfaction call for skilled employees who are fully committed to manage driving an organisation to accomplish its mission. The tourists first form expectations based on the needs, values, past expectations and external prompts about a product or service.

The term customer satisfaction has been around for a long time. Many researchers and academics have emphasized that, it is a key element for a company's success in the market as well a crucial factor for an organisations survival and it has a positive effect on an organisations profitability (Novikona, 2009, Angelova and Zekiri, 2011). A satisfied customer has a tendency to buy more than less satisfied customers. In a highly competitive market, customer satisfaction is indeed crucial key that builds strong and longterm relationships between the customer and the organisation. The measure therefore of customer satisfaction becomes a vital concern for many organisations and service providers so as to achieve success (Mohammad, 2012). Lewis and Mitchell (2011) suggested that when perceived quality is high, it leads to increased customer satisfaction. In fact, service quality leads to customer satisfaction. Saravana and Rao (2011), Lee et al (2009) acknowledge that customer satisfaction is based upon the level of service quality provided by the organisation. Reliability is therefore a key factor in evaluating overall service quality, however tangibles, empathy and assurance should not be neglected when evaluating expected service and customer satisfaction.

The employees at the Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves understand customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. However, more should be done in order to enhance service to the customers and improve employee performance. Yee, Yeung, and Cheng (2010) found that employee loyalty, service quality, and customer satisfaction have a positive influence on customer loyalty in a high-contact service industry. In addition, according to Oliver (2012), loyalty can be developed through different phases, which are the cognitive sense, affective sense, conative manner, and finally behavioural manner. The first three phases are usually referred as attitudinal loyalty, which are dependent on the experiences that customers have with service providers (overall satisfaction). Completing these three stages can lead to the behavioural loyalty as the final stage.

Customer Expectations and loyalty

It is of vital importance for organisations to understand the needs of their customers and provide goods and services that meet the customer's expectations by providing and thinking critically about their requirements (Buttle, 2012). Quality of service delivery is clearly a key factor in customer satisfaction. Expectations are predictions by customers, as to what is going to happen during a particular transaction, what the customer thinks, transacts what the expectation is going to look like. Harris (2013) stated that expectations are personal visions of the result that will come from the experiences that may be either positive or negative. If customer expectations are not fulfilled, then it leads to complaints. The complaint is a post-purchase behaviour which may be delight, satisfaction and dissatisfaction. If the customer is satisfied and pleased then he admires the service (Leventhal, 2014) when the customer is not satisfied, expressions of disappointment and complaints about the services cloud the organisation negatively (Santos, 2013).

The customer loyalty concept derives from the benefits associated with retaining existing customers (McMullan, 2012). Loyalty is a very extremely complex task and a customer's satisfaction is strongly associated with his or her re-purchase intentions.

The findings of the study are based on these three aspects as was conducted at the Royal Natal park

Figure 1.1 Evaluation aspects at Royal Natal National Park (Author's own)
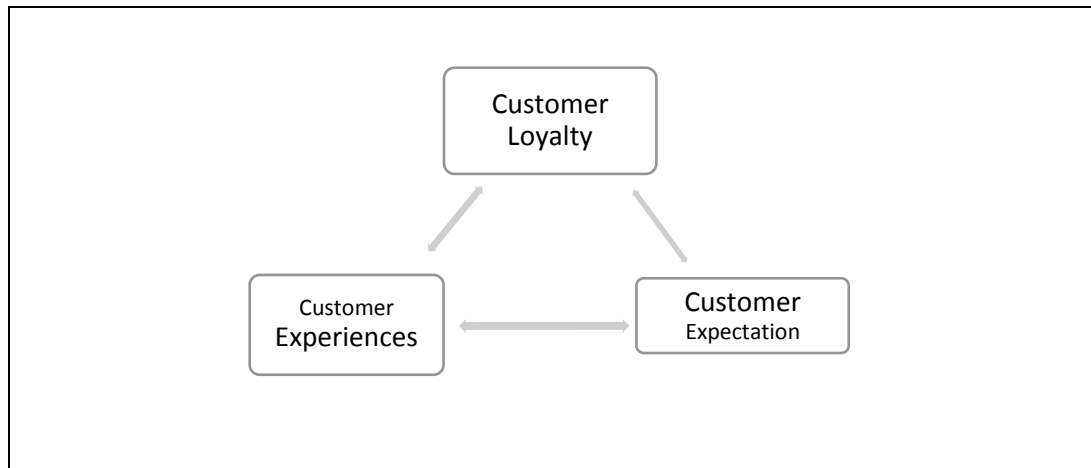
The customer loyalty concept derives from the benefits associated with retaining existing customers (McMullan, 2012). Tepeci (1999:226) confirms that resorts and game parks generate customer loyalty programmes to recognize tourists for their business and as an indication that the resorts are concerned about building and maintaining a good relationship with them. Loyalty is a very extremely complex task, if customer expectations are not fulfilled, then it leads to complaints and therefore loyalty is not attainable.

Titko and Lace (2010:1031) argue that customer satisfaction and loyalty are the foremost components of a tourist destinations' achievement in a particular market. We must not forget that tourists' satisfaction levels depends on the extent to which quality services meet customer expectations and exceed them if possible. Customer satisfaction is a "a customer's perspective based on the expectations and subsequent post-purchase experiences" (Hoffman, 2013). In other words, it is an evaluation of products or services quality level that meets or exceeds the customers' expectations. Wen and Chi (2013: 307) assert that the more exceptional the satisfaction level derivative from services provided by the service rendering business, the greater the trust and loyalty of the tourists to that destination, along with the tourists' willingness to maintain emotive commitment to the firm's services. Many destinations endeavor to create strong customer loyalty from their existing customers, as they attempt to meet and exceed their often challenging expectations (Jacobson, Olsson and Sjovall, 2004:31). Grobler and Nicolaides (2016) state that understanding what drives tourists is an significant issue which can make or break a destination. Since tourists consume products and services and return visit/s and sustainability is desired by destinations, it is imperative to identify variables that encourage the motivation, behaviour and satisfaction levels of tourists.

Methodology

A mixed methodological approach was used approval and consent were obtained by the relevant parties. A quantitative and qualitative approach was used where the researcher gave a self-completing questionnaire to a sample of conveniently selected tourists and some of the management of the park. In-depth interviews were also conducted with tourists. Data was thus collected from tourists visiting the Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves through the use of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. A descriptive form of findings was used in this paper. The structure of these questionnaires consisted of two major sections including demographic information and a service quality section. The following questions were asked

from tourists and were open-ended questions as questions that allowed the participants to freely express their answers as they wished, and to be as detailed and multifaceted or as simple as as they felt comfortable with.

The below table indicates the tourist profiles and experiences taken during the survey at the Royal Natal National Park

Table: 2 Respondents profile and experiences

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Age group	20-30	23
	30- 40	5
	40- 50	10
	50- 60	14
	60 above	19
Were your expectations met at the reception?	Yes	05
	No	95
Would you recommend Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves to your friends and colleagues?	Yes	95
	No	05
Were you satisfied with the service quality offered at Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves?	Yes	95
	No	05

The given table indicates that the highest number of tourist that visit Royal Park is between the age group of 20 to 30. Reason for this visit is that they mainly come for hiking and other adventure activities and would prefer camping overnight at Mahai camp site. Activities like horse-riding at Rugged Glen inside the park was a popular feature with tourists, and the older groups between 50 to 60 years of age and above would come to have a peaceful environment, and would use mainly Thendele resort for accommodation purposes.

Results and discussion

The findings of the study reveal that Royal Natal National Park and Reserves successfully meets tourists' expectations and experiences. These findings are based on the questions that were asked and responses that the tourist gave. The table clarifies the type of questions asked and responses given.

Table: 1 Factors and findings of the study

Factors	Questions	Findings
Experiences	Did you enjoy your visit to the Royal Natal National Park?	"I really enjoyed the visit"
	Were you satisfied with the service provided?	"I am satisfied with my decision to visit"
	Will you come back to Royal Natal?	"I prefer this destination."
	Will you recommend it to friends, relatives and family?	"I have positive feelings regarding Royal Natal."

	Were your expectations met?	"This experience is exactly what I need. My choice to purchase this trip was a wise one. This was a pleasant visit. This visit was better than expected."
Expectations	Attractions (natural, man-made, artificial, purpose built, heritage, special events) Accessibility (entire transportation system comprising of routes, terminals and vehicles) Amenities (accommodation and, other tourists service). Activities (all activities available at the destination and what tourists will do during the visits)	The majority of the respondents whom the researcher interviewed were happy with their experience saying that Royal Natal National Park has one of the best mountains and hiking trails in the world. Mahai camp site was loved by the majority of tourists and this includes returning customers of the park Thendele resort is has a breath-taking view and a calming atmosphere.

Royal Natal Park has a good idea of tourists that visit the park, and a weekly statistic was used to indicate the average number of visitors that visit the park, which is an indication that their expectations are met and their loyalty maintained by the friendly employees.

Figure 1.2. Average weekly visit at Royal Natal
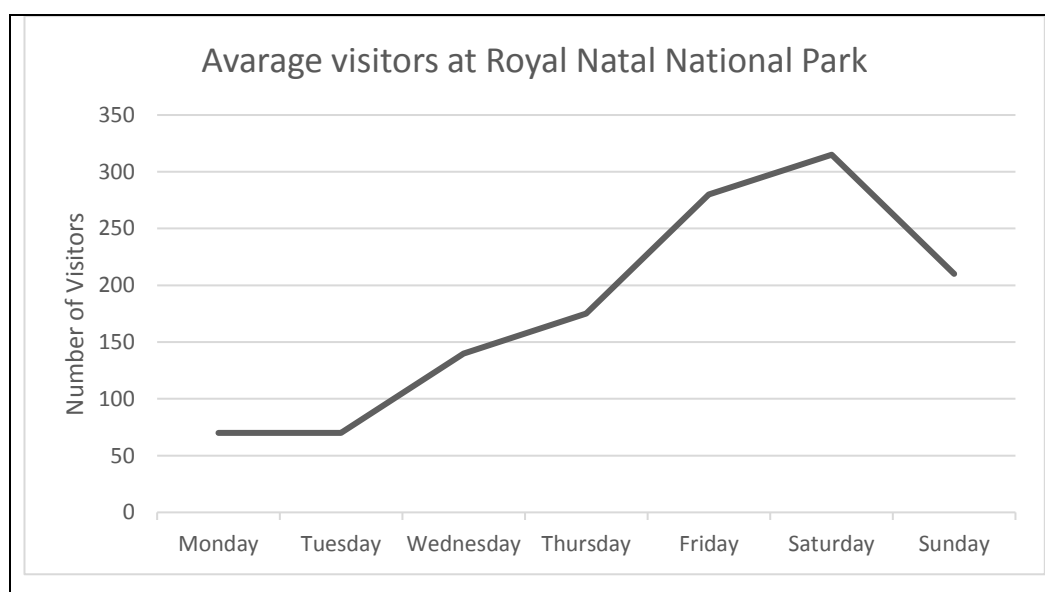
The graph is a representative of the total number of visitors per day from Monday to Sunday who visit the park. It is evident that the park has a bigger number of tourist on weekends. The visitors come to the park for relaxation, picnicking, fishing, horseriding and hiking with their families, friends and as couples.

With regards to expectations and experiences, 95% of tourists were satisfied with the service they get at Royal Natal, stating the warm welcome at the reception is good, the staff are helpful and efficient. Only 5% stated that they were not satisfied and their expectations were not met, and this was due mainly to the false information provided on the internet as a marketing tool. For example, it was indicated that children who are 12 years or younger, would be expected to pay half price whereas they were actually expected to pay an adult rate when they reached reception area where payment is made. This aspect therefore dissatisfied tourists who came to the park with children.

Evaluating the tourists Expectations and Experiences

During the interview with guests, when asked whether they were satisfied with the service quality at Royal Natal, there was a range of opinion on the issues as per the table below:

Service Quality on Site	Number of tourists	Frequency %
Reception	41	27
Thendele Resort	22	15
Mahai Camping site	42	28
Hiking Trails	25	17
Horse Stables	20	13

There were tourists who were extremely satisfied with Royal Natal National Park, who would come for camping, hiking and horse riding and really appreciated the nature available at the park. Amongst the satisfied tourist were those who have become regular users of the park and it this has happened for up to 30 years according to an international couple who visits the park each year. This was an evaluation both from International and domestic tourists who visited Royal Natal Park.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the main outcome of the study, the experience of working on-site for a period of six months, as well as the research findings. The following recommendations are suggested:

(a) Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves should continue training the employees on the importance of delivering quality service to the tourists.

(b) Online marketing advertisements should be updated and state exactly what tourist will pay when visiting Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves children. Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserve should check this issue on all the websites they market themselves on. Management should consider making children under the age of twelve pay half price. This can be done during off- peak in order to avoid losing profit and only apply the rule during peak time (major holidays).

If a booking is being made over the telephone, the reservationist making the booking should ask for children's' age and specify the rules to the customers in order to avoid dissatisfaction on the part of the guest as they arrive at the reception area.

(c) Employees continue offering satisfactory services to the guests, and for them to always strive to be calm especially with elite guests. This is because the Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves has international guests as well and their demands will differ from national or local guests' demands (or needs).

(d) Increase the number horse stables, so that they meet up with the demands of the customers.

(e) The Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves is currently managed by KZN Ezemvelo Wildlife, the provincial conservation body of KwaZulu-Natal. This recommendation is directed to the management body, to increase the number of

employees. This is because the trainees and student interns end up working extra hours in order to meet the many and varied expectations of guests.

(f) There should be more staff-guest encounter points during the walking trails and horse stables in order to enhance guest experiences.

Although the establishment seemed to be short-staffed according to the intern that was on-site, the employees work hard to give the best quality service to customers throughout the year and strive to meet the customers' expectations. This observation is valid as the study was conducted during the middle of the year, when the number of tourists was relatively moderate, however more people need to be employed in order for employees to get enough days off. If employees are rested and get enough time to spend with their families, it will make their working at the establishment as an employer more tolerable and enjoyable. When employees are satisfied and happy with management, they tend perform at their optimum levels and this was evident at the park as employees have a positive impact on Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves.

Conclusion

The Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves meets the expectation and enhances the guest experiences in a variety of ways. This is because they have been operational for many decades. Tourists obviously come with highly perceived expectations about Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves. However, in order for it to continue flourishing, the perceived value, and the given recommendations should be observed and acknowledged. Customer satisfaction brings value to their experiences. The survival of Royal Natal National Park and Game Reserves thus rests on its ability to satisfy the needs of tourist that visit their facilities.

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