

Persuasive Communication and Visitors Willingness to Pay Park User Fees

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Abstract

This study showed that persuasive messages were able to affect on the visitors' willingness to pay (WTP) park user fees (PUF). The primary aim of this study is to measure visitors' willingness to pay (WTP) such fees in Fruška Gora National Park, where no such measurement has previously been undertaken. By setting the main hypothesis that tourists need adequate motivation to pay PUF, the paper sought to answer on two very important questions with the setup of several lower-level hypotheses: are the visitors themselves actually willing to pay PUF? and what are the factors that influence visitors' willingness to pay (WTP)? Using persuasive messages was observed willingness to pay the PUF among 100% of participants. The method survey was conducted on three Park picnic areas, on a random sample of 253 participants. The data were processed with the SPSS program (version 17.0). To determine the frequency of specific deviations chi-square test is used.

Keywords: PUF, WTP, Tourism, Protected areas, Sustainability, Fruška Gora National Park

Introduction

Most countries have reserved a portion of their territories to the protection and preservation of natural environments. There are different categories and levels of conservation, but in general all protected areas are created in order to "Promote the persistence of species, communities or ecosystems that would otherwise decline or become extinct in the wild". A second main purpose in the creation of protected natural environments is the preservation of landscapes of outstanding beauty that provide opportunities for recreation or scientific study Alpizar (2006). The operation of protected areas is in most cases dependent on public funding. Before establishing park user fees (PUF), national park authorities are suggested to investigate visitors' willingness to pay (WTP) for the park, as well as visitors' motivations for justifying their WTP (White, Lovett, 1999; Togridou et al., 2006). In many protected areas worldwide, user fee systems have been implemented to maintain and manage natural attractions including facilities and infrastructure for visitors (Alden, 1997; Buckley, 2003; Rosenberger, Needham, Morzillo, Moehrke, 2012; van Oosterzee, 2000; Van

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Sickle, Eagles, 1998; Watson, Herath, 1999). User fees to access natural resources are considered an effective visitor management tool of social and environmental impacts in protected areas (Schwartz, Stewart, Backlund, 2012; Thur, 2010; Wang, Jia, 2012;). Where effective PUF systems are established, some of the financial revenue can be directed towards protecting, monitoring, and restoring natural environments and heritage sites that may be subject to impacts from ever increasing visitor numbers and their demands (Buckley, 2003). As a result, environmental impacts of visitors are minimised and people can enjoy a natural environment with appropriate visitor facilities (Baral, Stern, Bhattarai, 2008; Depondt, Green, 2006; Morey, Buchanan, Waldman, 2002; Watson, Herath, 1999). Hence, it can be a challenge for park managers to encourage visitors to pay user fees. There are examples of where successful means of communication motivated national park visitors to pay PUF so that management costs were minimised, revenue increased, and friction and resentment between visitors and park management were resolved (Brown, Ham, Hughes, 2010; Hughes, Ham, Brown, 2009;). The paper starts from the main hypotheses (H), that the visitors of the park are, with adequate persuasive communication, willing to pay PUF. The paper found that the greatest influence on WTP have persuasive communication in terms of “visibility” of the investment money (benches, trash cans, trails with signs, environmental protection, etc.), (Vogt, Williams, 1999; Ajzen, Rosenthal, Brown, 2000; Kyle, Absher, Graefe, 2003; Reynisdottir, Song, Agrusa, 2008; Chung et al., 2011), and motivation of health. Relationship between the height of the PUF and the height of the average incomes, and WTP has been noted, but it was not a deciding factor (Kahneman, Knetsch, Thaler, 1986; Monroe, 2003; Petrick, 2005; Chung et al., 2011;). The results of this study can help policy makers and site managers on the Fruška Gora National Park to determine whether a fee policy for natural attractions is a viable option from the visitor’s point of view. The results can also help decision makers in other national parks and protected areas reliant on nature-based tourism, to tackle the financial issue of natural attractions. In a wider sense, the findings of this study should make a good contribution to the tourism literature related to WTP for natural attractions.

Literature review

In order to encourage visitors to pay PUF, parks can manage visitor behaviour directly, by introducing reminder notices and fines, or indirectly by educating visitors to comply with established regulations. However, indirect measures that encourage visitors to behave appropriately are less obtrusive and have consequently become the preferred visitor management tool worldwide (Doucette, Cole, 1993; Marion, Reid, 2007). Persuasive communication has proved to be a very powerful means for the indirect management of visitors in recreation sites (Absher, Bright, 2004; Manfredo, 1992; Manning, 2003) and allows them greater freedom and control over their own behaviour (Cullinane, 1997; Holding, Kreutner, 1998; Steiner, Bristow, 2000; Vander Stoep, Roggenbuck, 1996). If individuals agree with the purposes of fee spending (e.g. trails with signalization, environmental protection), they are more likely to support user fees policy (Kyle, Absher, Graefe, 2003; Vogt, Williams, 1999; Williams, Vogt, Vitterso, 1999). Williams et al. (1999) argued that if people understand benefits from fees paid, they would be more willing to pay. However, Vogt, Williams (1999) found that park users tended to support user fees only when the revenues were used to maintain current service provision rather than to develop new service programs. That is,

campers who were given the 'maintaining' fee purpose condition generally agreed with the fee purpose more than those given 'improving' condition in the experiment. Demand studies indicate that WTP varies with income, education, occupation, demographic aspects and psychographic profiles (Laarman, Gregersen, 1996).

Research methodology

Study area

Fruška Gora Mountain is located between 45° 00' and 45° 15' north latitude and between 16° 37' and 18° 01' east longitude. It is a Mountain in the northern part of Srem (South-western Vojvodina) i.e. south-eastern periphery of the vast Pannonian Plain. It has a total surface area of 21,500 km², which makes 24.3% of the whole territory of the Republic of Serbia (Đurđev et al. 2010). Since this part of Vojvodina is situated between the Danube and the Sava rivers, this means that Fruška Gora Mountain is situated in Srem, mostly in Serbia, with only a small part, in the far west, situated in Croatia (Bukurov, 1978). Mountain is an interesting area for development of sport and recreational tourism in Vojvodina. In its west-east direction it has the length of about 80 km. This low island type mountain, with the peaks Crveni čot (539 m), Orlovac (512 m), and Iriški venac (490 m), represents a mountain with a special benefit for the development of sport and recreational tourism (Jovičić, 1962; Milić, 1973; Vujko, Plavša, 2010). Fruška Gora Mountain is proclaimed as a national park in 1960. in order to provide permanent protection and enhancement of its natural beauty and value. For research purposes, they were singled out by the three most visited resorts in the National Park (Stražilovo, Iriški venac i Popovica), i.e. their parking spaces, where not otherwise paid the PUF, except during the May holiday. Namely, on the Fruška Gora National Park is from 21.04.2012. started charging fees for entry into a protected natural area in the amount of 150 dinars. This fee includes the fee to enter the vehicle, lighting fires and using the parking lot at the park.

Sources of data

The first part of the paper is the field research and data collection by direct examination conducted in three picnic areas on the Fruška Gora National Park. These are the main parking areas that provide strategic access to natural attractions located along the single access road through the Fruška Gora National Park. The study included 253 participants, visitors of the picnic areas. The survey was conducted between May and August 2010, and the questionnaire consisted of questions grouped into independent and dependent variables.

Methodology

Questionnaire-based surveys were conducted in person with a sample of visitors at the selected parking areas. Independent variable is a group of questions that are related to gender, age structure and average income. The dependent variables reflect the opinion of the participants about the factors that influencing on visitors' willingness to pay (WTP). The study was started from the main hypothesis H: that on WTP mostly affects persuasive communication. Before the interview began, the subjects took a brief introduction about the importance of

paying PUF. They were presented all the benefits that PUF would bring to the National Park, whether it comes to protecting the environment in terms of conservation of specific habitats, or arranging excursions, sites, trails and more. In fact, that was used persuasive communication. Shortly after the “introduction” was started interviewing. As the first question asked to the participants was found the question: are the visitors themselves willing to pay PUF? It was interesting that all of the analyzed 253 questionnaires had an affirmative answer. This, however, did not confirm the initial hypothesis but was encouraged to further research. In order to test the main hypothesis, it was necessary to answer on two questions: are the visitors themselves *actually* willing to pay PUF? and what are the factors that influence visitors’ willingness to pay (WTP)? To get the answer to these two questions, and therefore to assess the accuracy of the initial hypothesis, it was necessary to set certain lower-level hypotheses: h1 – The height of the PUF affects on the WTP; h2- Height of the monthly income of the respondents affect on the willingness to pay a higher amount of the PUF; h3 – visitors who think of the PUF as beneficial or as a form of investment are more likely to pay PUF (benches, trash cans, trails with signs, environmental protection, etc.); h4 – visitors who feel attached to the park through the motivation of health are more likely to pay large amount for the PUF; h5 - frequent visitors are more likely to pay large amount for the PUF. The variables that were allocated showed the actual opinions of visitors about the WTP and the PUF. Understanding the factors that influence people’s willingness to pay PUF is critical when park management seeks to determine acceptable PUF. The idea of introducing entrance fees to natural attractions has been controversial and heavily debated. It is not the purpose of this study to explore this debate in detail, but to answer some fundamental questions.

Results and discussion

In the survey 253 questionnaires were analyzed, which makes fairly representative sample. Regarding the age structure of the visitor survey included 153 (53,6%) of the male population and 117 (46,4%) of women. The largest percentage of them 37,9% was over 65 years of age, followed by aged from 26 to 45 (30,4%), from 46 to 65 (20,6%), and the lowest participants were below 15 years (4,7%) and from 16 to 25 years of age (6,3%). The largest percentage of them 29,6% was with monthly income from 31.000 to 50.000 dinars, followed by 26,9% with monthly income from 51.000 to 70.000 dinars and 23,7% with monthly income from 16.000 to 30.000 dinars. The lowest percentage of them 0,8% was with monthly income over 101.000 dinars, followed by 3,2% with monthly income from 5.000 to 15.000 dinars, and 7,9% with monthly income from 71.000 to 100.000 dinars and with no incomes.

Although all of the participants answered “yes” to the question about willingness to pay aside a sum of money for the PUF, it was necessary to find answers on two questions: are the visitors themselves actually willing to pay PUF? and what are the factors that influence visitors’ willingness to pay (WTP)? The results seen in Table 1 showed the amount of tax that the respondents were willing to pay in relation to their monthly income, and the results seen in Table 2 showed the statistically significant difference in their responses. It is interesting that even 78.3% of participants said that they prefer the price of the PUF in the range of 50 to 150 dinars. Of that percentage, there was the largest number of those whose monthly income was in the range of 16,000 to 30,000 dinars. Particular attention was attracted by the fact that both subjects (0.8%) who have a monthly income over 101,000 also responded in favour of the PUF height from 50 to 150 dinars, while 13 participants (5.1%) with incomes

Table 1. The amount that participants were willing to pay

			How large amount of price you are willing to pay?			Total
			50-150 din	160-500 din	510-1000 din	
Monthly Income?	5.000-15.000 din	Count	8	0	0	8
		% of Total	3,2%	,0%	,0%	3,2%
	16.000-30.000 din	Count	58	2	0	60
		% of Total	22,9%	,8%	,0%	23,7%
	31.000-50.000 din	Count	48	14	13	75
		% of Total	19,0%	5,5%	5,1%	29,6%
	51.000-70.000 din	Count	45	20	3	68
		% of Total	17,8%	7,9%	1,2%	26,9%
	70.000-100.000 din	Count	17	1	2	20
		% of Total	6,7%	,4%	,8%	7,9%
	over 101.000 din	Count	2	0	0	2
		% of Total	,8%	,0%	,0%	,8%
	No income	Count	20	0	0	20
		% of Total	7,9%	,0%	,0%	7,9%
Total	Count	198	37	18	253	
	% of Total	78,3%	14,6%	7,1%	100,0%	

Table 2. Pearson Chi-Square test

	Value	Degree of freedom	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	47,976	12	0,000

of 31,000 to 50,000 dinars responded that neither the price of 510 to 1,000 dinars would not be a problem. The analysis of the data confirmed lower-level hypothesis 1 (H_1), which states that the height of the PUF affects on the WTP, but It was also established that the amount of monthly income does not affect on such decision, so the lower-level hypothesis H_2 is proved to be incorrect.

The results seen in Table 3 showed the even 69.2% of participants actually have a negative attitude about payment of the PUF because they gave the answer that they believe that the PUF will be payable solely because of the National Park as an institution, not as a protected area. Yet there were those that said they believe that the money from the PUF will be used for the provision and maintenance of national park facilities, e.g., garbage cans, benches, facilities, roads etc., for the provision and maintenance of picnic areas and for conservation and the protection of the environment (21,7%). This was confirmed the lower-level hypothesis H_3 – that visitors who think of the PUF as beneficial or as a form of investment are more likely to pay PUF (benches, trash cans, trails with signs, environmental protection, etc.). After examining the Table 4 it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in responses, which is $p = 0.000$.

Further research was an attempt to get to the data What are the main motives why respondents visited Park and whether their answers are related to the WTP. The results seen in Table 5 showed that the highest percentage is of those who believe that the mountain is near to their homes, and is full of interesting monuments and facilities (20,9%). All other answers were also the approximate percentage, so it was not noticed the connection

Table 3. Opinion of the participants about PUF

			Age structure?					Total
			0-15	16-25	26-45	46-65	over 65	
Your opinion on paying PUF?	If I pay the park user fee the money can be used for the provision and maintenance of national park facilities, e.g., garbage cans, benches, facilities, roads etc.	Count	0	0	14	9	1	24
		% of Total	,0%	,0%	5,5%	3,6%	,4%	9,5%
	If I pay the park user fee the money can be used for the provision and maintenance of picnic areas.	Count	0	0	9	6	1	16
		% of Total	,0%	,0%	3,6%	2,4%	,4%	6,3%
	If I pay the park user fee the money can be used for conservation and the protection of the environment.	Count	0	0	11	4	0	15
		% of Total	,0%	,0%	4,3%	1,6%	,0%	5,9%
	I believe that national park staff thinks that I should pay the PUF.	Count	5	10	43	23	94	175
		% of Total	2,0%	4,0%	17,0%	9,1%	37,2%	69,2%
	I don't know	Count	7	6	0	10	0	23
		% of Total	2,8%	2,4%	,0%	4,0%	,0%	9,1%
	Total	Count	12	16	77	52	96	253
		% of Total	4,7%	6,3%	30,4%	20,6%	37,9%	100,0%

Tabela 4. Pearson Chi-Square test

	Value	Degree of freedom	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	135,161	16	0,000

Table 5. The motive of the visit the Fruška Gora National Park

			How large amount of price you are willing to pay?			Total
			50-150 din	160-500 din	510-1000 din	
Why you're visiting Park?	For the recreational activities that I enjoy.	Count	26	10	0	36
		% of Total	10,3%	4,0%	,0%	14,2%
	Nature relaxes me.	Count	21	10	17	48
		% of Total	8,3%	4,0%	6,7%	19,0%
	It is much easier to handle with stress when you spend time in nature.	Count	38	4	1	43
		% of Total	15,0%	1,6%	,4%	17,0%
	The mountain is near, and is full of interesting monuments and facilities.	Count	41	12	0	53
		% of Total	16,2%	4,7%	,0%	20,9%
	I love Fruška Gora National Park because is good for my health.	Count	27	0	0	27
		% of Total	10,7%	,0%	,0%	10,7%
	I love hanging out with my family and friends.	Count	45	1	0	46
		% of Total	17,8%	,4%	,0%	18,2%
	Total	Count	198	37	18	253
		% of Total	78,3%	14,6%	7,1%	100,0%

Table 6. Pearson Chi-Square test

	Value	Degree of freedom	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	96,384	10	0,000

Table 7. Frequency of visits to the Fruška Gora National Park

			How large amount of price you are willing to pay?			Total
			50-150 din	160-500 din	510-1000 din	
How often you're visiting Park?	At least once a week.	Count	123	4	0	127
		% of Total	48,6%	1,6%	,0%	50,2%
	At least twice a week.	Count	8	27	16	51
		% of Total	3,2%	10,7%	6,3%	20,2%
	Three times a week.	Count	0	6	0	6
		% of Total	,0%	2,4%	,0%	2,4%
	More than three times a week.	Count	18	0	2	20
		% of Total	7,1%	,0%	,8%	7,9%
	Once a month or less.	Count	49	0	0	49
		% of Total	19,4%	,0%	,0%	19,4%
	Total	Count	198	37	18	253
		% of Total	78,3%	14,6%	7,1%	100,0%

Table 8. Pearson Chi-Square test

	Value	Degree of freedom	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	197,125	8	0,000

between the given answers. This was rejected the lower-level hypothesis h4 – that visitors who feel attached to the park through the motivation of health are more likely to pay large amount for the PUF.

The question: How often you're visiting Park?, was tried to find a correlation between the length of the visit and the WTP. It turned out that it was the largest percentage of participants who come at least once a week (50,2%). The following were the ones who come at least twice a week (20,2%), and those who come once a month (19,4%). Given the percentage of those who are willing to allocate for the PUF amount of 50 to 150 dinars, it is concluded that neither the duration of stay on the mountain does not play a role in the decision of the amount of the PUF. This was rejected the lower-level hypothesis h5 – that the frequent visitors are more likely to pay large amount for the PUF.

Conclusion

During the setup of main hypotheses H, on the two question was tried to be answered: are the visitors themselves *actually* willing to pay PUF? and what are the factors that influence visitors' willingness to pay (WTP)? It has come to the conclusion that participants have a very negative attitude to the PUF and that the height of the PUF that they are willing to pay for this occasion, is actually very symbolic. This means that the real answer to the first question was the fact that the respondents are not willing to pay the PUF. What is the answer to the second question is concerned, on the basis of the data obtained it can be concluded that the amount of fees just play a decisive role in their the WTP. All of this is actually confirmed the main hypothesis. It is concluded that the participants, who have not a positive attitude towards the payment of the PUF, after persuasive communication changed their opinion and answered in favour of the payment. So, bearing in mind the importance of the persua-

sive communication, management of the National Park got a powerful tool. Income from the PUF would be a way to raise the necessary funds, which would later invest in a national park management, protection and conservation of natural and cultural resources, and more. The results showed that an adequate approach and motivations of tourists can be crucial in creating WTP decisions. The fact is however that tourists expect to see concrete results of specific allocations of funds. Sustainable tourism with an emphasis on sports and recreational activities based on the motif of Health correlated with cleaner and better organized excursion, signs, maps and tourist guides, etc, should form the basis on which should rely all messages intended for tourists. Although it was noted the need to introduce the PUF for the Fruška Gora National Park, its implementation is still not fully possible because there are no proper conditions for its implementation. The limiting factor is the lack of adequate infrastructure networks and other facilities. This means that appropriate investment is needed to raise the service to the appropriate level. Some countries, such as the United States and Canada, have a long tradition of fee-paying in national parks and other protected areas (Reynisdottir et al., 2008). There are several reasons for viewing fees as a supplement rather than a replacement to budget allocations. Tourism demand is fickle and revenues from entrance fees might become unstable over time. A combination of public funds and user fees (and even other methods of financing) may therefore be reasonable and more effective. The aim in any case is to achieve increased sustainability in the use of recreational resources. Tourists bring often-cited benefits to a country's economy. It would be ideal if part of these benefits were contributed to the maintenance and management of the often under-funded natural attractions. (Reynisdottir et al., 2008). The low entry fees fail to justify conservation of biodiversity or pursuance of a policy of cost recovery (Mmopelwa et al., 2007). Where ability to pay is an issue, approaches which combine different kinds of fees and charges can be attractive. For example, fees for general entry to a nature park can be kept low so that few persons are excluded at the gate. Inside the gate, individual services and facilities are priced at their cost of provision. This has obvious political appeal, but faces the drawback that collection of different fees at the same site can be costly for management and irritating for visitors. Taxes levied on equipment (fishing gear, camping equipment, boats, cameras, etc) can generate substantial revenues in industrialized countries.

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