



Yield-Relevant Tourist Decision Making

*Project Title: Enhancing the Spatial Dimensions of Tourism Yield
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Kevin Moore, Clive Smallman, Jude Wilson, David Simmons

The objective of this study was to “develop an in-depth understanding of international tourist decision making processes, with emphases on understanding itinerary, activity and expenditure choices”. The report is one of a series contributing to understanding tourist yield (for full programme see : www.leap.ac.nz/spatial_yield) with a particular focus on the role that tourist’s decision making and itineraries form in the overall enhancement of the performance of the tourism sector (for an industry summary of previous supply side research see <http://hdl.handle.net/10182/260>)_

Methods

Methods included qualitative, on-site interview techniques informed by literature searches, on-site observations and stakeholder advice. 140 Intercept interviews (involving 182 tourists in total) were undertaken in five study sites in the Canterbury region based on the role each site might typically occupy in tourist itineraries. Intercept sites were: Christchurch (gateway); Kaikoura (through route – stopping point); Hanmer Springs (terminal destination – close to through route); Akaroa (terminal destination); and Tekapo (through route). Data were analysed through a number of iterations; first manually coding and recoding and use of NVivo qualitative software to identify emergent themes to identify the core characteristics and dimensions of tourist decision making.

Results

Analysis revealed several dimensions that underpin tourist’s decision making. These are best viewed through a lens of ‘trip type’ (including both trip purpose and group composition).

‘Type of Trip’ emerged as a primary determinant of both travel behaviour and decision making approach. Type of Trip categories were identified as:

- Sightseeing – “seeing/doing” New Zealand. Included 47 travel groups solely sightseeing and 93 groups that combined it with one of the other categories.
- Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) – involving some interaction with New Zealand resident friends or relatives. Some 57 travel groups incorporated a VFR component in their travel which were subsequently categorised as strong, moderate or weak VFR links
- Holiday/Family – involving a holiday-relaxation motive for the visitor as indicated by the expressed importance of spending time with their family during the trip to New Zealand. Altogether, 28 travel groups were identified in this category.
- Working Holiday – involving year long working holidays.
- Round the World (RTW) – visiting New Zealand as part of a much longer trip around the world or as part of a long stay (usually a working holiday) in Australia.
- Other – this category involved a variety of specific motives and purposes (e.g., weddings, courses, volunteering, etc.).

Type of Trip was ‘locked in’ **prior** to arrival in New Zealand and framed a wide range of travel characteristics (e.g., transport, length of stay, accommodation, etc.) and decision making processes (e.g., when, where and with whom decisions related to travel in New Zealand were made). Itinerary and accommodation decisions were by far the most likely travel related decisions to have been made prior to arriving in New Zealand. This was true of all tourists, but did vary depending on Type of Trip as well as on

some more specific variables (e.g., presence of children, transport type).

One important dimension to emerge from the decision making analysis concerned those decisions largely made **prior** to New Zealand (overall itinerary and accommodation); and those that exhibit a stronger decision making context **within** New Zealand (daily activities and purchases). Two additional dimensions of decision making are highlighted. The first is the significance of 'social others' – especially family, friends and New Zealanders themselves who 'actively sponsor' known sites or activities. The second is a gradual loosening of rigid (often pre-planned) decision making as trips evolve across time and visitors become comfortable with New Zealand as a destination and the significant 'ease of travel' they commonly report.

Activity and daily purchase decisions were particularly likely to be left 'open' until arrival at specific destinations and tourist sites **within** New Zealand. Visitors determined these 'open' decisions through a combination of encountered on-site information (e.g., signs, brochures, maps, etc.) and, most importantly, through active seeking by tourists of social sources of advice (e.g., over activities, accommodation, restaurants, etc.) and reassurance/reinforcement of contemplated decisions.

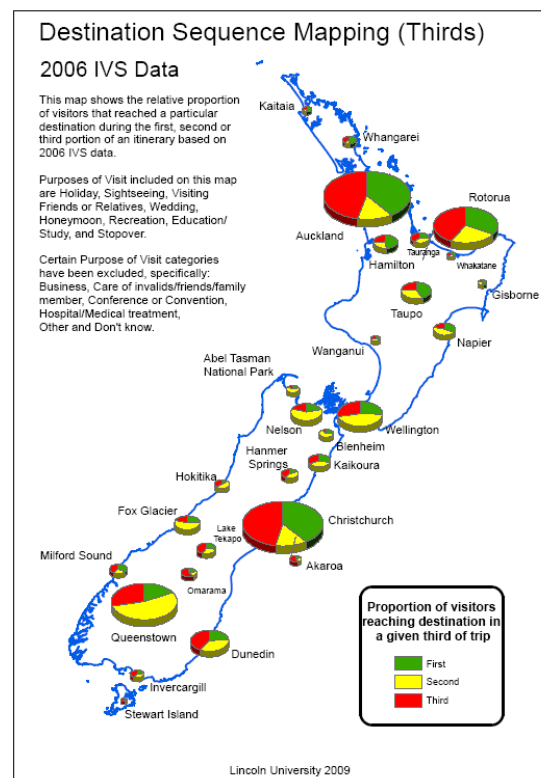
The social composition or context of these 'open' decisions introduced considerable 'serendipity' into tourists' behaviours. Tourists, like everyone else, seek out and rely upon the advice and recommendations of the people they know, trust or simply encounter when making many of their decisions. Social influencers in origin countries include New Zealanders resident overseas, and past visitors to NZ, all of whom can be active in broadly shaping tourists' itineraries within New Zealand. Once tourists arrive in the country, New Zealanders - especially those whom tourists visit while here – can be highly influential over specific choices and decisions. The research particularly highlights the significant role of recent migrants to New Zealand in encouraging friends and family to visit New Zealand and providing 'hands on' help and advice while they are here.

At the extreme (e.g., where a New Zealand resident takes over the planning for a tourist's trip) access to those networks can dramatically influence tourist decisions and behaviours. Stakeholders (e.g., tourism businesses) may not have control over the content of these networks

but participation in them either directly or indirectly through ensuring consistently high product quality and customer satisfaction will be increasingly essential. New Zealanders have a real role in not only encouraging people to come to New Zealand but also in providing everything from general advice about where to go and what to do, through to making the bookings and even travelling with visitors while they are here.

Decisions were carried out within a widely held perception amongst tourists of the 'ease of travel' in New Zealand. That is, the tourist infrastructure, combined with the helpfulness of New Zealanders (both in the industry and more generally), established a strong perception that travel in New Zealand would not involve major logistical difficulties or risks to the quality of the experience.

A 'fourth' dimension in tourists' decision making highlights the way the decision making process changes as the trip progresses in distinct stages. Based on interview data the research has grouped these into 'thirds' with previously 'locked in' decisions - for example, accommodation (within a number of types of travel) - becoming more flexible during different stages of a trip (e.g., the middle stage) and also become shaped by a range of social 'inputs' described above. Destinations can be represented in terms of their (temporal) position within itineraries (see map).



This 'positioning' information can inform marketing strategies and planning processes in particular regions based on the likely ways in which yield-relevant decisions could be influenced by the mix of travel types passing through a destination.

Recommendations for Stakeholders

Stakeholder recommendations include:

- a. Given the importance of social 'others' on tourists' decisions, business operators, marketers and planners at all levels should focus marketing efforts on marketing through social networks. Opportunities for such marketing identified by the current study include:
 - i. Web 2.0 technology such as social networking sites, travel blogs and travel recommendation sites;
 - ii. New migrant groups within the local community;
 - iii. Local residents (e.g., being well-known and regarded within the broader local and business communities);
 - iv. Residents and business organisations from regions that supply the destination with domestic tourists and services (for 'flow-on' recommendations).

Such opportunities allow messages to be embedded within naturally occurring networks that have been shown in this research to filter through into tourist decision making.

- b. Overall itineraries and 'Type of Trip' variables have different implications for spatially distinct sites or destinations which need to be taken into consideration in planning, policy and marketing strategies. Thus tourism planners, policy makers, Regional Tourism Organisations and government departments such as the Department of Conservation could use 'Stage of Trip' both to predict and influence site-specific visitation by the various 'Type of Trip' tourists.

- c. As noted, one of the most prominent findings was the openness of much of the tourists' time, especially once at a particular site or destination. The one day interviews, in particular, highlighted much uncommitted time in a 'typical' tourist day. When combined with tourists' openness to quality signage and information on-site, this suggests that a coordinated approach to organising such 'formal' information sources would help tourists engage more with local opportunities.

Future Research

The goal of the program as a whole is to build an (agent based) model of tourist decision making and in destination interactions that reflects accurately tourist flows evident in the IVS (see for example : <http://www.tourismresearch.govt.nz/Data--Analysis/Tourism-Flows-Model/>) and which can be used to test examine future possible constraints of tourist behaviour, while exploring the ways in which various tourist types contribute to financial, economic, social and environmental outcomes.

Additional opportunities for future research include: applying the model to other regions in New Zealand (e.g., especially in crucial North Island locations); investigating tour operator itinerary, accommodation and activity decisions to determine how these are devised; investigating Asian tourist decision making to identify any cultural differences in decision making processes that may affect refinement of the model developed here; development of quantitative approaches (e.g., surveys) based upon insights from the decision making data and modelling in this study; investigation of the detailed role that new technologies may play in tourist decision making (e.g., social networking sites, GPS systems, etc.).

A copy of the full report can be downloaded free of charge at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10182/1163>

