



Article Title

The role of travel agents' ethical concerns when brokering information in the marketing and sale of sustainable tourism

Citation

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Abstract

Using conservation tourism as a test case, this study explores the role highend travel agents play in selling sustainable tourism. It examines a niche marketing activity in that process. The study focuses on agents' consideration of ethics as they act as information brokers between tourists and operators. Data were collected from interviews with agents and analysed using a deductive content analysis based on six overarching concepts and theories on ethical decision-making. The findings emphasize the implicit influence within conservation tourism of tourism's ethical dimensions, whilst identifying many constraints that prevent a full consideration and/or disclosure of ethical concerns in the sales process. Most importantly, agents made assumptions using a false consensus bias about clients' preferences for service over concerns for the environment, and were not prepared to discuss the more sensitive issues surrounding conservation with their clients. A number of recommendations are proposed regarding the need to unpack conservation information, overcome the false consensus bias, and agents' reluctance to discuss ethics in the sales process. Finally, the findings have broader implications for the development of sustainable tourism, which ultimately will depend on a dialogue of ethical concerns and values within the tourism supply chain between suppliers, brokers and tourists.

Methods

This study adopts an insider approach to interview specialized travel agents and obtain commercially confidential information on the role of conservation variables in the sale of sustainable tourism experiences.

Results

The findings emphasize the implicit influence within conservation tourism of tourism's ethical dimensions, whilst identifying many constraints that prevent a full consideration and/or disclosure of ethical concerns in the sales process.

Conclusion

This study has sought to contribute to the limited research on ethical concerns that underpin the development of sustainable tourism; it is the first study to specifically look at ethical decision-making in conservation tourism, and is only one of two studies to consider ethical

decision making processes of travel agents within responsible tourism (Lovelock, 2008). By adopting this framework, the study has identified some of the theoretical basis underlying the challenges facing the marketing and sale of sustainable tourism and suggests one area where we might focus our attention in order to support the ongoing development of conservation tourism. We suggest, furthermore, that the issues identified here may be similar to those faced by other forms of sustainable tourism, and recommend that a similar framework be applied to research into sustainable tourism more broadly. Extending this research into pro-poor tourism, or tourism that addresses human rights, for example, may provide fruitful avenues for future research.