

2

Well-being experiences in nature: An emerging form of tourism

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Abstract

Tourism is a dynamic, constantly evolving activity that requires detecting consumer trends so that companies and destinations can adapt by offering new and improved competitive products and experiences. For the post-COVID-19 era, dominant projected trends suggest that consumers will be more attracted to authentic, environmentally responsible experiences in less touristy destinations and wide-open spaces. Natural areas and protected spaces rank among the clearest beneficiaries of such trends because they combine relaxation with environments conducive to social distancing as well as offering direct, positive impacts on human health and well-being. For all of those reasons, such spaces not only have the potential to offer new experiences closely related to well-being and the search for overall health but also face challenges to that end. Against that background, this chapter examines experiential tourism in relation to improved holistic well-being and provides examples of experiences in protected natural areas worldwide that offer physical, mental, social, environmental, spiritual, and/or emotional well-being.

Keywords

Experience, nature, protected area, tourism, well-being.

Introduction

Tourism is a dynamic, constantly evolving activity that requires detecting consumer trends so that companies and destinations can adapt by offering new and improved competitive products and experiences. In that light, consumer behavior draws the lines of action in the tourism sector, with special emphasis on the challenges that the sector faces during emergency situations. Amid the complexity of crises and situations of change in tourism, identifying and analyzing elements of a modulating, interrelated, interdependent nature can help to mark the evolution of the sector, as well as its origin and destination markets, in both the short and long term (Hernández & Padrón, 2020; UNWTO, 2021). This time around, the crisis is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit the tourism sector harder than most. As the pandemic continues to alter the behavior of tourists and patterns of mobility worldwide, its effects have also accelerated the reconstruction of altered forms of tourism. Thus, with change comes opportunity, as the adage goes—in tourism sector's case, the opportunity to rethink and redevelop tourism as an asset to the shift toward more resilient, sustainable communities (Euruni, 2020; One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme, 2020).

Rogan (2020) has predicted that 2021 will be a year in which renewal and reconnection assume new value. For tourism, the forecast means that today's travelers will seek out unique, safe and eco-friendly experiences. The UNWTO's observations indicate a trend of proximity-based tourism, along with nature getaways and outdoor experiences. For that reason, its global guidelines to restart tourism include promoting and developing new, segmented products targeted at individual travelers and small groups with special interests in nature, sports, culture, and gastronomy (UNWTO, 2020). Added to that, Riley (2020) has projected that after the COVID-19 pandemic, people will be more appreciative of and attracted to meaningful experiences, feel greater responsibility for the environment, and, in turn, seek out adventure travel, which by its very nature has all of the makings of a post-pandemic antidote, given its focus on less touristy destinations and wide-open spaces.

TripAdvisor (2020) has affirmed that nature is one of the pandemic's clearest beneficiaries, one that offers relaxation in an environment conducive to social distancing. Beyond that, tourism based on and in connection

with nature is directly related to well-being and holistic health for society. Experiences that enhance well-being can be used to transform not only the self but also one's attitudes and relationship with the environment (Pope, 2018). With such environmental awareness, societies can realize a more secure future for wildlife, higher-quality ecotourism, and greater visitor satisfaction (Newsome, 2020). Tourism and travel trends suggest that the market for trips focused on well-being has grown exponentially, while tourism in protected areas has grown progressively over the past 100 years, all within a sector that has steadily matured into one of the largest industries in the world (Azara et al., 2018). Worldwide, natural places and protected areas are recognized as destinations with all of the elements and challenging new experiences needed to promote the health and well-being of tourists, as well as local communities and the destinations themselves (Russell et al., 2013; Azara et al., 2018).

Against that background, the aim of this research is to exemplify and demonstrate the trends in well-being tourism in nature with good practices. This chapter first explores tourism experiences in relation to well-being and nature, a current trend, an interconnected relation, and an emerging form of tourism worldwide. Next, considering the physical, mental, social, environmental, spiritual, and emotional dimensions, suggested by Global Wellness Institute (GWI, 2018), it provides examples of experiences in natural areas that are seeking these dimensions. All this will allow a synthetic discussion that ties everything together, and that shows the interrelation between concepts, experiences, and well-being dimensions. Finally, the managerial implications and conclusion section summarize the value and results of this chapter. It ends with the three keypoints and the three questions addressed to researchers and students.

Experience, well-being, and nature: An interconnected relationship

Although the growing need to design and offer differentiated tourist experiences has increasingly been taken into account in the tourism sector (Brent-Ritchie et al. 2011; Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019), its origins date back to the mid-1970s (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The idea gained significant strength with the work of Pine and Gilmore (1999), who defined *experience* as occurring within a person who is engaged with an event on an