

Ecotourism Experiences of International Visitors to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary, Ghana

Francis Eric Amuquandoh ^a

&

Kwaku Adutwum Boakye ^b

&

Emmanuel A. Mensah ^c

Abstract

This article examines the ecotourism experiences of international visitors to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary in Ghana for the period 2003-2008. Through the content analysis method, written comments and observations made by the visitors upon the completion of their tours of the sanctuary were analyzed. The results revealed seven different experiences ranging from excitement, learning, escape, solitude, relaxation and being close to nature, to dissatisfaction. It was concluded that the experiences expressed by visitors regarding the park could have both positive and negative implications for the image of the sanctuary.

Key words: Content analysis, ecotourism experiences, Ghana, visitors' books

^a Department of Hospitality and Tourism; University of Cape Coast. E-mail: amuquandoh@yahoo.co.uk

^b Department of Hospitality and Tourism; University of Cape Coast

^c Department of Geography and Regional Planning; University of Cape Coast

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, national parks and other protected areas have become popular destinations for nature tourism and ecotourism, both of which are now important components of international tourism (Deng, Qiang, Walker, and Zhang, 2003; Nyaupane, Morais, and Graefe, 2004). Consequently, providing for ecotourism and quality recreation has become an important activity for many Forestry Departments and Agencies around the world, including those in Ghana (Honey, 1999; Shackley, 2001, Zeppel, 2006). Ecotourism is being promoted by governments of both developed and developing nations, as well as by the tourist industry and some conservation organizations, as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism (Beaumont, 2001; Hvenegaard, 1994). The advocates of ecotourism maintain that it has benefits for the environment that far outweigh its potential negative impact. Ecotourism can stimulate the economy and generate direct funding for conservation, as well as provide employment and entrepreneurial opportunities that justify the conservation of natural areas and protection of assets upon which the industry depends (Goodwin, 1996; Honey, 1999). The importance of ecotourism was underscored by the UN's designation of 2002 as the 'The International Year of Ecotourism' (Maclaren, 2002).

Ghana is among the African countries currently promoting ecotourism. Since the mid-1990s, the Ghana Tourist Board, in collaboration with local Non Governmental Organisations such as the Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC) and the Ghana Wildlife Society, has supported numerous community-based ecotourism initiatives including the conservation of community forests and wildlife reserves (Zeppel, 2006). Amongst the well known sites are the Amansuri Wetlands and the Ankasa Conservation Park in the Western Region, the Tafi Atome Monkey sanctuary and the Afadjato Nature Reserve in the Volta Region, and the Weichau Community Hippo

Sanctuary and the Paga Crocodile Pond in the north western and north eastern parts of Ghana respectively. Others include the Mole National Park in the Northern Region, the Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary near Nkoranza in the Brong-Ahafo Region, the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary near Kumasi in the Ashanti Region, and the Kakum National Park in the Central Region of Ghana.

More recently, Prakash, Wieringa, Ros, Poet, Boateng, Gyampoh and Asisch (2005) and Boamah and Koeberl (2007) have explored the ecotourism potential of the Lake Bosomtwe Basin and the need to protect the lake from increased pollution. They identified the lake, the impact rock, the local geology and the Bosomtwe Forest Reserve near Ankaase as some of the attractions that draw ecotourists to the area. Among the reasons for promoting ecotourism in Ghana are to diversify the country's tourism products, to spread the benefits of tourism to the rural areas, to stem the rural-urban drift and, also, to provide an economic justification for maintaining protected areas created by colonial governments (NCRC, 2004; Zeppel, 2006). Thus, the government of Ghana views ecotourism as a key sector for assisting with poverty alleviation in rural areas. Zeppel (2006) revealed that part of the revenue from the Community Based Ecotourism Projects was used to develop the ecotourism sites (improved trails, built toilets and visitor centres), and fund community facilities such as water pumps and schools.

Accompanying this popularity is increasing research interest into visitors' activities and experiences in these natural environments. Experience can be defined as 'the subjective mental state felt by participants during a service encounter' (Otto and Ritchie, 1996:166) or 'events that engage individuals in a personal way' (Bigne and Andreu, 2004:692). In the words of Broad and Smith (2004), examinations of visitor experiences in national parks,

protected areas and zoos have become one of the major research areas in ecotourism. Similarly, O'Dell (2005) reports that the experiential element of tourism, including feelings, sensations and consumer thoughts, are now recognized as important topics for investigation. Tourism experiences have moved from being simple value adding aspects of tourism to becoming valued commodities themselves.

Despite the importance of visitor experiences, no detailed research on ecotourism experiences has been documented on Ghana. Specifically little is known, for example, about the profile, motivations and on-site experiences of visitors to ecotourism sites in Ghana. Previous research has focused on the ecotourism potential in some parts of Ghana including the Lake Bosomtwe Basin (Prakash, et al. 2005; Boamah and Koeberl, 2007), the Community Based Ecotourism Projects in Ghana (NCRC, 2004; Zeppel, 2006), and community participation and expectations from ecotourism development (Awusabo-Asare, Abane, and Kissi, 1999; Dei, 2000). Specifically, Awusabo-Asare et al (1999) examined the individuals and societal needs in the creation of the Kakum Forest Reserve whilst Dei (2000) focused on the communities' participation in the planning and development of Kakum National Park.

Although visitors' books located at various ecotourism sites in Ghana may contain valuable information on on-site experiences of visitors, these sources remain largely unexplored. Commonly, secondary data including information in a visitor's book presents the quickest and the most economical way of obtaining feedback for site managers. They permit the analysis of views, comments, remarks and suggestions of visitors. Given the dearth of information on ecotourism experiences in Ghana, the authors investigated the on-site experience of international visitors at the Owabi Wildlife

Sanctuary, as expressed in the visitors' book.

Focusing on the visitors' books, this paper discusses the nature of experiences gained by international tourists from the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary. The specific objectives of the research were to assess the international market of the sanctuary, the profile of the visitors, and their experiences at Owabi. The ecotourism experiences were identified and examined through an analysis of the texts produced in the visitors' book of the sanctuary.

The motivation for the study originated from the fact that, it has potential use for planning and management of ecotourism attractions in Ghana. According to Webb (2002), a more informed understanding of visitors' experiences would assist conservationists and ecotourism managers with their decision-making on product development and the marketing of their products.

To the authors, the success of park managers depends in part on their ability to understand the content and structure of visitors' experiences. 'Content' involves the various elements of the experience, whereas 'structure' refers to how the elements are combined to define the overall experience. Thus, to sustain the international visitors' interest in Ghana's ecotourism products, an understanding of visitors' characteristics and experiences has a utility in designing suitable activities, services, and management frameworks.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Despite its widespread expansion and popularity, there is no universally accepted definition of ecotourism. For example, Boo (1991: 4) defines ecotourism as 'nature tourism that contributes to conservation through generating funds for protected areas, creating employment opportunities for local communities and offering environmental education', while the US Travel Data Center (1992) describes ecotourism as a travel during which the travellers learn about and appreciate the environment. However, the

literature reveals a degree of agreement that ecotourism should be defined as a normative concept, according to a number of key principles, the main ones being that it should take place in a natural setting, be ecologically sustainable and include some form of environmental education or interpretation (Stamous and Paraskevopoulos, 2003; Weaver, 2001). Some definitions also include the principles of contributing to conservation and providing net benefits to local communities. Although it can encompass both small and large-scale activities, the focus is expected to remain on small-scale activities.

Commonly, the advocates of ecotourism claim that it contributes to conservation by providing environmental education or interpretation to participants. They claim that the environmental education component of ecotourism fosters awareness and understanding of natural environments and consequently promotes pro-environment attitudes and responsible environmental behaviour (Australia Conservation Foundation (ACF), 1994; Goudberg, Cassells, and Valentine., 1991). Accordingly, ACF (1994: 12) contends that 'genuine ecotourism will facilitate the education and inspiration of visitors who will continue their commitment to the protection of the area after visitation'.

The combination of environmental education with firsthand nature experiences is said to be the key to these outcomes (Charters, 1996; Oliver, 1992). Indeed, some writers suggest that the nature experience itself leads to greater appreciation of nature and promotes pro-environment attitudes and behaviours (Brown, 1991; Gray, 1985). It has been assumed by many that all ecotourists will become active advocates for the environment following their visit. However, to date there has been little evidence to support these claims.

Both research and anecdotal evidence tends to suggest that not all ecotourists are already 'converted' to the pro-environment cause or interested in matters related to the environment (Beckmann, 1993; Cater, 1994). Indeed, many take part in an ecotourism activity as part of a larger, overall trip, and such people tend to be less pro-environment in their attitudes (Uysal, Jurowski, Noe, and McDonald, 1994).

ECOTOURISM EXPERIENCES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ECOTOURISTS

Research into the motivations, attitudes and experiences of ecotourists indicates that they are distinctive. An extensive body of literature has identified that environmental settings are therapeutic and of general psychological benefit to individuals. For instance, Scherl (1988), using the Repertory Grid Technique with a sample of 41 adults participating in an outward bound programme, revealed significant benefits related to the 'self' (i.e. self-concept, self-esteem, self-satisfaction, self-awareness). Prior to this, Ewart (1985) identified six underlying motivational dimensions, namely challenge/risk, catharsis, recognition, creativity, locus of control, and physical setting. Higham and Carr (2002) observed that the focus of ecotourism experiences in Aotearoa, New Zealand include experiencing the natural environment, meeting and talking with dedicated staff, learning about endangered birds, educational opportunities, learning about conservation in New Zealand and photographic opportunities.. Based on their investigation into the personal benefits attributed to wilderness, Roggenbuck and Driver (2000) recommended that experience categories such as the self-concept, therapeutic/mental health, physical health, self-sufficiency, social identity (kinship and recognition), educational, spiritual, and aesthetic/creativity benefits be incorporated into an overall outcome-based managerial agenda.

An important dimension of the efforts to understand the experiences of

ecotourists is their socio-demographic characteristics. Ecotourists have been found to differ from the conventional tourists in a number of areas including their socio-demographic and economic characteristics (Wight, 1996). According to Whelan (1991) and Weaver (2001), most ecotourists are from Europe, North America, Australia and Japan because they have more money and more leisure time than many of their counterparts. The average U.S ecotourist is a man or woman familiar with the outdoors, a working professional or retiree, between thirty-one and fifty years of age, and who most likely has had a previous experience of travelling abroad. Ecotourists are relatively wealthy; a survey of U.S. travellers to Ecuador found that approximately 25 percent of the group earned over \$90,000 a year in family income, and that another 27 percent earned between \$30,000 and \$60,000 (Wilson, 1987).

A number of studies have been conducted in the past two decades as part of the efforts to identify the key factors that influence ecotourists' experiences. Among the factors that have been found to influence tourist experiences include the intensity of the interaction, the social context and duration, the level of infrastructural support, the group size and type, the cultural interaction, the willingness to pay, the length of visit and the socio-demographic characteristics. Age has been shown to have marginal effects on visitor learning. Despite reported significant effects of age-grouping (Lothian, 2002; Lukas and Ross, 2005), research into the age-related effects on learned conservation knowledge shows no consistent or linear effect which might be expected if age reflected cumulative increasing benefits of experience. Some researchers, including Saltzer (2002) and Priskin (2003), have observed that gender is related to visitor satisfaction and perceptions of environmental impacts, whilst Lehto, O'Leary, and Morrison (2004) found no influence on any of the constructs tested. Visitors' places of origin have

also been found to influence their environmental awareness and attitudes (Lee and Moscardo, 2005; Priskin, 2003), and their levels of satisfaction (Moscardo, 2001).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The system model was employed to examine the on-site influence of the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary on international visitors (Figure 1). The sanctuary may be thought of as a system whose function is to convert inputs into some desired output through a transformation process. A system model uses three elements, namely input, processes and outcomes.

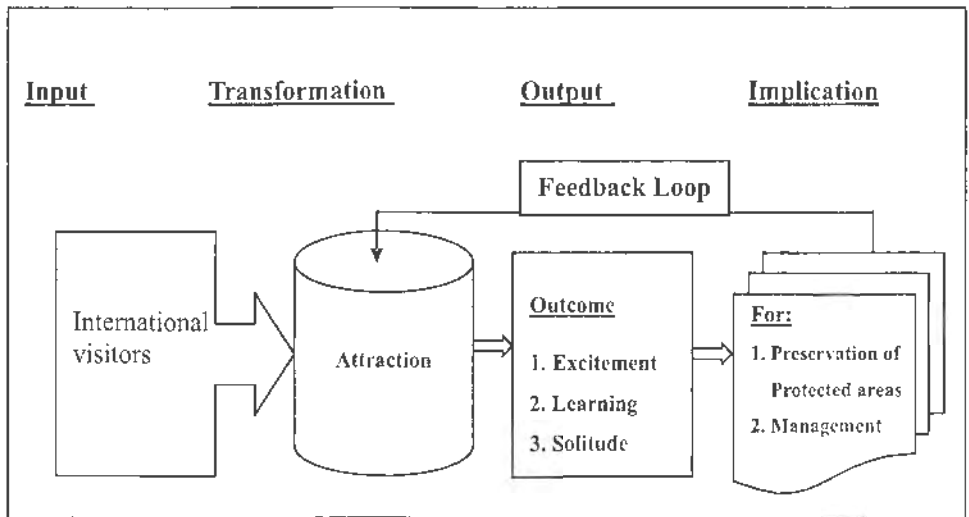


Figure 1: Input-Transformation-Output Relationship

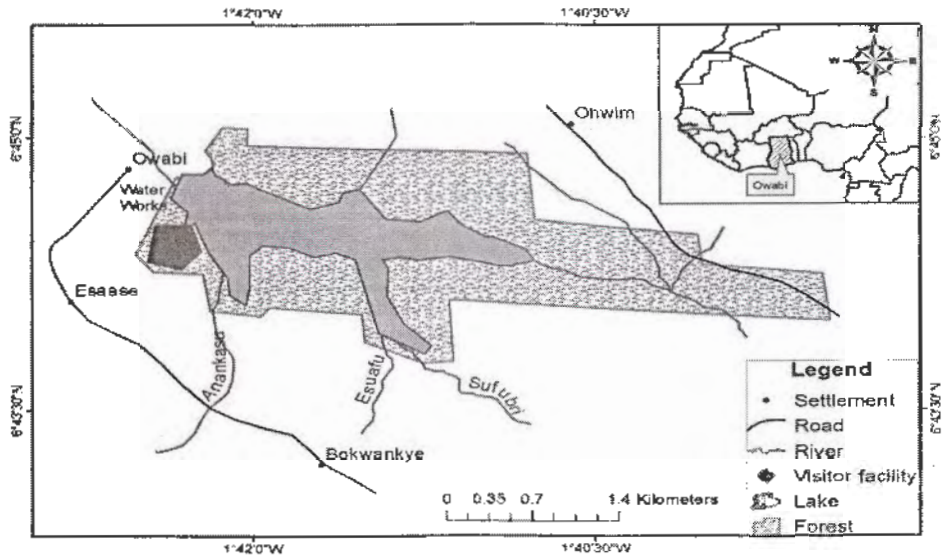
Source: Amuquandoh and Brown (2008)

Input comprises the resources used to carry out the processes. Input can be raw materials, or products or services produced by other parts of the system, but in this study input refers to international visitors to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary (2003-2008). Processes are the activities and tasks that turn the inputs into products or the desired output. As the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary a

natural environment associated with tourism, a guided or independent tour becomes a transformation process for a number of people. Outcomes are the results of the processes or the direct outputs generated by a process. With respect to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary the outcome of the visit is reflected in the comments, expressions and observations made in the visitors' book. At the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary, the visitor's book is located near the exit, where visitors can express their overall impression of the visit. In the words of Katriel (1997: 71), this position allows "an audience-contributed gesture of closure". The links within the system in the framework signify 'flows' between components and highlight the existence of relationships between the different components (Figure 1). For example, the outcome of the visit could serve as a feedback for management of the sanctuary to address some of the concerns raised by the consumers. Thus, the outcome of the transformation process has implications for the system (the sanctuary). The framework makes it possible to rationalize and simplify the real world complexity of nature tours into a number of constructs and components. This approach was adopted due to its simplicity and popularity in tourism studies. It was also chosen because of its ability to highlight inter-relations among various components. The model makes it easier to understand the relationships among various activities and the impact of each on the others. This framework has been used in various forms by tourism researchers like Anuquandoh and Brown (2008), Laws (1990) and Leiper (1991). Specifically, Leiper (1991) employed this approach to examine the issues and factors that affect tourism development whilst Laws (1990) used it to organize elements necessary for tourism development into input, output, and external factors that condition the system.

THE STUDY AREA

The study is based on one specific wildlife management area- the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary (Figure 2).



Source: Resources Management Support Centre, Forestry Commission (2003)
Figure 2: Map of Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary in the Ashanti Region, Ghana

The site is an important inland wetland protected under the Ramsar Convention and has a comprehensive and well kept visitors' book. The proximity (23km) of the sanctuary to the city of Kumasi (the availability of infrastructure in terms of air and road access and hotels) has also made the sanctuary a popular destination for both researchers and wildlife tourists. The 1300 hectares inland Ramsar Site was gazetted in March, 1971 and declared a Ramsar Site in 1988. The sanctuary has a wet semi-equatorial climate with an average temperature of 26°C and rainfalls of between 1500mm and 1700mm per annum. Four seasons are distinguishable in the basin: the dry season (December to April), the first rainy season (May to July with the peak in June), the monsoon drought (July to August) and the second rainy season (September to November).

The sanctuary is dedicated to the protection of the Owabi Lake and maintenance of biodiversity including migratory birds from Europe. It is known for its pristine beauty, abundance of vegetation and wildlife and the Owabi Lake. The sanctuary serves as a habitat for many butterflies, over 140 species of birds, monkeys, bush pigs, bushbucks, antelopes and reptiles like snakes. The avifauna is relatively rich with indigenous birds and some migrants. About 161 birds consisting of 29 families have been recorded, 13 of which are listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). In addition, about 199 species of vascular plants have been identified in the sanctuary. These include 91 species of trees, 19 species of shrubs, 40 species of herbs, 14 species of grass, 1 parasite, 6 species of ferns and approximately 29 climber species. The park has guided hiking trails and interpretive walks about medicinal and other plant uses.

Apart from being famous for educational tours and ecological studies, the Owabi Sanctuary has the potential of hosting **picnics, bird watching**, hiking, **boating, recreational fishing** as well as monkey observation. From the Kumasi Zoo, one can continue to Owabi to enjoy a guided walk through the sanctuary, and possibly to Owchim to see the interesting bead industry. **Currently, the sanctuary is characterized by wide-open spaces and low levels of development. Facilities in the sanctuary consist mainly of a car park, a visitors' centre and walking tracks of varying lengths. Management of the sanctuary is undertaken by the Ghana Wildlife Division of the Ghana Forestry Commission and the park entry fee was under US\$2.**

METHODOLOGY

The on-site experiences of international visitors to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary were identified and examined through an analysis of texts produced in the visitors' books. Specifically, the experiences of the visitors were derived from the expressions, comments and observation made in the visitors' book. Thus, the study involves an analysis of how tourists 'decode', (that is, interpret) the place they visit (Norton, 1996). Other information obtained from the visitors' books included visitors' nationalities, sexes, professions, and the size of travelling party.

Members of the study group were considered to be ecotourists on the basis of their participation in an activity that included the three key principles that define an activity as ecotourism, namely that it occurs in a natural setting, includes some environmental education or interpretation and makes a direct contribution (in the form of an entrance fee) to the continuous protection and management of the site. As the study area is a national park, it was defined as a natural setting. Environmental education was obtained as visitors were provided with fully guided walks during their trip in the sanctuary. The independent groups were considered to fulfil the environmental education criterion on the basis that travelling to a natural area for the purpose of observing nature represented a prime ecotourism social motive of 'learning about nature' as identified by Ballantine and Eagles (1994). In addition, interpretive material in the form of signs and brochures provided by the Ghana Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission was available to them.

The data analysis process started with the translation into English of comments written in languages such as French, Spanish and German. This exercise was carried out with the help of experts in foreign languages in the Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast. Although it is impossible to know

who writes in the visitors' books, it was roughly estimated that as many as two thousand, nine hundred ($n = 2,900$) visitors recorded their impressions during the period of the study: 2003-2008. Written statements deemed unrelated to the tour experience such as "OK" and "my friends", for example, were omitted from the dataset. Comments from domestic visitors were also excluded since the study focused only on the experiences of international visitors. As a result, only 1,900 responses were useable.

The post-coding method comprising the compilation of comments and developing of a coding scheme came next, during which codes were assigned to specific comments/observations. Care was taken to ensure that the codes reflected all the valuable comments and observations contained in the visitors' book. To account for inter-coder reliability an experienced researcher was also tasked to code the same information, but no marked differences were observed. The coding procedure adopted was therefore considered reliable. A total of ten sample texts were found to consist of between 10.6 and 12.4 words on the average, without counting visitors' signatures. These texts might be described as concise, expressing the gist of visitors' on-site experiences.

Like all the data collection techniques, visitors' books are not problem-free. As Kristeva (1986) points out, text producers are also consumers of previous texts an unavoidable reality that also suggests that their own contribution may be influenced by their engaging in a process of intertextuality. It is also noted that the ideas expressed in visitors' books may not be very representative since not all types of visitors write in such books. However, all these disadvantages do not diminish the research value of the visitors' book since all relevant tools in social sciences have some inherent weaknesses. Questionnaires and interviews (the established and widely used tools), for

example, may well ensure representativeness but not the spontaneity of visitors' contributions (Stamou and Parakevopoulos, 2003).

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Table 1 shows the number of international visitors to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary from 2003-2008. The analysis of the data indicated that the park alone attracts visitors from over 31 countries from outside the continent, an indication of its importance as an ecotourism destination. This finding also supports the view that visitors' books provide an opportunity for tracing visitors that pass through a site (Noy, 2008). The spread of the country of origin of the visitors lends support to the argument that environmentalism is now a global phenomenon. It also confirms the assertion made by (Phipps, 2007) that tourism is a multilingual and intercultural experience.

Although diverse people visit the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary, the study revealed that the park attracts more visitors from Europe (British: 19.3%; Dutch: 19.6%; Germans: 14.5%; Austrians: 4.5%) and North American (Americans: 15.1% and Canadians: 3.8%) (Table 1).

Table 1 Profile of International tourists of Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary (N= 1900)

Individual Characteristics	Frequency	Percent (%)
Sex		
Male	1143	60.2
Female	757	39.8
Nationality		
Dutch	370	19.5
British	365	19.2
North Americans	287	15.1
Germans	276	14.5
Austrians	85	4.5
Canadians	73	3.8
Belgian	64	3.4
Swiss	62	3.3
French	56	2.9
Swedish	54	2.8
Occupation		
Student	832	43.8
Educationists/ Researchers	400	21.1
Professional	392	20.6
Volunteers/E	144	7.6
Tour operators/travel consultants	92	4.8
Retirees	25	1.3
Clergy	11	0.6
Homemaker	4	0.2
Travel profile/party size		
1	925	48.7
2-3	327	17.2
4-5	51	2.6
6 and above	597	31.5

Members of both sexes were found to patronize the park, with the males (60.2%) forming the majority. Visitors refer to their status as students, educationist/researchers, professionals, volunteers, tour operators/travel consultants, retirees, clergy, and homemakers (Table 1). The visitors who described themselves as students (43.8%) formed the majority whilst the homemakers formed the minority (0.2%) (Table 1). The finding is consistent with observations made by Honey (1999) that for several decades, national parks and other protected areas have attracted scientists and students. The majority of the visitors were in the sanctuary alone, with only a few

accompanied by family, friends or members of their tour groups. Their profile conforms to that identified by other studies (Higham and Carr, 2003; Honey, 1999, Whelan, 1991).

Experiences found in visitors' books at the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary

Table 2 presents the on-site experiences of international visitors to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary in Ghana. Seven categories of on-site experiences were distinguished- being close to nature, escape, relaxation, learning, improved well-being, adventure/excitement, and dissatisfaction (Table 2). Most of the experiences expressed by the visitors were found to be consistent with the list of benefits that visitors associate with national parks and protected areas (Archer and Wearing, 2003; Ormsby, Moscardo, Pearce and Foxlee, 2004). The most frequently mentioned experiences were adventure/excitement (37.6%), learning (23.0%) and being close to nature (18.7%), whilst improving well-being was the least (Table 2).

The top two experiences were found to conform to the traditional role of national parks and protected areas. The large number of visitors who associated their visit to Owabi with adventure/excitement and learning was found to be consistent with the ecotourism definition put forward by US Travel Data Center (1992). This organization describes ecotourism as a travel during which the travellers learn about and appreciate the environment. Experiences relating to escape and being close to nature were found to support the hypothesis put forward by Heimstra and McFarling (1974) that people visit natural areas to reconnect with nature and escape from urban living. It was evident from the results that a sizable number of the visitors considered their trip as an opportunity to be close to nature.

Table 2: Benefit Domains and Individual Benefit items

Benefits Domain	Examples of comments by visitors	Frequency	Percent (%)	Total (%)
Being close to nature	Experience nature	47	1.6	18.7
	Enjoy natural scenery	512	17.1	
Escape	Experience solitude	179	6.0	6.0
Relaxation	Rest mentally	17	0.6	11.9
	Enjoy the smell and sound of nature	329	11.0	
	Help release built-up tension	10	0.3	
Learning	Learn more about natural history	445	14.9	23.
	Keep physically fit	205	6.8	
	Learn more about nature	34	1.1	
	Experience new and difficult things	19	0.6	
Improve Well-being	Experience sense of personal freedom	4	0.1	0.9
	Help you to recover from everyday stress	20	0.7	
	Help reduce depression and anxiety	3	0.1	
Adventure and Excitement	Experience excitement	950	31.7	37.6
	Enjoy different temperature than what you experience back home	11	0.4	
	Doing something challenging	10	0.3	
	Experience adventure	157	5.2	
Dissatisfaction	Ant bites, lack rest stops, Unable to sight animals	44	1.5	1.5
Total		2996	100	100

Alongside the positive experiences were some reports about dissatisfaction. About 44 visitors, mostly British (13.6%), Italians (10%), Dutch (3.2%) and Americans (2.8%) were unhappy with certain aspects of their tour. The major sources of dissatisfaction in the ecotourism experience were ant bites, hot temperatures, difficulty in sighting wildlife, narrow trails, lack of rest places and high entrance fees. This finding debunked the notion shared by some researchers including Stamou and Paraskevopoulos (2003) that visitors' books function more as books of congratulations than as records of

complaints. It is obvious from the study that visitors' books may contain both good and bad news for the managers of attractions and facilities. This finding expands on the common sources of dissatisfaction associated with ecotourists. The common sources of dissatisfaction identified with ecotourists in national parks are lack of interpretation, education or good guiding (Almagor, 1985; Blaney and Hatch, 1998).

Ecotourism Experiences by Visitors' Profiles

It is a fact that most human experiences with products, services, facilities and attractions are influenced by socio-demographic and economic factors. Specifically, the ecotourism literature suggests some form of linkage between ecotourist experiences in protected areas and their socio-demographic characteristics (Cottrell, 2003; Ormsby et al, 2004). The specific variables considered in the analysis were nationality, sex, and occupation. Table 3 contains the experiences expressed by visitors of the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary by socio-demographic characteristics.

Traditionally, visitors' places of origin have been found to influence their motivations for destination choice (Lehto et al, 2004; Tourism in Queensland, 2006) and levels of satisfaction (Moscardo, 2001). Thus, visitors' place of origin is often used as a proxy for diverse cultural differences. Both similarities and differences were observed with regard to visitors' experiences at the country level. Irrespective of their countries of origin, visitors described their visit to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary as exciting (over 33%) and informative (over 23%). However, visitors from Austria (99.8%), Belgium (68.8%), Switzerland (61.3%) and Britain (60%) rated the excitement domain relatively higher than their counterparts whilst those from Sweden (50%) and Britain (44%) attached relatively more importance to learning. On the whole, Canadians were noted to relate their

visit more with escape (20.5%) whilst the extent of dissatisfaction with some aspects of the tour was found to be higher among visitors from Britain (13.6%) and Italy (10%) (Table 3).

Table 3: Experiences by Visitors' Profile

Individual Profile	Visitors' Experience							Total
	Escape (%)	Relaxation (%)	Learning (%)	Improve Well-being (%)	Excitement (%)	Dissatisfaction (%)		
Nationality								
Dutch	34.6	10.0	23.0	38.1	1.9	53.0	3.2	370
American	30.7	9.4	22.6	38.7	0.0	49.1	2.8	287
Belgian	26.6	14.7	17.2	35.9	1.6	68.8	0.0	64
German	28.6	6.2	17.4	38.0	2.9	59.8	2.9	276
British	26.0	11.2	17.3	43.6	0.3	60.0	13.6	365
Swiss	43.5	1.6	6.5	43.5	0.0	61.3	0.0	42
Canadian	35.6	20.5	12.3	23.3	0.0	46.6	5.5	73
Austrian	12.9	0.0	4.7	9.4	0.0	99.8	0.0	85
French	48.2	8.9	25.0	30.4	0.0	48.2	0.0	56
Swedish	16.7	13.0	16.7	50.0	5.6	33.3	0.0	54
Italian	35.0	15.0	22.5	10.0	0.0	52.5	10.0	40
Sex								
Male	28.1	9.3	17.6	34.8	1.3	60.9	2.4	1143
Female	31.4	9.6	20.5	40.3	1.6	57.1	2.1	757
Occupation								
Student	31.6	7.5	18.9	32.6	2.2	66.6	2.2	832
Teachers/								
Researchers	33.0	7.5	18.0	36.8	0.3	55.0	4.5	400
Volunteers	18.8	13.2	22.9	38.9	1.4	61.1	0.0	144
Professionals	27.8	13.5	18.6	48.0	1.3	45.7	2.0	392
Clergy	27.3	27.3	9.1	27.3	9.1	45.5	0.0	11
Travel operators	19.6	12.0	13.0	26.1	0.0	71.7	0.0	92
Retiree	28.0	0.0	28.0	52.0	0.0	44.0	0.0	25
Homemaker	0.0	25.0	25.0	25.0	0.0	99.0	0.0	4

Both male and female visitors to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary were noted to associate their visit with excitement/adventure (male: 60.9%, female: 57.1%) and learning (male: 40.3%, female: 34.8%). On the whole, the females were found to relate their visit more to being close to nature (31.4%), escape (9.6%), relaxation (20.5%), learning (40.3%) and improving well-being (1.6%) than their male counterparts who were more excited, and, at the same time, dissatisfied with their experiences.

Like the others, adventure/excitement and learning emerged as the most popular experiences across the different occupation groupings. Aside this, retirees (28.0%) and homemakers (25.0%) were noted to relate their visit more to relaxation than their counterparts whilst the clergy described their experience as being close to nature (27.3%) and enjoying solitary conditions (Table 3). On the whole, educationists/researchers emerged as the most dissatisfied people whilst homemakers (99.0%) and travel consultants were the most excited groups.

DISCUSSION

Visitors' statistics compiled by the Ghana Wildlife Department (2000-2008) suggest that there is a consistent increase in the number of international visitors to the Owabi Sanctuary. This finding is consistent with a report made by Buckley (2002) that the scale and scope of commercial activities in public protected areas continues to increase. The literature suggests that one of the main reasons for the increasing demand for ecotourism activities is the environmental movement (Lec, 1997; Fennel, 2003) that has taken place in the past few decades. Saarinen (2005), on the other hand, relates the shift towards nature-based tourism to wide changes in consumption and economic production, that is, moving from Fordist to Post-Fordist production. Thus, nature-based tourism has emerged as a form of tourism that represents an alternative to mass tourism in terms of its greater individuality, activity and flexibility.

From the supply-side, it is suggested that the interest in nature-based tourism has been accompanied by some destinations' parallel interest in developing this particular form of tourism. Rinne and Saatamoinen (2005) report that as a rural development policy, nature-based tourism has been introduced as a substitute for the declining agricultural activity in Finland after the nation joined the European Union. The finding also suggests that the establishment and promotion of Owabi as a national park has been largely successful.

The sizeable number of tourists who described themselves as volunteers lends support to the notion that volunteer tourism is becoming a popular tourism phenomenon. Volunteer tourism is the type of tourism whereby individuals combine travel with volunteer work. Thus, it involves attracting individuals who are seeking tourist experiences that are mutually beneficial to their personal development as well as to the social, natural, and economic development of the host nation. While Raymond and Hall (2008) recognized that the concept of international voluntary work is not a new phenomenon (eg. early examples include missionary movement), they acknowledge that in recent years there has been a rapid increase in their numbers. Callanan and Thomas (2005) linked the increase to an increase in sending organizations that promote, sell and organize programmes for volunteer tourists. According to these researchers, sending organizations now offer a large variety of options depending on volunteer tourists' preferred activity, location and duration.

The seven categories of experiences identified with international visitors to the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary appear to support the earlier works of Higham and Carr (2003), Archer and Wearing (2003) and Ormsby et al (2004), all of whom pointed to the fact that the experience encountered by ecotourists at national parks and protected areas are mixed and diverse. The study shows

that on the average visitors associated two experiences with their visit, with the most common mentioned experiences being adventure/excitement and learning.

The emergence of learning as the second most important experience was expected. As noted by Stein, Denny and Pennisi (2003), learning is consistently rated as one of the most important motivators of ecotourists. Some authors, including Fennel (1999) and Honey (1999), also insist that education must occur if the nature-based tourism business can be described as ecotourism. According to Stein et al (2003) and Weiler and Ham (2001), education has an important role to play in helping to provide a sustainable supply of quality nature-based recreational experiences as well as ecotourism opportunities. Researchers, including Stein et al (2003), have noted that many visitors to nature-based recreational areas want to learn more about the environment. Past researches have shown that the desire to learn new information is an important motivation of nature-based recreational visitors (Ham, 1992).

However, it is evident from Table 3 that individuals do not place equal importance on learning when they visit natural areas. It emerged from the study that Swedish (50%), British (43%), and Swiss (43.5%) visitors placed greater importance on learning than their counterparts. Similarly, it was noticed that retirees (52%), professionals (48%) and females (40.3%) attached more importance to learning in natural environments than their counterparts.

The sizable number of visitors (18.7%) who saw their visit as an opportunity to be close to nature is in conformity with literature. Studies of ecotourists, both on commercial ecotours and travelling independently, have found that

they generally share the motivation of wanting to view or experience a natural area and to learn about nature (Ballantine & Eagles, 1994; Hatch, 1998). It is also consistent with the hypothesis put forward by Heimstra and McFarling (1974) that people visit natural areas to reconnect with nature and escape from urban living.

The comments by the clergy to the effect that their visit to the park offered them an opportunity to get closer to nature and also to enjoy solitude were expected. For some people, including the clergy, travel for religious and spiritual purposes as well as to sacred locations and places of exceptional beauty or mystery are the essence of travel. Prior to this, Rinschde (1992) had identified religious buildings as a space where tourists can develop their faith and find peace. This notion can be traced to the romantic period when travel to natural areas was highly recommended and promoted. One of the popular axioms of the romantics was that to be closer to God, one needed to be with nature. Thus, for the clergy, nature appreciation is one of the reasons to travel or to tour a protected area.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper shed new light on two aspects of ecotourism, namely the genre of visitors' books and the experiences of visitors in a wildlife sanctuary in Africa. It suggests that visitors' books can be particularly revealing of the on-site experiences in an ecotourism site. Traditionally, suppliers of products and services need to have information about the experiences of their consumers in order to market their products and services more effectively. The study demonstrated that visitors' books provide one of the quickest and most economical ways of generating such information. As suggested by the systems model applied in the study, the comments and experiences expressed by the visitors about the park have implications for the image, marketing and

management of the sanctuary.

Critical examination of the comments made by the visitors revealed that their experiences have both positive and negative implications for the attraction. For instance, visitors' reported experiences such as learning and excitement have the potential of boosting the image of the park whereas issues bordering on excessive heat, ant bites, difficulty in sighting animals, and lack of resting spots may have negative publicity. As evident from Figure 1, the outcome of the transformation process has implications for the system (the sanctuary). Issues bordering on excessive heat, ant bites and difficulty in sighting animals, provides valuable information which park managers could use to prepare their clients prior to the trip.

Since learning was rated as the second most important experience in the sanctuary, it can be said that it is fulfilling part of its core mandate. Apart from their conservation role, national parks in the world, including the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary, are required to provide ecological, historical and cultural education to the public. The Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary was established in 1971 to, among other things, educate the public, and the evidence from the visitors' books suggests that the park is performing well in that regard. About 23% of the visitors acknowledged that they learnt something new from their visit to the sanctuary.

Although only about 2% of the visitors reported being dissatisfied with their experiences, it has been suggested by Hawkins et al (1989) that there is much to learn from such people because they are likely to be expert travellers who know their way through the complexities in the tourism trade and who may have encountered similar experiences. They tend to be individuals who search diligently, complain vigorously, join organizations, pinpoint fraud

and deception, and generally, police the tourism market.

From the methodological perspectives, the study aligned itself with Stamou and Parakevopoulos (2003) that the observation and comments expressed in the visitors' books can be subjected to some level of quantitative treatment. Studies of tourists' experiences based on visitors' books are demonstrating a noticeable trend away from the positivist approach to more interpretive, qualitative and reflexive modes of enquiry (see Coleman and Crang, 2002; Noy, 2004). The value of the descriptive method employed in the present study is that it highlights the nature and scope of visitors' experiences in natural environments which are often missed in the qualitative treatment of the same issues.

At the global level, the study contributes in building an understanding of ecotourists' characteristics, expectations and experiences (the human dimensions of nature-based tourism). These can assist in developing appropriate management strategies to enhance national parks and protected areas, and to assist in addressing some of the concerns of tourists regarding the use of the environment for tourism purposes. Visitors experiences' in tourist destinations reveal how satisfied or dissatisfied the target market is with what is currently available, what product features and benefits those visitors desire and how they compare with the services offered by competitors. According to Boyd, Westfall and Stasch (2004), managers in general need certain kinds of information in order to be able to satisfy their customers' wants and needs and to design effective marketing programs while still earning profits.

Also the study could be used as a framework for evaluating the benefits and experiences being offered to visitors by the other protected areas in Ghana,

including the Kakum, Mole, Ankasa and Bia National Parks. Since parks in Ghana are required to maintain visitors' log books, such books could be used in ascertaining the benefits and experiences visitors associate with these parks. Current recreational resource management frameworks developed in the United States and other places require managers to understand how specific settings result in experiences and benefits.

Apart from these, the outcome of the present study could serve as a baseline for monitoring changes in the benefits and experiences that visitors associate with the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary overtime. Lawrence, Wickins and Phillips (1997) reveal that as natural areas become more popular, they tend to come under pressures which in the end affect the quality of visitors' experience. Hence, the need to monitor the benefits and experiences visitors' associate with the attractions over time.

Finally, the study also reinforced the value of maintaining a good visitors' book in tourism attractions, including hotels, restaurants, museums, national parks and zoos. As evident from this study, visitors' books offer an opportunity to assess the market of facilities, characteristics of clients, their activities and experiences as well as their complaints relating to the attraction. Generally, the systematic understanding of visitors' characteristics, activities and experiences provides useful inputs for the planning and management of nature-based tourism on the local scale (Newsome, Moore, and Dowling, 2002).

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