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WHAT HIKERS WANTS? THE PERSPECTIVE OF TRAVEL AGENTS

Abstract:

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries and its total contribution to the global economy in 2014 was US$7.6 trillion, which equates to 9.8% of total economy GDP in 2014. Mountains are important regions for tourism industry and its second most popular tourist destinations after coastal regions. Hiking and trekking are most popular activity in mountains region and it is estimated that more than 50 million people visit mountains each year. So that hiking was come out to individual activity and it's to be a massive event. Nowadays hiking is commercialized and mostly it's become organized by travel agency and tour operators. Travel agency which is offering hiking activities to know the demands of the individuals involved in these activities and is required to submit to it for services. The aim of this study to determined hiking participant expectation from hiking by travel agency perspective. 34 travel agency officials participated in the study. Data were collected by questionnaire developed by the researchers. Results show that according to travel agency officials "visual quality" is the most important expectation factor for hikers. And other expectation factors are "safety", "accessibility", "existence of pristine local services", "the difficulty of the trail", "expert guidance service", "the popularity of the trail/ well-known", "the trail crowdedness", "existence of infrastructure and superstructure (WC, water points etc.)", "activity costs", "presence of guidebook" and "appropriate climate conditions".

Keywords:

Alternative tourism, hikers, travel agency, expectation

JEL Classification: L83

Introduction

Hiking is a concept that is mostly evaluated within the outdoor sports. But evaluating the hiking activities only within the scope of the outdoor sports, extremely limits the scope of the concept. Hiking is as well as being an activity with high sporty intensity, also offers opportunities, such as, knowing different cultures, seeing exotic locations, visiting historical and archaeological places, observing the natural life, socializing, expanding psychologically, allowing to gain health and fitness. Besides many benefits of these activities, unlike other nature sports it is an activity for every age group and every segment of society can participate in without requiring specific skills, technical material. Moreover, this activity can be performed in the places where individuals live, in the natural areas where they can reach in a short time and in too far points of the world as well. For this reason, hiking is a both touristic and recreational popular activity (Çetinkaya, 2014). Travel and tourism industry is an important industry that contributes directly to the world gross domestic proceeds and employment. According to the data of 2014, tourism and travel industry has created the 9.8% total gross domestic proceeds by contributing 7.6 trillion dollars to the global economy (WTTC, 2015). It is considered that the mountain tourism has a share of 15-20% ($ 70-90 billion) (Panos, 2002; UNEP, 2007) the tourism industry, which is one of the world's most important industries, and every year, about 50 million people are estimated to visit the mountains. Hiking activities are performed primarily in the natural areas and mostly in the mountains. According to the research performed by Ecotourist Market Profile (2000), hiking is one of the three most important travel elements for ecotourists (Argawal and Baranwal, 2012). In addition, on the research conducted in many destinations, it is seen that hiking is the most popular activity among the ecotourists (Wight, 1996). Ecotourism is a kind of tourism growing at a rate of 20% to 34% every year since the early 1990s, and generates 7% of the market of international tourism according to the World Tourism Organization estimates (BAKA, 2012). When considering the ecotourism market share and growth rate, the dimensions of the hiking demand is understood well.

Today, because the mountains and the natural areas are heavily used for touristic purposes, activities being performed are no longer individual activities, they have become mass activity. While these areas are highlighted to be the second most popular tourist destination after coastal regions (Mieczkowski, 1995), millions of people utilize the natural areas to participate in various recreational and tourist activities. For these reasons, a part of mountain climbing and hiking activities have been commercial. The mentioned activities are organized by important tour operators and national and local companies. Even most of the hiking and climbing activities, as with other forms of tourism, are marketed in the form of package tours (Somuncu, 2004). The purposes of these activities participant such as, exercising, regeneration, relaxation, watching landscapes, wildlife tracking, visiting the cultural and archaeological areas, discovering the natural history (Lekies and Whitworth, 2011) and also they have the opportunity to choose from different

alternatives. This choice leads to the emergence of a purchasing behavior. Understanding consumer behaviors provides to produce and supply the tourism products in the consumer's request (Demir and Kozak 2011). Hiking is a touristy product by oneself. In this sense it requires to choose from many alternatives. Choice among these alternatives like many other touristy product, significantly vary extending from different countries options to different regions options or even different hiking routes options within the same region. At this point, hiking trails presented as a product should include the specifications meeting the demands and expectations of tourists and eco tourists. If heavily favored hiking activities aren't managed well, they affect the vegetation and physical and biological structure of the natural areas they are performed negatively (Sun and Walsh, D 1998). Being known the demands of individuals attending hiking activities by the travel agencies, which offers hiking activities and offering services regarding these demands will contribute the existence of enterprises and sustainable use of the natural areas as well. Therefore, the travel agencies must keep in the forefront of sustainability when planning hiking services. In this context, this study was carried out for the evaluation of the expectations of the individuals attending these activities by the travel agencies which organized the activities of hiking having a significant share within the growing travel industry.

Material and Method

The aim of the study is the evaluation of hiking activity demands of the individuals participating in the hiking activities by the travel agencies which organize the hiking activities. The travels agencies associated with Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURSAB) and organize the hiking activities have constituted the scope of the study. Obtaining the contact information of the agents designated for the study, the information form prepared by the researcher has been sent to all agents. As a result of the data obtained it has been found that all of the travel agencies reported by TURSAB haven't handled with hiking activities actively. For the determination of the travel agencies actively engaged in hiking activities, through accession the internet addresses of companies, deeply research has been carried out concerning the areas of their activity. As a result of this research, it has been determined that seventy travel agencies have conducted hiking organizations. By calling the designated travel agencies, the contact information of the authorized people has been obtained and information form prepared has been sent by e mail. Forty one of the travel agencies to whom information form had been sent have called back. Seven of forty one travel agencies have stated that they haven't conducted the hiking organizations actively. Also one travel agency has stated that it had purchased services from another travel agency, contacted for the hiking organizations with in the scope of the survey. The study has been conducted with thirty three travel agencies actively organizing hiking activities. Questionnaire consists of open-ended questions concerning general information of travel agencies, and hiking expectations of the individuals involved in hiking activities. Content analysis approach

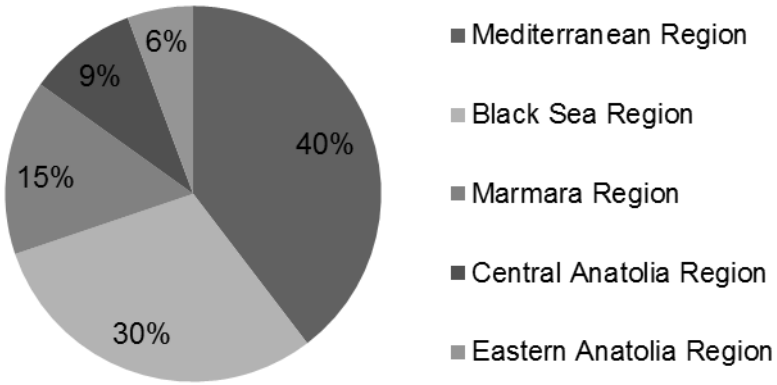
was used in the analysis of open-ended questions. This approach is often used in the analysis of open-ended questions. This method aims providing a base through explanation of obtained raw data, and after arranging the resulted situation being clarified, revealing the code and categories in certainty (Yaman, Vidinlioğlu and Çitemel 2010). In the scope of this analysis technique, codes were found by examining the data obtained from the study by the examiner, and these codes were classified under specific themes (Bulgu, Koca Arıtan and Aşçı, 2007).

The digital data resulting from Questionnaire are entered into Microsoft Excel being encoded and have been analyzed using SPSS 18 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), in the evaluation phase of the data, identifier statistical methods, such as frequency (f) and percent (%) were used.

Findings

In accordance with the data obtained from performed studies, approximately 2000 hiking tours are organized by the travel agencies in Turkey in a year and 22,000 people are involved in these organizations. 70% of the hiking activities in Turkey are conducted in Mediterranean and Black Sea regions (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of Hiking to Regions



According to the information obtained from the study, the most important factor affecting the individuals participating in hiking activities is visual quality (36.6%). The following factors respectively are security (11.0%), easy accessibility (11.0%), existence of pristine local services (food and beverage facilities, accommodation, etc.) (8.5%), the difficulty of the trail (8.5%), the presence of expert guidance service (7.3%), the popularity of the trail/ well-known/ (3.7%), the trail crowdedness (3.7%), existence of infrastructure and superstructure (WC, water points etc.) (%2.4), activity costs (2.4%), presence of guidebook (2.4%) and the appropriate climate conditions (2.4%), (Table 1).

Table 1: The Influencing Factors to Trail Preferences of Hikers

	f	%
Visual Quality	30	36,6
Security	9	11,0
Accessibility	9	11,0
Existence of Pristine Local Services (food and beverage facilities, accommodation, etc.)	7	8,5
The Difficulty of The Trail	7	8,5
Expert Guidance Service	6	7,3
The Popularity of The Trail/ Well-known	3	3,7
The Trail Crowdedness	3	3,7
Existence of Infrastructure and Superstructure (WC, water points etc.)	2	2,4
Activity Costs	2	2,4
Presence of Guidebook	2	2,4
Appropriate Climate Conditions	2	2,4

Discussion and Conclusions

Today, hiking activities have become an important tourism product. It is highlighted that while mountain tourism has a share of about 15 percent in the tourism sector, (Panos, 2002; UNEP, 2007), when the data obtained was examined it can be said that this figure is lower in Turkey. According to tourism statistics in Turkey, 61% of tourists visit the country for holiday purposes (TURSAB, 2014), any statistic information regarding the foreign visitors involved in mountain tourism or hiking doesn't exist. According to data obtained from the studies, It has been determined that yearly 22000 people are involved in hiking activities. In this issue, the number of tourists coming to the Turkey in 2014 constitutes 0.06% of this number (www.ktbyatirimisletmeler.gov.tr). This number is quite low according to the rates in the world. Also it is seen that the hiking activities are concentrated in the Mediterranean area. This situation is similar to the general structure of the Turkish tourism. This condensation is thought because of that Lycian and St. Paul the routes accepted as the fourth longest walking routes in Europe and the world's tenth most beautiful walking routes (Baştemur, 2009; www.theguardian.com; www.lonelyplanet.com) are established in Antalya. It also seems to support this opinion

that eco tourists mostly (66.8%) prefer (66.8%) route (especially Olimpos Cirali and Adrasan, Kaş, trails) as activity area (Ay et al., 2010). The route is thought to be heavily used due to some reasons ,such as ; natural, historical, cultural characteristics, marine connection, different tourism products offered by other activities rather than hiking (sea, sand, Sun, climbing, paragliding, canyon passing, authentic accommodation, etc.), the appropriate climatic conditions, and Antalya is a tourism Center. Also, because this route is the first walking route opened in international standards, marked and which guide is prepared, it might be increasing the route intensity.

According to the officials other findings obtained from the study are related with the factors affecting the trail preferences of the individuals involved in hiking activities. In this respect, the factors affecting the trail preferences of the individuals are visuals, security, easy accessibility, pristine local services (food and Beverage facilities, accommodation, etc.),trail difficulty, the presence of expert guidance, trail popularity/well known, the trail crowdedness, lower and upper structure (WC, water points etc.) activity costs, presence of guidebook and the appropriate climate conditions. The factors identified in the study are similar to the factors used to determine the properties of a trail made by Bektaş (2010). According to the data, the most significant factor affecting the trail preferences of the individuals involved in hiking activities is visuality (natural beauty). This result similar with the results obtained by Gibson's study (1994) which is about that the most valued trail preference is natural beauty and Dorwart et al. founds study (2010) which is about that the most enjoyed trail preference is natural beauty. The second important factor has been determined as "security" as a result of the study. Risk is one of the important components of outdoor sports and adventure programs (Attarian, 2012), and a lot of parks involved in hiking activities are closely interested with walking security (Stewart et al., 2000). Therefore security factor effects on the expectations of users are considered naturally. Especially in the hiking activities there are many risks that may occur physically. For this reason, many measures are taken to reduce the risks in hiking areas. Another factor affecting trail preferences "is the easy accessibility". Easy accessibility affects user satisfaction in urban (Çetinkaya et al. 2014) and rural areas, (Uzun and Müderrisoğlu, 2010) recreation areas. The easy accessibility is also one of the features of the most successful destinations (Oter and Ozdoğan, 2005). In addition, Goosen and Langers (2000) study's finding about the most quality indicator for the individuals involved in hiking activities in rural areas is easy accessibility to the natural beauty, suggesting parallels with the study about the most important factor affecting trial preferences of the individuals involved in hiking activities. Pristine local services are one of the most motivating factors for eco tourists (BAKA, 2012). Because hiking activities are important eco touristy products and the user expectations about pristine local services in hiking trails is considered naturally. This result supports the idea that hiking activities are important cultural activities besides a sports branch. Hiking is a performance-based activity and an activity that can be performed without requiring excessive physical force as well. When considered that these activities are mostly carried out with recreational

aims (Outdoor Foundation, 2013), it is natural "trail difficulty" to affect the demands of participants. According to the travel agencies officials, the presence of "expert guidance services" and "guidebook" are among the factors affecting the trail choice of participants. The presence of these opportunities also supply the needs regarding information, language difficulties, suffering the difficulties of being a stranger, on the other hand reduces the probable risks which may occur during hiking activities (getting lost, entering the dangerous zones, wild animal encounter etc.). Therefore, like other tourism products, guidance service is required in hiking activities as well. In addition, it is a different subject of discussion that only 4.75% (Çetin and Kızılırmak, 2012) of guides in Turkey have an expertise with regard to hiking. Also "the presence guidebook" increases the acknowledgment of the region and contributes the destination to be preferred. Price/quality compliance, climate conditions, diversity and possibilities are common features of successful destinations (Goosen and Langers 2000). In this sense, it is clear that hiking activities which is considered a touristy product will be affected from these factors. The result of the study seems to support this view. The impact factor defined in the study is the “trail crowdedness”. Outdoor recreation studies are largely concentrated in the topic "crowded". It is defined in the related literature that crowdedness affects outdoor recreation quality and user satisfaction (Manning and Freimund, 2004). This detection in the literature is parallel with the study results. As a result, it is determined that the expectations of individuals involved in hiking activity which is an important tourism and recreation activity is determined correctly by travel agencies in connection with literature. This raises an important result in respect of sustainability of hiking sourced touristy activities. It is considered that a well-managed outdoor activity will contribute to economical and socio-cultural development in rural areas and also provide support for environmental protection works.

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