

PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIVE ATTRACTIVENESS OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM ASSETS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN CVB DIRECTORS AND VISITORS

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Abstract.—This study uses the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to examine the similarities and differences between directors of Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVB) and the general travelling public in their perceptions of the attractiveness of nature-based tourism resources in the state of West Virginia. Results indicate that the two groups are significantly different in their perceptions of the resource assets in question. Specifically, the top five most attractive nature-based tourism resources, from the perspective of CVB directors, are golf courses, rivers, state parks, cabins, and lakes. In contrast, the top five nature-based tourism resources ranked by visitors are state parks, national forests, wildlife management areas, state forests, and national parks. Research implications and future research needs are discussed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have indicated that visitors and resource managers have varying perceptions of the same resources in terms of their management practices and the status of ecological integrity (Swinerton 2002). However, few studies, if any, have examined the similarities and differences between Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) directors and the general

travelling public in the attractiveness of nature-based tourism assets. To this end, this study examines and compares the perceptions of nature-based tourism assets in West Virginia from the perspectives of CVB directors and visitors. This comparison was conducted using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) (Saaty 1980).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the limited literature on the perceptions of tourism resources by CVB directors and visitors, this literature review draws upon findings from other related study fields.

In the field of parks and recreation, a number of studies have looked at visitors' perceptions of campsite, wilderness area, and trail impacts (Dorwart et al. 2004). These studies suggest that managers often differ from visitors in their perception and their evaluation or interpretation of impacts on recreational resources (Dorwart et al. 2004). For example, White et al. (2001) found that visitors perceive open areas with less vegetation as desirable, whereas managers perceive vegetation loss as a negative impact and detrimental to the viability of the natural resources. Similarly, Farrell et al. (2001) also found that campers' perceptions of ecological impacts differed from managers' perceptions, in that campers did not rate the impacts negatively as managers did (as cited in Dorwart et al. 2004). These two studies suggest that visitors tend to pay more attention to the functional benefits of the ecosystem than the ecological integrity of the ecosystem. The following two studies report similar findings.

Anderson et al. (2000) found that many Asian-Americans (mostly Koreans and Japanese) picked young bracken fern fiddleheads for use in holiday and everyday meals. They thought that ecologically,

“picking bracken fern does not endanger the ferns” (p. 759) but this contradicts managers’ perceptions. The second study focused on Canadian national parks, which generally convey a sense of wildness and naturalness. Swinnerton (2002) found that the majority of visitors perceived the landscape as being ecologically healthy even though the parks were actually ecologically degraded.

As stated in Manning (1999, p. 281), “research indicates that managers’ perceptions of outdoor recreation may differ from those of visitors. If a basic purpose of managing outdoor recreation is to provide satisfying experiences to visitors, then objective and systematically collected information is needed from visitors about what defines satisfying recreation experiences.” Therefore, it is important, though challenging, for managers to learn how to reconcile their perceptions with those of visitors and to design management strategies that best serve the common good (Dorwart et al. 2004).

3.0 METHODS

This study examines whether or not CVB directors and visitors have similar perceptions of nature-based tourism attractions in West Virginia. A questionnaire was designed based on findings from the literature (i.e., Deng et al. 2002, Strager and Rosenberger 2006) and input from participating CVB directors. This questionnaire contains pairwise comparisons of 21 categories of nature-based tourism assets in the state using the AHP. The AHP criteria are presented in Table 1. Data from CVB directors was collected using mail questionnaires while intercept surveys were used to collect data from visitors at the I-68 West Virginia

welcome center. Following Dillman’s (2000) Total Design Method, a package containing a cover letter, a copy of the questionnaire, and a stamped and self-addressed envelope was mailed to the directors in May 2008. Field trips were also made to meet with some of the directors in May and June 2008. Convenience sampling was used for visitor surveys between April and June 2009. Visitors who were first timers or not familiar with the state’s natural tourism resources were excluded from the survey.

Pairwise comparisons were conducted using the software Expert Choice, which created a ranking order of weights for 21 types of assets (see Table 1). The ranking order was then statistically compared by the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (Spearman’s rho), a technique for determining the correlation between two ordinal variables.

4.0 RESULTS

Fourteen of 26 CVB directors approached participated in the study, resulting in a response rate of 53.8 percent, while 191 of 360 eligible visitors approached were willing to take part in the survey, resulting in a response rate of 53.1 percent. Figures 1 and 2 present the ranking orders of weights determined by the AHP for directors and visitors, respectively. The normalized ranking orders are presented in Figures 3 and 4. According to CVB directors, the top five most attractive nature-based tourism resources are golf courses, rivers, state parks, cabins and lakes. In contrast, the top five nature-based tourism resources ranked by visitors are state parks, national forests, wildlife management areas, state forests, and national parks. The normalized ranking of CVB directors’

Table 1.—The application of paired comparisons using the AHP Scale (Adapted from Saaty 1987)

Intensity of Importance	Determination and Explanation
1	Two attributes are equally important
3	One attribute is slightly more important than the other
5	One attribute is moderately important than the other
7	One attribute is very important over the other
9	One attribute is extremely important over the other

responses indicates that rivers, state parks, cabins, and lakes are about 87 percent, 75 percent, 67 percent, and 66 percent as attractive as golf courses, while for visitors, national forests, state forests, wildlife

management areas, and national parks are about 74 percent, 71 percent, 69 percent, and 67 percent as attractive as state parks.

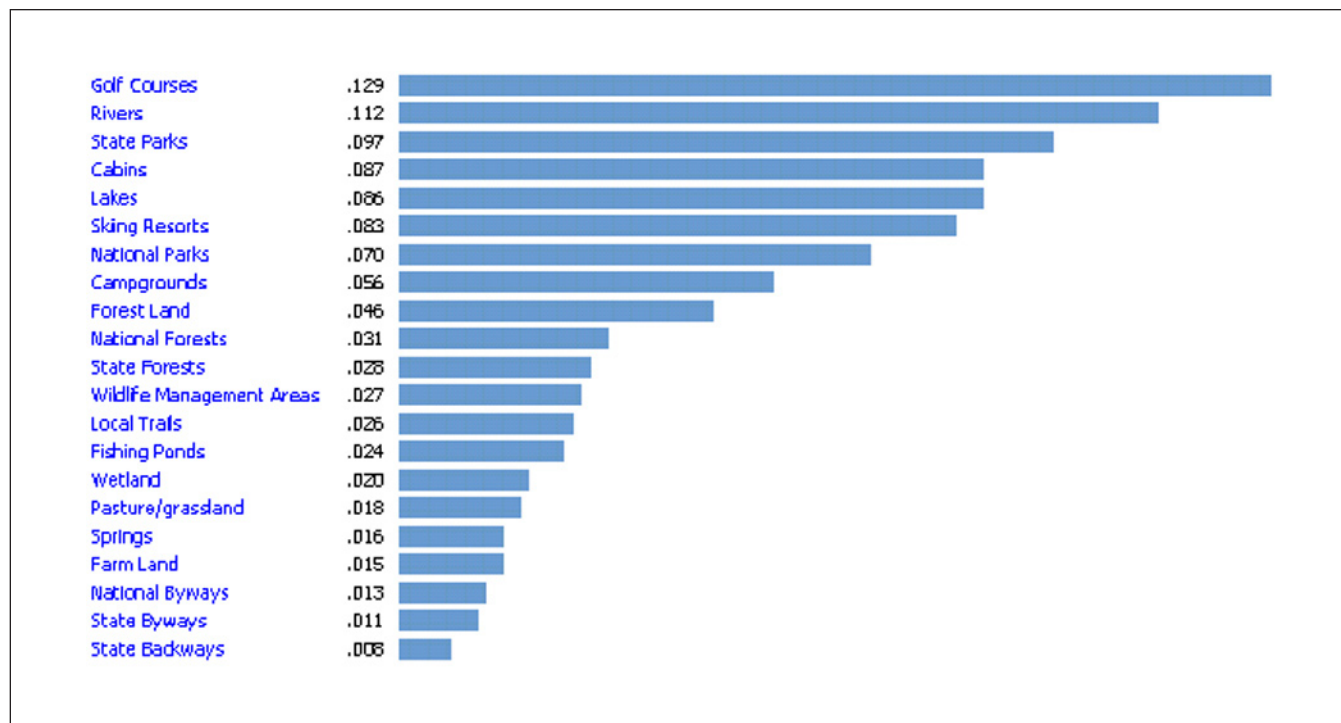


Figure 1.—Ranking order of weights for Convention and Visitor Bureaus (CVB) directors.

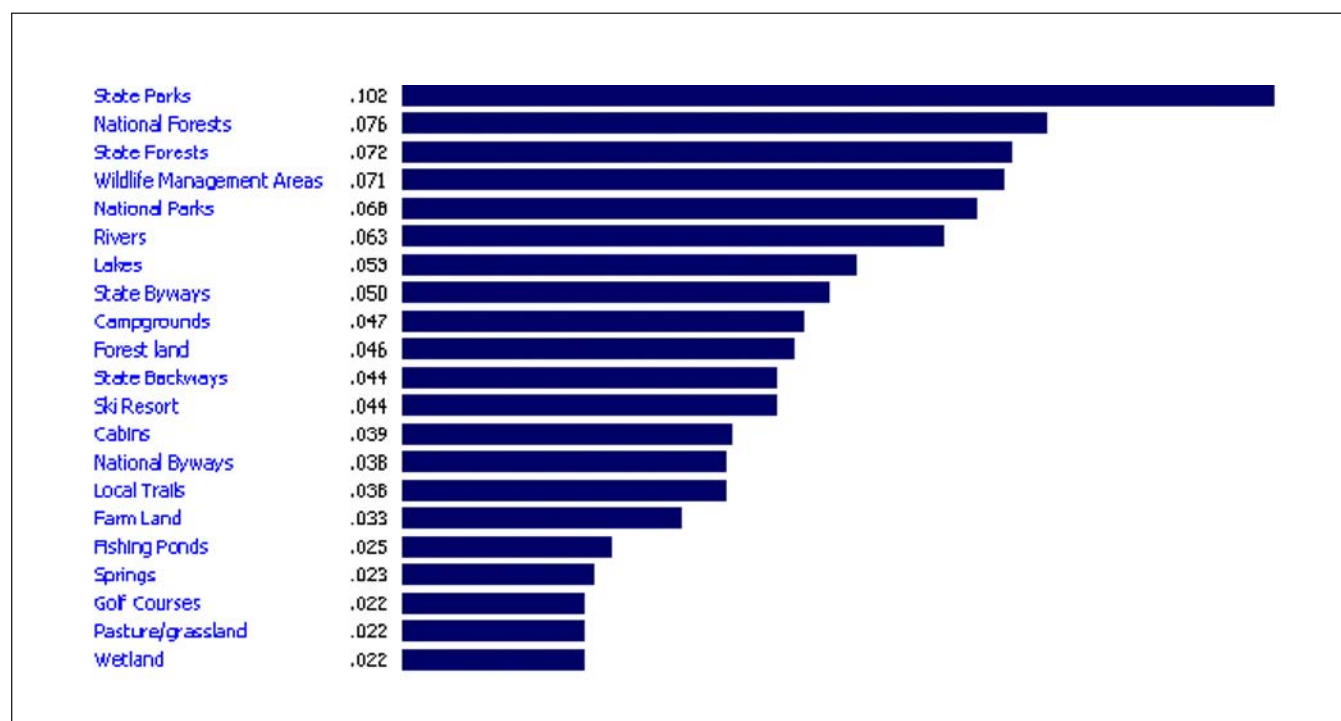


Figure 2.—Ranking order of weights for visitors (Overall Inconsistency = .02).

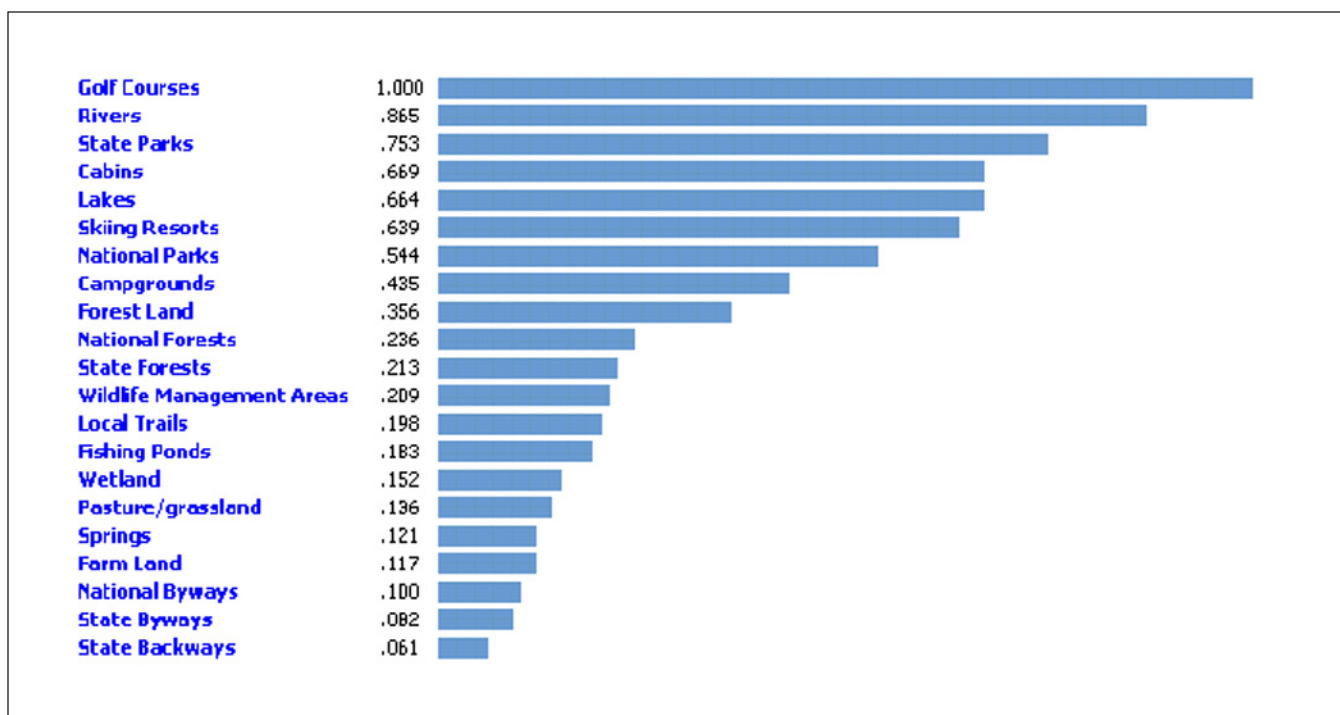


Figure 3.—Normalized ranking order of weights for Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVB) directors (Overall Inconsistency = .02).

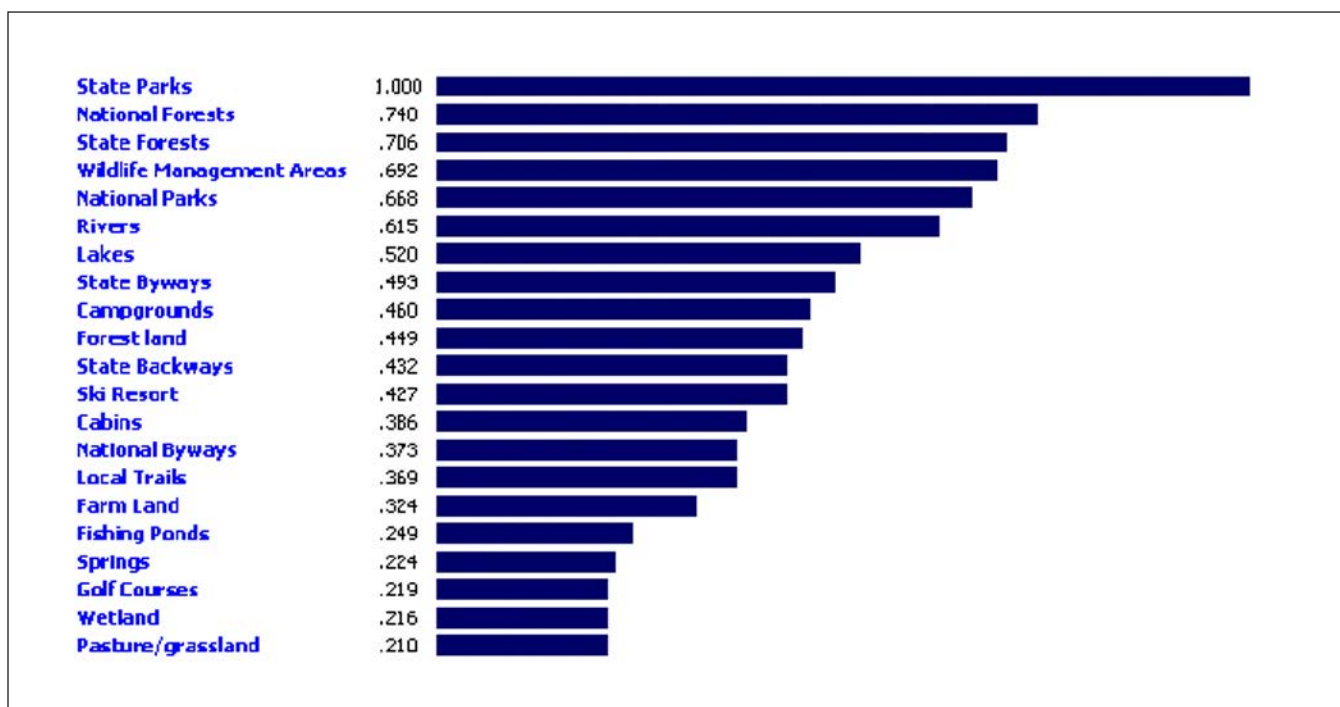


Figure 4.—Normalized ranking order of weights for visitors (Overall Inconsistency = .02).

Table 2 presents the comparison of visitors' and CVB directors' ranking orders of the 21 types of nature-based tourism resources. As shown, state parks were ranked no. 1 by visitors and no. 3 by directors. In contrast, golf courses were ranked no. 1 by directors and no. 20 by visitors. The correlation analysis shows that both groups' perceptions of those resource assets are not significantly correlated ($p > .05$). That is, the ranking order by visitors is significantly different from that by CVB directors.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Visitors' perceptions of resource attractiveness in this study are comparable with a previous study by Longwoods International (2004), which found that forest, lakes/rivers, and farms were among the most frequently reported attractions experienced by visitors to West Virginia in 2004. As in the present study, forest-based attractions (i.e., state parks/forests,

national parks/forests, wildlife management areas), farms, lakes, and rivers were also ranked higher than other tourism assets by visitors. In addition, the finding from the present study that state parks were ranked the highest by visitors and third by CVB directors is also comparable to a previous study by Deng and McHenry (2007) that focused on "Wonderful West Virginia" magazine users' perceptions of the magazine and topics of interest covered in the magazine. In that study, state parks were ranked as the first, third, and second most interesting topics, respectively, by former subscribers, current subscribers, and those who have never subscribed to the magazine.

In this study, the top five assets as ranked by visitors were all public lands managed by federal or state agencies. These public lands provide a wide array of opportunities for outdoor recreation activities. In contrast, two of the top five assets ranked by directors are private properties (i.e., golf courses and cabins, although some golf courses are public). It should be noted that another type of private business, ski resorts, was ranked 6th by CVB directors but 13th by visitors. This finding implies that CVB directors may have paid more attention to those tourism assets whose owners may be CVB members. This has some important implications for state tourism development. First, the marketing effort may want to target the resources that visitors perceive as the most attractive rather than those favored by CVB managers. Second, this finding suggests that the future of West Virginia's tourism depends on the authenticity of natural features and rural character of the state. As a result, the state should pay more attention to protecting these assets from degradation by other commercial activities such as mining and timbering to keep the state "wild and wonderful" ("Wild and Wonderful" is the West Virginia Division of Tourism's advertising campaign tagline).

This study is not without limitations. First, visitor surveys were only conducted at one welcome center. In future studies, surveys should be conducted at other welcome centers and/or destinations. Second, visitors' perception of the attractiveness of nature-based tourism assets was compared with that of only

Table 2.—Ranking comparison of 21 outdoor recreation resources between visitors and Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVB) directors.

Outdoor Recreation Resources	Ranking by visitors	Ranking by CVB directors
State Parks	1	3
National Forests	2	10
Wildlife Management Areas	3	12
State Forests	4	11
National Parks	5	7
Rivers	6	2
Lakes	7	5
State Byways	8	20
Forest Lands	9	9
Cabins	10	4
Campgrounds	11	8
State Backways	12	21
Ski Resorts	13	6
National Byways	14	19
Farm Land	15	18
Local Trails	16	13
Springs	17	17
Fishing Ponds	18	14
Pasture/Grasslands	19	16
Golf Courses	20	1
Wetland	21	15

one group, CVB directors. Future studies may need to include other groups such as tourism planners, staff with relevant state agencies such as West Virginia Division of Tourism, and West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, among others.

6.0 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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