

Tourism perceptions of New Zealand eco-cultural tourism products

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Introduction

Given international tourists’ interest in nature and eco-experiences in New Zealand and the interest by some of them in Māori culture, there appears to be scope for tourism products that combine both nature and Māori cultural elements. Our research explored demand for such products and aimed to bridge the gap between ‘expressed’ interest and ‘actual’ experience by observing tourists while they were on Māori tourism experiences and interviewing them afterwards. We looked at those experiences in relation to a range of Māori cultural tourism products and, in particular, the ‘value added’ to tourism experiences by Māori cultural components. The specific research questions addressed were: What attracts tourists to Māori tourism products; how is Māori culture experienced within those products; is there a difference between experiences of traditional and contemporary culture; and, how do they value those experiences?

Interviews

We examined nine Māori-operated tourism experiences covering traditional performances, hangi, Māori arts and crafts, cultural information or marae visit, Māori-guided experiences, and Māori-operated transport or accommodation. All were Māori-operated businesses and most had some nature component. We conducted 31 in-depth, semistructured interviews with 53 free independent travellers from the United Kingdom, Australia, North America and Europe, aged from late teens to 60s. They used a mixture of transport modes including hired campervans or rental cars, an organised backpacker bus network, public transport and private cars.

Results

Tourists did not always recognise Māori culture or people. The most frequently mentioned experiences of Māori culture, apart from traditional performances, were visits to museums with historical displays of cultural items. Some tourists reported that their travel in New Zealand had not brought them into much contact with contemporary Māori culture. However, these same tourists often talked about learning to pronounce Māori words, and about purchasing paua, greenstone or bone carvings as souvenirs.

Tourists often did not realise that they had participated in a Māori tourism experience and had participated for other reasons (e.g., for the scenery, the adrenaline rush, the actual activity, or wildlife or nature experience). This made it difficult to get tourists to reflect on their experiences of Māori culture. For many tourists the stated focus of the whole experience needed to be Māori for it to be considered a Māori experience. Overall, tourists wished to experience Māori culture in recognisable ways, which often meant engaging with the traditional ‘marketed’ aspects of culture rather than with contemporary culture. Meeting Māori people, having Māori bus drivers telling Māori stories, and experiencing a mihi or karakia were not considered Māori cultural experiences per se.

Despite this, Māori cultural components appear to add some value to general tourism experiences. Our research suggests that this comes primarily from engagement on a personal level with contemporary culture. This can be experienced in various ways: Through meeting Māori people (e.g., meeting locals and having Māori guides, drivers, and hosts); hearing Māori stories (e.g., guides and hosts sharing legends, histories, and personal stories); seeing the culture in action (e.g., guides and hosts doing mihi and karakia, demonstrating weaving, and explaining cultural protocols); and experiencing hands-on activities (e.g., visitors singing waiata, doing bone carving, learning to weave, and doing poi or kapa haka).

Often, tourists did not connect Māori culture with Māori tourism. Some interviewees enjoyed seeing how New Zealanders and Māori really live today, but, while they expressed much interest in learning more about contemporary Māori culture, most were unsure how to go about this. Some commented that their ideas about contemporary culture were garnered by reading newspapers and listening to the radio while travelling. Many were just as interested in 'all' New Zealand culture and when asked about their cultural experiences talked positively about meeting 'locals' who they did not distinguish specifically as Māori. Contemporary Māori culture was seen as being more authentic by some; seeing the culture in action—the living culture—contributed to their feelings of authenticity.

In this respect, guides were important. Guides performed multiple roles in imparting information, explaining protocols, mediating between tourists and hosts, and helping make cultural experiences more 'real'. Even with active mediation from guides, some tourists were uncomfortable with cultural experiences, particularly those involving personal interaction. Often, because guides were the only 'locals' tourists came into personal contact with, they also played an important role as mediators connecting traditional aspects of Māori culture with contemporary practice—something many tourists said they found difficult to understand. If tourists had any prior knowledge of Māori culture, it was normally based on the traditional aspects as shown in tourist promotional material—images of haka and of performers in traditional clothing.

However, most visitors would not be prepared to pay more for experiences that included this type of engagement, although some said that if they had known about the Māori components/guides etc., beforehand, with all else being equal, it may have influenced their decision to participate. In part, this may be a result of price sensitivity, in particular among younger visitors, who were on tight budgets. However, when the activities offered were 'special' (such as the once-only, tick-off experiences like sky diving) or were activities they were passionate about, these people were prepared to pay more. Others appeared to have come to expect Māori cultural components as a normal part of their New Zealand tourism experiences through Māori employed as guides, drivers and hosts.

Discussion

Current marketing does not include the many different aspects of Māori culture in New Zealand. This presents a barrier for operators providing niche products other than the mainstream concert performances and marae visits. To influence what tourists perceive to be Māori culture and how they comprehend it, tourism authorities and individual operators need to increase the profile of the many different cultural elements that visitors can experience. This means broadening the traditional images of Māori culture to highlight a wider variety of elements in the culture; elements that are not currently obvious to tourists. While it seems that tourists will not pay more for these aspects of an experience, Māori elements do, however, add considerable value to both the enjoyment of and satisfaction with an experience.

Despite this, most mainstream tourists do want to visit cultural attractions. However, many niche cultural products are small-scale and they are often located in remote areas. We found that visiting such areas enabled tourists to engage with locals (both Māori and non-Māori) through genuine, non-commercial, real-life interaction. In this respect, given that the attraction is focused on having few other tourists around, and on having a non-commercial feel, the sustainability of tourism businesses in these areas is problematic

Many tourists in our sample had compared the Māori cultural tourism experiences found in New Zealand with indigenous cultural tourism they had experienced elsewhere. This suggests at least some habitual interest in the cultural components offered by international travel. Of key importance to the tourists is how culture is presented, and how 'easy' the experience is for them. In this respect guides are important. The 'authenticity' of the experiences appears to be less important, as most of the tourists interviewed had very little knowledge of Māori culture before coming to New Zealand, and therefore had nothing to judge authenticity by.

While New Zealand does not attract cultural tourists, tourists still have some interest in cultural experiences. It is beneficial to understand Māori eco-cultural products in the context of general tourist experiences. The way in which culture is presented makes a difference and has the potential to add considerable value to the tourism experience, thereby creating niches for eco-cultural products and other products. However, international tourists currently seem reluctant to pay a premium for such products.