Reporting Research 9 – interpretation in a natural setting

The value and importance of personal and non-personal interpretive media in enhancing the visitor experience and the broader management of protected areas is now well established in the academic literature. Prior to a visit, the website and a range of downloadable materials can successfully provide informative and helpful information about the area, its range of wildlife, natural features as well as the facilities and services available on-site. Whilst, a downloadable app might be used to inform the visitor on how they might behave on-site perhaps using a code of conduct. On arrival, leaflets, guidebooks, exhibits and on-site staff can be used to guide the visitor around as well as entertain and inform them throughout their visit. Research studies continue to assess the effectiveness of interpretive media in delivering this combination of roles but also for educating the visitor about the wonders as well as the fragility of many protected areas.

A study by Phan & Schott (2019) explored the importance and performance of various interpretive media for tourists visiting Cat Tien National Park in Southern Vietnam. This national park is approximately 150km from Ho Chi Minh City and is bordered on three-sides by the Dong Nai River. Tourists are required to make a river crossing to access the park via a single entry and exit point. The park is a typical lowland tropical rainforest and rich in biodiversity, reporting some 113 species of mammal, 351 species of birds and is abundant with butterflies hosting 50% of all the species recorded in Vietnam. The park is particularly famous for its primates including golden-cheeked gibbon, langur and three species of macaques. It is also a reliable place to see Siamese crocodile as well as a good range of lizards and snakes (Cat Tien National Park, 2021). The park includes two wildlife centres: the Cat Tien Bear Rescue Centre established in 2005 and the Dao Tien Endangered Primate Species Centre founded in 2008, both of which attract international funding (Phan & Schott, 2019:494).

In this study, eight interpretive media available to tourists within the park (see Table 1) were assessed using Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA). This model measures the importance of a factor for them and compares it against their view of the factor's actual performance on the day of their visit, typically using pre-and post-visit questionnaires. It is similar to the Expectation-Experience Analysis model which is also widely used to gauge visitors views of interpretive media and on-site facilities and services. Both models use a series of Likert statements to provide scores which can then be compared against the two axes of Importance-Performance or Expectation-Experience. The resulting means for each factor are plotted on the relevant axis, creating a quadrant (as illustrated in Table 2) with the four resulting

groups of data indicating factors which were regarded by them as being of 'low priority', 'keep up the good work', 'possibly overkill' or 'concentrate here'. Thus, the model becomes a useful tool in assessing whether the interpretive media and on-site facilities and services under scrutiny are being directed to and received by tourists in the right way.
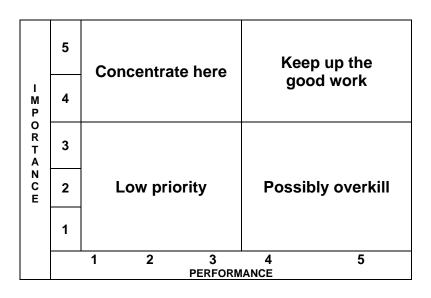
Table 2. Importance-Performance Grid
(source: the author, 2021).

IMPORTANCE 5 / 4	**Concentrate here**	**Keep up the good work**	
3 / 2 / 1	**Low priority**	**Possibly overkill**	
	1 2 3	4 5	
	PERFORMANCE		

A total of 316 tourists agreed to take part in the survey at Cat Tien National Park. All completed the pre-arrival questionnaire but only 237 completed the post-arrival questionnaire, giving an overall response rate of 77.9% (Phan & Schott, 2019:495). The profile of respondents is recorded in Table 3.

Table 3. Profile of respondents
(summarised from Phan & Schott, 2019:496-497).

Gender	53.6% female and 46.4% male
Nationality	74.3% Vietnamese and 25.7% International (predominantly American, Australian & Japanese)
Travel arrangements & Length of stay	64.6% Independent travellers 35.4% On a package tour 67.1% Staying 2 days, 32.9% Staying 1 day
Visited before	53.2% Had not visited the park before, 44.3% 1-3 times, 2.5% more than 4 times

Results of the study

Table 1 below summarises the mean results for the eight types of interpretive media assessed by the tourists.

Table 1. Mean results: views of respondents on importance and performance. Presented in a ranked order by importance
(summarised from Phan & Schott, 2019:497).

Interpretive media	Importance (mean) + rank order	Performance (mean) + rank	Performance v. Importance
Site interpreter / local guide	4.82 (1)	4.03 (2)	Negative
Interpretive signs about the park	4.67 (2)	4.45 (1)	Negative
Videos at the rescue centres	4.64 (3)	3.26 (8)	Negative
Staff at the museum	4.58 (4)	4.00 (3)	Negative
Displays at the museum	4.44 (5)	3.28 (7)	Negative
Brochures at the ticket office	3.51 (6)	3.94 (4)	Positive
Directional signs around the park	2.18 (7)	3.42 (5)	Positive
Staff at the ticket office	2.03 (8)	3.34 (6)	Positive

Note: In this study, a 5-point Likert scale was used where 5 = extremely important / excellent performance and 1 = not important at all / poor performance.

It is interesting to note that the three least important media for tourists on arrival ('*Brochures', 'Directional Signs' and 'Staff at the ticket office'*) all performed well in the post-visit analysis. However, it is clearly worrying that the top five media in terms of importance on arrival for tourists, all scored worse in terms of their actual performance for them on the day of their visit. Although, of the top four media, only '*videos at the rescue centres'* dropped out of the top four completely for its actual performance.

Commentary

In terms of the transferability of this study, the following comments are posed to encourage conversation and reflection on the use of the IPA model at other locations.

1. The use of IPA through pre- and post-visit questionnaires generates a quadrant of data enabling site managers to better understand the value of interpretive media and on-site facilities and services according to their visitors. In this study, one of the media of least importance to them actually seemed to be performing as one of the best. This might indicate perhaps that too much time had been spent developing something that they did not value strongly. This approach of analysing feedback from visitors can therefore be an extremely valuable outcome from an IPA study, revealing what they do not necessarily value very strongly.
2. The outcomes from an IPA study should always be further tested using in-depth interviews or perhaps focus groups with your visitors.

3. It is also important to explore whether the results of an IPA study represent the collective view of all of your visitors or merely a particular sub-group. In this study it is reasonable to assume that the Vietnamese visitors for instance, may react somewhat differently to the media on offer compared to the international tourists.

4. Finally, an IPA study can also be highly effective in comparing the responses of those visitors who visit the location regularly and who may well have a different view and needs from the location, in comparison to those visitors who are making their first visit.

References

Three useful webpages providing further information about Cat Tien National Park are:
UNESCO World Heritage (Tentative List) information:
https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5070/

A brief travel review of the park:
https://theculturetrip.com/asia/vietnam/articles/a-bref-guide-to-vietnams-famous-cat-tien-national-park/

A brief overview of the park:
https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Cat_Tien_National_Park/

Dao Tien Endangered Primate Species Centre:
www.go-east.org

Phan, T.T. and Schott, C. 2019. Visitor responses to environmental interpretation in protected areas in Vietnam: a motivation-based segmentation analysis. *Tourism* Recreation Research, 44(4), 492-506.

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