

Dolphin Watching Tour from the Tourists' Perspective

An Exploratory Study in Lovina, Bali, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Tourist behaviour has been widely accepted as dynamic over time, thereby studies on this field have been continuously evolving. Understanding tourist perspective within the area of wildlife tourism is in particular essential. Not only because it has not been much researched, but also because it has a great importance especially when it is related to behavioural and environmental aspect, as well as sustainability. This article reports on tourists' perception toward dolphin-watching tour in Lovina, Bali, Indonesia. The study was a preliminary stage of a larger research aiming at developing a code of practice for the tour. Data were collected from 21 research participants, using interview and a pen-and-paper open ended questions and were analysed qualitatively. The study endeavoured to elicit participants' motivation, perception, expectation and satisfaction toward the tour. The participants were also encouraged to add additional content in the open-ended section. It was revealed that there were differences in expectation for the first timer participants and the repeated ones. Next, the perceptions toward dolphins were mainly viewed from its physical characteristics. The following themes emerged from data analysis were personality traits, intelligence, activities, and the needs to be protected. Finally, almost all participants were satisfied with the tour. Those who were not able to see the dolphin said that they would return to fulfil their curiosity. This piece of finding suggests that compared with man-made product, toward a nature-based product or service, tourists are more tolerant and willing to repurchase. Limitation and direction for future research are presented at the end of the discussion section of this paper.

Keywords: *Dolphin-watching tour, Expectation, Motivation, Perception, Satisfaction.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the globe, dolphin-watching tour is a rapidly growing industry [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] that adds to the wildlife tourism. Such growth is in line with the changing behaviour of tourists who are looking for more than just relaxation [4], marking a considerable shift from the stereotypical 4-S (sun, sea, sand, sex) [6] to a more demanding tourist, one of which is seemingly fulfilled by interacting with wildlife. Observation activity toward dolphins in their natural habitat [2] from a boat, air or land, formally or informally with several commercial aspects [7] (this mainly defines the dolphin-watching tour), has been considered an interesting attraction for tourist and thus, has gained a great attention [8]. In fact, this type of tourism is said to grow faster than most tourism sectors over the past decades [9].

However, while it receives a growing interest and gains economic benefit, this type of tourism has been associated with negative impacts to the wildlife and environment [1] [2] [3]. Take as an example is boat disturbance that has the potential to affect the behaviour, vocalisation, and habitat use of the dolphins [10]. This is particularly true when the organisation of the tour is yet in its infancy phase, in which, control and appropriate management are lacking.

Nevertheless, viewing from a more positive side, the rapid growth of this industry at the same time brings opportunity to promote awareness for conservation and pro-environment attitude [2] [11]. Although, debate surrounding the short term and long-term impacts is still going, previous research has stressed the importance of regulation [2]. Moreover, the literature has highlighted the needs of effective environmental education to develop awareness and respect for animal and

environment during wildlife tour [2]. In fact, such education has been found to improve tourist satisfaction [2].

While a great amount of research within the area of dolphin-watching tour has been dedicated, limited focus was given on the tourist side. It is arguably important to deepen the understanding of tourist's perception, motivation, expectation and satisfaction toward dolphin-watching tour in order to help propose a guidance and regulation to be implemented during the tour which hopefully helps ascertain the sustainability of the dolphin and its environment. How tourist behave and perceive this type of wildlife tourism remain an open question [12] [13] that needs to be addressed.

Arriving from the above gap, this paper draws a demographic profile of dolphin-watching tourists in Lovina, Bali, Indonesia and explores their motivation, perceptions, expectation, and satisfaction toward their trip. Understanding tourist perspectives toward dolphin-watching tour helps making decision with regard to producing regulation on permitted activities as well as the levels and types of interaction [14] and developing strategies to promote a more ecological behaviour [15].

1.1. Tourist activities during dolphin-watching tours

A move towards nature-based leisure has been one of the observable changing behaviours of tourists. Above other things, it may be driven more by the inherent needs to interact with nature and animal [16]. It seems that these needs are partly enhanced by the pressure of living in urban areas that results in reduced contact with the component of nature. Moreover, it is also relevant during Covid-19 pandemic situation, where people prefer to be in a more open air and natural environment. In fact, engaging in natural settings has been recognized as one significant way to improve human wellbeing [17] [18] [19] [20]. As such, people seek out interactions with nature and animals during leisure time [17].

Although it may vary among individuals, to certain degree, an encounter with nature during dolphin-watching tour is one way to fulfil such innate need [18]. Previous research has shown that interactions with wild animals, particularly dolphin that is known as an exotic, friendly, and happy animal [21], gives a unique experience [17].

As in other wildlife tourism, there are a number of activities during dolphin-watching tour. The dolphin-human interface ranges from merely watching from distance to a closer one such as swimming with, touching, and feeding them. In fact, dolphin tourism can occur from three different platforms such as land-based, boat-based, and air-based [22] [7].

1.2. Tourist perspectives towards dolphin-watching tours

Previous study has highlighted the influences of dolphin tourism on psychological, economic, environmental, physiological, social, and educational aspects [23]. In particular, the positive effects of human-dolphin encounter [15] have reinforced greater interest in the dolphin tourism [13]. Although it cannot be generalised among individuals in terms of its quality, the interaction with dolphin is known to provide mental health and wellbeing [19] [20]. Even more, to many people, an interface with dolphin has been a lifelong dream [14]. Thus, it seems necessary to further investigate the dolphin tourism from the perspective of tourist for example in terms of engagement and experiences [14], as well as motivation, perceptions, and expectation.

Compared to other non-human animals, dolphin seems to have a special place in human heart. There are some expressions that can indicate this. For example, people are more likely to be open or permissive to dolphin rather than to even a dog when it comes to choose which one to let their children to play with [24]. Another example of common expression is that people can swim with dolphin, but can hardly dance with wolf [14]. Indeed, dolphins have been perceived as unique creatures [14] which are constantly appealing and famous for its altruism trait [25].

Furthermore, dolphins are commonly portrayed as possessing similar characteristics to human such as intelligence, altruistic behaviour, entertaining, and playful [14]. Dolphins are also perceived as charismatic, happy, and friendly being [14]. Furthermore, this animal has become part of traditional folklore played across the globe in which the dolphins' lives are considered mysterious and have magical powers to connect and merge with people on the land. In certain countries, it is even believed that dolphins can shapeshift and capture souls [26].

A different point of view regards dolphins as spiritual being which have the ability to improve physical and spiritual wellbeing [16] based on which a dolphin therapy is developed and known [14]. Earlier study has reported the so called 'dolphin effect' after the therapy in which people feel healed because of the alleviation of chronic depressions; removal of pains, and recovery of illness [27]. Although still need more evidence, another study emphasised that dolphins have a kind of palliative power by scanning the human body [28].

Above all, some people may put more importance on environmental aspect, while others may be simply open to this experience and potentially benefit the most [14]. Thus, what alters the outcome of human-dolphin interaction seems to be the attitude toward it. In other words, how tourist behave and view this enactment of

dolphins is influenced by individual perspectives of nature.

With such perceptions toward dolphins' characteristics, it is not surprising that the popularity of dolphins increased dramatically. It can also be expected that the motivation of people to interact with or to join a dolphin-watching tour may be born from understanding the characteristics of dolphins.

1.3. *The impacts of dolphin-watching tours*

A large number of research has provided insights into the negative consequences of dolphin tourism, primarily related to sustainability and environmental aspects [31] [32]. The observable changing of the dolphins' behaviour such as, changes of activities [32], avoidance [14], movement [33], shift in speed [34], diving behaviour [35], group formation [33], sexual behaviour [36], and vocalisation [37] have been highlighted particularly due to vessel disturbance. Included in the vessel aspects are noise, density, distance, aggressive manoeuvre [36] [38]. The physical movement, noise [14] and number of tourists, are also responsible for the behavioural changes of the dolphins. Previous research has specifically stressed that in the long term, the changed behaviour may become permanent and potentially threaten individuals and populations [39] [40].

From the operator point of view, as dolphin tourism has increasingly earned a great popularity, it may bring consequences and pressure. First, people may seek out dolphin places on their own. Second, people ask tour operator to discover new locations which may lead to the degradation and more popularisation of new sites [14].

In summary, notable concerns have emerged from these studies and has led to the needs of rules or regulations. This, can be initiated by understanding the tourist's perspective toward dolphin-watching tour.

2. METHOD

Using a qualitative approach, four related topics of motivation, perception, expectation, and satisfaction of tourists were under investigation in this study. Data were collected based on voluntary participation from 21 tourists who were recruited using a purposive sampling technique in which at least one dolphin tour experience was required. The methods of data collection were interview and a pen-and-paper open ended questions distributed to tourists between May-October 2021, in Lovina Beach, Bali, Indonesia.

The instruments for data collection were in English and Indonesian. The research participants were first asked about their demographical data followed by perception, motivation, expectation, and overall satisfaction toward the dolphin-watching tour. Additional comments were sought to enrich the analysis. The

interviews were conducted for around 25-30 minutes each. Those who prefer to respond to the open-ended questions were given a pen and paper and answer the question. This procedure finished within 20 minutes.

Data were then analysed qualitatively. First, data were transcribed. Then, the analysis was conducted with the help of Microsoft Excel, by adopting the data driven coding technique which involved the three-coding-method of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this section, the demographic data of the research participants are presented first, followed by the findings and discussion of the four topics under study.

3.1. *Demographic Profiles*

Of the 21 participants in this research, 73% were female and 27% were male. Respondents were mostly between 36-55 years of age. Only 18% were between 18-35 years. In terms of origin, 15 were Indonesian, 3 were Holland, 2 were French, and 1 American. The foreigners were expatriates who work in Bali. The majority of the participants reported that it was their first time to join a dolphin-watching tour. There were 2 participants who were not first timers but took their twice and third trip.

3.2. *Tourists Perception and Motivation*

Human perceptions play an important role in motivating them to engage especially in dynamic activities thus, within the tourism context, framing of events is essential to the tourist experience [14]. The results of this study showed that perceptions toward dolphin motivate the participants to join the dolphin-watching tour. The research participants described that the pre-existing perceptions toward dolphins in their mind encourage them to join the tour, although it is also subject to other things such as availability, agreement with time, whether there are people or relative to accompany, and weather.

There were five themes emerged from the data analysis. The main perception of dolphin came from the physical characteristic (50%) of the animal. This includes helpful to human, pleasant, free, happy, courageous, fun, friendly, entertaining, loving, does not like noise, and kind hearted. It is followed by personality traits of the dolphin (35%) such as cute, beautiful, big, mammal, and attractive. The rest of the categories (each counting for 5%) are activities on the sea such as swimming, jumping, being in group; and animals that need to be protected, and intelligence. These findings partly agree with the previous research on the perception toward dolphins [25] [14].

3.3. Tourist Expectation and Satisfaction

The wildlife tourism literature stated that attitude, environmental stimuli, and physiological drives influences desires to pursue the viewing of and interacting with wildlife [14]. Human expectation of an interface with dolphin is pre-determined by image, contemporary culture [14] information, motivation, as well as perception.

Before the encounter, tourists form certain expectation toward the tour. This study revealed that the majority of tourists expect to see the dolphin relatively close enough during their tour. What is more, a few participants described that they wanted to also touch the dolphin. While others, said that they expect to see a big number of dolphins performing their natural attractions on the sea such as jumping. Participants who have joined the tour previously did not put high importance to see the dolphin. One male participant explained, "*I have been in this kind of tour. So personally, it is okay if I do not see any dolphins today.*" This means that there were differences in expectation for the first timers and the repeated tourists.

In line with their expectations, what made the tourists satisfied is primarily the chance and ability to see the dolphin. This is in line with [41] who stated that customer satisfaction is determined by the difference between expectation and perceived service. Contrariwise, the most dissatisfying experience during the trip reported by the participants was when they did not see the dolphin. However, they understood that it is beyond the control of the tour operator and they were willing to return and join the tour again. This is in line with the previous research that found that for human, interactions with dolphin are a long-life dream [14]. One participant explained, "*Of course I will come back. I want to see the dolphin. I am curious about how it looks in reality.*" Such attitude seems to be different when the product is not nature based for example, hotel service. When a hotel guest is not happy with the hotel service, it is likely that the guest does not want to stay at the same hotel. This means that when a service or product can be controlled by the provider, then the customers (hotel guests or tourists) tend to find other service provider for their next encounter. In the case of nature-based service such as dolphin tour or other activities which require high reliance on weather, in the event of dissatisfaction experiences for example when it is raining or when unable to see the dolphin, the tourists still intend to return and try their luck. In other words, tourist are more tolerant toward dissatisfaction for a nature-based service such as dolphin-watching tour compared to a man-made product or service.

3.4. Limitation and Direction for Future Research

This study used a qualitative design to explore the topic under study and to answer the research questions. While the strength of qualitative approach is evident, its limitation is also present. The main disadvantage of a qualitative study is that its findings are not ready to be generalized to a wider population [29] with the same degree of certainty as it is in a quantitative study [30]. In other words, the results of the study are not tested to obtain a statistical significance [30] to enable generalisation. Using both qualitative and quantitative approach enable researcher to obtain the advantages of each method. It may provide stronger results and reduce the limitation.

Another limitation is from the aspect of research participants. Due to the limitation of public activities ruled by the Government of Indonesia to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, there were not many tourists taking the dolphin-watching tour. Most of the tourists were local and domestic which may lead to a question of representativeness of the sample.

Nevertheless, this study was an initial and smaller part of a larger research aiming at providing recommendation of a code of practice of dolphin-watching tour in Lovina beach to the local government. Thus, the results of this study allow for further research particularly with regard to address the needs for educational type of activities during the trips and appropriate management based on which the sustainability of the wildlife and environment as well as the economic aspect derived from the tour can be better achieved.

4. CONCLUSION

Wildlife tourism such as dolphin-watching tour is a rapidly growing industry that provides benefits, mainly in terms of economy. However, at the same time, it brings several consequences especially with regards to sustainability and environment.

Addressing the call for investigation, this study attempted to explore the dolphin-watching tour in Lovina, Bali, Indonesia, from the tourists' perspective. A qualitative approach was used to analyse data gathered from 21 tourists. There were five themes of tourist's perception of dolphin emerged from the data analysis which are physical characteristics, personality traits, intelligence, activities, and the needs to protect the dolphin. These pre-existing perceptions drive the tourist to join the dolphin tour. In terms of expectation, almost all participants reported that the biggest expectation was being able to see the dolphin. Finally, the majority of the tourist expressed their satisfaction toward the tour. Those who did not see the dolphin described their dissatisfaction,

however they indicated their intentions to return and join the tour again. The results of this study are limited by the nature of the qualitative approach with regard to its inability to generalise findings. Future research may look into the development of a code of practice to guide the practice of dolphin-watching tour that is more sustainable and environmentally friendly.

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