The Effects of the Visual Environment on Tourists Perceptions of a Destination

Stacy R. Tomas, Ph.D.

National Extension Tourism (NET) Conference
June 2009
IMAGE IS EVERYTHING!

PERCEPTION IS REALITY!
First Impressions Matter

- Because tourists cannot try out, test drive, or sample a vacation or tourism experience, first impressions are critical.
- The physical setting sets the stage, which facilitates the experience.
- Attractions are defined by their pulling power. (Gunn, 1997)
  - This magnetism is what draws tourists in, encouraging them to stay longer and explore the setting.
Vacationscape

- Coined in 1972 by Clare Gunn to describe the environment in which tourists experience a destination.

- A product of design, development and managerial operation.
Vacationscape

☐ What do we SEE, SMELL, FEEL, and HEAR as we travel?

☐ Are designers and developers sufficiently sensitive to our interests and reactions?

☐ What is the destination image?
“Engineering” Tourists’ Experiences

☐ Carbone and Haeckel 1994
  ■ “Sticktion”
  ■ “Talkability”
  ■ Deliberately setting targeted customer perception that results in successful registration of that perception.

☐ Bitner 1992
  ■ Servicescape = visual metaphor for total offering
  ■ Servicescape = facilitator; hinders or aids the visitor experience
  ■ Encourages approach or avoidance behaviors
Atmospherics

☐ Kotler 1973
  ■ Intentional control and manipulation of environmental cues
    ☐ Sights, sounds, smells

☐ Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal & Voss 2002
  ■ Environmental cues, choice and patronage
    ☐ Social, Design and Ambient Factors
    ☐ Affect perceptions of quality and price
Contextual Fit and Inference

- Does a destination or the setting “fit in”? Is it “out of place”?
  - Theme
  - Branding
  - Congruency

- Inference
  - Is this place expensive?
  - What type of tourists visit?
  - Does the destination match tourists perceptions of themselves (or who they would like to be)?
Sensory Cues

- Visual Environment
  - Built or constructed materials
  - Places to sit and rest
  - Maintenance and upkeep
  - Water Features
  - Presence/Absence of Urban influences
  - Crowding
  - Signage
  - Presence/Absence of Vegetation

- Influence Quality, Satisfaction and Behavior
Study Purpose

- Determine if changes in the visual environment affect respondents’ perceptions of quality and level of satisfaction.

- Determine which visual quality elements have the strongest influence.
Research Methodology

- Study Design
  - Experimental design
  - Modification of 4 photographs (zoo setting)
  - Three treatment levels
    - Treatment 1 = High visual quality ($T_{high}$)
    - Treatment 2 = Mediocre visual quality ($T_{med}$)
    - Treatment 3 = Low visual quality ($T_{low}$)
## Visual Element Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Located</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>MAINT</td>
<td>Maintenance and Upkeep</td>
<td>Photograph 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>SIGN</td>
<td>Type of Sign</td>
<td>Photograph 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>BUILT</td>
<td>Built or Constructed Elements</td>
<td>Photograph 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CROWD</td>
<td>Level of Crowding</td>
<td>Photograph 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>VEGET</td>
<td>Amount of Vegetation</td>
<td>Photograph 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SEAT</td>
<td>Available Seating</td>
<td>Photograph 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>WATER</td>
<td>Amount of Water Present</td>
<td>Photograph 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>URBAN</td>
<td>Urban Skyline</td>
<td>Photograph 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photograph 1</td>
<td>Photograph 2</td>
<td>Photograph 3</td>
<td>Photograph 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment 1</td>
<td>Treatment 2</td>
<td>Treatment 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study Logistics

- Target population: undergraduate students at 2 universities in Parks, Recreation and Tourism introductory classes
- On-line survey (3 versions)
  - Simulation of trip to the zoo
  - Asked respondents to rate preferences for the scenes as well as overall perceptions of the hypothetical zoo
- Response rate 57.5% (330 of 574)
**Did Perceptions Differ by Treatment?**

### Summary of MANOVA Results for Visual Quality Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$T_{\text{high}} - T_{\text{med}}$</th>
<th>$T_{\text{high}} - T_{\text{low}}$</th>
<th>$T_{\text{med}} - T_{\text{low}}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>VISUAL QUALITY ITEMS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance and Upkeep (MAINT)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Sign (SIGN)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built Elements (BUILT)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Crowding (CROWD)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of Vegetation (VEGET)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available Seating (SEAT)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of Water Present (WATER)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Skyline (URBAN)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Which Visual Quality Elements Have the Strongest Influence?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>MEDIOCRE</th>
<th>LOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGN</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>MAINT 0.20</td>
<td>CROWD 0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUILT</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>SEAT 0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEGET</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td></td>
<td>SIGN 0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WATER</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Quality</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGN</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>MAINT 0.40</td>
<td>CROWD 0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUILT</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>WATER 0.26</td>
<td>MAINT 0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SIGN 0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significant Results from Multiple Regression Analyses Across Treatments
So, What Does This Mean?

- Attention to Visual Environment can help insure high quality, satisfying experiences
  - 7 out of 8 Visual Elements influenced some aspect of perceptions
- Visual Elements accounted for a sig. large portion of variance in Satisfaction (31% - 44%) and Quality (28% - 35%).
So, What Does This Mean?

- Maintenance, Signage and Crowding
  - Overall appearance and upkeep is of central importance
  - Related to reliability
  - Crowding may hinder or enhance experience—can control by creation of open spaces and flow patterns
  - Signage—entrance sets the stage and helps to define expectations

- Sight is the dominant sense (Nasar, 1997)
  - Investments in improving the visual appearance are likely to lead to improved perceptions about the destination’s quality.
So, What Does This Mean?

- From holistic perspective, offers empirical evidence to support the role of the visual environment in shaping tourists perceptions of destinations.

- Relates back to Gunn (1973)
  - “place qualities” are the very essence of the pulling power of destinations

- Supports role of servicescape and vacationscape
So, What Does This Mean?

Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1996) – favorable Behavioral Intentions are associated with
- Say positive things
- Recommend to others
- Remain loyal and repurchase
- Spend more with provider
- Pay price premiums

Satisfaction and Quality influence Behavioral Intentions

Visual Environment influences Satisfaction and Quality
Development Considerations

- Homogenization
  - Mass tourism
  - Path of same-ness
  - Visual landscapes begin to look alike

- Place Qualities
  - Uniqueness
  - Pulling Power
  - Authenticity?
Development Considerations

- “HERE” for residents is “THERE” for tourists.
- So, the place must meet the needs of both locals and tourists.
- Does “HERE” = “THERE”?

- Every place tells a story—intentionally or unintentionally
THE END! Questions?