

# An Empirical Research on the Ecological Orientation of Low Season Visitors to Portorož

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Ecologically-oriented destinations require knowledge and understanding of the ecological attitudes of the tourists visiting them. This paper examines the ecological orientation of tourists in the Slovenian seaside destination of Portorož, with a focus on the low season. More specifically, the environmental awareness of tourists in Portorož and their perception of the ecological orientation of Portorož are investigated. Structured questionnaires were used to interview the tourists in selected locations in Portorož. The research found that the tourists consider the ecological orientation of a destination as neither important nor unimportant in their choice of destination. Furthermore, the tourists perceived its ecological orientation to be at an average level. Comparisons between hotel and non-hotel guests are also observed.

*Keywords:* ecotourism; destination; ecological orientation

## Background

In an increasingly competitive international tourism market, ecologically oriented destination management is vital for positioning destinations in the market. Consumers are increasingly supportive towards social welfare and environmental protection at destinations (Sloan, Legrand, & Chen, 2009). Similarly, Sarigollu (2009) argues that consumers are becoming more sensitive to environmental issues. Moreover, tourists are also aware of the seriousness of environmental degradation, which results in more ecologically conscious tourists who desire to purchase ecologically-friendly products, and who favour businesses that support environmental practices (Roberts, 1996; Kalafatis, Pollard, East, & Tsogas, 1999; Laroche, Bergeron, & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001). Recent research that was undertaken by the Athens Laboratory of Research in Marketing, in collaboration with the Cen-

tre of Sustainability about the green marketing, found that more than 92% of consumers have a positive attitude towards environmentally sensitive companies (Papadopoulos, Karagouni, Trigkas, & Platogianni, 2010). However, some research (for instance, Pigram, 1996; Archer, 1996; Thomas, 1992; Garrod & Willis, 1992; Laarman, & Gregersen, 1996) found that consumers increasingly value environmental resources. Some tourism suppliers have attempted to change their corporate structures and cultures to be more environmentally responsible (Dief & Font, 2010; D'Souza & Taghian, 2005). However, Kempton, Boster, and Hartley (1995) stated that consumers do not know enough about environmental issues in order to act in an environmentally responsible way.

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that considers the needs of the entire environment. It attempts to harmonise the wants and needs of the tourism industry

with the local environment. Price and Murphy (2000) stated that ecotourism is nature based and environmentally educational; it contributes to the quest for sustainability and brings local benefits. Furthermore, Swarbooke and Horner (2007) define eco-tourists as tourists who are largely motivated to see the nature with the purpose of observing wildlife and learning about its environment. Moreover, there are different 'shades of green tourists,' i.e. different types of environmental awareness of tourists on their environmental concern since tourists' attitudes regarding environmental issues are highly dependent on where the tourists originally originate (Ivarsson, 1998; Swarbooke & Horner, 2007).

A sustainable-oriented destination calls for ecologically-oriented destination management. Destination policy makers have to understand, plan and manage tourism impacts and attempt to maximise the benefits of tourism in a given destination. It requires cooperation of different stakeholders, including marketing of individual tourism suppliers with the goal of implementing ecological practices within destinations. Middleton and Hawkins (1998, p. 8) state that tourism marketing 'must balance the interests of shareholders/owners with the long-run environmental interests of a destination and at the same time meet the demands and expectations of customers.' An environmental commitment can have an impact on destination differentiation and destination positioning when appropriately communicated to the market.

Tourists' understanding of environmental and ecological orientations, and their attitudes represent a starting point for developing their awareness about ecological issues and stimulating ecologically oriented behaviour. However, Poirier (2001, p. 209) stated that environmental concern is lagging behind efforts to change attitudes of tourists. Moreover, Lee and Moscardo (2005) stated that environmentally aware consumers are more likely to have pro-environmental behaviour.

The current study was undertaken to examine the perception of tourists about, firstly, the consideration of a destination's ecological orientation when choosing a destination and, secondly, the ecological orientation of visitors to Portorož. Tourists in Portorož in autumn

and winter were included in the research, representing a limitation of the study. Thus, the findings cannot be generalised to year-round tourism. The goal of the study is to investigate the actual state of the ecological orientation of tourists in Portorož. Moreover, the research reveals the specificities of both hotel guests and non-hotel guests in this regard. Thus, the study is meant to contribute to the discussion of ecological orientation of tourists in Portorož.

### Research Methodology

The research is focused on tourists in Portorož; face-to-face surveys were conducted at selected locations in Portorož, including hotels, the tourist information centre and campsites. Proportional stratified sampling was used, ensuring that the structure of accommodation of respondents was in line with the structure of accommodation of tourists in Portorož. The present research is a part of a broader piece of research on the characteristics of tourists in Portorož in the low season.

The survey was performed between November 2011 and January 2012. It was administered by three interviewers who were trained for the interview. Data collection is based on a structured questionnaire, which was divided into two parts. The first part included a five-point Likert-type scale, but just two scales are included in the present research. Respondents were asked to classify their consideration of destination ecological orientation when choosing a destination (1 = absolutely not important, 5 = very important) and their perceptions of the ecological orientation of Portorož on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = absolutely non-ecologically oriented destination, 5 = very ecologically oriented destination). The Likert-type scale was used because it is the most commonly used technique in tourism surveys, and five- or seven-point scales are the easiest to understand and sufficient for most purposes (Finn, Elliott-White, & Walton, 2000, p. 96). The second part of the questionnaire included the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. A total of 436 usable questionnaires were collected.

There were 223 (51.1%) of women and 194 (44.5%) men included in the survey. The average age of re-

*Table 1* Consideration of Ecologically Oriented Destination in Destination Choice

Item	Hotel guests	Non-hotel guests	Total
Very important (5)	17 (5.4%)	2 (1.9%)	19 (4.5%)
Important (4)	112 (35.6%)	22 (20.6%)	134 (31.8%)
Neither important, nor unimportant (3)	123 (39.0%)	47 (43.9%)	170 (40.3%)
Not important (2)	59 (18.7%)	33 (30.8%)	92 (21.8%)
Absolutely not important (1)	4 (1.3%)	3 (2.8%)	7 (1.7%)
Total	315	107	422
Mean	3.25	2.88	

spondents was 44 years. 319 or three quarters of the respondents (73.2%) stayed at a hotel, 64 (14.7%) at a self-catering apartment, 38 (8.7%) in private rooms, 3 (0.7%) at a pension, 1 (0.2%) at a campsite, and 6 (1.4%) respondents stayed at other accommodation facilities. The study provides a representative sample on national structure of tourists in Portorož. There were 217 Slovene tourists included in the survey, which represented 49.8% of respondents, followed by Italian tourists (113; 25.9%), Austrian tourists (44; 10.1%), German tourists (18; 4.1%) and Croatian tourists (4; 0.9%); 19 respondents were from other countries.

The average period of stay of respondents was relatively high. There respondents with four- to seven-night stays in Portorož prevailed, representing 214 or 50.0% of respondents in the survey; 17 (3.9%) of respondents stayed longer than seven days in Portorož, and 197 (46.1%) of respondents stayed in Portorož from one to three days. Among the respondents, there were only 67 (15.7%) respondents who were visiting Portorož for the first time during the survey. Others were return tourists in Portorož and most of them were regular tourists; 168 (39.3%) of them had visited 10 or more times. Therefore, it can be assumed that the respondents know Portorož well.

## Results

Regarding the question about the consideration of a destination's ecological orientation in the choice of destination, respondents gave relatively evenly distributed answers (Table 1); 422 respondents answered to this question. There were 315 hotel guests and 107 non-hotel guests. The mean response for hotel guests

was 3.25, and the mean score for non-hotel guests was 2.88. An independent sample t-test shows a statistically significant difference between hotel and non-hotel guests (sig. = 0.000). The latter have lower consideration for a destination's ecological orientation when they choose a destination. The frequency distribution shows that the average score (3 = neither important nor unimportant) prevails. This score was given by 170 or 40.3% of respondents. Moreover, only seven (1.3%) of respondents gave the lowest score (absolutely not important) and 19 or 4.5% of respondents gave the highest score (very important).

Furthermore, 421 respondents answered the question about their perceptions of the ecological orientation of Portorož (Table 2); there were 314 hotel guests and 107 non-hotel guests. The overall perception of ecological orientation of Portorož is near average. There is a statistically significant difference between hotel and non-hotel guests revealed by independent sample t-test (sig. = 0.000). Hotel guests perceive Portorož to be a more ecologically oriented destination (mean = 3.01) than non-hotel guests do (mean = 2.51). A total of 153 (36.6%) of respondents gave an average score (neither important, not unimportant) to the ecological orientation of Portorož; among them, there were 122 (38.9%) of hotel guests and 31 (29.0%) non-hotel guests. About one quarter of the respondents rated Portorož as ecologically oriented; among them, there was a higher percentage of hotel guests (96; 30.6%) than non-hotel guests (15; 14.0%). Only five hotel guests rated Portorož as a highly ecologically oriented destination. Additionally, 134 respondents rated Portorož as non-ecologically oriented destina-

Table 2 Perception of Ecological Orientation of Portorož

Item	Hotel guests	Non-hotel guests	Total
Very ecologically oriented destination (5)	5 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (1.2%)
Ecologically oriented destination (4)	96 (30.6%)	15 (14.0%)	111 (26.4%)
Neither ecologically oriented, nor non-ecologically oriented destination (3)	122 (38.9%)	31 (29.0%)	153 (36.3%)
Non ecologically-oriented destination (2)	79 (25.2%)	55 (51.4%)	134 (31.8%)
Absolutely non-ecologically oriented destination (1)	12 (3.8%)	6 (5.6%)	18 (4.3%)
Total	314	107	421
Mean	3.01	2.51	

tion; among them, 79 (25.2%) were hotel guests and 55 (51.4%) non-hotel guests. Eighteen (4.3%) respondents rated Portorož as an absolutely non-ecological destination.

In summary, it was found that visitors to Portorož evaluate the ecological orientation of a destination as neither important nor unimportant in their choice of destination. Furthermore, they perceive the ecological orientation of Portorož at an average level.

### Concluding Remarks

This research has shed some light on the ecological orientation of visitors to Portorož. The investigation was based on surveys of the low season (autumn and winter). Following the results, it can be concluded that the ecological orientation of Portorož is relatively low in the perspective of tourists in Portorož in the low season. Such tourists are also not ecologically oriented; the ecological orientation of destination does not seem to be important for them when choosing a destination. In this regard, there is also a difference between hotel guests and non-hotel guests. The former are more ecologically oriented and also consider Portorož to be more ecologically oriented. It can be assumed that respondents know Portorož well, since they are mostly repeat tourists and more than half of the respondents were there for a stay longer than three days.

Managerial implications are drawn based on the study findings. Firstly, Portorož should attract ecologically oriented tourists in order to develop sustainable tourism through establishing environmental marketing, which would also promote the ecological posi-

tioning of Portorož in the tourism market. Secondly, eco-tourism in Portorož should be promoted to different stakeholders in order to raise awareness of ecological issues; implementation of eco-labels and eco-brands should also be considered.

Following the trend of the ecological orientation and sustainability of destinations, a need arises for further investigation on how to expose the ecological sustainability of destinations related to sea and nature. Finally, further research should include a correlation between the socio-demographic characteristics of tourists, such as, tourism spending, country of origin, age and ecological orientation of tourists to obtain more in-depth information on the ecological orientation of tourists in Portorož. Longitudinal research on the ecological orientation of tourists in Portorož is planned in order to provide an appropriate time comparison; this should reveal whether there will be any changes or improvement in this regard. Moreover, the ecological orientation of summer visitors (i.e. the high season) is also needed to determine whether seasonal variations of tourists exist.

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