

Scenic Beauty Preferences of Cameron Highlands Malaysia: Local versus Foreign Tourists

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Abstract

Scenic beauty is an important component of the tourism industry in the highland environment of Malaysia. This paper presents the differences in scenic beauty preferences between local and foreign tourists visiting the Cameron Highlands, using a questionnaire survey (n = 439). The aim of the study was to evaluate the effects of three scenic beauty parameters (natural, land uses, and management activities) on the scenic beauty preferences of both groups. An exploratory field observation was used to determine the relevant management variables that were probably associated with the highland management practices. The Independent Sample t-Test was used to compare the differences in their preferences. The hypotheses stated that foreign tourists were more likely to agree on the effects of management practices on the scenic beauty preferences than were the local tourists. While those hypotheses were not fully supported in this study, results did indicate that there are significant differences in two scenic beauty parameters: natural beauty and management activities. Interestingly, foreign tourists stated higher agreement on the effects of the natural beauty and management activities parameters than did the local tourists. These facts suggest that the foreign tourists were more sensitive to the effects of the current landscape management practices than were the local tourists. Secondly, the results also suggest that the foreign tourists appreciated the natural beauty of the Cameron Highlands more than the local tourists did. Importantly, the findings have implications to the District Council and Land Office of Cameron Highlands, since the agencies can use the information to decide on suitable management practices that benefit the tourism industry here. Good management decisions can help protect and sustain one of the most precious natural resources of the country from becoming exploited and exhausted.

Keywords: *Scenic beauty; Preference; Local tourist; Foreign tourist; Landscape management practices*

1. Introduction

Because of their scenic beauty and recreational opportunities, highland landscapes are significant tourist attractions. Scenic beauty, in particular, is a major draw for visitors to natural environments such as forests, lakes, and highlands, and is frequently mentioned in travel reviews (Clay and Daniel, (2000); Zube, Sell, and Taylor, (1982). For tourists, scenic beauty affects the overall quality of their recreational experience (Daniel and Vining, 1983), thereby increasing the monetary value of such natural areas (Zube, 1980). With scenic beauty being so critical to the tourism industry, appropriate landscape management practices must be adopted in order to maintain the visual attractiveness of natural areas.

Cameron Highlands was selected as the research study area because the highland has a unique scenic beauty (Allen, 2005). It is a treasured natural heritage of Malaysia and one of the long-established tourist destinations (Khairulmani, 1998). The highlands are also well known as one of the oldest and largest hill resorts in Malaysia (Leong, 1992). During British colonial rule, Cameron Highlands was appreciated for its cool climate and scenic landscapes. The highland served British government officials as a retreat, providing relief from the tropical climate. After Malaysian independence in 1957, the highland was promoted as a tourist destination. At the same time, more agricultural land has been developed into resorts (Leong, 1992), and since the 1970's many vacation homes and hotels have been built in the area.

The District Council and the Land Office of Cameron Highlands are the agencies responsible for the management of the highland. Although both agencies are conscientious in their management tasks, differences in policy or regulation sometimes create overlapping duties or conflicts over specific methods and strategies.

Jamilah, Ahmad Makmom, Manohar and Zaliah, (2006) suggest that methods that preserve the visual aspect of scenic beauty could be the primary measure for assessing the effects of development and management of the natural landscape. The effects of landscape management practices on the scenic beauty of the Cameron Highlands can be deduced from tourists' reviews (Tahvanainen, Tyvainen, Ihalainen, Marjut, Vuorela, and Kolehmainen, 2001). Assessments such as these suggest that the management practices carried out in the Cameron Highlands can indeed alter the scenic aspect of landscapes and contribute to a high-quality tourist experience by preserving their scenic beauty.

The main purpose of this paper is to assess the scenic beauty of the Cameron Highlands by comparing preferences between local and foreign tourists. This paper developed and tested the hypothesis that the foreign tourists were more likely than the local ones, to comprehend the effects of the current management practices (natural beauty, land uses and management activities) on scenic beauty. This study attempted to determine the types of management practices that create significant differences in scenic beauty preferences between the two groups.

2.0 Background

Cameron Highlands is recognized as the premier hill resort of Malaysia (Knopf, 1996). Located on the Banjaran Titiwangsa (Titiwangsa Range), the highland is the most treasured natural heritage of the country, and a popular tourist destination. Travel reviews give the impression that the Cameron Highlands possess the most scenic landscapes in Malaysia (Knopf, 1996; Richmond et al., 2004; Allen, 2005). The highland landscapes are indeed varied and unique, offering many interesting experiences to a visitor, such as wilderness areas, vegetable farms, flower farms, and a butterfly farm. It was Sir Hugh Low who in 1888 first thought of turning The Cameron Highlands into a resort (Allen, 2005). Since then, Cameron Highlands has indeed been established as a popular resort, with its scenic landscapes and pleasant weather drawing many visitors. The pattern of development has been nature-based one, preserving the natural features of the area.

The economic growth of the Cameron Highlands has been based on agriculture and tourism (Allen, 2005). Analysis shows that agriculture is the major land use, focusing primarily on tea plantations and vegetable farms (Leong, 1992). However, tourism and the cut flower industry have economic importance as well. These uses have dominated the pattern of land use since 1930's, suggesting that the landscape management practices of the Cameron Highlands have produced diversities of land use. Among these uses, however, maintaining natural areas (e.g. forest, hill, waterfall and lake) probably has the most significant impact on tourism. Even during colonial times the importance of the Cameron Highlands as a natural area was recognized, although it was also then that the land began to be used for tea plantations. It is noteworthy that the tourism industry is still flourishing here, and even increasing (Allen, 2005). It appears that the tourism industry of the Cameron Highlands has great potential to expand and draw tourists from around the world.

3.0 Methods

Two methods were used to assess the scenic beauty preferences of the tourists— exploratory field observations and a questionnaire survey. The exploratory field observation method was based on the approach implemented by Gary and Daniel (2000). Babbie, (1979) notes the advantages of a field observation—it provides a comprehensive perspective about the real situation at a site. A review of Akhbar, Hale, and Headley (2003) confirms that a questionnaire survey is one of the methods generally used to assess scenic beauty. Furthermore, surveys are means of making descriptive assertions about the attitudes and preferences of a sample population.

3.1 Exploratory Field Observation

The exploratory field observation was carried out from 26th to 28th October 2006 at the three main territories of Cameron Highlands: Ringlet, Tanah Rata and Brinchang (**Fig. 1**). The main purpose of the field observation was to observe the relevant management variables that were probably associated with the highland management practices and that affected the scenic beauty. The secondary purpose of the field observation was to identify the locations and routes most frequented by tourists. This information was important because it helped the researcher to determine the potential locations for data collection. Cameron Highlands can be reached through Ringlet, using Tapah as one of the access roads. Agriculture is the main land use in Ringlet. The next territory after Ringlet is Tanah Rata, which lies between Ringlet and Brinchang. Tanah Rata can be considered to be the heart of Cameron Highlands because it is the center for administrative activities. Brinchang sits at the highest altitude of the three settlements. Most tourist attractions are located here.

Photographs were taken of various types of landscape scenes in the sampled areas. Analysis of these photographs allowed the researchers to determine the types of highland management practices that had been applied in these areas. These management variables were then grouped into three scenic beauty parameters; *natural beauty*, *land use and management activity*. These findings were subsequently used to formulate the contents of a questionnaire survey. **Table 1** presents the sample of the photographs, while **Table 2** groups the management variables into the three scenic beauty parameters.

3.2 Questionnaire Survey

The objective of the questionnaire survey was to determine the effects of management practices on the scenic beauty of the Cameron Highlands as perceived by both local and foreign tourists. The approach to the questionnaire survey was similar to that implemented by (Ryan, 1998; Ryan, 2002; Pavlikakis and Tsihrintzis, 2004). The survey was conducted daily at the study areas for a period of one month—from 1st May 2007 to 31st May 2007. The survey was divided into two sections. *Section 1* dealt with the demographic background and the social characteristics of the respondents. The respondents were asked to state their gender, age, place of origin, level of education, occupation and income. The instrument was a close-ended written approach.

Section 2 asked the respondents to state their preferences for the types of landscape management practice—their agreement or disagreement with the given statements—by choosing a number with a highly structured graded response, as recommended by (Daniel and Boster, 1976). The graded responses were paired with forced statements using a 5-point likert scale; (1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; and 5 = Strongly agree).

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The selection of the samples was based on the stratified systematic sampling method. The sample size obtained was 439 units from a sample pool of 560 units. The survey response rates were calculated using the responses of the participating respondents, and the number of the declining respondents. The response rate was 89%.

4.0 Results and Discussion

Tabular data relating to the differences in scenic beauty perceptions between local and foreign tourists was generated using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for Windows, version 12.0. The differences in scenic beauty preferences of the two tourist groups were compared using the independent sample t-Test at the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$. These differences were compared based on three groups of scenic beauty parameters: natural beauty, management activities, and land use.

Results indicated that the value of the test statistics for the preferences of natural beauty was 3.336, with p of 0.001; hence there was a significant difference in preference for this parameter between two tourist groups, at the level of significance 0.05. The value of the test statistics for the preferences of management activities was 3.321, with p of 0.001, again indicating a significant difference in preference between the two tourist groups, at the level of significance 0.05. Finally, the value of the test statistics for the preference of land use was 1.844, with p of 0.066. For this concept, there was no significant difference in preferences between the two tourist groups at the level of significance 0.05. Interestingly, one of the major differences between the two types of tourists concerned their preference for the scenic beauty of waterfalls and lakes. The foreign tourists were more attracted to these landscape scenes than the local tourists were. These differences could be due to past experiences and memories of the local tourists, who may either remember their own direct observations of these scenes or possess old postcards of them, and realize that the scenic views were recognizably better in the past. They, unlike the foreign tourists, understand that pollution and sedimentation have distorted the view of both types of landscapes.

Table 3 presents the results of the quantitative analyses. The findings confirm that among the three scenic beauty parameters, only natural beauty and management activities parameters have significant differences in scenic beauty preference between the two tourist groups.

H1: Foreign tourists were more likely to agree on the effect of natural landscapes on scenic beauty preferences than were local tourists

The hypothesis was supported ($t = 3.34$; $p = 0.001$). Local (mean = 3.88) and foreign (mean = 4.10) tourists differed significantly in their scenic beauty perceptions of the natural beauty concepts, although in general, they agreed on the concept of scenic beauty perceptions.

H2: Foreign tourists were more likely to agree on the effects of management activities on scenic beauty preferences than were local tourists

The hypothesis was supported ($t = 3.32$; $p = 0.001$). Local (mean = 3.60) and foreign (mean = 3.76) tourists differed significantly in their scenic beauty perceptions of the management activity concept, although in general they agreed on the concept of scenic beauty perceptions.

H3: Foreign tourists were more likely to agree on the effect of land use on the scenic beauty preferences than were local tourists

The hypothesis was not supported ($t = 1.84$; $p = 0.066$). Local (mean = 3.29) and foreign (mean = 3.40) tourists had similar perceptions of the effect of land use on scenic beauty.

5.0 Conclusion

The hypothesis that the foreign tourists were more likely than the local tourists to agree on the impacts of highlands management practices on preference for scenic beauty, was not fully supported in this research. The result of the Independent Sample t -Test in **Table 3** has shown that there were, however, significant differences in scenic beauty preferences between the local and foreign tourists. Among the three scenic beauty parameters (natural beauty, land use, and management activities), both natural beauty and management activities did have significant differences in preferences between the two tourist groups.

In general, the results indicate that the current highland management practices did have impacts on the scenic beauty preferences of tourists visiting the Cameron Highlands. Only the scenic parameters of natural land use (forest, lake, waterfall, and hill) and management activities (forest clearing, hill flattening and street planting), however, had higher impacts on the scenic preferences of the foreign tourists than they did on those of the local tourists. These differences in preferences of scenic value need to be considered when choosing management practices of the Cameron Highlands. (In spite of this study's findings of differences in preferences, though, researchers could not compare these differences to those found in a previous study because that previous study did not address the same issues.)

This information provides significant insights for the District Council and Land Office of Cameron Highlands to consider. Both authorities can use these insights to protect the natural environments of the Cameron Highlands. These highlands have the potential to significantly increase the tourism industry here, generating important income to the region.

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Table 1: Photographs of scene that were classified into three scenic beauty parameters

1. Natural beauty



Natural hill



Natural Forest



Robinson Waterfall



Lake

2. Land use



Resort



Residential



Commercial



Golf Course



Vegetable farm on flat



Vegetable on terrace



Tea plantation

3. Management activity



Hill flattening



Forest clearing



Street planting

Table 2: Scenic beauty parameters as identified during an exploratory field observation

Scenic Beauty Parameters	Management Variables
Natural Beauty:	Natural hill, Natural forest, Lake, and Waterfall
Land Use:	Resort, Residential, Commercial, Golf course, Vegetable farm, and Tea plantation
Management Activities:	Hill flattening, Forest clearing, and Street planting

Table 3: Differences in scenic beauty preferences between two tourist groups visiting Cameron Highlands

Scenic Beauty Parameters	Groups	Agreement level ¹	t - value	p
1. Natural Beauty	Local	3.88	3.336	0.001
	Foreign	4.10		
2. Management Activities	Local	3.60	3.321	0.001
	Foreign	3.76		
3. Land Uses	Local	3.29	1.844	0.066
	Foreign	3.40		

1. Cell entry values: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

Figure 1: Location of Cameron Highlands, Malaysia

