Consumerism in Sustainable Tourism: A Survey of UK Consumers

Dr Graham A. Miller

Senior Lecturer

University of Westminster

35 Marylebone Road

London

NW1 5LS

Tel: +44 207 911 5000 ext 3054

Fax: +44 207 911 5171

Email: G.Miller01@wmin.ac.uk

Consumerism in Sustainable Tourism: A Survey of UK Consumers

Abstract

This article presents the results of a survey of tourism consumers from the Destinations Travel Show in the UK in 2000. Four hundred and eleven tourism consumers were interviewed over four days at the show on the type of information that they used in the selection of their holiday destination. This article posits that the power of the consumer can be a major force for progress towards greater sustainability by the tourism industry, acting as a rationale for change, which is often missing from more traditional planning, management or regulatory techniques. The research shows consumers are already making decisions based on environmental, social and economic quality for day to day products and are keen to transfer these habits to the purchase of tourism products. Recommendations are made, highlighting the need for the tourism industry to capitalise on this demand for a wider range of product information, and so promote moves towards greater levels of sustainability in the industry.

Keywords:

Consumers, UK, product information

Introduction

If tourism is seen as a direction from which to approach sustainable development, then planning, management, regulation, self-regulation and economic mechanisms can be seen as the well-known paths which governing authorities typically follow. The WTO (1995:30) places a stamp of authority on the potential of the tourism industry, defining Sustainable Tourism as tourism that “meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future”. It is envisaged as leading to the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems”. Yet, while the definition acknowledges the need for future tourism products to satisfy the needs of tourists, the power of the consumer to force change in the tourism industry and promote greater sustainable development is often overlooked (Mowforth and Munt 1998). This article aims to provoke this discussion, citing evidence gained from research conducted at the “Destinations” Travel Market, held at Olympia conference centre, London from the 10th to 13th of February 2000. The thesis of this research is that consumerism can promote sustainable tourism and the paper aims to determine if consumers of tourism products are asking for, and then using, an expanded range of product information to influence their holiday purchase decisions. If the consumer does feel that s/he wants access to more environmental, social, cultural, economic or political information prior to booking, then this will provide the industry with a strong rationale to provide this information. Such a development would link with the increasing calls in the academic literature for advancement in the monitoring and development of indicators by the tourism industry (Jafari 1989, Butler 1990, Müeller 1994, Hunter 1995, 1997, Wall 1997 and Goodall & Stabler 1998, Miller 2001a).

Green Consumerism

Ottman (1992:3) defines green consumerism as "individuals looking to protect themselves and their world through the power of their purchasing decisions. In their efforts to protect themselves and their world, they are scrutinizing products for environmental safety". This definition contains two motivating forces for seeking product information and taking action; to protect oneself and to protect one's world. It is the contention of this author that these two forces are not mixed evenly, but by tying the protection/enhancement of the world to the protection/enhancement of individuals, ideological abnegation is not necessary and twin goals can be achieved. In this way, consumerism has the potential to promote sustainable tourism.

There is a plethora of authors who believe the green consumer is taking over. Wight (1993:3) states, "There is no question that the marketplace is becoming 'greener', or more environmentally sensitive, both in terms of awareness and in its desire to contribute through its efforts a more sensitive approach to numerous activities and purchases". Middleton and Hawkins (1998:12) concur, "…we believe there is overwhelming evidence of customer preferences for product qualities that are unambiguously concerned with environmental quality at chosen destinations". Yet, Swarbrooke (1996) confirms what these authors show, that there is generally a lack of evidence to support the bold claims made because such information is commercially sensitive and difficult to collect without co-operation.

This is certainly the case in determining the reasons why consumers make the choices they do, although, as stated above, it is contended that at best, the dominant motivation can be considered one of selfish altruism. A lack of convincing evidence is particularly acute in determining the reasons why consumers make the choices they do (US Travel Data Centre 1992), although, as stated above, it is contended that at best, the dominant motivation can be considered one of selfish altruism.

Ayala (1995) states the total global market for environmentally friendly products to be worth US$200 billion per annum and rising rapidly, while the market for nature based tourism is predicted to be growing at between 25 and 30% annually to reach US$300 billion by 2000 (McBoyle 1996). A Market Opinion and Research International (MORI) (MORI 1997) survey of UK consumer attitudes to the environment and tourism showed 61% of consumers thought it was "very" or "fairly" important for any travel company that they dealt with to take into account environmental issues. This represented a rise of nine percentage points over the answers received to the same question when asked in 1995, while the figure rose to 77% when consumers were asked to consider companies from industry in general (Worcester 1999), illustrating tourism's image as a clean, or "smokeless" industry (Romeril 1989). Consumers also stated that they would be prepared to pay £7.10 (mean score) extra to ensure the tour operator they travelled with was committed to environmental protection and £7.50 for the same commitment from accommodation providers (MORI 1997). Further, a Co-op survey (Co-op Travel is one of the UK's largest independent travel agents) (Co-op 1998) found that

76% of their customers were concerned about the pollution levels in the tourism resort, 73% wanted information on the effects of tourism on the natural and societal environment in the destination, 67% wanted information on the human rights record of a country and 55% wanted to know about the general wage levels of tourism workers in their resort.

Yet, a weakness of much of this research is the distinction between what survey respondents say and what they actually ask for or do. In the research cited above conducted by the Co-Op (Co-Op 1998) the concern expressed by consumers about the effects of tourism was shown to be high, yet a telephone enquiry line set up so that customers could actually enquire about environmental issues in specific destinations received very few (less than twenty in one season) enquiries (Lane 2002).

Maloney and Ward (1973) describe the strong link between what is said and what is done as our "verbal commitment", while Mansfeld (1995:73) is of the opinion that for the tourist "…real world choice behaviour… might differ substantially from the way in which he would ideally desire to act". Thus, a survey by Research International (The Observer 1996) of UK attitudes to green products that showed 90% of consumers wanted action to clarify the environmental boasts made by companies, can either be seen as a sign of real intent by consumers, or a view expressed in an ideal world. In the same survey 20% of respondents said they bought products because of the product information, or labelling. This would seem to be a more realistic figure for consumer involvement with product information, because although still open to dishonest answers, the question does ask the consumer about their actual purchasing behaviour rather than the more hypothetical question relating to what the consumer would like to see with regard to product information. Williams, Shaw and Griffiths (1996) agree that an accurate measure of attitudes and likely behaviour on holiday can be ascertained by asking consumers about, or observing consumers, during their daily activities and behaviour at home. Swarbrooke (1996:A70) also concurs, "People do not buy holidays in isolation, they are an extension of everyday lifestyles and are usually linked in some way to how consumers buy other products…It is also likely that the messages a customer responds to when buying food or clothes or entertainment may well be similar to those they respond well to in relation to tourism products".

The split between stated consumer intentions and actual consumer behaviour cannot be overstated. Concern for the validity of any research on this topic necessitates a comparison of any surveyed results against the amount of products meeting stricter environmental standards that are actually purchased. Yet, within tourism such a comparison is complicated by the difficulty in obtaining information about the environmental credentials of any product available for purchase. A profusion of labels and standards intended to facilitate consumer's choice have resulted in an opportunity for false claims and have left the consumer confused (Wight 1993, Wickers 1992). Further, within the mass tourism market there is a lack of understanding by consumers that tourism is a product that can have negative impacts, and as such, any consciousness that is applied to the purchase of other products may not be applied to tourism, further reducing the likelihood of professed interest in environmental issues being translated into buying behaviour.

Perhaps the best example of an actual change in consumer behaviour is the move to purchase more organic food despite its extra cost. During 1986 one of the UK's leading supermarkets sold ten organic product lines, it is now selling over 50 times that amount, with sales increasing 125 five fold since 1995 (The London Evening Standard 1999). Nationally, the market for organic food in the UK is estimated to be worth £500 million in 2000 and will be worth 10% of the total food market by 2005. As well as providing a significant example of actualised interest, the market for organic food demonstrates the importance of people's selfishly altruistic position i.e. that people will favour goods that promote sustainability when they also deliver a tangible benefit to the consumer personally. It is recognised that the rise in consumer's interest in organic food has risen because of health fears (Soil Association 2002). As such, the tourism industry is well-placed to promote sustainability should the consumer recognise the benefits to be had personally from more sustainable practices made by the industry.

Ottman (1992) provides further evidence of green consumerism and quotes research from the Market Intelligence Service Ltd that shows how in New York, of all consumer products introduced in 1991, 13.4% were positioned as green, up from just 4.5% in 1989. Similarly, green consumerism has resulted in UK supermarkets considerably shifting their position over the labelling of foodstuffs with Genetically Modified (GM) ingredients. A previous campaign against supermarkets to introduce a more ethical trading policy led one commentator to observe, "In this process of flexing their muscles, consumers are creating a new form of citizenship" (The Independent 1997). This reflects the sentiments expressed by Raymond E. Thomas (quoted in Smith 1990) over a quarter of a century previously;

> "Every purchase of a product or service could become a 'vote' for a marginal change in the shape of society, as well as for the product purchased. For example, Procter & Gamble and Unilever share the detergent market in this country, and to all intents and purposes, despite differing advertising, their products are the same. But the social impacts of these two companies differ substantially. If they chose, or were compelled to broadcast those social impacts, detergent buyers in their purchasing could vote for their preferred set of social impacts…Armed with social impact data, adequately presented by firms, the public at large could truly participate in shaping society by the exercise of purchase votes".

The goal of increased social reporting is becoming more of a reality amongst the largest companies in the world, although for the smaller and medium sized companies the idea is still nascent. In 1993 only three of the FT-SE 100 companies produced a separate environmental report to accompany their financial reports, but this had increased to 79 by 1996 (The Times 1997a). When this was extended to all UK companies, only 28% produced a separate environmental report, as compared to 43% of all US companies. Indeed, the level of reporting has reached such a sufficient level to command annual awards for the most revealing and best-constructed environmental report. The winning report in 1999 went to Anglian Water for the manner in which the report related a wide range of social and environmental issues in a reader-friendly style, mirroring the trend in financial reports to make them understandable to the individual investor, who plays an increasingly prominent role in the shareholding (The Independent 1999).

Tourism Products

Dinan (1999) believes that although much of the evidence into the consumer's search for product information comes from Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) it is dangerous to draw lessons from the research because of the differences between these products and the tourism product. However, if research into FMCGs does bias the picture of consumers' requirement for product information then there is evidence of consumerism to be found from within the tourism and hospitality industry. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) funded Air Transport Users Council (ATUC) in 1997 published for the first time a league table of the best and worst airlines for delays suffered during the previous summer's peak season as a response to consumer requests (The Times 1997b). As an example of "green consumerism", the survey of UK beach and coastal water quality publishes its results in the annual "Reader's Digest Good Beach Guide" such is the interest amongst potential consumers for greater information on which beaches meet or fail quality standards. Smith (1991) quotes research showing between 11% and 25% more business is attracted to beaches upon receipt of a EU "Blue Flag" recognising quality and safety. The research by MORI (Martin 1997) into tourism and the environment shows a doubling, from 14% to 28%, from 1988 to 1996 in the percentage of respondents meeting what the research describes as "environmental activist" status, while the amount of "green consumers" had risen from 19% to 36% over the same time period. In the case of both of these figures, the percentages had dropped from their highpoint during the early '90s, but did seem to be constant at their present levels. As an example of actual behaviour, McBoyle (1996) recounts the level of questions pertaining to the environment that arise during tours of Scottish distilleries, not an activity that one would readily link with the environment.

However, despite the wide definition of "green consumerism", the concept is far from having universal coverage amongst consumers. Consumers still buy products that they know fail to protect themselves or their families, and so it is an axiom that products are still consumed which fail to protect the wider world. McKercher (1993) also reminds us of the sixth fundamental truth about tourism, that tourists are consumers not anthropologists, and the seventh fundamental truth, that tourism is entertainment. While Middleton and Hawkins (1998:28) believe in the ultimate power of the green consumer, they question the way in which the consumer influences the provision of goods, "The key pressures for change within the European market are not being brought to bear by the visitors themselves. The evidence indicates that tourists are not specifically demanding so-called 'green' or 'eco-labels' on the products they select, but they will not return to destinations which fail to offer environmental quality as part of the tourism experience". Thus the change in the nature of products demanded is not through consumers seeking product information, but through an experiential process in which non-environmentally friendly goods are rejected after consumption.

Middleton and Hawkins (1998) continue to make their case for the change in the consumer market by citing the growing education of the public towards the environment through the formal schooling process. This vitiates their argument that the changing market is an experiential one, as the increased awareness provided by formal education must result in any change in consumption *before* consumption, rather than *after* consumption as would be necessitated by a trial and error learning process. Wight also (1993:8) disagrees,

> "Consumers are switching allegiances, challenging traditional ethics, and *actively* seeking out products that are perceived to fulfil their needs, even if more costly. They do not look at the price of a product; they *ask* if there is an environmental or moral issue involved. Tourists as consumers, are *asking questions*, *seeking* creative travel alternatives, and are willing to pay extra to obtain the travel experiences they desire" (emphasis added).

The research by Jamrozy, Backman and Backman (1996) further strengthens the view that consumers do seek product information prior to consumption. They contend that consumers who are interested in an issue (protecting themselves or the wider world) would be more receptive to information concerning that issue and would also be likely to articulate their concerns and spread the message to others. Stone, Barnes and Montgomery (1995) agree with this view and cite the rapid increase in the membership of environmental groups in the US and Europe as evidence of the increased involvement of consumers. In 1985 GreenPeace had 100,000 members in the US and Europe with a $1 million annual budget, whereas by 1991 this had risen to five million members and a $160 million annual budget. Today, it is estimated that one in ten of the British electorate is a member of an environmental group (Radio Five 1997). As opinion leaders on a subject, the involved consumer represents a target for organisations wishing to spread their message. With any group of involved, receptive potential consumers, it is unlikely that an organisation would simply wait for the consumer to establish their preferences by trial and error, but instead would try to approach the consumer with product information. Simultaneously, the consumer would be willing to accept this new product information as a shortcut to a product that meets the consumer's necessary requirements on a certain issue.

This research aims to provide evidence of consumer interest in receiving more information about the tourism product and whether the consumer is using this expanded range of product information to influence booking decisions.

Methodology

Research Design

The research was conducted at the Destinations 2000 Travel Market, sponsored by the Daily Telegraph (a leading quality newspaper) and British Airports Authority (BAA), and held at Olympia from 10th-13th February. This event attracted over 40,000 people in 1999 and was held at the peak of the booking season. Over 350 organisations were exhibiting in 2000, and one organisation, the Centre for Environmentally Responsible Tourism (CERT), was willing to allow this research to be conducted from their stall at the event. Being present at the exhibition to invite respondents to participate in a self-administered questionnaire combined the advantages of self-administered questionnaires with face-to-face delivery to achieve the advantage of a high number of respondents and avoid the disadvantage of misinterpretation or non-comprehension. A further advantage of self-administered questionnaires is the standardised nature of their delivery and thus the reduction in interviewer bias intruding on the research, which could otherwise threaten the reliability of the research.

The methods used to select respondents from within the Travel Market ensured that the sample was representative of those present, but, the surveyed population cannot be considered to be representative of the entire UK holidaying population. Being present at a travel market distinguishes those consumers attending from the mass tourism market, as does the nature of the tourism companies exhibiting. Trying to obtain a representation of the UK tourism market is an extremely costly and complex challenge, yet, the group surveyed at Destinations 2000 Travel Market are important for analysis as they represent frequent travellers and can be considered to be the “leading edge” of consumption trends. Such a survey enables the researcher to avoid the problems of achieving representation of the whole UK tourism market, while enjoying the benefits of identifying future consumer trends.

A concern in any research is the extent to which respondents will give the socially desirable answer rather than the one that truly reflects their feelings. A further concern is the weakness of beliefs held by respondents not being predictive of behaviour, even if the answers received reflect the genuine beliefs held by respondents. These weaknesses are exacerbated when the research concentrates on hypothetical questions or intentions to do something. Thus, as far as possible, questions concentrated on actual behaviour to limit the potential for invalid answers. Validity of measurement was further improved by the obfuscation of the true focus of the research to make it more difficult for respondents to identify what the socially desirable answer is. The pilot survey did not reveal any problems with the language or nature of the questions asked, although changes were made to the design, giving more space to the definitions and utilising shading and boxes to greater effect.

Research Administration

Four hundred and eleven respondents were surveyed over four consecutive days, 140 of whom were questioned on Thursday and Friday, and 271 on the Saturday and Sunday. Every fifth respondent crossing an imaginary line from the right of the interviewer was approached to answer the questionnaire, and if that respondent refused to participate then the very next person was approached. This process of attrition continued until a person agreed to the interview request. The travel show was held the week before the school half-term holidays, and so an observation made by regular exhibitors was that the majority of attendees came over the weekend.

The relaxed environment of the travel show ensured that people were largely willing to participate in the research. In addition, the De Vere hotel chain generously donated an all-expenses paid weekend for two at any of their UK hotels and this was of added value in persuading people to participate. Thus, the refusal rate was very low (less than ten percent) and not a cause for concern in introducing bias into the survey (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996).

Research Analysis

The exploratory nature of this research meant that complex and derived methods of analysis were not appropriate. The aim of this survey was to gain an indication as to whether consumers were willing to use a wider spread of information in the purchase of their future tourism products. Further research will be necessary to establish what groups of consumers hold what opinions and to what extent. This research sought to determine if there was a spark of interest that could be fanned in the future. To this end, frequencies were produced using the statistical package SPSS, and cross-tabulations of the main demographic variables against all questions were compiled.

Despite limitations, the chi-squared test suited the research requirements because of its simplicity and flexibility. It also ensured that calculations remained close to the original data rather than becoming removed or derived measures. Sapsford (1999:174) observes, “It is a superficially very crude method of analysis, but it can detect all the effects that more sophisticated methods can identify”. The test enabled a statistical assessment to complement human analysis of the cross tabulations looking for evidence of relationships between variables. As such, while the traditional 95% significance level was adhered to in this research, attention is drawn towards the possibility of relationships with slightly lower levels of significance for the purposes of conducting further future research.

<u>Results and Discussion</u>

Survey Respondents

Thirty-eight percent (153) of respondents fell in the age category 25-34, yet otherwise there was an almost even distribution across the remaining age categories. The sample contained 42.5% males (173) and 57.2% (233) females in the sample. This difference is exaggerated by the propensity of females to take charge of completing the questionnaire when a mixed sex couple were selected, even though groups were requested to use the industry standard "next birthday rule" to determine who should answer the questionnaire. The sample reported a high level of educational achievement amongst respondents and thus demonstrates the non-representative nature of this sample (and therefore population) when compared against the general public. However, this finding will also be reflective of the greater number of younger people represented at the travel show than in the public as a whole. Responses for the question of occupation again show the group to be slightly contrary to the national norm.

Being present at a travel market the respondents have shown their interest in tourism, and also a willingness to seek information for themselves beyond that which is available from a high street travel agent. Overall, the group can be seen to reflect Cohen's (1972) "individual mass tourist" who travels with greater flexibility than the organised mass tourist, but perhaps leans towards the "explorer" who travels more independently and is more prepared to make his/her own travel plans

Consumer Use of Product Information

Information was gathered on the behaviour of respondents in their day-to-day lives with regard to the use of green product information and their level of consumer activism. The section was headed “Section One asks about your use of green product information at home”, in order to ensure respondents contained their answers to their use of information, rather than to express their concerns with the broader topic of environmental issues. Question one asked respondents how much green product information influenced their purchase decision for day to day products.

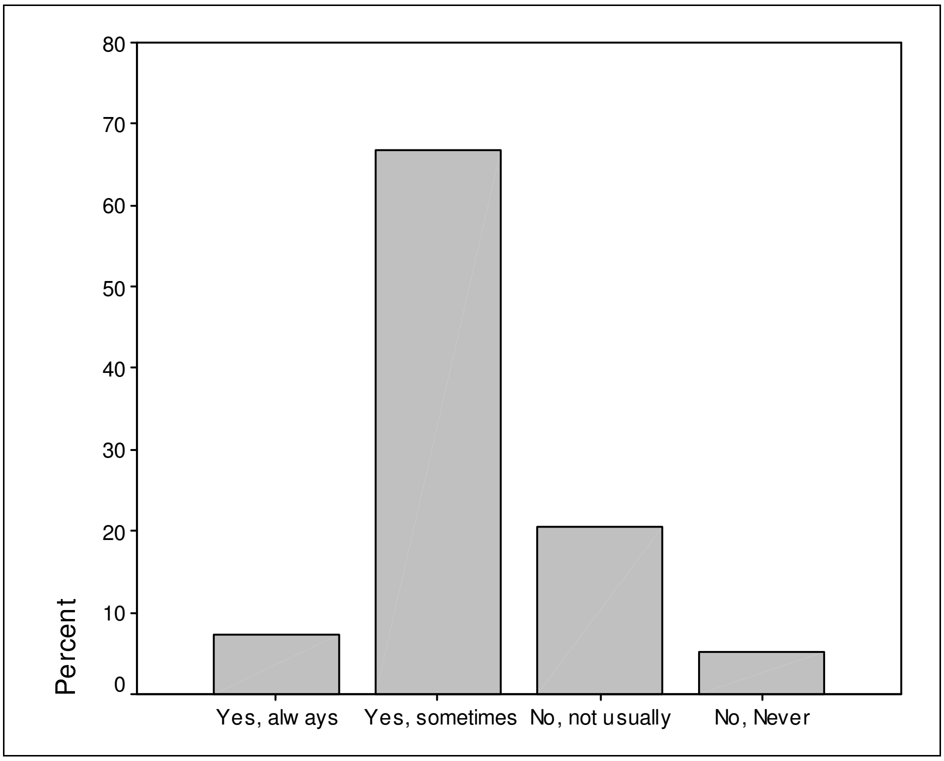

Figure 1: Does green product information influence your decision?

A definition of “green product information” was provided prior to this question, in order that all respondents understood the phrase equally, explaining that anything from a “fair trade” sticker on a packet of coffee through to a detailed environmental statement about a holiday could be understood to constitute green product information. Caution must be exercised in interpreting the results of any questionnaire, especially where respondents may feel there is a socially desirable or “correct” answer to a particular question. However, the level of 7.4% (30) of respondents who said they are always influenced by green product information, and 66% (272) who said they are sometimes influenced, are reflective of the evidence of consumers using product information shown in the literature. Further, the 21% (84) who replied that they did not usually use such information, and 5% (21) who said they never used green product information, would signify that respondents felt able to answer freely and were not pressured into giving a particular answer.

Having identified the extent to which product information was used, question two asked if consumers would like to see more day to day products with green product information.

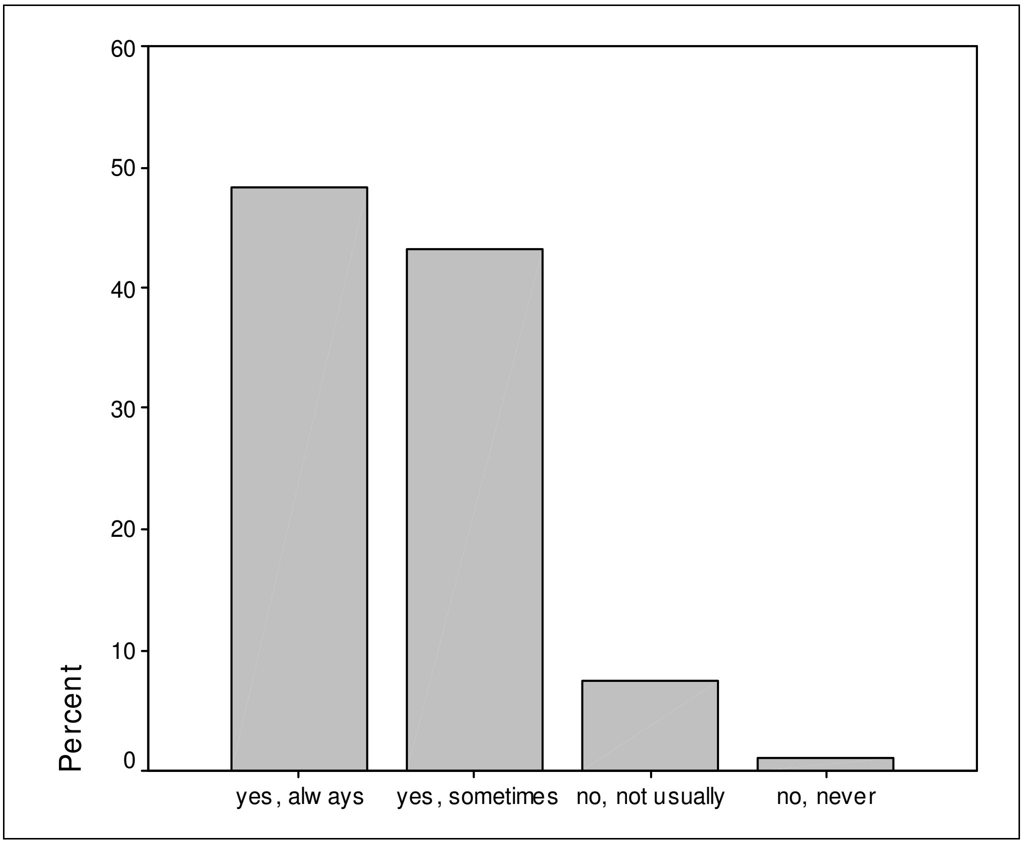

Figure 2: Would you like to see more day-to-day products with green product information?

Despite 25% of respondents in the previous question replying that they rarely or never use green product information, only 8.4% (34) did not want to see more such information in the future on day to day products. This would seem to signify a preparedness to use extra information in purchase decisions if that information could be more widely available. Comments made by respondents during the completion of the questionnaire included complaints about the size and lack of standardised presentation of current product information. With specific regard to green product information, respondents were wary of the environmental claims made by companies and this could also be a reason why more people wanted an expansion and development of their use than were using them in their current form.

Questions three and four sought to identify the extent to which respondents actively sought product information from other sources. By their very presence at the Destinations Travel Show the respondents had shown a propensity to collect information prior to purchasing, or prior to travelling, but the aim of the question was to explore through what other methods information was obtained in addition to labelling.

	YES (FREQUENCY)	YES (%)
Have you purchased any consumer magazine in the last 6 months?	137	33.7
Have you watched any consumers affairs TV programme in the last 6 months?	356	87.5

Table 1: Level of consumer activism

With 87.5% of this sample claiming to have seen a consumer affairs programme within the previous 6 months and almost 75% of respondents in question one saying that their purchase decisions are affected by green product information, these results demonstrate the power of Watchdog[1] and other such TV programmes. Television would appear to be a much more powerful tool in creating awareness about an issue to the consumer, although with over one third of the sample having bought a consumer magazine in the previous six months, the responses indicate a sample actively seeking, or at least receptive to, extra information.

[1] Watchdog is a BBC consumer affairs TV programme, which regularly attracts over 8 million viewers in the UK

Having asked about use of green product information, whether more would be desired and how actively information is sought about products, the next question asked about membership of groups with links to the wider environment and/or tourism. This was to identify if consumers were sufficiently concerned about an issue to join and make donations to a group conducting work on that issue. A number of groups were identified for the respondents, and space was provided to include any other groups of which they might be members.

	YES (FREQUENCY)	YES (%)
Are you a member of any group?	179	44
Including:		
National Trust	84	20.6
RSPB	22	5.4
Tourism Concern	13	3.2
Green Peace	25	6.1
WWF	43	10.6
Friends of the Earth	17	4.2
Ramblers Association	21	5.2
Miscellaneous	44	10.8

Table 2: Are you a member of any of the listed groups?

While 44% of the sample was members of at least one group, the 411 respondents held 269 memberships between them to various groups and show a strong inclination to act on their concerns. These figures also reflect those of Dinan (1999) who surveyed tourists to Devon and found 23.2% of respondents to be members of the National Trust. The National Trust has a membership of nearly three million, representing under 5% of the general public, while the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has a membership of under one million, demonstrating again the non-typical nature in this regard of the sample. Dinan (1999) hypothesised that the large proportion of tourists who were members of the National Trust in her survey was due to the high number of National Trust properties in the area and that people had joined to take advantage financially of the discounts membership affords. While there are relatively few National Trust properties in London, there are many within an easy distance and may explain why membership is so much higher than, for example, the Ramblers Association.

Green Consumer Index

An index was calculated by scoring all the possible answers a respondent could have made to the questions relating to consumer use of green product information. Thus, a consumer could "score" a maximum of twenty points from the first section according to "how much" of a green consumer they were. This score enabled each respondent to have his/her level of green consumerism on a day-to-day basis placed on an index. To simplify cross tabulation, the index was divided into three groups, which relate to the scores of the top 33% (from 9 to 20 points), the middle 33% (from 7 to 8 points) and then the lowest 33% (from 1 to 6 points).

Using Pearson's Chi-squared measure, no significant relationship was found between the green consumer index and the gender of respondents, nor with the age of respondents. However, question one shows a relationship between the use of green product information for day-to-day purchases and gender, with females scoring higher than expected, and males lower than expected (significant at the 90% level). This is likely to reflect the greater percentage of females who purchase day to day products rather than a greater inclination towards green product information because, as for the more hypothetical question two, no significant relationship between gender and a desire to see more green product information could be established. Indeed, neither gender nor age produced significant effects on any of the other questions asked throughout this first section of the questionnaire.

Consumer Use of Product information for Tourism Products

While the previous section determined the level of green consumerism for day-to-day products, the focus now switches to tourism consumption patterns and the use of a similar kind of information to make those decisions for the purchase of holidays. In order to simplify the questions, “the environment” was defined for respondents as “not just the natural environment but also the man made environment, society, culture and the economy”. While this definition may have mixed topics that were of concern to consumers with those not of concern, this approach had the advantage of simplifying the questions and also uniting the often-disparate impacts of tourism for a more holistic consideration.

The results of question six are presented below.

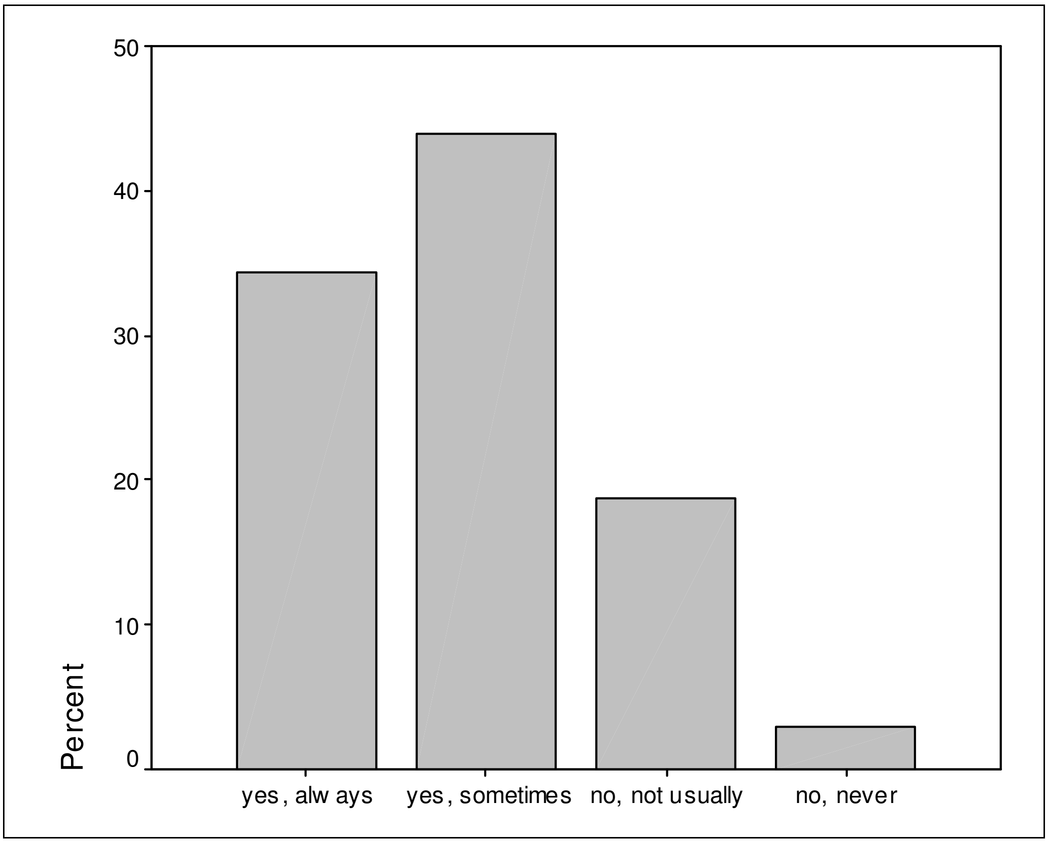

Figure 3: Before going on holiday, or once you are on holiday, do you look for information about the environment in your intended destination?

The aim of question six was to determine the use of green product information by consumers, and not to assess the extent to which consumers were interested in knowing about the environment in their intended destination. Most consumers will be interested to know about the environment as a way of determining if the intended destination is suitable for their holiday needs, and answered accordingly. Thus, mirroring section one, section two of the questionnaire began with the reminder to respondents that they are being asked about their use of green product information with regard to their holiday.

Question six also served as a gateway to subsequent questions in this section.

Thus 78% (219) of respondents did either always or sometimes look for environmental information about their intended destination. Twenty two percent of respondents stated that they did not look for environmental information and were routed straight to question eleven.

Question seven was concerned to know when this environmental information was sought. A finding from previous research amongst tour operators showed a lack of clarity over the most appropriate time to provide any environmental or sensitive information (Miller 2001b). Despite this lack of understanding, none of the industry respondents had conducted any research into the subject, believing instead that if there was a problem, it would have been identified via customer satisfaction questionnaires. Beyond providing information to an area about which there is little knowledge, it is important for this research to know what type of information is provided and when it is required. It is axiomatic that the type of information supplied to consumers in-flight to the destination will need to be of a different nature than that available before consumption decisions are made.

Figure 4 demonstrates the majority (52%, 168) of people claimed that they searched for environmental information about their intended destinations prior to booking. This would also indicate that for these respondents the information plays a role in the decision making process. However, for the 35% (111) of respondents who do not look for information until they have already made their booking and the 12% (39) who look after arrival at the destination, it is possible that the information they do obtain still plays a role in future destination decisions. It is perhaps prudent again at this stage to express caution and recognise that the respondents have been surveyed in a setting at least partially abstracted from the normal booking environment. Yet, by stressing to respondents the survey's aim to explore their use of information on the environment in the destination, rather than their concern for the environment itself, the survey does provide evidence that consumers are seeking out green product information and are using it to make decisions about their destinations.

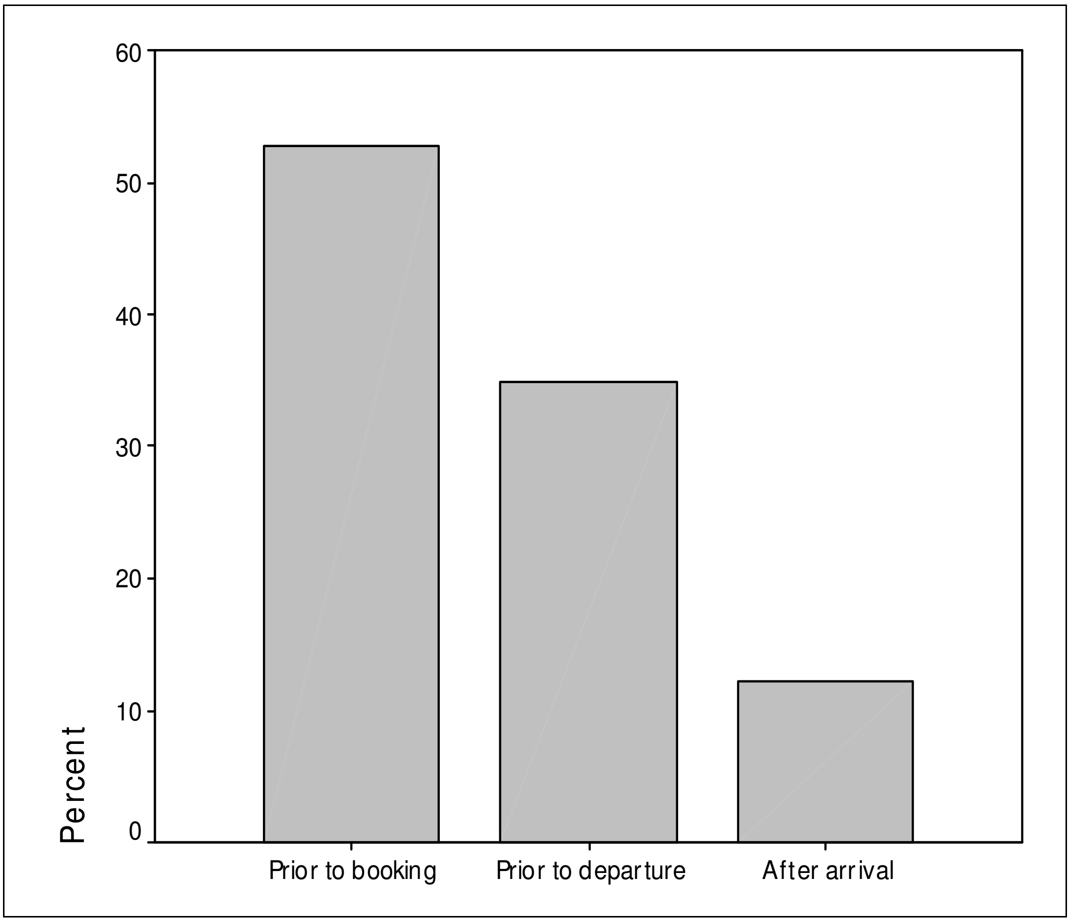

Figure 4: When do you seek environmental information about a destination?

Following on from asking if and when information is sought, the next question tried to ascertain where respondents turned to for this knowledge. Respondents were able to tick as many sources as were applicable from a list provided; there was also an opportunity for any "other" sources of information to be listed. Several respondents identified libraries as being of use in this regard.

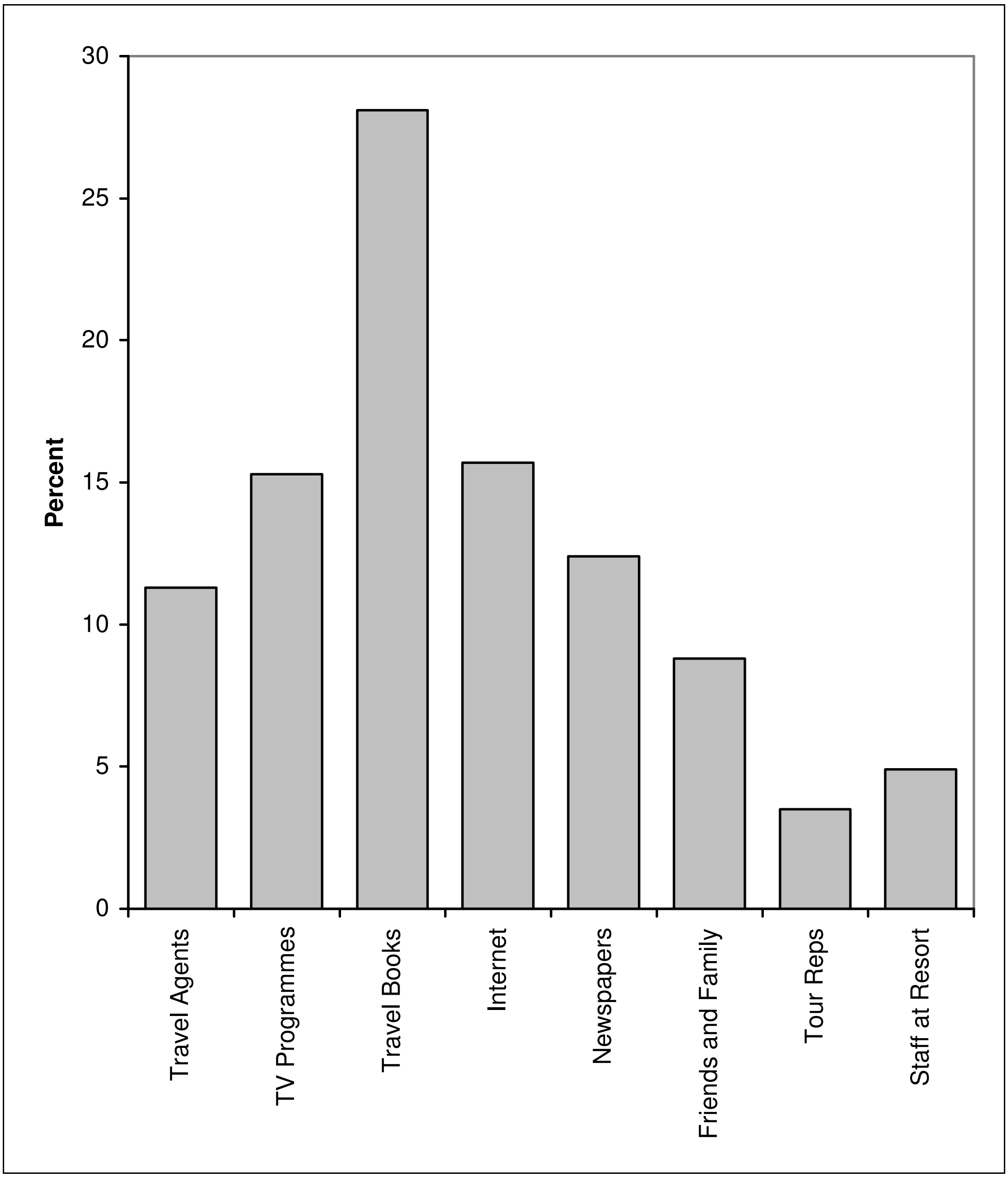

Figure 5: Where do you seek this environmental information from?

Of the 979 answers received to this multi-response question, only 11% (111) stated that the travel agent would be a source of information to them about the environment in their intended destination. Given the prime position that the travel agent has traditionally occupied (the “march of the multiples”) with regard to the flow of holiday information, it can be argued that the travel agencies are missing an opportunity to provide a service. The result is that consumers are turning to alternative methods to gather information. The risk for travel agencies must be that these consumers also turn to alternative methods to book their holidays. The cause and effect of this relationship may be reversed, however, as it would seem obvious from the research that if travel agencies were to provide propinquitous environmental information, then more potential consumers might enter a travel agency (52% of respondents seek environmental information before booking – question 7) and so the possibility of booking with that agency increases.

Travel books were identified by 28% (275) of respondents as a source of environmental information, 15% (150) said TV programmes and 12% (121) the travel sections of newspapers. These sources are very uni-directional; by contrast the internet is a more interrogative/interactive source of information. Fifteen percent of (154) respondents (the second highest response) said that they used the internet to search for environmental information on their holiday destination. In the UK as a whole, 16.5% of the population are connected to the internet at home, and 24.1% have access via either the home or work (MORI 1999). These figures show the potential value of the internet as a tool of inquiry for the travel industry as the rates of internet usage increase.

Question nine continued to explore how influential such green information could be to the consumer in their purchase of travel products, mirroring the initial question asked for day-to-day products. The answers to this question also reflect closely the answers received to question one, although respondents were slightly more positive in reference to their use of environmental information for holiday purchase decisions. This more favourable response may indicate a greater awareness of the potential impacts that tourism can have over the potential impacts caused by day-to-day products. Alternatively, the increase may show the respondents' willingness to give the "correct" answer having identified the focus of the research. It also must be accepted that despite the questionnaire directions to consider the use of information and not the environmental issues in the destination, some respondents may have answered according to the latter – illustrating the problems of separating decision making issues, from issues of general environmental interest.

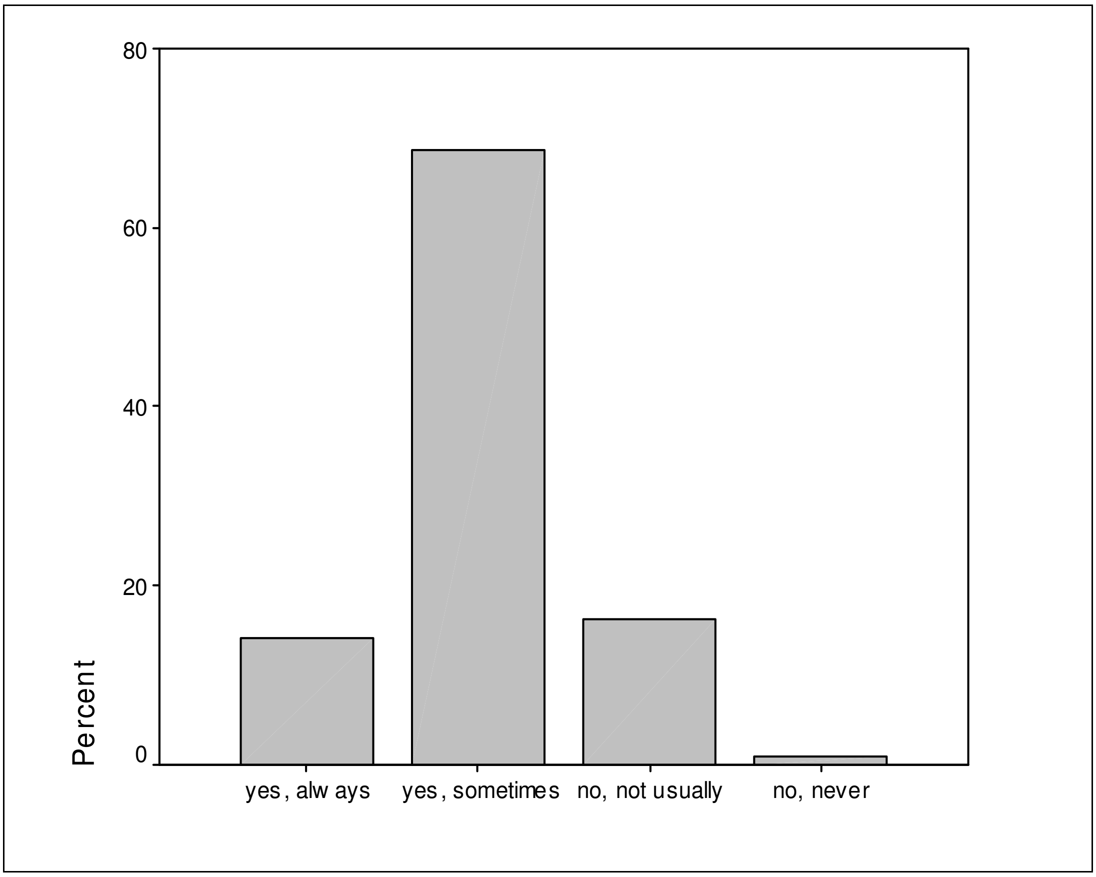

Figure 6: Does this environmental information influence your choice of holidays?

Figure 6 shows that of the 320 respondents 15% (45) are always influenced by the environmental information that their search has revealed and a further 69% (220) were sometimes influenced by this information. Perhaps somewhat expectedly, only 17% (55) did not allow the information to influence them to any degree once they had obtained it. In question six, 88 respondents did not search for environmental information and 55 respondents from question nine did not use this information, thus 35% (143) respondents did not allow themselves to be influenced by the supply of extra environmental information. The remaining 65% (264), reported actively seeking and then using that information in the decision making process for their holiday.

Question ten asked respondents if they felt it was easy to find environmental information on a destination. It had been expected that those surveyed would criticise the provision of information and require information be made more easily accessible. Forty four percent (140) of respondents did feel that environmental information was sometimes difficult or always too difficult to obtain, but, 56% (181) agreed with the question that it was always easy or sometimes easy to obtain the desired information. One reason for this will be the nature of the group surveyed. As paying attendants at a travel show, the population had already demonstrated its willingness to seek out information prior to travelling. Other reasons may be the high level of academic qualifications that respondents reported as well as the high level of internet access, factors that could make finding required information easier.

Question eleven asked all respondents (including those who had replied they did not look for environmental information in question six) whether they felt that they received too much environmental information currently about their holidays. A finding from previous research (Miller 2001b) was that tour operators were reluctant to provide extra information for fear of overloading or patronising customers. Figure 7 below shows respondents spotted the negative question and were almost consonant in their opinion that currently too much environmental information is not provided.

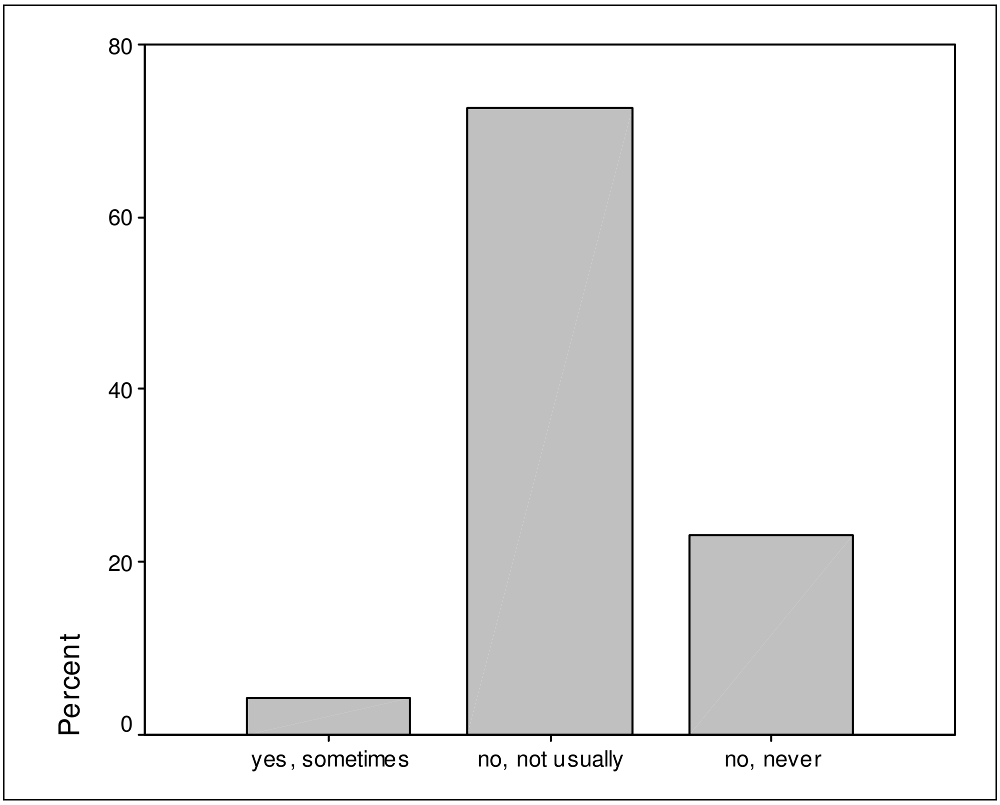

Figure 7: Do you feel that you currently receive too much environmental information about your holidays?

The final closed question to this section asked respondents to identify from a list all those whom they considered should be responsible for providing environmental information about their holidays. Respondents were able to make multiple selections.

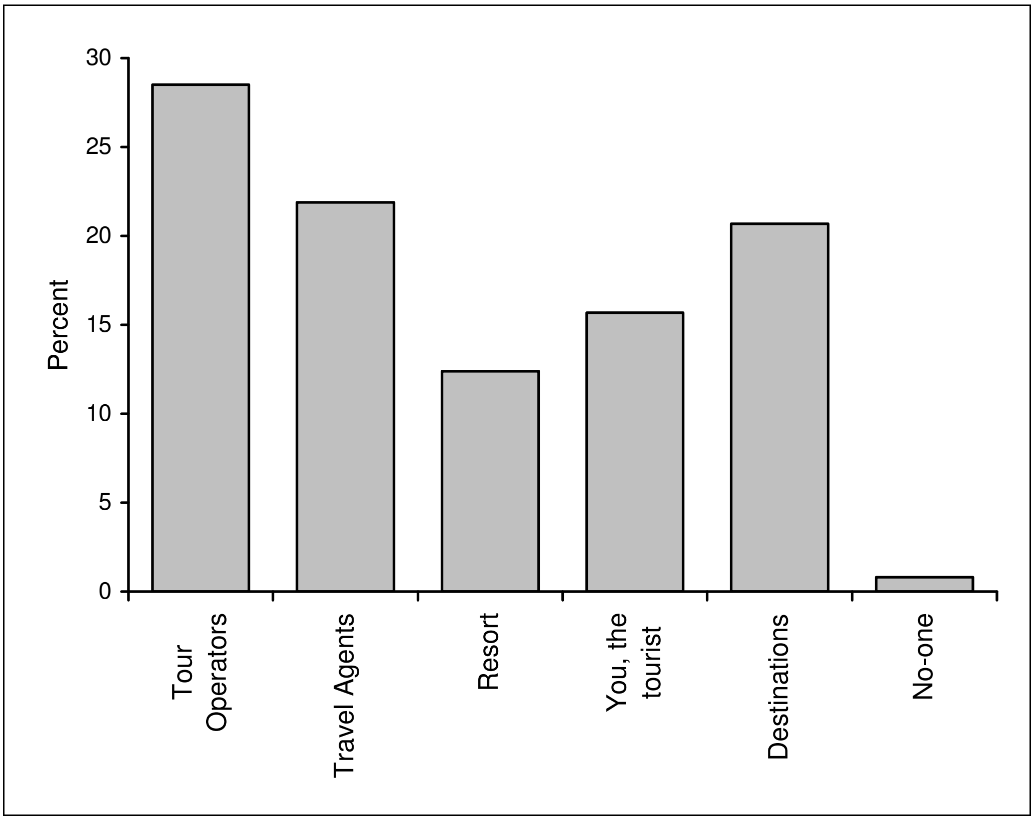

Figure 8: Whose responsibility do you think it is to provide environmental information about your holidays?

The vertically integrated nature of the outbound tourism industry in the UK means that travel agents who own tour operators and tour operators who own travel agencies have an added burden of responsibility according to those surveyed. The low incidence of tourists holding themselves responsible is exaggerated by the ability of respondents to tick all that they felt should be held at least partly culpable. Thus, where consumers accept responsibility it is invariably shared with other stakeholders, whereas the results showed consumers far more likely to name just tour operators or travel agents as responsible. A survey by Tearfund (2000) of 2000 members of the general public, published during the week of the

Destinations Travel Market asked the same question about responsibility to provide "ethical information". The results of this Tearfund survey also strongly identified tour operators (54%) and travel agents (52%) as the organisations with the greatest responsibility, although no reasons were provided for this imposed responsibility.

As would be expected, there is a strong relationship between the green consumer index and the extent to which consumers look for environmental information about their intended destination. However, as with the use and influence of day-to-day products, no difference can be discerned with respect to gender, age or education levels. Wight (1996) found that in a wider population, age, gender and educational status were influencing variables for propensity to take an environmentally focused holiday. Yet, Eagles & Cascagnette (1995) asserted that while age, education and income may be important factors, environmental attitude rather than any other variables play the strongest role in determining intended behaviour. Indeed, Wight (1996) points to the way in which the literature is unclear about the effect of differing factors on the environmental behaviour of customers. Thus, while there may be other unmeasured variables that influence responses, it would appear, from the research conducted at Destinations 2000, that being present at a travel show is a more important determinant of response than any of the measured differences within that population. However, further research at travel shows would need to be conducted in order to generalise this finding further.

Conclusion

Hardin (1968:1247) states "Responsibility is a verbal counterfeit for a substantial *quid pro quo*. It is an attempt to get something for nothing". This research has sought to avoid imploring a particular group to take more responsible behaviour and tackle the problems of the world. Instead, this research aimed to establish if consumers within the surveyed population are asking for and using an expanded range of product information prior to booking. In finding evidence to support the research aims, this survey of a limited population has identified the rationale amongst a leading edge of UK consumers for the commercial industry to promote greater levels of sustainability in the products they provide. This rationale is that consumers will increasingly want, and reward, companies who provide a greater supply of information on the destinations of interest.

A central tenet of the research was the selfish altruism that consumers show when their stated opinions are tested, making consumers more likely to purchase a product that benefits the consumer as well as the wider world, rather than just the wider world. While this phenomenon can be expected across all products, as a service industry, tourism enjoys simultaneous production and consumption, both in time and space. Thus, a tourism consumer is more readily faced with the consequences of his or her consumption decisions in a way that a consumer of a manufactured product is not. A tourist who ignores reports on the poor state of the natural environment in a destination, or poor host/guest relations will suffer the effect of choosing such a holiday while at the destination. For the consumer of a manufactured product where the manufacturing has occurred in a physically removed location and at an earlier time, there exists an ability to "switch-off" concern for employment practices, or environmental records etc while the purchase is made in order to secure a desired product. This “inseperability” of production and consumption both in time and space offers consumerism in the tourism industry the potential to promote more sustainable products. As a corollary, there can be a cautious acceptance of the research thesis that consumerism has the potential to promote sustainable tourism.

Yet, oppositely, if the consumer becomes less interested in the impacts of their behaviour and draws away from the impacts, then so will the commercial companies, and their likelihood of taking action will commensurately lessen. This research found evidence to believe that consumers are becoming more concerned and are willing to take action now. However, reinforcing the warning about the non-representative nature of the surveyed population, it is apparent from the behaviour of the main tour operators in the UK that concern shown in this survey is not widespread amongst the wider population and so a douse of sobering water needs to be poured over any rising spirits created by this survey.

In order to place the views of those surveyed it is helpful to view consumer awareness as a ladder with the UK consumer spread over three rungs. Those consumers interviewed at Destinations 2000 can be placed on a heightened rung as a result of their willingness to seek out and use green product information. The second group rest on the same rung of the ladder for fifty weeks of the year, but see their two-week holiday as a chance to “switch-off” and leave their concerns and responsibilities at home, stepping down a rung temporarily. For this group, tourism is about hedonism and luxuriating; the rise of the all-inclusive resort in which the tourist is king for two weeks supports this assertion. The third group are on a rung below and show little awareness or action to promote more sustainability either in their home society or in the society of their tourism resort. Thus, the position that the tourist occupies on the ladder will determine the extent to how much information is sought. A key element of this provision will be the degree of aggregation that the information receives before it is passed to its intended audience. Understanding that there are consumers with different levels of consciousness is an important research finding and could give rise to the same information being presented differently according to the audience. Thus, the information can be tailored to suit the budding interest of the consumer and does represent an excellent way in which to foster awareness.

Arguably, the role of technology speeds this process, enabling both the producer to reach the consumer faster, but also for the consumer to reach product information more readily. Wade (1997) believes that computer technology can furnish the end-user with information in a more manageable form and even for the end-user to dictate the form in which they receive that information. Beyond tourism, Bakkes (1997) suggests a software programme in which the end-user can use a model to select their own indicators of sustainable development in order to make comparisons with other geographical areas or industrial sectors. This achieves the goal of involving the end-user with the selection of indicators and thus generating interest in the topic. However, if indicators of sustainable development are selected and de-selected from a list, then does the selected set still represent the goals of the original set? It seems obvious that the answer is no. However, what such a process would achieve is the increased involvement of the end-user, which in turn would allow greater understanding and acknowledgement of the problems and so potentially facilitate more rigorous action at a governmental level as the need for action would be better understood. Such an interactive and interrogative approach to information search represents the future of product declaration, and one that sits easily with the development of Indicators of Sustainable Tourism (Miller 2001a).

A possible option for travel agencies to revitalise their supply of information could simply be to have free internet access to sites providing environmental information available to customers in the shop (this would have the added advantage of giving waiting customers something to do while they suffered the often long delays to speak to a travel consultant), or via their own website. The research showed evidence that consumers felt tour operators and travel agents to be responsible for providing more information on the tourism product, information consumers were currently forced to search for independently. If consumers are searching for information independently, then there is a greater probability that these consumers will book independently. Providing the information that consumers request would appear to be a potential opportunity to encourage consumers back into the fold from which the travel agents can earn a commission. Recently, the major UK travel organisation My Travel (formerly Airtours), has, through its website (www.mytravel.com), begun adding comments to the descriptions of its destinations that extend beyond traditional descriptions and could loosely be described as covering some of the issues concerning sustainable tourism.

However, for Wight (1993) the problem is not with the amount of information provided, but with the honesty and accuracy of the information. Wight (1993:4) observes, "…there is considerable collective power resting within the hands of the individual tourist" and this has attracted less scrupulous tourism suppliers to provide false or misleading information in order to capitalise on the demand. Such a scurrilous policy risks damaging the integrity of the original concept as tourists are deceived and increasingly disenfranchised. Yet, as Baudrillard (1998) avers, the art of the advertiser is precisely to deal in the vague and non-verifiable, this is what makes them so successful. Tilden (1957; quoted in Bramwell and Lane 1993) delightfully comments, "It is not good to gild the lily. Not only is the lily destroyed, but the painter has made the confession that he does not understand the nature of beauty". However, such an obviously sensible view ignores the short-term profit to be made from gilding the lily. Yet, unless the more exaggerated claims of product suppliers can be constrained, the consumer will rely on product information to a decreasing degree and a potential approach to promote more sustainable products will be lost.

Acknowledgement:

The author would like to acknowledge the kind generosity of Mr Peter Chipenfield at CERT for providing invaluable assistance in conducting the primary research for this paper.

References

Ayala, H (1995) From Quality Product to Eco-Product: Will Fiji Set a Precedent? **Tourism Management**, 16 (1), pp39-47

Bakkes, J (1997) Research Methods. In **Sustainability Indicators: Report of the Project on Indicators of Sustainable Development**. Moldan, B., Bilharz, S (Eds), Wiley & Sons, Chichester, pp379-389

Baudrillard, J (1998) **The Consumer Society**. SAGE Publications, London

Bramwell, B., Lane, B (1993) Sustainable Tourism: An Evolving Global Approach. **Journal of Sustainable Tourism**, 1(1), pp1-5

Butler, R (1990). Alternative Tourism - Pious Hope or Trojan Horse? **Journal of Travel Research**, 28(3), pp40-45.

Cohen , E (1972). Towards a Sociology of International Tourism. **Social Research**, 39, pp164-182.

Co-Op (1998) **Beyond the Brochure: Report calling for the Traveller's Right to Know**. Co-Op Travelcare, Manchester

Dinan, C (1999) **A Marketing Geography of Sustainable Tourism – With Special Reference to Devon, England**. PhD Dissertation, University of Exeter, Unpublished

Eagles, P., Cascagnette, J.W (1995) Canadian Ecotourists: Who are they? **Tourism Recreation Research**, 20 (1), pp22-28

Frankfort-Nachmias, C., Nachmias, D (1996) **Research Methods in the Social Sciences**. Arnold, London.

Goodall, B., Stabler, M (1998) Principles Influencing the Determination of Environmental Standards for Sustainable Tourism. In **Tourism and Sustainability: Principles and Practice**, Chapter 19, pp 279-304

Hardin, G (1968) The Tragedy of the Commons. **Science**, 162, pp1243-1248

Hunter, C (1995) On the Need to Re-conceptualise Sustainable Tourism Development. **Journal of Sustainable Tourism**, 3 (3), pp155-165

Hunter, C (1997) Sustainable Tourism as an Adaptive Paradigm. **Annals of Tourism Research**, 24(4), pp850-867

Jafari, J (1989) An English Language Literature Review. In Bystranowski, J (ed) **Tourism as a Factor of Change**: A Socio-cultural study. Centre for Research and Documentation in Social Sciences, Vienna

Jamrozy, U., Backman, S., Backman, K (1996) Involvement and Opinion Leadership in Tourism. **Annals of Tourism Research**, 23(4), pp908-924

Lane, B (2002) Personal communication. 30th May

Maloney, M., Ward, M (1973) Ecology: Let's Hear it From the People. **American Psychologist**, 28, pp583-586

Mansfeld, J (1995) The "Value Stretch" Model and its Implication in Detecting Tourists' Class-Differentiated Destination Choice. **Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing**, 4(3), pp71-92

Martin, A (1997) Tourism, The Environment and the Consumer. Paper presented at "**The Environment Matters**" conference, Glasgow, April 30th-May 2nd

McBoyle, G (1996) Green Tourism and Scottish Distilleries. **Tourism Management**, 17(4), pp255-263

McKercher, B (1993). Some Fundamental Truths about Tourism: Understanding Tourism's Social and Environmental Impacts. **Journal of Sustainable Tourism**, 1(1)

Middleton, V.T.C., Hawkins, R (1998) **Sustainable Tourism: A Marketing Perspective**. Heinemann-Butterworth, Oxford

Miller, G (2001a) The Development of Indicators for Sustainable Tourism: Results of a Survey of Tourism Researchers. **Tourism Management**, 22(4), pp351-362

Miller, G (2001b) **The Development of Indicators for the Promotion of Sustainable Tourism**. PhD Dissertation, University of Surrey, Unpublished.

MORI (1997) Green Behaviour – Sustainable Trends, Sustainable Lives? **www.mori.com/pubinfo/green.htm**

Mowforth, M., Munt, I (1998) **Tourism and Sustainability: New Tourism in the Third World**. Routledge, London

Müeller, H (1994) The Thorny Path to Sustainable Tourism Development. **Journal of Sustainable Tourism**, 2(3), pp131-136

Ottman, J (1992) Industry's Response to Green Consumerism. **Journal of Business Strategy**, pp3-10

Radio Five (1997) **Breakfast News**. 23rd February

Romeril, M (1989) Tourism and the Environment - Accord or Discord? **Tourism Management** 10(3) pp204-208

Sapsford, R (1999) **Survey Research**. SAGE Publications, London

Smith, N.C (1990) **Morality and the Market**. Routledge, London

Smith, V (1991) **Tourism Alternatives: Potential and Problems in the Development of Tourism.** University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA

Soil Association (2002) **Annual Review**, Soil Association, Bristol

Stone, G., Barnes, J., Montgomery, C (1995) ECOSCALE: A Scale for the Measurement of Environmentally Responsible Consumers. **Psychology and Marketing**, 12(7), pp595-612

Swarbrooke, J (1996) Understanding the Tourist – Some Thoughts on Consumer Behaviour Research in Tourism. **Insights**, November, ppA67 – A76

Tearfund (2000) **Don't Forget Your Ethics**. Tearfund, London

The Independent (1997) Shoppers Force Big Stores to Behave Ethically, 27th October

The Independent (1999) Small is Beautiful for Environmental Awards, 24th February

The London Evening Standard (1999) From Fad to a £500m Business That is Booming, 3rd December

The Observer (1996) UK Attitudes to Green Products, 6th October

The Times (1997a) Green Audits on the Increase, 9th June

The Times (1997b) Holiday Airlines Rated for Their Delays, 5th April

US Data Travel Center (1992) **Discover America: Tourism and the Environment: A Guide to Challenges and Opportunities for Travel Industry Businesses**. Travel Industry Association of America, Washington, D.C

Wade, J (1997) Managing an Environmental Policy in a Resort Hotel. Paper presented to the **EuroCHRIE/IAMS Conference: Hospitality Business Development Conference**, Sheffield Hallam University, 13th-15th November

Wall, G (1997) Sustainable Tourism: Unsustainable Development. In Wahab, S., Pigram, J (Eds) **Tourism Development and Growth: The Challenge of Sustainability**. Routledge, London, pp33-49

Wickers, D (1992) Whither Green, **Sunday Times**, 5th January

Wight, P (1993) Ecotourism: Ethics or Eco-Sell? **Journal of Travel Research**, winter, pp3-9

Wight, P (1996) North American Ecotourists: Market Profile and Trip Characteristics. **Journal of Travel Research**, Spring, pp2-10

Williams, A., Shaw, G., Griffiths, A (1996) **Tourism, Leisure, Nature Protection and Agri-Tourism: Principles, Partnerships and Practice**. Sourcebook, European Partners for the Environment, Belgium

Worcester, R.W (1999) **Environment, the Public and the Media: Public and Expert Opinion on Environmental Matters**. April. MORI, London

WTO (1995) **What Tourism Managers Need to Know: A Practical Guide to the Development and Use of Indicators of Sustainable Tourism**. WTO, Madrid