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Attitudinal and Cultural Influences on Preferences for Sustainable Tourism Services in Southwestern China Forestry Landscape

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Abstract

The booming tourism industry in China causes increased resource consumption, and threatens ecologically sensitive areas. These issues are particularly crucial in southwestern China, which harbours one of 25 global biodiversity hotspots, and is a popular destination for domestic Chinese tourists. In the study reported here, we assess influences on Chinese domestic tourist destination choice relevant to the sustainable tourism development in southwestern China in a two step process. First, the influence of attitudes on sustainable tourism services is analysed. In the second step, attitudinal influences are supplemented by an analysis of indirect, cultural influences expressed by tourist images of nature. Technically, we utilise a choice experiment to assess the influence of destination attributes - including availability of sustainable tourism services -, of attitudes and of images of nature on destination choice. Data was collected from 213 middle class respondents in Beijing and Chengdu. Factor analysis singled out two ‘positive’ attitudinal dimensions (in favour of sustainability, concern for losing opportunities) and one ‘negative’ attitudinal dimension (sceptical attitude on sustainable tourism). Only the sceptical attitude significantly influence the destination choice. The sceptical attitude counterbalanced the positive willingness-to-pay for sustainable tourism services from 4480RMB to 450RMB. In the second step, only the robustness by divine designer and the non-spirituality image of nature dimensions display substantial impacts on preference variations. The more spiritual the image of nature of a Chinese middle class tourist, the more s/he prefers - and is willing to pay for - trips featuring more natural attractions and more sustainable tourism services. In sum, our study suggests that there are attitudinal barriers that hinder a substantial share of Chinese middle class tourists to accept sustainable tourism services. The generally positive attitude towards sustainable tourism stated in attitudinal surveys does currently not translate easily into sustainable consumption and production opportunities in the tourism industry.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, destination choice, image of nature