

DEFINING VISITOR SATISFACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
CAMPING ORIENTED NATURE-BASED TOURISM  
WITHIN ALABAMA STATE PARKS

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## VITA

Melissa A. Van Hyfte, daughter of James and Dale Van Hyfte, was born April 26, 1980, in Danville, Illinois. A graduate of Seeger High School in West Lebanon, Indiana, Missy attended Indiana State University, where she graduated in 2002 with a Bachelors of Science Degree in Recreation and Sport Management with an emphasis in Travel and Tourism. In 2003, she relocated to Columbia, South Carolina where she began pursuit of a Masters Degree in Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Management from the University of South Carolina. During her time at USC, Missy worked as a Graduate Instructor and was named the Graduate Student of the Year in 2003, among several other scholarships and awards. In 2004, she relocated to Charlotte, North Carolina where she worked as a Special Events Planner for Ballantyne Resort. Missy began pursuit of her doctoral degree in 2006 in Hotel and Restaurant Management at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. She had the honor of being selected to represent Auburn in the Northern California Epicurean Tour and at the Quality of Life Awards held at the United Nations in 2007, to serve as the Program Assistant for the Auburn Abroad in Italy Program in 2008, to serve as a Future Faculty Fellow for the Auburn University Biggio Center in 2008 and 2009 and to receive multiple local and national scholarships, awards, and leadership positions, throughout her time at Auburn. Missy also worked as a Graduate Instructor during her three years in Auburn. She currently works as an Assistant Professor of Hospitality and Event Management at Lasell College in Newton, Massachusetts.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

DEFINING VISITOR SATISFACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
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WITHIN ALABAMA STATE PARKS

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Whether out of economic circumstance or a genuine desire to reconnect with nature, recent years have witnessed an increase in demand for alternative nature-based forms of tourism activity. Alongside this interest in the outdoors has come a demand for quality servicing infrastructure to meet the very wide variety of needs, wants and expectations expressed and sought by today's traveling public. This has presented a range of challenges to those in the nature-based tourism supply sector, not least those at the front line, whose role is now shifting from environmental stewardship and education to one of customer service agent. Against this background this project seeks to address the issue of quality product/service provision in satisfying nature based tourists in the

state of Alabama. A study of visitor perceptions in 23 state parks sought to evaluate visitor satisfaction with state park camping service provision and its role in driving visitors future behavior with respect to potential re-visitation and recommendation intention. Results attest to the psychometric performance of the research instrument, as well as pointing to the key drivers of both dependent variables. An exploratory factor analysis identifies four factors that are critical to the sample population in terms of explaining and predicting both satisfaction and future behavioral intention.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Aims and Objectives**

This research reports on an effort to gain a better understanding of the drivers of customer satisfaction and their effects on future behavioral intentions (FBI) in the context of car camping as a part of nature-based tourism (NBT). Hence, the prevailing objective of this study is to develop and test an instrument intended to measure customer satisfaction drivers in NBT settings. Secondly, this study addresses the issue of quality service provision and its relationship to customer satisfaction and longer term business success within this sector. Thirdly, this research attempts to increase understanding of the role that satisfaction plays in FBI as it relates to this sector of the industry while defining the satisfaction construct in nature-based settings and those forces that make a real difference to the decision to revisit and/or recommend NBT environments.

The research examines the literature relevant to each of the key research constructs and addresses the different sectors of the tourism industry, as well as the relationship between customer satisfaction and FBI. As a matter of research protocol, several hypotheses were developed and will be presented for analytical testing. The theoretical justification for each of the hypotheses will be presented as well as the statistical evidence that lends support to, or rejects each. Further, it is the intent that this project will serve as a basis for more research in the NBT sector in regard to service,

satisfaction and FBI. Specifically, the utilization of the cognitive scale developed in this study in other tourism settings.

### **Significance**

There is a sizeable quantity of literature that conceptualizes the customer satisfaction construct and its relationship to the service quality construct (Barsky & Nash, 2002; Bowen & Chen, 2001; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Lam, Wong & Yeung, 1997; Lee & Hing, 1995; Mowen, 1995; Pizam & Ellis, 1999; Wycoff, 1984).

Disconfirmation models, which maintain that service quality and satisfaction are the difference between what a consumer expects to receive and his or her perceptions of the actual service delivery, have come to dominate the literature on service quality and satisfaction. As the literature on customer satisfaction has developed, an attempt to develop scales applicable to a variety of service settings has occurred. This continuous effort has generated several tools, such as the SERVQUAL scale, absolute measures of satisfaction and Gronroos' Service Quality Model (Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Gronroos, 1983, 2001; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Consequently, as NBT has become increasingly important in both economic terms and in the lives of a growing portion of the population, research on the satisfaction of visitors in this unique sector has grown.

Satisfied customers can be an excellent form of marketing. By understanding and monitoring customer satisfaction, parks and other outdoor recreation facilities will be able to capitalize on word-of-mouth marketing and beneficial publicity. Practitioners' ultimate goal should be to effectively reduce the occurrence of service failure as well as find the best way to recover and retain the visitors, regardless of what mistakes may have been made. Satisfied customers often become loyal customers. By knowing and

understanding the origin of customer satisfaction, camping facilities will be able to maximize the likelihood of visitor satisfaction which, hopefully, will lead to loyal customers who return and persuade others to visit as well.

This study intends to justify the time, money, and effort put into increasing service quality for these experiences. Results should encourage outdoor camping facilities to take an in depth look at their procedure(s) and to evaluate their effectiveness in attaining loyal visitors.

Research has shown that an organization's ability to provide positive outcomes determines a customer's commitment to a mutual relationship. Payne, Christopher, Clark and Peck noted in 1995 that the higher the level of customer satisfaction in the relationship-not just the product or service-the greater the likelihood that the customer will be loyal to the company providing that service or product.

Research has also suggested that there is a direct link between service quality and customer satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Gabbot & Hogg, 1997; Gwynne, Devlin, & Ennew, 1998). Thus, this particular study will detail how theoretical determinations of tourism match up against real world examples. Specifically, the strength of the link between service and consumer satisfaction will be shown.

NBT is now recognized as a large and continually developing segment of the greater tourism industry with significant potential to renew struggling rural environments. A key component to any such approach is the need to offer balance with respect to quality of nature and quality of service. This view is shared by Eagles who states that success in the provision of NBT is ultimately dependent upon both "levels of environmental quality and suitable levels of consumer service" (2001, p. 2). Whether

from a busy metropolis or remote wilderness, today's nature-based traveler warrants the same expectation and demands of the delivery process – namely it should meet and exceed their quality expectations during each and every visit. This has presented a range of challenges to NBT operators whose role is now shifting from environmental stewardship and education to one of customer service agent. Once foreign concepts such as visitor satisfaction, service quality and customer loyalty are now key foci to most outdoor conservation and preservation organizations. Because of the uniqueness of this type of tourism, the lack of a specific scaling instrument for such nature-based experiences is a note-worthy weakness in the literature as a whole.

In response to said weakness, the overall concentration of this research is to develop an evaluative measure of visitor satisfaction and FBI and then validate it using both exploratory and confirmatory statistical methods. In addition, the survey used attempts to account for those factors found to be most influential in determining a nature-based, camping tourists' overall level of satisfaction, and to determine if these factors indeed play a role in the visitor's future behavioral intentions.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the unique disposition of nature-based tourism and the relative lack of scale development in this sector, this study endeavors to answer several questions that are relevant to nature-based, specifically car camping, tourism. The essential issue to be investigated is exactly how outdoor camping facilities must inevitably utilize advanced tactics in service in order to stay competitive in the tourism market. First is the question of what factors exactly, influence a camping visitors' level of satisfaction and to what extent? Second is how well the newly developed cognitive scale will perform in terms of



its ability to explain satisfaction in an outdoor camping setting. Third is what role do these factors play in overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions, specifically visitors' intent to return as well as their intent to recommend the facilities to other campers. Implications from the findings for academics will be addressed and finally, managerial implications of the study will be developed specific to the site tested and recommendations of how to improve service quality and cognitive satisfaction will be presented.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

While every effort to minimize limitations has been made, this research, like any other, has its flaws. The following section is intended to disclose these flaws in an effort to avoid the same errors in future research.

This study is limited in scope due to the fact that the respondents are all visitors of state parks in the same state and therefore under the same governing umbrella. Because of this there may be biases or predispositions that would be specific only to that state, region, or governing body and may not apply to all regions. It would be beneficial for future researchers to attempt to utilize respondents from several geographic locations and facilities to avoid this bias. Also, because of the nature of the sample, visitors who declined to participate in the study are not being evaluated. This is an important factor because information from these visitors could represent a specific population who are, for one reason or another, not interested in such investigative and improvement efforts for their car camping experience.

## **Organization of the Study**

The key point of this phenomenological study will be to explore what factors contribute to car camping visitor satisfaction and what impact this has on visitors' future behavioral intentions. By identifying the particular factors that best predict visitor satisfaction and loyalty, the study will allow NBT operators to focus on those features that most directly impact future operations.

The following framework reveals the basis for the phenomenological study and the manner in which it will be conducted. Chapter II consists of a review of the literature, exploring the research documenting tourism on a global, national and local scale, the different sectors in the tourism industry and, of course, the relationship that customer satisfaction, service, and brand loyalty plays in NBT. Existing surveys on measurement of service will be discussed. The existing literature will be explored, and a path for future development revealed. Chapter III discusses the research design and questions, the context of the study, the description of the participants, the measures taken for ethical protection of the participants, the role of this researcher, the methods of data collection and analysis, and the validity of the study. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study. Lastly, Chapter V provides an interpretation of the findings along with academic and managerial implications, the recommendations for action, and recommendations for future research.

## **Definition of Terms**

Car camping: a means of getting to a campground without having to carry gear on one's back. Common types of car camping include transportation to and from campgrounds such as boat, horse, recreational vehicle (RV), or car.

Mediator variable: a separate entity that intervenes in the effect of the stimulus on the behavior (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Nature based tourism (NBT): a specific sector of the tourism industry in which tourists migrate to what they understand to be a different and usually more 'pure' environment (Wilson, 1992). Often included in this category of tourism are ecotourism, adventure travel, wilderness travel and car camping.

Path analysis: method by which the individual paths connecting one variable with another variable within a model are examined.

Pearson product-moment correlation: a parametric statistic whereby two continuous variables are analyzed to understand the relationship between the two variables, its strength and direction (positive or negative) (Leddy & Ormrod, 2005).

Regression analysis: a parametric statistic whereby the effectiveness of one or more variables to predict the value of another variable is determined (Leddy & Ormrod, 2005).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter has multiple objectives, which focus on reviewing the literature in relation to the main constructs used in this study. The first section will broadly cover tourism on both a global and local scale, including trends and sectors within the industry. Secondly, nature-based tourism (NBT) will be defined and its impact on both the tourism industry and the state of Alabama discussed. Critical success factors in NBT will be discussed which will then lead to a dialogue on service and satisfaction, including their key antecedents and measurement tools. Finally, future behavioral intentions will be briefly introduced and defined, and pertinent literature concerning the relationship between each of these topics will be covered.

#### **Tourism Defined**

One of the key components of this research is the subject matter itself, state parks and its visitors who are often not considered when the broader topic of tourism is discussed. In order to properly present the remainder of Chapter II a discussion of the broader terms of tourism must first be conducted in an effort to understand where NBT falls within this industry.

Williams and Buswell defined leisure as the consumption and participation in travel and accommodation. Further, tourism consists of three components including travel, accommodation and participation in activities at the destination (2003). Clearly,

car camping, as a component of NBT, falls under the general realm of tourism as it encompasses all three of the facets listed above with visitors traveling from both far and near and multiple types of accommodations being utilized that often become the focal point of the activities themselves. One sector of the tourism industry that could encompass NBT is leisure tourism. The motivations for leisure tourists generally come in the form of participating in activities, such as visiting spa and wellness centers, observing sports as a form of entertainment, and hiking in national forests. Individuals that participate in this form of travel generally have a shared interest which is used to establish a common bond among other people that are like minded (Plog, 1991). The connection between NTB and leisure tourism is a unique one, with many visitors often basing their experience around simply communing with their environment.

### **Global Tourism**

Currently, the global tourism market is a hot bed for economic activity. Even in tough economic times, in developed nations such as Australia, Spain, and the United States, tourism is a considerable contributor to each nation's gross domestic product (GDP). According to the 2006 Tourism Satellite Accounting, travel and tourism spending exceeded US \$6 trillion globally in 2005 (asiatraveltips, 2004). Additionally, between 1999 and 2003, Euromonitor found that Eastern Europe was the only region to record consistent annual growth in terms of incoming tourism. This growth rate of approximately 17 % was well ahead of more developed regions such as Western Europe and North America (euromonitor, 2008). Because the tourism industry is one of the largest industries in the world, global tourism provides strength to many struggling

economies. Moreover, tourism can improve subjugated economies by creating what is known as the “multiplier effect” (Khan, Phang & Toh, 1995).

The economic multipliers’ effect is composed of two dimensions; direct and indirect impacts. For example, “air lines, travels agents, hotels, shops, restaurants, and other tourist facilities,” (Khan et al., 1995, p. 65) are known as direct multipliers. On the other hand, “hotels purchase raw food for their restaurants and detergents for their house keeping departments,” (Khan et al., 1995, p. 65) these are known as indirect multipliers.

On the other hand, global tourism does have its challenges. From terrorism to the resurgence of developed nations’ domestic tourism, managers must continuously improve and reevaluate their service delivery systems in order to increase customer satisfaction and encourage future return visits. Furthermore, in order for companies to remain competitive, they must focus on issues such as safety, quality, service, and recovery. In other words, companies must invest in total quality management systems in order to face the new public mind-set. It is a well accepted fact that tourism professionals now have to serve a more skeptical customer base, who is more eager than ever before to complain and transfer their allegiances to perceived providers of quality tourism services (O’Neill, 2000).

### **Tourism in the United States**

Tourism in the United States remains strong. The International Trade Administration Office of Travel and Tourism stated that “The U.S. Department of Commerce announced that 4.1 million international visitors traveled to the United States in September 2007, an increase of 13% over September 2006” (Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, 2008). However, it is speculated that the U.S. tourism industry has

suffered the loss of international tourists recently due to the weakening of the American dollar. Nevertheless, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council “the economic GDP is likely to contract by 3.3% in 2009 and to expand by only 0.3% in 2010. But, looking beyond the current crisis, travel & tourism is expected to resume its leading, dynamic role in global growth.” (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2009). With varied climates and regions throughout the U.S, tourists can visit mountains, beaches, lush forests, and even deserts. It is home to many of the world’s largest cities and spectacular, natural beauty. Not surprisingly, practitioners have chosen to build a tourism infrastructure around these natural environments that can both attract and retain visitors over the longer term. Accordingly, the state of Alabama has taken advantage of its natural beauty, by providing Alabamians and visitors to the state with scenic, rich, and beautiful natural attractions in the venue of state parks.

### **Alabama Tourism**

When many people think of the state of Alabama, there is usually a variety of stereotypical considerations, from the civil rights era to what is often referred to as the redneck culture. In modern usage, redneck predominately refers to a particular stereotype of whites from the Southern United States. According to Foster, mentioning Birmingham can bring to mind associations with the deviance of racial intolerance and violent resistance to progressive change (2000). Some think that this mindset has caused previous visitors to think of Alabama as only a “drive-through” state. Because of this, many state and local representatives have worked tirelessly over the past twenty-five years to correct these negative impressions and generate a more “drive-to” state of mind for visitors. As the stigmatism has lessened, the state has progressed, by creating,

maintaining, and sharing its natural beauty with all who enjoy nature. One way Alabama has attempted to convey its natural beauty to the masses is by marketing its state motto, now known to many as *Alabama the Beautiful*. As a result of these efforts, the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel estimate that approximately 18.3 million people visited the state in 2002, representing approximately 2% of Gross State Product, and with combined spending (both international and domestic) at just over \$6.5 billion, an increase of some 7% over 2001 (O'Neill & Hubbard, 2004).

Analysis of state lodging tax revenues, Smith Travel Research data on hotel occupancy rates and field intercept surveys conducted in previous years were used to estimate the economic impact of tourism on Alabama for calendar year 2006.

- Based on the primary and secondary data, it is estimated that over 22.3 million people visited the State of Alabama during 2006.
- The most visited counties in the state were Baldwin, Jefferson, Madison, Mobile, and Montgomery.
- The above counties accounted for 64% of the total number of visitors to the state.
- Travelers are estimated to have spent over \$8.3 billion in Alabama. This represents an increase of 10% over 2005 spending.
- Travel industry expenditures represent 5% of Alabama's Gross Domestic Product – overall production – in 2006.



- An estimated 162,688 jobs – 8.2% of non-agricultural employment in Alabama – were directly or indirectly attributable to the travel and tourism industry.
- The total impact of the travel and tourism industry on Alabama's earnings in 2006 is estimated at almost \$3.4 billion.
- In 2006, over \$628 million of state and local tax revenues were realized, primarily due to travel and tourism activities.
- Every \$76,103 of travel-related expenditures creates one direct job in Alabama.
- For every \$1 in Alabama's travel-related expenditures, the state retains a total of \$0.41.

Tourism obviously plays a vital role in the economy of Alabama. It is no surprise that the state's tourism product is built around the demands and limitations of its varied natural environments. The Department of State Parks are considered the guardians of the state's natural environment and not only have to maintain the physical environment but they are also tasked with having to market state tourism as a product and ensuring that visitors, both from in and out of state, feel welcome and have an enjoyable stay. Thus, it is vital that the state itself assure a beautiful, natural, and welcoming environment where tourists will feel inclined to visit whether they frequent hotels, cabins, or other camping facilities.

### **Trends in Tourism**

To stay current in the field of tourism and continue to grow in a positive manner, one must consider the current trends and their implications. First and foremost, it is

important to look at the current economic state. Tourism is an industry that is built around discretionary income, therefore a likely one to suffer in tough economic times. It is therefore reasonable to presume that in an economic decline, tourists are likely to travel less, stay closer to home, and spend less money.

Another popular topic today is that of sustainability. Many people are paying much more attention to the welfare of their natural environments and feeling the need to protect the natural resources that we have left. In an effort to do that, tourists are often finding more ways to commune with these natural environments and considering destinations that fit this lifestyle.

Health is also an area that has continued to flourish in the tourism industry. Travelers are no longer just seeking a beach to lie on, but considering options that lend to a healthier lifestyle, such as hiking or biking. In recent years, health and wellness tourism has become a popular alternative to the traditional.

Another important trend that the industry is seeing is the search for rural engagement. According to the United Nations 2007 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects, for the first time in the world's history, there are now more people living in cities than in rural areas. Because of this, many travelers are seeking to get out of their current urban lifestyle and get back in touch with their more natural environment.

In looking at these trends, it is an obvious connection that in order to stay competitive, regions must pay close attention to their natural environments that are bringing in these tourism dollars and understand how to both protect them and keep them as desirable options for potential tourists.

## **Sectors of Tourism**

There is no definitive list of all sectors of tourism. This is because many of the types of tourism are arguable and as is the fact that many fit in to sub-categories of other sectors. A brief internet search of tourism sectors indicates an overwhelming amount of categories and subcategories that each of these “types” of tourism could fall under. The popular Wikipedia sight, on any given day, shows over 70 different categories of tourism.

For example, some of the more popular sectors often found are rural tourism, space tourism, medical tourism, health and wellness tourism, archeological tourism, religious tourism, cultural tourism, disaster tourism, heritage tourism, literary tourism, music tourism, poverty tourism (or poorism), sex tourism, wine tourism, and nature based tourism.

For this research project, the focus will be on the latter of topics mentioned, nature based tourism (NBT). Eadington and Smith (1992) suggest that disillusionment with traditional mass tourism forms and the many problems it has triggered have forced an “alternative tourism” agenda over recent decades. The authors define alternative tourism as tourism that is consistent with “natural, social and community values and which allows both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences”. Many of the afore-mentioned types of tourism could obviously fall under this category. One form of alternative tourism activity that has grown in terms of economic significance globally, is that referred to as nature-based tourism and in particular, car camping as a form of NBT. Motivated by the usual blend of pull and push motivational factors, increasing numbers of visitors are gravitating towards the natural environment for their recreational pursuits. At its most basic, NBT may be defined as the

simple “temporary migration of people to what they understand to be a different and usually more ‘pure’ environment” (Wilson, 1992, p. 23). This view is shared by Torn (2007, p. 13) who states that growth in this market has “increasingly concentrated on pristine environments and protected areas.” It may be communing with nature for its own sake or engaging in some form of passive to high risk activity in unspoiled/unaltered natural settings. Eagles (2001, p. 2) suggests that demand has become sufficiently large that “submarkets are becoming apparent” including ecotourism, adventure travel, wilderness travel and car camping:

- Ecotourism involves travel for the discovery of and learning about wild, natural environments.
- Wilderness tourism involves personal re-creation through primitive travel in environments devoid of human disturbance.
- Adventure tourism relates to some form personal accomplishment or team building by conquering wild and dangerous environments, and
- Car camping is viewed as safe, personal or family oriented travel in the interface between the wild and civilized (Eagles, 1995).

### **Nature-based Tourism**

Eagles (2001, p. 1) suggests that for many countries NBT “is an important component of their overall tourism industry.” That said, there is, as yet, no reliable global indicator of market size or potential. This, of course, is not surprising given that agreement has not yet been reached on a clear definition of what constitutes a nature-based tourist (Khan & Su, 2003) and/or nature-based tourism activity. The World

Tourism Organization (WTO, 2002) offers insight as regard to the extent of global eco-tourism as a sub-category suggesting that in 2000 this market accounted for approximately 10-15% of global tourism activity. Turning to the United States, Phillips (2008) tells us that a recent study from the Outdoor Industry Association points to the fact that nature-based tourism has a large national economic footprint of \$730 billion contributed annually to the U.S. economy. This view is supported by a national United States Forest Service (USFS, 2001) report which states that some 257 million people visited national forest park (NFP) sites in 2001. Further, it is estimated that on average, each visitor went to approximately 1.2 recreation sites in 2001. A follow up report by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 2003 estimated that annual visitation to NFP sites nationwide stood at 204.8 million visits. Once again visitors averaged 1.2 site visits for each NFP visit, or 245.9 million site visits in total. Additionally, this report estimates 174.5 million viewing corridor visits which run along the perimeter of most National Forest Service lands. Across all segments, visits to NFP sites generated just over \$7.5 billion in direct spending, 64% of which was made up by non-locals.

In addressing the question, why has nature based tourism has become so popular, Eadington and Smith (1992) cite two principal reasons closely attached to the historical development of tourism. First and foremost there is the issue of tourist disillusionment with the excesses of the modern day tourism industry. The tourism industry has grown significantly over the past twenty years, progressing from the pursuits of a privileged few to a mass movement of people. However, just as the industry has been growing, so it seems has the public's disillusionment with the many conflicts that have arisen. Many hosts and guests alike have become disaffected by mainstream tourism and the physical

scarring of otherwise pristine environments as well as the rupturing of various host societies cultural values systems through the time lagged effects of acculturation and cultural drift. Akama and Kieti (2003, p. 73) tell us that “Postmodern social and economic changes, especially in the developed countries in the north, have enhanced the value of natural areas and the promotion of nature-based tourism and recreational activities.” Second, the authors cite competition and the fact that as tourists have started to shun the more traditional mass destinations; practitioners, government and host communities alike have been forced to consider alternative and more appealing tourism forms as a means of regenerating interest in their area and/or attracting tourists away from other destination areas (2003).

### **Nature-based Tourism and Car Camping in Alabama**

Camping is a traditional American experience that attributes significantly to the tourism industry in Alabama. The tourism industry alone represented an estimated 5.5% of the states gross domestic product and contributed approximately 3.7 billion dollars to its bottom line in 2007 (Alabama Economic Impact Report, 2007). Many believe that with the current declining economic conditions, more Alabamians are likely to turn to these less expensive alternatives from the more traditional vacations that can prove considerably more expensive. These factors make it more important than ever to understand the clientele partaking in these activities and their needs.

### **Impact of Nature-based Tourism**

Specific benefits of NBT to a community include: employment, recognition of the region, focus on the sustainability of the region’s natural resources, taxation benefits, economic impact, direct spending, and the development and overall growth in tourism.

When regarded as a key, profitable segment of the tourism industry, it's no wonder that issues such as service and visitor satisfaction have begun to be recognized.

### **Critical Success Factors in Nature-based Tourism**

In order to better serve the needs of this growing breed of tourist we must first understand what factors play a role in their satisfaction levels. In addition we need to understand how exactly these satisfaction levels will affect the bottom line. One clear way to increase revenue is by developing long term relationships with customers.

Research has shown that quality, value, and satisfaction can directly influence behavioral intentions, even when the effects of each of these constructs are considered simultaneously (Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000). It is therefore imperative for campground officials to understand what they can do to increase guest satisfaction levels and ultimately the customers' willingness to return.

Environmental quality has proved, of course, a central component for nature-based tourists, but only after the required services and facilities have been supplied. The natural environment is viewed as important to these tourists, however low levels of expertise, seclusion, and knowledge are common. Key reasons for choosing specific campgrounds are convenience and location, with previous visitations, and enjoying nature ranking secondary (Murray, Eagles, Paul, Kay, Paul & Mulrooney).

Given the economic potential, it is not surprising that government and practitioners should seek to invest wisely in the development of this sector ensuring its continued development and long-term success. This requires expertise and experience on a range of fronts though, that are not typical to the nature-based tourism sector, for example marketing, quality evaluation, customer relationship building and

communication. Eagles (2001) suggests that what is needed is a change in mind from traditional government funded agency to a free-market approach to business and visitor management. Dwyer and Edwards (2000) support this contention suggesting that quality is the most important factor in nature-based tourism development. In addressing the key management challenges faced by operators, the authors' state "There is growing community expectation of high quality facilities and interpretation of natural facilities' and what is needed is a 'consistent long-term, high quality' approach to meet reasonable expectations of nature-oriented tourists." (p. 267). More than any other form of visitor, it seems, nature-based tourists are strongly driven by word of mouth recommendation which ultimately depends upon a mix of environmental quality, access and support facility quality and service quality. What is required, therefore, is a comprehensive quality assurance/control program guided by a total quality management approach, to determine and assure consistently and continuously appropriate quality standards for nature-based visitors.

Not surprisingly, quality features largely in the strategic planning efforts of most national and regional tourism authorities involved in the development of nature-based tourism. Key in any such approach is the need for nature-based operators to understand the criteria visitors use to evaluate quality and determine subsequent satisfaction ratings. This view is shared by Lee, Graefe and Burns (2004) who suggest park managers will be better positioned "to enhance their management of forest destinations to satisfy tourists." (p. 73). McCool (2002) puts it as follows "There are three significant challenges that confront those for whom providing high quality recreation and tourism opportunities is important":



- First, mapping and measuring the visitor experience and their expectations.
- Second, linking those expectations to the attributes that are needed to provide them, and
- Third, the need to balance the relationship between the natural environment and supporting tourism infrastructure (2002, p. 1).

### **Quality and Measurement in Nature-based Tourism**

The need for ongoing research that details visitor expectations, the outcomes they seek and ultimately visitor satisfaction with the environment, service and support facilities offered is paramount. While the importance of the subject matter is clear and widely accepted there has been a shortage of studies addressing the satisfaction and/or service quality constructs in the nature-based tourism sector which are clearly important to the survival of this sector of the industry.

LaPage and Bevins (1981, p. 1) who address the issue of “Satisfaction Monitoring for Quality Control in Campground Management.” conducted a four year study of camper satisfaction and concluded that “satisfaction monitoring is a useful tool for campground managers.” The authors developed and tested a 14-item measure of campground satisfaction focusing on both physical, employee and process attributes and found that the more physical and/or tangible attributes of the campground visitor experience played an important role in defining overall satisfaction. Jaten and Driver (1998, p. 43) also highlight the need for “Meaningful Measures for Quality Recreation Management.” The authors link success to quality provision and suggest the need for “Total Quality Management” practice, which establishes quality standards throughout

parks and monitors, measures and reports on actual satisfaction achievement. The authors go on to identify what these quality standards should relate to, highlighting some 18 variables under the categories of health and safety, general recreational setting, safety and security and responsiveness to customer need (1998).

Backman, Backman and Malinovsky (2000) investigated the measurement and influence of service quality in a nature based setting and demonstrated the importance of including a programming/educational dimension in nature-based tourism settings. Results suggest that nature-based tourists' expectations of quality differ by destination and business type and the authors propose the need for further research to examine the influence that involvement and performance have on loyalty. Lee et al., (2004) address the issue of service quality, satisfaction and behavioral intention among forest visitors. Their findings suggest that service quality is a vital antecedent of satisfaction and that satisfaction plays a mediating role between service quality and behavioral intention. The implication in terms of practical application for forest park managers and subsequent investment in quality service standards is obvious. That said, there is an apparent weakness with the model proposed and tested in that the three service quality dimensions uncovered by an exploratory factor analysis were summated to create an aggregate value for service quality as opposed to being addressed in their own right in terms of prediction and explanation of the model proposed.

Hardy, Ogunmokon and Winter (2005) report on an exploratory study of factors influencing campers level of loyalty to camping sites and using an on-site survey method sought to differentiate between the perception of loyal and not so loyal campers and subsequent satisfaction ratings. The authors offer tentative support for the suggestion that

the degree of satisfaction experienced by a camper is moderated by the level of loyalty felt. That said, the sample population comprised only 51 respondents, which lead some to question the accuracy of the results. Ellis and Vogelsong (2002) explored those demographic indicators relating to overall visitor satisfaction with eco-tourism development, suggesting the need to “deconstruct the visitor’s overall experience” (p. 52) in order to focus on individual factors that might influence satisfaction either adversely or positively. They provide further evidence to suggest that loyal/repeat visitors display significantly higher satisfaction levels than first time visitors and that site specific and more tangible variables such as cleanliness displayed a greater role in overall satisfaction than other variables.

The limited research that does exist clearly points to the fact that sustained and continuous quality improvement is not possible without some indication of quality performance and service. To know the real effect of changes over time, nature-based tourism professionals require measures to compare the quality performance of the nature-based tourism experience. As LaPage and Bevins (1981, p. 6) state that “satisfaction monitoring offers a means of quality assurance for the visitor, an approach to performance measurement for the administration, and a rational basis for decision making about use limits and the delivery of recreation services.” In order to understand how to better monitor the satisfaction of NBT visitors, we must first understand the components of service that ultimately influence these travelers.

### **Service Defined**

Service can be defined as an intangible good. It is both produced and consumed simultaneously. It is characterized as perishable and labor intensive. Given this

intensively laborious characteristic, employees must be trained in company established systems and procedures in order to deliver a specific product. Bearing in mind that a product can be delivered by different individuals, variability in the way the product is perceived and/or received becomes a challenge. When dealing with service delivery systems, Bell and Winters (1993) state that “there is no better place to implement specific solutions, however, than in the hospitality industry, where customer service is inseparable from employee performance” (p. 93).

### **Service Measurement**

There is a need to assess the expectations of the consumer, predispositions, and perceptions of reality that he/she may bring to the service delivery equation. This simply means that customers’ perceptions are their reality. One widely used measurement tool for these expectations is called SERVQUAL (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990). This measurement tool, short for service quality, has been extensively researched to validate its psychometric properties and while it has attracted criticism for its conceptualization of quality measurement issues, it has nonetheless been applied in a wide variety of sectors (Lam et al., 1997; Lee & Hing, 1995; Lewis, 1987; Ryan & Cliff, 1997).

Presently speaking, SERVQUAL is a metric commonly used within the hospitality industry. “Although widely referred to as SERVQUAL, the five elements can more easily be remembered through the acronym “rater” (O’Neill & Hubbard, 2004, p. 90). O’Neill and Hubbard (2004) refer to ‘rater’ as an acronym to describe reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness. Based on these five dimensions, customers’ perceptions of quality service can be analyzed. Methods or constructed

instruments can now take qualitative feedback and quantify the findings into metrics. These findings can reveal strengths and/or weaknesses of a company's mission to delivery on service execution. SERVQUAL and the elements that define it will be discussed at greater length within the satisfaction discussion of this chapter.

### **Service Quality in Tourism**

The conceptualization of the service quality construct, its relationship to ongoing customer satisfaction, loyalty and spending patterns and methods of evaluating it, have been a central theme of the hospitality literature over the past several years. Hospitality operations now have to serve an increasingly discerning public, who, it seems, are more eager than ever to complain and transfer their allegiances to perceived providers of quality accommodation services. Consequently, a large portion of marketing effort is now being directed at both getting and keeping customers. Evidence suggests that an organization's ability to consistently satisfy customers will go a long way towards achieving this core objective. Not surprisingly, a large portion of organizational effort is now being directed at developing an operational means for achieving just that. Inherent in any such approach is the need to continually monitor operational performance so that energies can be better directed at consistently satisfying customer needs (Langer, 1997).

Customer service, and service quality, is now a focus for many corporate or marketing strategies and high levels of service are typically seen as a means for an organization to achieve a competitive advantage. Langer states that "most industries continue to face dramatic changes in their environment, ranging from the increasingly global nature of the marketplace to the growing importance of services as a tool of competitive differentiation" (1997, p. 7). Delivering exceptional service, especially in the

hospitality industry, creates a plethora of opportunities for companies to surpass the competition and become recognized leaders in their industries.

Service quality can be broken down into two dimensions: technical quality and functional quality. Technical quality refers to what is being delivered while functional quality is concerned with how the service is delivered. It takes both of these elements to create a superior service quality experience yet it is difficult due to a unique characteristic of service; the simultaneous production and consumption of services. Hospitality services also suffer from a high level of heterogeneity. Services vary in standard and quality over time because they are delivered by people to people and are a function of human performance. Each service experience is different because it varies from producer to producer and from customer to customer. The customer's overall evaluation of a service encounter does not rest solely on the processing of tangible attributes or the intangible elements from the service provider but instead on a combination of the above, paired with the customer's mood, emotions and attitudes (Mantel & Kardes, 1999).

### **Unique Nature of Services**

Services in general are unique unto themselves when compared to more traditional goods. It is often understood that tourism and hospitality services have a host of attributes that differentiate them from tangible goods (Berry, Zeithaml & Parasuraman, 1985; O'Neill, 1992). These attributes only contribute to the complexity of providing and maintaining a high level of service quality, retaining customers and increasing profits and loyalty.

- **Intangibility.** When a service is purchased, there is often not a tangible object to show for it. "Because they are performances and experiences rather than objects,

precise manufacturing specifications concerning uniform quality can rarely be set” (Zeithaml et.al., 1990, p. 15). Although the performance of most services is supported by tangibles, the essence of what is being bought is a performance provided by one party, for another. They cannot be displayed, sampled, tested or evaluated before purchase (Bagozzi, Gopinath & Nyer, 1999).

- **Inseparability of Production and Consumption.** Service Inseparability implies that production takes place simultaneously with consumption. Generally, goods are first produced, sold, and then consumed. Services on the other hand are usually sold first, and then produced and consumed simultaneously. Further complicating the issue is the fact that service is very laborious. Getting every employee of a hotel or restaurant to do the right thing is often an enormous challenge (Reisinger, 1992; Berry et al., 1985).
- **Heterogeneity.** Services by nature are heterogeneous, meaning they are less standardized and uniform than goods because they are delivered by people to people and are a function of human performance. Because the customers buying services meet face-to-face with service employees, service outputs can hardly be standardized as products are. Also, an important aspect to note when discussing heterogeneity is that customers differ in both their needs and expectations (Reisinger, 1992).
- **Consistency.** It is difficult to provide the same level of service time after time. Employee performance varies depending on multiple factors including the employee’s mood, motivation, training, personality, and even factors related to

the customer receiving the service. Additionally, this is affected by whether or not the customers communicate their wants and needs to said employee. Also there is a shortage of uniform, objective standards according to which tourism service performance and quality can be assessed (Iwaarden, Wiele & Williams, 2005).

- **Perishability.** Service perishability notes that linked to the notion of heterogeneity or simultaneity is the idea that services must be provided and utilized at the point of consumption, during the service encounter. Services cannot be stored. If they are not consumed then they are lost forever. A guest room that is not occupied for a night is lost revenue in much the same way that an unsold seat at a concert is also potential profit lost. Tourism services must be consumed at the same time that they are produced (not purchased) or they are perpetually lost (Iwaarden, Wiele & Williams, 2005).

These are each important factors to bear in mind when considering service as a source for customer satisfaction. Another important factor to consider is the atmosphere in which the service is being delivered, or servicescape.

### **Servicescape**

Because of the unique nature of service, including intangibility and heterogeneity, it has often been hypothesized that consumers turn to more tangible aspects of their service encounter when judging their experience (Jamal & Naser, 2001; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994). Support for this idea comes from empirical evidence suggesting that the tangible and physical surroundings of the service environment can have a significant impact on customers' perceptions of service quality (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994; Jamal



& Naser, 2001). Often referred to as servicescape, these tangible items are the physical environment in which the actual service is being provided. Items such as the overall appearance of campsites, cleanliness of restroom facilities, and availability of electrical outlets are evaluated by the customer. The evaluation of these factors (and others) will then, in part, help to evaluate the overall determination of satisfaction. For example, a camper who is entertaining his children on a family outing might place more emphasis on the availability of picnic tables and recreation facilities than would a seasoned outdoorsman looking to commune with his natural environment.

### **Servicescape in Nature-based Tourism**

Research on servicescape has been previously conducted in wildlife, leisure tourism settings. It has been found to be a crucial component in the formation of customer satisfaction in nature-based tourism. Arnould, Price and Tierney (1998) explain that the following qualities in wilderness settings provide restorative and even transformative benefits and factor in to visitor satisfaction:

- Being away - distance from the world of pressures and obligations.
- Extent – involving both a feeling of the interrelatedness of the immediate elements of the environment so that they constitute a portion of a larger whole and a promise of a continuation of the world beyond what is immediately perceived.
- Compatibility – a feeling combining relatedness, awe and wonder and the absence of environmental nuisances.

- Soft fascinations – when the exploration of thoughts, including confusing or stressful feelings and memories is made more tolerable by the presence of pleasurable stimuli.

Additionally, consumers spend a relatively large amount of time engaged in nature-based tourism activities, as opposed to other service encounters. For example, when dining at a restaurant, a customer will spend a relatively short amount of time with the service providers of the establishment, whereas visitors will likely spend days engaged in activities throughout their camping experience. Research has indicated that in such instances the perceived quality of servicescape plays a vital role in the satisfaction of the consumer (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994).

Bitner identifies three core dimensions of servicescape that can influence visitor's holistic perceptions of the servicescape. The dimensions identified are as follows:

- Ambient conditions (weather, temperature, air quality, noise, music, odors, etc.).
- Spatial layout and functionality (the way in which areas and facilities are laid out and the ability of those items to aid the visitor's enjoyment).
- Signs, symbols, and artifacts (signage being used to direct customers to desired destinations) (1994).

Wakefield & Blodgett (1994) found that each of these factors had a positive effect on the perceived quality of specific tourism venues. Perceived quality had a positive effect on satisfaction, which in turn had a positive effect on the length

of time visitors desired to stay at their leisure service and on their repatronage intentions.

### **Core Service and Employee Service**

The interaction between service quality and the different types of leisure tourism have been broken down in to two realms, one being the physical plant as discussed previously (servicescape) and the other being the interaction between the consumer and the service provider. Key to this personal contact is the role of the core service and the employee. The core service has been defined as the processes by which the service is delivered, whereas the employee service refers to the behaviors or performances of the employees in the delivery of the service (Grace & O’Cass, 2004). The authors further contend that:

Where there is consensus in the literature that both the core service and employee service influence the customers’ perception of value and their level of satisfaction with the service, some advocate that increasing emphasis should be placed on the interpersonal dimensions of the service offering (Grace & O’Cass, 2004, p. 453).

Clearly, core service is an important component; however employee service is also a key factor. Due to the intangible disposition of services, consumers tend to look at the behavior of employees as a means for evaluating their overall satisfaction level (Jamal & Naser, 2001; Stauss, 2002). This personal contact can also be seen as being affected by the service recovery process. When there is a service failure, consumers become inherently more dependent on the services that they receive. The ability of the service provider to overcome the initial service failure and rectify the situation is crucial.

## **Service-Profit Chain**

Because employee service is such a crucial part of the service experience, it is inherent that the means to which these employee services are created be examined. High service quality is not only necessary when dealing with external customers but it is also essential in regards to employees. Employees (or the internal customers) must also be satisfied with the level of service quality that they receive. One way to illustrate the relationship between internal operations and customer satisfaction in services is proposed in *The Service-Profit Chain* (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994). The Service-Profit Chain establishes relationships between profitability, customer loyalty and employee satisfaction, loyalty and productivity. It is not solely the various elements of the chain that are of interest, the focus should also be placed on the individual links within the chain.

The Service Profit Chain also states that profit is directly affected by customer loyalty, which is a result of high external customer satisfaction derived from high service quality, which is created by satisfied internal customers. Paraskevas (2001) believes that “high level of quality built into the internal service chain will consequently result in high level of quality products and services offered to the external customer” (p. 285). Simply stated, happy employees create happy customers (Heskett et al., 1994).

The links in the chain (which should be regarded as propositions) are as follows: “Profit and growth are stimulated primarily by customer loyalty. Loyalty is a direct result of customer satisfaction. Satisfaction is largely influenced by the value of services provided to customers. Value is created by satisfied, loyal, and productive employees. And employee satisfaction, in turn, results primarily from high-quality support services

and policies that enable employees to deliver results to customers” (Heskett et al., 1994, p. 164).

### **Continuous Quality Improvement and Total Quality Management**

In focusing on the different factors in service that ultimately lead to customer satisfaction, one must not overlook *Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)*. CQI is a managerial process in which organizations identify, plan, and implement ongoing improvements in service delivery. CQI provides a critical way to assess and monitor the delivery of services to ensure that they are consistent with an organization’s best practice principles. It is regarded as a critical component for an increasing number of hospitality organizations. This is the basis for what is often referred to as Total Quality Management, or TQM. TQM is best described by Beich as a quality-centered, customer-driven, management-led process to achieve an organization's strategic mission through continuous service improvement (1994). The customer perceives the quality of a service depending on the competence of the staff; therefore management depends on the competence of other staff members to provide customers with a continually excellent service experience.

Once customer satisfaction has been reached, it must then be continually upheld. TQM is often used as a way to maintain customer satisfaction. People by nature have limitless desires which are never permanently satisfied (Walsh, Hughes & Maddox, 2002). “Therefore TQM initiatives must include an in-built culture of continuous improvement which can help an organization satisfy the needs of its customers on an ongoing basis” (p. 300). Hellsten and Klefsjo (2000) describe TQM as, “some form of ‘management philosophy’ based on a number of core values, such as customer focus,

continuous improvement, process orientation, everybody's commitment, fast response, result orientation and learn from others" (p. 239).

Babbar and Aspelin (1994) state that TQM is often a misunderstood concept because many companies believe it is something that can easily be purchased and implemented like some form of package deal. Some companies buy into TQM as some sort of quick fix program instead of realizing it is a complicated process that needs the commitment of the entire company with the understanding it is a long-term course of action. Sashkin and Kiser (1993) describe TQM as the development of an organizational culture which is defined by, and supports, the constant attainment of customer satisfaction through an integrated system of tools, techniques and training.

### **Satisfaction Defined**

Currently, the most widely used definition of satisfaction states that satisfaction is "the consumer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under-or-over fulfillment" (Oliver, 1997, p. 13). Within this definition there are a couple of noteworthy details.

One important point to note is that the evaluation of a consumer's satisfaction generally occurs at the end of the processing activity, this allows for both hasty judgments of products and services that are consumed relatively quickly, as well as judgments of satisfaction resulting from products or services with lengthy consumption periods. This does not mean, however, that consumers cannot make some form of evaluation during any part of the consumption process. In reality, evaluation of

satisfaction starts from the moment consumption begins; therefore some form of evaluation can be given while the overall assessment of satisfaction is being developed.

Another factor to consider is that satisfaction can be regarded in terms of singular events leading up to a consumption outcome and as a collective impression of these events. Furthermore, customers can be either satisfied or dissatisfied with the *level* of satisfaction received. The idea that a guest could be satisfied but still unhappy with the end result leads to a theory that expectations play a major role in the evaluation of satisfaction. For example, if an avid camper visits a campsite that he has heard has exemplary facilities available, he may expect an extreme level of quality of these facilities. Because this camper has been given such a high impression by others, the expectations that he has would be very high. While the camper may experience a decent level of satisfaction with the facilities, when compared with the expectations of the exemplary facilities, the end evaluation may be one of dissatisfaction. If this level of satisfaction had been received during any other camping experience, the end result may have been positive, but because the expectation of phenomenal facilities was present, adequate facilities were found to be disappointing.

### **Zones of Tolerance**

One important component of satisfaction to consider is consumers' *zones of tolerance*. This theory suggests that customers hold several different expectations about service. The first of these expectations, desired service is essentially the level of service that a customer hopes to receive. This is a combination of what the customer believes can be and should be provided in the context of customer service and service quality. The second expectation is referred to as acceptable service, or the level of service that a

customer will accept (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). If conceptualized as points on a line, the space between the two points (acceptable service and desired service) can be thought of as the zone of tolerance. If service drops below the acceptable service point customers will be discouraged and their satisfaction with the company challenged. If service performance surpasses the desired service point then customers will be delighted and probably quite surprised as well (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000).

Just as services can all be different, so can consumers. Different customers will have different zones of tolerance. Some customers will have wide zones of tolerance, leaving a large range of service from providers and others will have much more restricted zones, requiring a tighter range of service. There are many factors that play in to customers' zones of tolerance, like time that a customer has or the price of the service. It has been found that higher prices do not necessarily drive up expectations, however the acceptable service point may increase, thus causing the overall zone of tolerance to become smaller (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2001; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). The more important a factor is to an individual customer, the narrower the zone of tolerance is likely to be. Naturally, it is the customer that determines which parts of the service provided are the most important and which ones are secondary. In recognizing that consumers each have their own zones of tolerance, which are dictated by different factors for each, specific drivers of satisfaction should also be investigated.

### **The Importance of Satisfaction in Nature-based Tourism**

As previously discussed, Lee et al. (2004) addressed the issue of service quality, satisfaction and behavioral intention among forest visitors. Their findings suggest that service quality is a vital antecedent of satisfaction and that satisfaction plays a mediating



role between service quality and behavioral intention. Hardy et al. (2005) offered further support for the suggestion that the degree of satisfaction experienced by a camper is moderated by the level of loyalty felt. They provide further evidence to suggest that loyal/repeat visitors display significantly higher satisfaction levels than first time visitors and that site specific and more tangible variables such as cleanliness displayed a greater role in overall satisfaction than other variables. Simply put, “satisfaction monitoring offers a means of quality assurance for the visitor, an approach to performance measurement for the administration, and a rational basis for decision making about use limits and the delivery of recreation services.” (LaPage & Bevins (1981, p. 6).

### **Satisfaction and Service Measurement**

With a consumer market very willing to complain, businesses within the services industry are scrambling to gain a competitive edge. With the multitude of challenges, models are needed to take factual, qualitative data, and quantify those measures. To do this, companies should assess its consumers’ profiles. Simply put, what are the characteristics or behaviors of the services, which the company provides to keep guests coming back?

As mentioned earlier, SERVQUAL and RATER are tools of continuous quality measurement. Furthermore, different constructs of these two qualitative metrics can be utilized when measuring service quality and satisfaction. Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages. Here are a few examples.

Comment cards are regularly used and play an important part of continuous quality improvement. The primary reasons this method is used are inexpensiveness and administration requirements. This kind of survey gives a firsthand account of a guest’s

experience. However, there are noticeable complications with comment cards. More times than not, consumers feel inconvenienced. Furthermore, the surveys tend to be utilized in the event of major negative or positive experiences. In addition, “a major disadvantage is low return rate” (O’Neill, 2000, p. 180).

Focus groups present another venue to measure service reliability. There are mass amounts of information, which can be gathered in focus groups. In particular, information which frontline employees bring forth can be most enlightening. To be more effective, focus groups should, and most times do involve guests. “Once again, expense is a problem, especially for the small-to medium-sized enterprise.” (O’Neill, 2000, p. 175)

A third and very qualitatively rich form of measurement is a mystery shop program. Mystery shops are consistent and specifically measurable. Most programs are created with qualitative data which is previously established. In most cases, they are unobtrusive and most employees cannot tell when, where, or what time the shops will take place. It is most important to note, mystery shopper programs are expensive. In addition, analyzing the data is very time consuming and laborious.

There are many different methods to measuring quality and satisfaction. Comment cards, focus groups, and mystery shop programs measure both quantitative and qualitative data. Once collected, the data can be quantified into metrics. These metrics can prove extremely helpful for hospitality operations.

Another important related concept is the Disconfirmation Paradigm is the knowledge of customer expectations and requirements is essential for two reasons – it provides understanding of how the customer defines quality of service and products, and facilitates the development of a customer satisfaction questionnaire (Pizam & Ellis,

1999). One main problem with this is that the perception of quality lies within the customer. Groth and Dye (1999) state that “the total perceived value of a service comes from two sources. First, customers perceive value that originates from the service act itself. Second, customers perceive value that originates from the quality of the service act” (p. 277). Perceptions can change with customers’ moods and emotions and may not accurately reflect the quality of the service. Moreover, customers’ perceptions of quality service may differ drastically from the actual quality of the events that created the service (Groth & Dye, 1999). This thinking is the basis for the disconfirmation paradigm which is described by Pizam and Ellis (1999) as:

Customers purchase goods and services with pre-purchase expectations about anticipated performance. Once the product or service has been purchased and used, outcomes are compared against expectations. When outcome matches expectations, confirmation occurs. Disconfirmation occurs when there are differences between expectations and outcomes. Negative disconfirmation occurs when product/service performance is less than expected. Positive disconfirmation occurs when product/service performance is better than expected (p. 328).

The Disconfirmation Model has three outcome states on a variable scale.

According to Robert Johnston (1995), the three states are “dissatisfaction”, resulting from poor perceived quality (negative disconfirmation), “delight” from high quality (positive disconfirmation) and “satisfaction” from adequate quality (confirmation). When expectations exceed the actual outcome of an interaction, negative disconfirmation occurs and the customer is often left dissatisfied. The events that created this disconfirmation are

considered to be service failures (Johnston, 1995). It is the responsibility of the service organization to resolve these situations.

There are multiple ways to measure quality but first let us look at the different types of measures. In the service industry, two types of research methods are typically used, and often together. According to Leddy and Ormrod (2005), quantitative research is used to answer questions about relationships among measured variables with the purpose of explaining, predicting and controlling phenomena. On the contrary, qualitative research is typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view (Leddy & Ormrod, 2005). Additionally, qualitative measurement is regularly used for gathering data by means of comment cards, mystery shoppers and management observation. This information is typically then used to formulate objective measures to quantitatively evaluate customer feedback. Quantitative measurement generally takes the form of surveys and questionnaires.

As previously discussed, one of the most widely used instruments to measure service quality is the SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman et al. in 1985. The model was created based on the disconfirmation paradigm. "The model on which SERVQUAL is based proposes that customers evaluate the quality of a service on five distinct dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles; and that service quality is the difference between a customer's expectations and perceptions of the quality of a service" (Wong, Mei, Dean, & White, 1999, p. 137). The SERVQUAL model identifies specific criteria by which customers evaluate service quality. Measurements are taken using surveys and questionnaires and are weighted by

importance, usually on a five point Likert scale. The questionnaire consists of two sections: a section to measure customers' service expectations of organizations within a specific sector and a corresponding section to measure customers' perceptions of a particular organization in that sector. According to Parasuraman et al. (1985), service quality should be measured by subtracting customer perception scores from customer expectation scores ( $Q = P - E$ ). The gap may exist between the customers' expected and perceived service is not only a measure of the quality of the service, but also a determinant of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction. This is important because it shows the connection between the expectations and perceptions of customers and can show companies where they need to improve. The SERVQUAL instrument is one of the most commonly used constructs when attempting to measure service quality and satisfaction.

In essence the five elements of the RATER model are:

- Reliability – The ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- Assurance – The knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
- Tangibles – The physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of the location.
- Empathy - Caring, individualized attention, and appearance of personnel.
- Responsiveness - Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.

Berry et al. (1985) believe that these five dimensions are a concise representation of the core criteria that customers employ in evaluating service quality (O'Neill, 1992). This scale is considered to be an indirect or disconfirmation measure of service quality

and satisfaction (Yuksel & Rimmington, 1998). The model contends that service quality can be conceptualized as the difference between what a consumer expects to receive and his or her perceptions of actual delivery. It suggests that product and service performance exceeding some form of standard leads to satisfaction while performance falling below this standard results in dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1997).

On the other hand, there are perception models such as SERVPERF which is based only on perceptions of performance. SERVPERF and SERVQUAL share the same concept of perceived quality; however, Llusar and Zornoza (2000) explain, that “The main difference between these models lies in the formulation adopted for their calculation, and more concretely, in the convenience in the utilization of expectations and the type of expectations that should be used” (p. 901). Robledo (2001) contends that “supporters of this paradigm maintain that expectations are irrelevant and even misleading information for a model intended to evaluate perceived service quality. They maintain that the perception of the customer is the only measure required” (p. 23). Once service quality is measured, companies must find a way to continually improve their quality and continue to keep customers satisfied.

### **Future Behavioral Intentions**

As part of an organization commitment to relationship marketing and quality, measurements of loyalty and future behavioral intentions (FBI) have become a priority. It seems intuitively rational that there should be a contributory link between quality of service, level of customer satisfaction, and the organization’s success. Higher quality of performance and levels of satisfaction are perceived to result in increased loyalty and future visitation, greater tolerance of price increases, and an enhanced reputation (Baker

& Crompton, 2000). Each of these are critical in regard to increased revenue, namely through intent to return and to positively recommend. These actions are generally a result of customer loyalty.

Edvardsson, Johnson, Gustafsson and Strandvik define loyalty as “a customer’s predisposition to repurchase from the same firm again” (2000, p. 918). Oliver elaborates by stating that “customer loyalty is a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influence and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior” (1997, p. 392). Importantly, Reichheld (1996) found that loyal customers impact organizations by generating more income, allowing for less marketing dollars to be spend in keeping a customer (rather than recruiting one) and becoming desensitized to price.

Oliver contends that customers progress through four phases of loyalty, which are discussed below.

- Cognitive – The information base to the consumer compellingly points to one brand over another. This phase consists of loyalty based on cognition alone. This one factor, however, does not make a customer loyal.
- Affective – Affect is connected to satisfaction through both cognition and attitude. As a part of this phase, a consumer has either a positive or negative feeling or attitude toward a specific brand or product. This phase must be based on some type of prior interaction or experience (i.e. cognitive loyalty).
- Conative – The behavioral intention dimension of loyalty that is influenced by changes in affect toward the brand. This phase implies an intention or

commitment to behave toward a goal in a particular manner. It is a loyalty state containing the deeply held commitment to buy.

- Action – The motivation intention in the previous phase is converted into readiness to act. This is also accompanied by a desire to overcome obstacles that might prevent the act. If this is repeated, action inertia develops, thereby facilitating repurchase. Readiness to act is related to the deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, whereas overcoming obstacles is related to re-buying despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior (1997).

### **Importance of Loyalty**

In the tourism industry, customer satisfaction and service quality do not always lead directly to loyalty. Because of the afore-mentioned benefits or retaining existing customers, the development of customer loyalty has become an important focus for marketing strategy research in recent years (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Hagen-Danbury & Matthews, 2001; McMullan, 2005). According to Olorunniwo, Hsu and Udo, loyal customers impact the profitability and overall success of the organization in three ways. First, a customer's repeat business generates income for the company. Second, due to the cost of marketing and advertising, an organization makes less of a financial commitment in retaining customers compared to recruiting new customers. And third, loyal and satisfied customers often spread the word and recommend the services to others (2006).



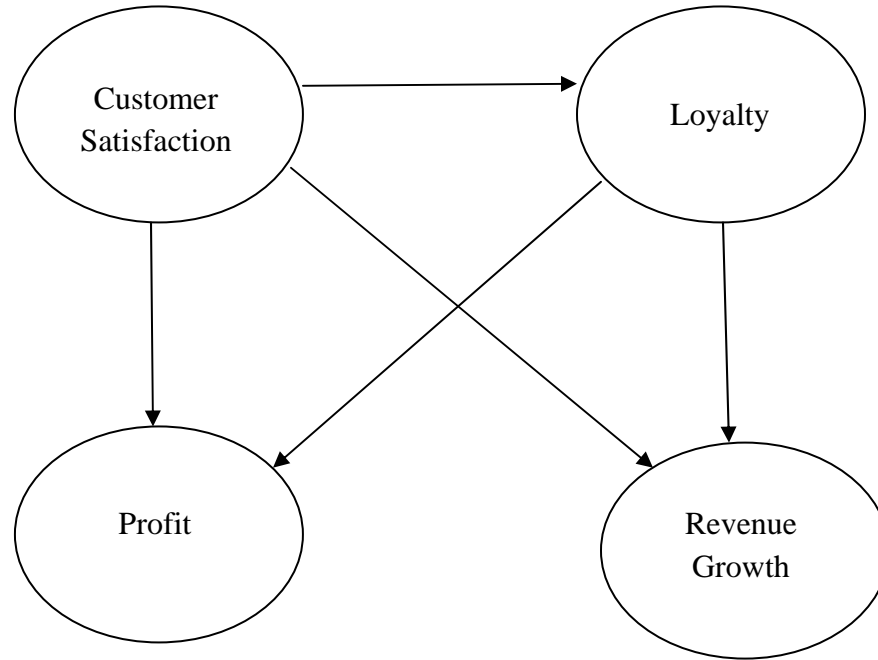
Edvardsonn et al. argue that much of the effect on satisfaction on profits and sales growth is mediated by increased customer loyalty (2000, p. 917). They further contend that consumer costs generally occur early in an organization's relationship with that consumer, while profits tend to accumulate only after a customer has been loyal for some time. Edvardsonn et al. state that there are 6 factors that affect overall costs, revenues and resulting cash flows, as listed below:

- Acquisition costs – These costs transpire early in an organizations relationship with a new customer. Incentive programs, awareness advertising, and prospecting costs are all examples of acquisition costs. These tactics designed to recruit and retain new customers often entail considerable costs to before any revenue is generated by the consumer.
- Base revenues – Throughout each time period that a consumer remains loyal to an organization, said organization will receive base revenues. This revenue is more evenly distributed as the re-purchase cycle continues. For example, a revolving bill such as magazine subscription would fit into this category.
- Revenue growth – As a customer becomes increasingly satisfied and consequently, more loyal with an organization they will generally find more opportunity to reward the organizations “good behavior” and consequently gain trust in the quality of the output. In doing so, the revenue gained in this step generally comes from two sources, the cross-

selling of additional products and services and an increase in purchase volume.

- Operating costs – As the purchase-consumption-repurchase cycle continues, operational costs will likely decrease. The more an organization forms a relationship with its customers, the easier it should be to understand their preferences and therefore be less costly to cater to them.
- Customer referrals or word of mouth – Organizations that continually generate high levels of satisfaction, and therefore loyalty, will ultimately generate customer referrals and positive word of mouth advertising which, in turn, will generate additional sales revenue.
- Price premiums – Finally, when customers reach this stage of loyalty, they are more willing to pay a price premium than newer consumers would likely be willing to give. Also, loyal customers are more likely to be in a repeat purchase mode as opposed to a mercenary mode. Because of this, they are less likely to take advantage of price discounts or other offers for switching to a competitor (2000).

**Figure 1 – Loyalty Profit Chain**



Edvardsson et al. (2000) follow up their discussion by illustrating this theory in the Loyalty Profit Chain as seen in the above diagram. The authors further maintain the value of the model by stating that “The overall result is a per customer profit stream that increases over time. The more loyal the customer and the longer the customer is retained, the more sales and profits the customer generates.” (2000, p. 919). As a result, the impact that satisfaction and its part in the configuration of loyal consumers plays a critical role in the continued success of tourism organizations. Because of the unique disposition of NBT, it is critical that there be a measurement in place that can decipher exactly what factors lead to satisfaction and ultimately visitor loyalty.

### **Satisfaction and Future Behavioral Intentions**

As previously discussed, delivering high quality service is important because research has indicated that “ it costs about five times as much money, time and resources

to attract new customers as it does to retain existing ones” (Pizam & Ellis, 1999, p. 326). One viewpoint, from Lockwood (1996) states that “the hospitality industry deals for the most part with customers’ implied needs. The customer is unlikely to state them explicitly. These needs then become a series of expectations in the customers’ minds. If these expectations are met or exceeded then the customer will be satisfied and will have had a ‘quality’ experience” (p. 4). Deming (1982) suggests that while an unhappy customer will go to someone else, a customer who is only just satisfied may also change because they can’t lose a lot and they might gain. He argues that profit comes from repeat customers; customers who boast about the product and service that they receive and bring their friends with them next time, in other words, loyal customers.

### **Summary**

This chapter has underscored the relevant literature regarding the key constructs that form the basis of this research. Factors such as customer service, customer satisfaction and future behavioral intentions have been defined and elaborated upon as they relate to nature-based tourism and car camping. In subsequent chapters the theoretical framework for this project will be unveiled and tested and conclusions will be reviewed.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

In past years, it has been very easy for tourist operators to claim that the unique characteristics of the service industry have prevented any attempts at measurement. However, the competitive nature of the present day business environment has forced the industry to alter this viewpoint (Lovelock, 1983; Berry, 1995; Lovelock, Patterson & Walker, 1998). Unlike those within product-based industries, managers in the service industry have fewer objective measures of quality by which to judge production. Cronin and Taylor (1992) explain that that managers need to know what aspects of a particular service best define its quality. This should enable the organization to take up a competitive position based upon its ability to deliver that which is demanded as opposed to that which the organization perceives to be in demand. It has become increasingly obvious that perpetual quality improvement is not possible without some indication of quality performance. As a result, managers need measures to compare the quality performance of the service. As evidence continues to suggest that continual measurement is one way of differentiating the successful long-term quality improvement program, it has become imperative for managers to provide for its application in the tourism context (Getty & Thompson, 1994; Lewis, 1987).

Importantly, the basic objective for every organization is to be profitable, which of course applies to executives in the nature-based tourism sector as well. As previously discussed, in order to be profitable, managers and organizations must have a clear understanding of what causes their customers to be satisfied. However, because of the unique nature of the tourism and service industry, it becomes necessary to tailor the research to these specific settings. The major objective of this research is to develop a cognitive scale specifically for nature-based tourism settings, measure its reliability and validity and assess its ability to explain visitor satisfaction and future behavioral intentions (specifically attitudinal behavior). Moreover, the research will examine the effect of customer service on both visitor satisfaction and future behavioral intentions.

### **Research Hypotheses**

The conceptualization of service quality, its relationship to the satisfaction construct, and methods of evaluating it have been a central theme of the tourism literature over the past three decades. While many options present themselves for the evaluation of both service quality and customer satisfaction it is widely accepted that performance only measures deliver better psychometric results in terms of both reliability and validity. For this reason the current study relied on the use of an absolute measure of performance to evaluate visitor satisfaction with car camping service provision throughout the state of Alabama. While the study relied heavily on other pre-validated models (LaPage & Bevins, 1981; Jaten & Driver, 1998) in the early stages of its development, the final measurement instrument was deemed original in its content and focus and largely untested. Hypothesis one (H1) is presented as follows:

- **H1: The car camping visitor satisfaction instrument will display sufficient psychometric performance in terms of reliability and validity.**

The literature points to the fact that when it comes to the typical nature-based tourism experience, visitor satisfaction depends upon satisfying consumers on two fronts: namely through the provision of a quality natural environment and supporting service infrastructure. Nature-based operators must therefore attend to standards in both respects. Therefore, it is suggested that the actual factor structure pertaining to the typical nature based tourism experience will substantively comprise two factors encompassing the more tangible/physical natural environment (TANGIBLE) and intangible service aspects (SERVICE) of the visitor experience. Hypothesis two (H2) is therefore presented as follows:

- **H2: A two factor structure comprising both the tangible and the intangible, service quality dimensions will accurately define visitor's perceptions of a typical nature based tourism experience.**

As indicated previously, managers need to know what aspects of a particular service best define its quality and drive or explain visitor satisfaction. Thereafter they will be better positioned to deliver a more satisfying customer experience and continuously focus resources on areas in need of quality investment and/or divestment. The challenge is not easy however; as an individual's environment is rich in stimuli trying to attract attention and at any one time our senses may be over-powered, requiring selectivity to be exercised. Those stimuli that are attended to normally, stand out in terms of their relevance in satisfying the particular need experienced by the consumer (Kotler, 1994).

The current study focuses on the more tangible elements of the camping encounter and their role in driving and/or explaining the overall satisfaction and behavioral intention constructs. There is considerable literature that has defined services in terms of their level of tangibility/intangibility, with the observation that highly intangible services pose particular challenges for marketers (Gronroos 1984; Zeithaml 1981). These challenges include the need to reduce perceived risk prior to purchase, due to the absence of tangible visible cues prior to purchase (Lovelock, et al., 1998). The presence of tangible cues post-purchase provides further cues, which remains after other elements of the service offer are consumed. It can, therefore, be hypothesized that tangible elements of the camping experience may stand out in individuals' perceptions and prove much more important in terms of defining overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions than other elements pertaining to the overall visitor experience in a nature based setting. As was noted in the discussion on servicescape, this seems particularly relevant in the exploration of nature based tourism activities where the driving motivation is the actual commune with nature. Hypothesis three (H3) can be described as follows;

- **H3: The tangible dimension of the nature-based visitor experience will prove more important in terms of explaining overall visitor satisfaction and future behavioral intention than other factors pertaining to car camping satisfaction.**

While debate continues as to the one best way to define and evaluate visitor satisfaction, it is now pretty well accepted that quality drives visitor satisfaction, which in



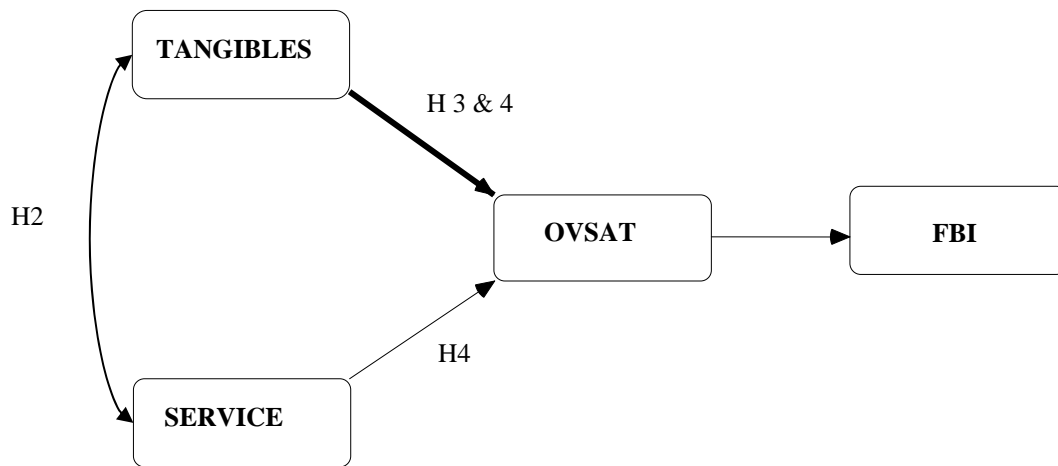
turn drives the consumers' future behavioral intention and/or loyalty to a particular supplier or destination. Hypothesis four (H4) is thus presented as follows:

- **H4: The overall quality of the visitor's nature-based camping experience, as represented by the previously proposed two factor structure, is positively correlated with their overall satisfaction and subsequent future behavioral intentions represented by intent to revisit and/or recommend the nature based tourism provider to others.**

### **Proposed Theoretical Model**

The model proposed consists of four main variables. As previously discussed, this project will be examining a factor structure pertaining to the typical nature based tourism that is comprised of two factors encompassing the more tangible/physical natural environment (TANGIBLE) and intangible service aspects (SERVICE) of the visitor experience. It is proposed that both of these factors will be directly correlated to the overall visitor satisfaction (OVSAT). Further, the model proposes that each of these factors will correlate with each other. Finally, it is proposed that each of these factors will directly correlate with the visitor's future behavioral intentions. Thus, the proposed model is presented below in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Proposed Theoretical Model



### Methodological Overview

This study involved a mixed method, two stage design (Barbour, 1998; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The first stage consisted of an exploratory research design which included interviews with university based tourism experts, destination marketing tourism representatives, nature-based tourism specialists and actual nature-based tourists (both in and out-of-state) vacationing in the state of Alabama. This facilitated the delineation of the measurement construct as it applied to the camping services offered by Alabama State Parks and development of a set of items to measure visitor satisfaction with State Parks camping provision (De Vaus, 1996). A number of existing scales were also reviewed and a pool of items generated which reflected camping satisfaction (Ennew, Reed & Binks, 1993; Jaten & Driver, 1998; LaPage & Bevins, 1981; Lee et al., 2004). This traditional approach is recommended for developing a set of validated and reliable scale items (De Vaus, 1996; Oliver, 1997).

In addition, expert opinion was supplemented by an extensive review of current practice within the United States and international tourism sectors. Nature-based visitor satisfaction measurement models utilized throughout the United States and internationally were reviewed as part of a search of the extant literature. A panel of experts was formed to validate, trim and refine the initial items. The panel consisted of five experts; two university faculty who specialized in services marketing and methodology; and three nature-based tourism practitioners. The panel reviewed the scales and current practice using criteria for validity and reliability (Bearden, Netemeyer & Mobley, 1993) which included the number of items included and their fit to the area under investigation, an acceptable Cronbach's Alpha or reliability level for the scale and best practice. The panel's brief was to evaluate each item based on criteria that examined the theoretical definition, the construct's domain and the operational definition (Bearden et al, 1993). In other words, the scale items needed to be consistent with the literature and the domain of study – namely satisfaction with camping provision.

Accordingly, each of the different components of methodological framework utilized for this study, including the research sample, the research instrument and the research procedures will be addressed in the latter part of this chapter.

### **Qualitative and Quantitative Research**

The methodological framework for this study consisted of a twelve month cross-sectional study of guest satisfaction throughout all State Parks accommodation outlets, twenty three in all, beginning April 2007. Whilst predominantly quantitative in nature, the main study was preceded by a qualitative research study as previously explained.

### *Qualitative Research*

Merriam (1998) offers much insight on qualitative research in noting that all types of qualitative research are based on the perspective that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p. 6). The focus of qualitative research is on understanding how individuals have created meaning in their realities through their lived experiences (Merriam, 1998). This research focused on learning more about how outdoor, nature-based, tourism venues can maintain a competitive advantage in the grab for tourists.

An exploratory research design consisting of one to one semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Alabama State Park officials and visitors traveling for tourism related purposes within Alabama preceded the main quantitative study. A total of five State Parks officials were approached from a variety of accommodation outlets throughout the state and a series of semi-structured interviews were held over a two week period in February 2007. Officials provided insight to the variables that should be measured and their relevance. Additionally, feedback was sought from all participants in relation to the importance of the service quality issue as it relates to the State Parks accommodation product as well as their pre-defined definition of those variables deemed central in evaluating the service quality construct. Park visitors were also approached and asked questions about their reasons for choosing a particular state park, if they'd previously visited the facility, what the driving factors in deciding to visit, and what factors were most important to them. For each of the interviews in the qualitative process extensive notes were taken, later transcribed and thoroughly examined for accuracy. The results from this qualitative stage of the study as well as a detail review of relevant

literature formed the basis of the primary research instrument (the questionnaire) and satisfied the requirement for face validity, i.e. the necessity for the questionnaire to measure what it was designed to measure – visitor satisfaction in a NBT setting and FBI.

### ***Quantitative Research***

The core data collection and previous research comprised the administration of an exit intercept questionnaire. The panel of experts and park officials helped to fine tune the questionnaire by noting irrelevant and duplicated questions and identifying industry related jargon that might not be fully understood by park visitors.

The final questionnaire focused on measuring visitor perceptions of the quality of accommodation and services offered by the Alabama Department of State Parks (ADSP) and sought to correlate this metric with visitors' intent to return to state park outlets and/or recommend them to others. While the questionnaire predominantly sought to measure visitor satisfaction with the quality of accommodation provision; the guests' future behavioral intention and demographic data were also collected as well as information related to the effectiveness of Alabama State Parks advertising and promotion. The scale developed took the form of a 34-item self-completion questionnaire, which visitors were asked to complete upon their departure from the park's reception area. For each item respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of the attributes listed on a five point Likert scale anchored at (1) very dissatisfied through to (5) very satisfied. A further four-item scale related to such issues as overall satisfaction with the park experience, overall product and service quality and value for money perception was included. In addition, respondents were also asked about their intention to

recommend and/or revisit the various parks visited. Both items were anchored on a similar scale ranging from (1) very unlikely through to (5) very likely.

After concluding the qualitative and quantitative steps of the research, the next step was to conduct statistical analyses on the data collected. This testing took the form of both exploratory and confirmatory statistical testing and included: reliability and validity testing, factor analysis, multivariate regression and path analysis. The chief objective of this step was to either support or reject the main research hypotheses.

### **Research Sample and Setting**

The sample was drawn from visitors to twenty three state parks located throughout the state of Alabama and managed by the Alabama Department of State Parks (ADSP). ADSP own and operate a variety of accommodation types, including traditional hotels and lodges, renovated rustic cabins and fully serviced car camp sites at each of its 23 state parks. It should be made clear however that only 19 of the 23 parks offer public access for car camping. State Parks are located throughout the state and for the most part encompass a blend of forest and water ways. Most parks also offer tourists a variety of nature-based activities including walking, in season fishing, bird watching, cycling and interpretive educational services.

Alabama relies almost entirely on a variety of nature-based tourism activities for its tourism revenue. The most recent economic impact study for the state (ABTT, 2008) estimates that almost 22.4 million people visited the State of Alabama during 2007. Travelers are estimated to have spent over \$9.3 billion state wide which represents some 5.5% of Alabama's GDP. Almost 70% of total tourism expenditures and travel related earnings were classified as non-metropolitan and thereby nature-based in origin. Indeed

the mountain and river heritage regions of the state realized a 20% combined growth rate over 2006. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFW, 2004), estimate the direct economic impact of nature-based recreation alone in Alabama to be worth around \$4.3 billion annually. Hunting and fishing are unquestionably very popular outdoor activities throughout the state, with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) estimating some 423,000 hunters and 851,000 anglers who spend freely on their past times. Alabama ranks near the middle of the pack in state population, for example, it is fifth in retail sales of hunting equipment and is in the top 10 in retail sales of fishing equipment. According to the USFW, hunters, anglers and wildlife observers alone provide an economic impact in Alabama of more than \$3.1 billion. Additionally, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation suggests that hunting and fishing expenditures alone account for approximately 36,000 jobs statewide.

Additional sample information worthy of note includes the fact that camping is ostensibly a summer/fall activity, which is clearly very weather dependent with just over 90% of responses having been received between the months of May and November. The busiest month for state wide camping operations was May with almost 32% of responses having been completed in this month. Just over 46% of respondents indicated that they chose their site out of convenience and just over 26% indicated that they did so based upon a previous stay. Additionally, just over 58% of respondents were from the state of Alabama.

### **Adequacy of Sample Size**

The importance of the sample size, or the number of actual usable surveys collected, is extremely important when it comes to the statistical methods utilized to

analyze the data collected. There are two types of errors that can occur, therefore, certain precautions need to be taken in order to minimize their potential effect. The first is known as Type I Error. It is defined as “the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis when actually true, or in simple terms, the chance of the test showing statistical significance when it actually is not present” (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998, p. 10). In order to combat this problem, the researcher sets the alpha level, the acceptable limits for error, at .05. The second type of error is called Type II error. This is defined as “the probability of failing to reject the null hypothesis when it is actually false” (Hair et al., 1998, p. 11). Mediated by both of Type I and Type II error is the power or the probability of correctly rejecting the null hypothesis when it should be rejected. Because Type I and Type II errors are inversely related, as Type I error becomes more restrictive (moves closer to zero), the Type II error increases. Reducing Type I errors therefore reduces the power of the statistical test. Complicating the matter is the fact that power is not only dependant on the alpha level; in fact it is determined by the following three factors:

- **Effect Size-** The probability of achieving statistical significance is based not only on statistical considerations but also on the actual magnitude of the effect of interest, or a difference of means between two groups, or the correlation between variables in the population, termed the effect size. A larger effect size is more likely to be found than a smaller effect and thus to impact the power of the statistical test. Effect sizes are defined in standardized terms for ease of comparison. Mean differences are stated in terms of standard deviations, so that an effect size of .5 indicates that the mean difference is one-half standard



deviation. For correlations, the effect size is based on the actual correlation between the variables.

- **Alpha-** As already discussed, as alpha becomes more restrictive, power decreases. This means that as the researcher reduces the chance of finding an incorrect significant effect, the probability of correctly finding an effect also decreases.
- **Sample Size-** At any given alpha level, increased sample size always produces greater power of the statistical test. But increasing sample size can also produce too much power. By increasing the sample size, smaller and smaller effects will be found to be statistically significant, until at very large sample sizes, almost any effect is significant (Hair et al., 1998; Babbie, 1992).

Of the 10,000 questionnaires distributed, 2,599 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of approximately 26%. As previously indicated questionnaires were distributed upon check-in to the camp site and visitors were invited to drop completed questionnaires in a locked drop box at the check-out facility or at the security check point upon departing each park.

### **Data Collection and Procedure**

Questionnaire administration took place over a twelve month period from May 2007 through to April 2008, thereby capturing both on and off-peak season data. Participants were approached upon arrival at the various camp sites about the nature of the study and their willingness to participate in the research. Those who expressed an interest were passed a survey during the check-in process and asked to deposit it upon check-out (at the completion of their stay) or upon departing the park. Completed surveys

were placed in a secure drop box and forwarded monthly by park attendants for input and analysis.

### **Non-Response Bias**

One important detail to be accounted for in this study is that of a non-response bias. This is the bias that results when respondents differ in meaningful ways from non-respondents. In this particular case, 10,000 questionnaires were distributed to the Alabama Department of State Parks (ADSP), who in turn distributed them at each of the twenty-three parks taking part in the study. 2,599 completed questionnaires were returned, generating a response rate of 26%. However, it is unknown exactly how many of these questionnaires were not distributed and how many were simply not completed by park visitors. Further, it is unknown the reasons for which visitors who did not complete a questionnaire chose not to do so. Mean scores were however, analyzed and compared between questionnaires that were filled out during different months in order to assess if a bias occurred for different times of the year. No significant difference was found in the responses based on the time of year they were completed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

So as to ensure that there was no violation of ethical rules of conduct associated with the administration of this research, several precautions were taken. First and foremost was the approval and strict adherence to the rules and guidelines established by the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Auburn University. All necessary written approval was granted to the researcher before any part of the survey administration was conducted. Inherent to those guidelines were the promise of anonymity for the respondents. Accordingly, no identifying questions were asked to the respondents and in no way could

the researcher track respondents based on his or her responses to the survey. At the completion of this project all surveys that were used in this project will be disposed of using the standard disposal methods of sensitive documents approved by Auburn University. It is felt by the researcher that the adherence to IRB guidelines and the voluntary nature of the administration has prevented any possible breeches of ethical conduct.

### **Summary**

In summary, this chapter has provided an in depth overview of the research methodology used in the execution of this project. Also included were an in-depth description of the sample group, tools used to measure different variables, the method in which the surveys were administered, and a description of how the data were collected and organized. The next chapter will contain the actual analysis of the data and the results that were produced from this analysis.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

This chapter presents the results of the study and is divided into six sections. Section one provides a brief description of the returned questionnaires. Section two provides information on the sample demographic characteristics. Section three provides an item based analysis of the key results for both visitor satisfaction and future behavioral intentions (FBI) containing descriptive statistics for all scales as well as statistical correlations of both outcome variables. Section four addresses the psychometric performance of the research instrument and includes both reliability and validity data for all scales employed. Dimensions have been aggregated based upon the results of an exploratory factor analysis. Section five addresses the key research hypotheses and section six discusses the model set for the study and analysis of its paths.

All efforts shall be made to separate the reporting of the results in Chapter VI from the discussion and interpretation of the results, which will be reserved for Chapter V.

#### **Description of Returned Questionnaires**

The sample was drawn from visitors to twenty three state parks located throughout the state of Alabama and managed by the Alabama Department of State Parks (ADSP). The ADSP own and operate a variety of accommodation types, including traditional hotels and lodges, renovated rustic cabins and fully serviced car camp sites at

each of its 23 state parks. It should be made clear however that only 19 of the 23 parks offer public access for car camping. State Parks are located throughout the state and for the most part encompass a blend of forest and water ways. Most parks also offer tourists a variety of nature-based activities including walking, in season fishing, bird watching, cycling and interpretive educational services.

Of the 10,000 questionnaires distributed, 2,599 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of approximately 26%. As previously indicated questionnaires were distributed upon check in to the camp site and visitors were invited to drop completed questionnaires in a locked drop box at the check-out facility or at the security check point upon departing each park. The questionnaires were printed and distributed over the course of one year.

### **Sample Demographic Characteristics**

Results indicate that camping is ostensibly a male dominated activity (67.4%) for those 45 years and above (approximately 68%) as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Age and Gender Distribution

<i>Age</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
17-24	93	3.6	Male	1753	67.4
25-34	233	9.0	Female	778	29.9
35-44	438	16.9	Missing	68	2.6
45-54	522	20.1	<b>Total</b>	<b>2599</b>	<b>100.0</b>
55-64	643	24.7			
65 +	647	24.9			
Missing	23	0.9			
<b>Total</b>	<b>2599</b>	<b>100.0</b>			

In addition to age and gender, respondents were also asked to select how many times (if any) they had previously stayed at the park and for what purpose. As illustrated in Table 2, just over half (51.5%) of respondents indicated that this was a first time visit for leisure and/or pleasure purposes (77.6%). Visitors were also asked what form of transportation was used to travel to the park. Eighty-five percent of respondents indicated that they traveled to the camp site via Recreational Vehicle (RV) or private car as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 2. Frequency and Purpose of Visit

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Visits</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Leisure	2016	77.6	Never	1339	51.5
Business	50	1.9	1-5	553	21.3
VFR	129	5.0	6-10	196	7.5
In-transit	370	14.2	10 +	487	18.7
Missing	34	1.3	Missing	24	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>2599</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>2599</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 3. Type of Transportation

<i>Type</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Car	825	31.7
RV	1386	53.3
Tour Bus	5	0.2
Motorcycle	7	0.3
Missing	376	14.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>2599</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Presented in Table 4 is the employment status of the camping visitors. As noted, almost 40% of those surveyed categorized themselves as being retired, which when looked at in the context of age implies a lot of early retirees.

Table 4. Employment Status

<i>Status</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Employed	1140	43.9
Self-employed	257	9.9
Retired	1029	39.6
Student	21	0.8
Home maker	95	3.7
Missing	57	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>2599</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Additional sample information worthy of note includes the fact that camping is seemingly a summer and fall activity, which is clearly very weather dependent with just over 90% of responses having been received between the months of May and November. The busiest month for state wide camping operations was May with almost 32% of responses having been completed in this month. Just over 46% of respondents indicated that they chose their site out of convenience and just over 26% indicated that they did so based upon a previous stay. Additionally, just over 58% of respondents were from the state of Alabama.

#### **Item Based Analysis of Key Results**

Section three will turn to the different scales employed in the survey including a univariate analysis of the measurements used in this study. This section will specifically focus on the satisfaction and future behavioral intention (FBI) scales.



### *Description of Satisfaction Scale Items*

This segment pertains to visitor satisfaction. The degree of satisfaction experienced was measured on a 5-point Likert type scale anchored at (1) Dissatisfied through (5) Very Satisfied. This portion of the questionnaire can be broken in to two sections, individual elements and overall satisfaction. The section involving satisfaction with individual elements was comprised of twenty-eight statements involving both the tangible and intangible elements. Visitors were asked their satisfaction levels on items such as the physical condition and welcoming appeal of the park, attitude of front desk employees, bathroom cleanliness and condition, and billing accuracy. Table 5 summarizes the mean, standard deviations, and skewness for each of the individual satisfaction scale items.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Individual Item Satisfaction

<i>Scale Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>
Access/Signage to park	4.440	.832	-1.794
Physical condition and welcoming appeal of the park	4.385	.829	-1.565
Grounds of the park	4.427	.773	-1.608
Reception/Greeting upon arrival	4.592	.710	-2.086
Welcoming appeal of the reception area	4.430	.735	-1.352
Availability of reception employees	4.563	.658	-1.732
Reservation accuracy	4.469	.816	-1.444
Timeliness of check-in	4.642	.612	-2.102
Attitude of front desk employees	4.717	.607	-2.996
Appearance of front desk employees	4.685	.575	-2.405
Ability to locate campsite	4.574	.709	-2.244
Physical condition of campground	4.342	.900	-1.698
Physical condition of campsite	4.348	.904	-1.724
Availability of hookups	4.454	.816	-1.732
Quality and supply of bathrooms	4.184	1.045	-1.372
Bathroom lighting	4.253	.937	-1.304
Bathroom heating and ventilation	4.209	.946	-1.177
Bathroom cleanliness and condition	4.179	1.061	-1.399
Attitude and friendliness of employees	4.574	.697	-2.075
Availability of employees	4.490	.705	-1.516
Knowledge level of employees	4.494	.710	-1.349
Employee dress code	4.478	.695	-1.206
Park's natural resource activities	4.333	.819	-1.169
Timeliness of check-out	4.570	.636	-1.570
Billing accuracy	4.566	.644	-1.597
Farewell	4.387	.810	-1.263
Follow-up on problems experienced	4.192	.901	-.604
Feeling of safety and security	4.537	.706	-1.847

The mean for each of the scale items in Table 5 ranges from 4.179 to 4.717. This indicates a positive experience for visitor satisfaction based on these individual items, illustrating that the average response for each of these items fell between “satisfied” and “very satisfied”. Also it should be noted that the mode for each of the twenty-eight items was 5.00 and the range for each was 4.00 indicating that each category was chosen at least once and that “very satisfied” was the most frequent choice for each item.

Four items on the satisfaction scale were directly related to the *overall* satisfaction of each visitor. Visitors were asked their satisfaction levels on their overall visit to the park, the overall level of product quality, the overall level of service quality, and the value perceived for the price paid. Table 6 summarizes the mean, standard deviations, and skewness for each of the overall satisfaction scale items.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Overall Satisfaction

<i>Scale Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>
Overall visit to the park	4.590	.714	-2.279
Level of product quality	4.458	.781	-1.861
Level of service quality	4.516	.704	-1.691
Value perceived for price paid	4.581	.702	-2.105

The means for each of the scale items in Table 6 have a diminutive range, from 4.458 to 4.590, again indicating a positive experience for visitor satisfaction. This denotes that the average response for each of these items also fell between the “satisfied” and “very satisfied” categories. The mode for each of these four items was 5.00 and the range for each was 4.00, again indicating that each category was chosen at least once and that “very satisfied” was the most frequent choice for each item.

#### ***Description of Future Behavioral Intention Scale Items***

This segment pertains to the guest’s future behavioral intention (FBI). The degree of intent was measured on a 5-point Likert type scale anchored at (1) Very Unlikely through (5) Very Likely. Visitors were asked to rate their likelihood to exhibit specific certain attitudinal and behavioral conduct including their likelihood to revisit the park, recommend the park to others, make the park their “park of choice”, and consider other parks during future trips. Table 7 summarizes the mean, mode, standard deviations, and skewness for each of the individual scale items.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Future Behavioral Intentions

<i>Scale Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>
Likelihood to revisit park (if in area again)	4.516	5.00	.897	-2.415
Likelihood to recommend park to others	4.513	5.00	.939	-2.400
Likelihood that park will become “park of choice” for future visits	4.231	5.00	1.080	-1.471
Likelihood to consider other parks	2.841	3.00	1.232	.112

The mean for each of the scale items in Table 7 ranges from 2.841 to 4.516. The difference in mean range in the fourth item (likelihood to consider other parks) is likely related to the fact that this particular item is the only one not related specifically to the park that the visitors were staying at. A “very unlikely” or “unlikely” response in this scenario still indicates a positive reaction to the park itself. For example, a visitor might have given the response “very unlikely” to the item “likelihood to consider other parks” because they had a positive experience at the park and would prefer to stay there again. This coupled with the responses to the other items indicates a high likelihood to exhibit positive future behaviors. Also it should be noted that the range for each of the items was 4.00 indicating that each category was chosen at least once.

For the purpose of this study, the research will hence forth focus on the first two items in this scale (likelihood to revisit the park and likelihood to recommend the park to others) as these represent acts of behavioral actions as opposed to attitudinal.

### **Psychometric Performance of Research Instrument**

While the overriding goal of the research was to explore the relationship between camping visitor satisfaction and FBI, it was also deemed essential to test the psychometric performance of each of the scales employed in the study. Reliability evaluation of a measurement procedure consists of estimating how much of the variation

in scores of different variables is due to chance or random error and according to Rubinson and Neutons (1987), such measures are necessary in order to ensure the same results will be consistently reproduced in subsequent administrations of the instrument. Coefficient alpha is used to estimate the degree of reliability with estimates ranging from 0 to 1.0. The higher the coefficient (closer to 1.0) the stronger the linear relationship of the items being correlated and the higher the internal consistency.

Leddy (1993) indicated that validity would raise the following questions. What does the test measure? Does it, in fact, measure what it is supposed to measure? How well, how comprehensively and how accurately does the test measure? Thus, for the purpose of this study, the questions are best posed as follows. Does this measure truly identify the most critical attributes of visitor satisfaction in a camping setting? And does this measure truly assess the respondents' FBI to the park? In an attempt to answer these questions, the following section presents an overview of the data available to assess the instrument's validity.

The two overriding goals of the study were to address the issue of visitor satisfaction with camping services provided by the Alabama Department of State Parks as it relates to the visitors' FBI and to test the use of the measurement instrument within this service setting (car camping environments). The instrument performed well in terms of both reliability and validity. Overall reliabilities were  $\alpha = 0.96$  for the twenty eight item satisfaction scale,  $\alpha = 0.88$ , for the four item overall satisfaction (OVSAT) scale, and for the two item *behavioral* FBI scale,  $\alpha = 0.89$ . These reliability scores clearly exceed the usual recommendation of  $\alpha = 0.70$  for establishing internal consistency of the scale. In

addition to the overall validity of the scales, content or face validity and construct validity will also be reported in this section.

### ***Content Validity***

According to DeVellis (1991), the basic conceptual criterion a measurement scale must meet is content or face validity. Simply stated, an instrument could be considered to be high in face validity if the readability of the measurement appears to measure what it is intended to measure. During the development of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1988) SERVQUAL, the service quality scale had undergone the accepted process for scale development; however, modifications were necessary for two reasons: 1) the measurement had to be tailored to the camping sector of the tourism industry and 2) scales were added to measure FBI. In addition, the instrument underwent construct or validity by state park officials, park visitors, and hospitality students. This process was applied in reference to Allen's (1995) view that since the criterion validity is the adequacy of items in terms of content domain; review must be by appropriate experts. In summary, the park officials, visitors, and students made an expert, qualitative judgment that the instrument appeared to be valid.

This qualitative task was accomplished prior to the completion of the final measurement instrument, during the focus group and pilot study stage of the research. This stage began with the seeking out of expert opinion. This opinion was supplemented by an extensive review of current practice within the United States and international tourism sectors. Nature-based visitor satisfaction measurement models utilized throughout the United States and internationally were reviewed as part of a search of the extant literature. A panel of experts was formed to validate, condense and refine the

initial items. The panel consisted of five experts; two university faculty who specialized in services marketing and methodology; and three nature-based tourism practitioners. The panel reviewed the scales and current practice using criteria for validity and reliability (Bearden et al., 1993) which included the number of items included and their fit to the area under investigation, an acceptable Cronbach's Alpha or reliability level for the scale and best practice. The panel's brief was to evaluate each item based on criteria that examined the theoretical definition, the construct's domain and the operational definition (Bearden et al., 1993). In other words, the scale items needed to be consistent with the literature and the domain of study – namely satisfaction with camping provision.

The next stage of this process began with an initial interview with the Director of ADSP and two ADSP Directors of Operations. These officials also helped to shape what the instrument should measure. Additionally a series of “mystery shops” were completed at eight of the state parks during which sixteen visitors were approached at random and interviewed about what qualities were important to them when determining their satisfaction levels. Results of these interviews were reported back to the park officials and adjustments were made to the suggested items for the satisfaction scale. All discussions were recorded, subsequently analyzed and cross-checked against independently recorded notes for accuracy. The development of the initial instrument was derived from the feedback received during these focus groups.

The groups identified several important features that guided the development of the instrument. These features are stated below.

- First and foremost, the majority of respondents felt that their satisfaction revolves around a number of factors related to both the quality of the facility and the service received, in addition to uncontrolled factors such as the weather.
- Second, when discussing the tangible aspects, such as the campgrounds, it is important to acknowledge the feelings that become a part of these aspects, such as a camper's feelings of safety and security.
- Thirdly, emphasis was placed on the fact that an important component of the service aspect is consistency in service. Many respondents felt that it was important to acknowledge employee service training as a factor in consistent service.
- Finally, various attributes previously identified in SERVQUAL were also identified during this session. Characteristics such as reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness were all mentioned in one form or another on numerous occasions.

Upon completion of this stage the initial instrument was created. At this point further qualitative research was conducted with a group of students within a college level hospitality program, enrolled in a service quality course. Participants were presented with an initial draft of the survey instrument and were given a brief overview of the aims and objectives of the research project. Participants were also given an initial draft of the invitation prepared for distribution with the instrument. Discussion about the instrument included the readability of the instrument, organization of the scale items, and appropriateness of the scale items. This rough draft of the instrument was also presented



to the Director of ADSP, who in turn discussed possible issues with his team and returned with feedback. Once again, the discussions were recorded and the instrument was revised in accordance with the feedback received. The following items resulted from the discussion:

- First, a majority of respondents recommended placing the FBI scale on the front of the instrument. Participants felt that more respondents would be willing to complete the survey if the critical information caught the respondent's attention in the beginning. This led to a reorganization of the instrument, placing the demographic information at the top, followed by FBI, and each of the satisfaction scales on the back.
- Second, both sets of participants were concerned about the complicated item wording, particularly with respect to the use of industry jargon and the detailed description of the scale items. As a result, the item wording and scale instructions and descriptions were restated and simplified.
- Thirdly, the participants identified a need to ask respondents about their overall satisfaction with product and service quality, their perception of overall value for money and their overall park experience.
- Finally, participants were concerned about the number of variables on the instrument and found that several items were measuring similar constructs. Participants felt that this gave the impression that the same question was being stated more than once. The notion was made that this may cause respondents to become aggravated; thus, suggesting that the length of the survey may contribute

to a high abandon rate. As a result, several scale items were reworded and clarified, three demographic questions were removed as deemed irrelevant to the study and repetitive FBI variables were eliminated.

Additional questions were asked regarding respondents' future behavioral intentions (FBI); whether they intended to revisit the park surveyed if in the area again and whether they would be happy to recommend it, based upon this experience, to family and friends.

In summary, several improvements were made to the instrument based on the qualitative analysis gathered during the focus groups and panel reviews. At the conclusion of the final focus groups, the agreement was reached that the items included on the instrument were relevant and useful to the domain of visitor satisfaction and FBI in the camping segment of the tourism industry. Each event was concluded within two hours and the participants were thanked for their time and valuable feedback.

### ***Construct Validity***

The instrument was also assessed in terms of construct validity. According to Cohen, Swerdlik and Smith (1992), construct validity refers to a judgment about the appropriateness of inference drawn from test scores regarding individual standings on a certain kind of variable called a construct, where a construct is described as an informed scientific idea constructed to describe or explain behavior. Principally, the researcher investigating a test's construct validity must formulate hypotheses about the expected behavior of high scorers and low scorers on the test. In short, if the test is a valid measure

of the construct, the high scorers and low scorers will behave as predicted by the hypotheses.

While a number of procedures may be used to provide different kinds of evidence that a test has construct validity, the two principal procedures relate to the provision of convergent and in terms of the research instrument's ability to discriminate between the underlying dimensionality of the satisfaction construct. In turn, both issues are addressed below in the context of the adapted SERVQUAL instrument utilized in the present study.

### ***Convergent Validity.***

According to Leddy (1993), convergence is a means of testing for construct validity, which looks to the focal effect of various methods of measuring a construct and is assessed, in part, when other measures used to measure like-constructs converge (Rubin, 1993). Convergence was investigated by calculating the mean score for the overall satisfaction scale and correlating (Pearson's product moment correlation) this with the mean score from the two item FBI scale. This form of examination explores the question: Do like measures perform similarly and as expected? (Rubin, 1993). The test used for this procedure was Pearson's product moment correlation. This test was used to give an index of the direction and strength of linear association between the two variables. In short, the closer the correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) is to 1 or  $-1$ , the stronger the association between the variables. A positive correlation of 0.486 was found between overall satisfaction and FBI, which was significant at the 1 percent level ( $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally a strong positive correlation of 0.798 was found between visitors total satisfaction (the visitors scores on the individual satisfaction measures) and FBI. This

was also significant at the one percent level ( $p < 0.001$ ). The results of these tests are reported in Table 8.

Table 8. Correlations

		FBI	Mean Overall Satisfaction Score	Mean Total Satisfaction Score
<b>FBI</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	1	.486**	.408**
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>		.000	.000
	<b>N</b>	2576	2486	2518
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	.486**	1	.798**
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.000		.000
	<b>N</b>	2486	2492	2492
<b>Total Satisfaction</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	.408**	.798**	1
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.000	.000	
	<b>N</b>	2518	2492	2525

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### ***Discriminant Validity.***

Discriminant validity, on the other hand, means that the researcher should be able to differentiate the construct being studied from other similar constructs (Leedy, 1993).

According to Cohen et al., (1992), a validity coefficient showing a statistically insignificant relationship between test scores and/or other variables, with which scores on the test being construct validated, should not theoretically be correlated provides discriminate evidence of construct validity. The question of discriminate validity necessitated the computation of a further correlation coefficient (Pearson product moment) between respondents.

The analysis of discriminate validity was facilitated via an exploratory factor analysis using the principal components extraction technique. The analysis made use of the VARIMAX factor rotation procedure in SPSS version 16. A component matrix was initially generated to ensure that the analyzed variables had reasonable correlations (greater than or equal to 0.4)

with other variables. Unrotated and rotated component matrices were inspected and variables that did not correlate or correlated weakly with others were excluded (De Vaus, 1996). The result of the corresponding KMO of “sampling adequacy” was 0.960 and Bartlett’s test for sphericity was 32902.461, which is considered a high Chi-Square, significant at the level of 1 percent (sig. =0.001). The results of these tests rendered the data factorable and consequently the factor analysis was generated. Table 9 illustrates strong factor loadings (item to total correlations) along four dimensions with coefficient alpha scores ranging from 0.88 (TANGIBLES) to 0.93 (PEOPLE), which combined accounted for approximately 68% of the variance explained. From the analysis, extracted component one (PEOPLE) is reflective of what might best be described as the softer and more personal people oriented aspect of the camping experience. Component two (SERVICE) relates to the more process oriented elements of service delivery; component three (TANGIBLE) is reflective of the more physically oriented aspects of the camping experience and component four relates solely to the issue of restroom availability and cleanliness.

The results point to a degree of cross-loading across six variables (7, 11, 20, 21, 22, and 27) which were removed from the subsequent analysis. Additionally, item 1 failed to make the minimum cut-off (0.40) and as such did not load on any of the four factors. A further factor analysis was then run with the compressed set of 21 variables, revealing an identical four factor structure accounting for almost 71% of the explained variance.

Table 9. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Variable	Direct Disconfirmation Measure			
	Comp 1 People	Comp 2 Service	Comp 3 Tangible	Comp 4 Restroom
Attitude of front desk employees	.855			
Reception and greeting	.824			
Appearance of front desk employees	.781			
Timely check-in process	.725			
Availability of reception employees	.713			
Attitude and friendliness of employees	.686			
Welcoming appeal of reception area	.613			
Availability of employees	.612	.460		
Knowledge level of employees	.602	.511		
Timely check-out		.755		
Park's natural resource activities		.682		
Billing accuracy		.678		
Farewell		.665		
Follow up on problems		.624		.404
Employee dress code	.524	.566		
Reservation accuracy	.414	.544		
Feeling of safety and security		.467		
Physical condition of campground			.846	
Physical condition of campsite			.823	
Grounds of the park			.718	
Physical condition and appeal of park			.656	
Availability of electrical hookups			.555	
Ability to locate campsite	.473		.499	
Quality and supply of bathrooms				.841
Bathroom cleanliness and condition				.807
Bathroom lighting				.790
Bathroom heating and ventilation				.767
<b>Eigenvalue</b>	14.40	2.277	1.35	1.08
<b>% of variation</b>	51.44%	8.13%	4.82%	3.88%
<b><math>\alpha</math> alpha</b>	.93	.89	.88	.91

### Testing of the Central Research Hypotheses

Attention shall now turn to section five of the analysis and the testing of the key research hypotheses as set within the original research framework. In short, the data gathered during the quantitative stage of the research process will be scrutinized in order to test for consistency with each of the research hypotheses.

### ***Hypothesis 1***

While the overriding goal of the study was to address the issue of visitor satisfaction with camping services provided by ADSP, it also proved useful to test the use of the measurement instrument within this service setting (i.e., outdoor camping environments). In order to do, the instrument had to first be tested for reliability and validity. Hypothesis 1 is proposed as follows:

- **H1: The car camping visitor satisfaction instrument will display sufficient psychometric performance in terms of reliability and validity.**

This hypothesis was investigated by using a number of methods. Content and construct validity (including convergent and discriminate validity) were tested and dimension based analyses were conducted for each of the constructs.

The instrument performed well in terms of both reliability and validity. Overall reliabilities were  $\alpha = 0.96$  for the twenty eight item satisfaction scale,  $\alpha = 0.88$  for the two item future behavioral intention (FBI) scale,  $\alpha = 0.89$  for the four item overall satisfaction (OVSAT) scale. These reliability scores clearly exceed the usual recommendation of  $\alpha = 0.70$  for establishing internal consistency of the scale and lend strong support for this hypothesis.

When testing content validity several improvements were made to the instrument based on the qualitative analysis gathered during the focus groups and panel reviews. At the conclusion of the final focus groups, the agreement was reached that the items

included on the instrument were relevant and useful to the domain of visitor satisfaction and FBI in the camping segment of the tourism industry.

Construct validity was addressed in terms of both convergence and the research instrument's ability to discriminate between the underlying dimensionality of the satisfaction construct. The test used for this procedure was Pearson's product moment correlation. This test was used to give an index of the direction and strength of linear association between the two variables. In short, the closer the correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) is to 1 or  $-1$ , the stronger the association between the variables. A positive correlation of 0.486 was found between overall satisfaction and FBI, which was significant at the 1 percent level ( $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally a strong positive correlation of 0.798 was found between visitors total satisfaction (the visitors scores on the individual satisfaction measures) and FBI. This was also significant at the one percent level ( $p < 0.001$ ). The results of these tests are reported in Table 5.

The analysis of discriminate validity was facilitated via an exploratory factor analysis using the principal components extraction technique. The result of the corresponding KMO of "sampling adequacy" was 0.960 and Bartlett's test for sphericity was 32902.461, which is considered a high Chi-Square, significant at the level of 1 percent ( $sig. = 0.001$ ). The results of these tests rendered the data factorable and consequently the factor analysis was generated. Table 6 illustrates strong factor loadings (item to total correlations) along four dimensions with coefficient alpha scores ranging from 0.88 (TANGIBLES) to 0.93 (PEOPLE), which combined accounted for approximately 68% of the variance explained.



The results pointed to a degree of cross-loading across six variables which were removed from the subsequent analysis. Additionally, item 1 failed to make the minimum cut-off (0.40) and as such did not load on any of the four factors. A further factor analysis was then run with the compressed set of 21 variables, revealed an identical four factor structure accounting for almost 71 % of the explained variance. Revised reliability statistics for each component again ranged from  $\alpha = 0.88$  for the Tangible component to  $\alpha = 0.93$  for People.

The results of these analyses supported H1 by indicating that the car camping visitor satisfaction instrument does display adequate psychometric performance in terms of both reliability and validity. However, they do not lend support to Hypothesis which proposed the emergence of a two factor structure as opposed to the four factor structure uncovered.

### ***Hypothesis 2***

Based on a detailed review of the literature as well as expert opinion paired with multiple focus groups a two factor structure was developed in order to define visitor perceptions of satisfaction in a camping setting. Hypothesis 2 may thus be posited as follows:

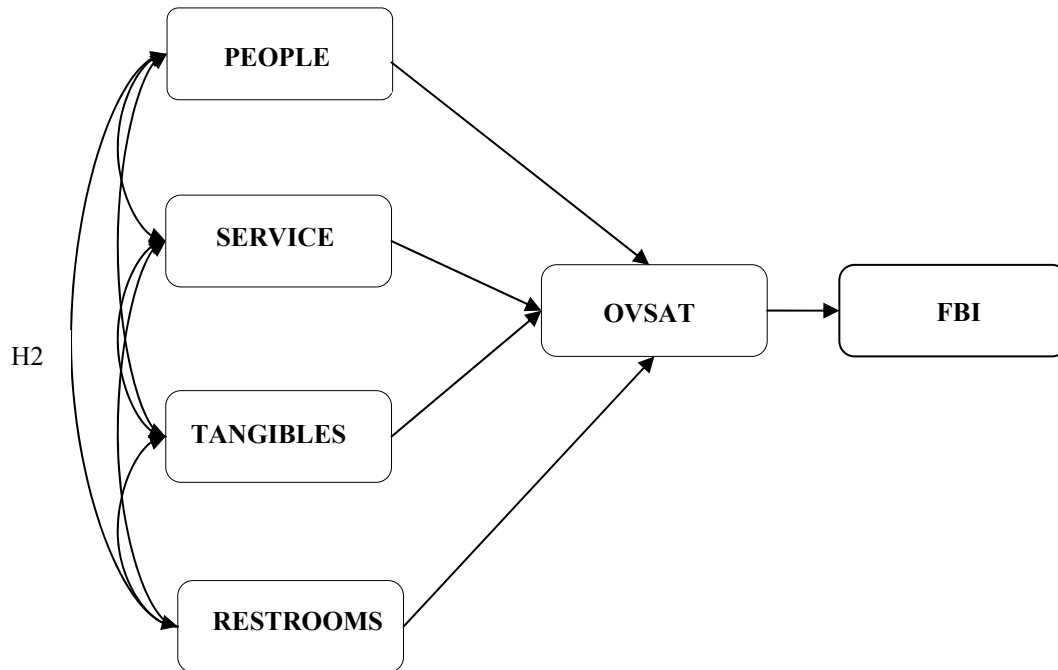
- **H2: A two factor structure comprising both the tangible and the intangible, service quality dimensions will accurately define visitor's perceptions of a typical nature based tourism experience.**

As mentioned in the discussion of H1, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted in order to condense each of the proposed scale items into separate dimensions by summarizing the underlying patterns of correlation.

The analysis of discriminate validity was facilitated via an exploratory factor analysis using the principal components extraction technique. The result of the corresponding KMO of “sampling adequacy” was 0.960 and Bartlett’s test for sphericity was 32902.461, which is considered a high Chi-Square, significant at the level of 1 percent (sig. = 0.001). The results of these tests rendered the data factorable and consequently the factor analysis was generated. Table 6 illustrates strong factor loadings (item to total correlations) along four dimensions with coefficient alpha scores ranging from 0.88 (TANGIBLES) to 0.93 (PEOPLE), which combined accounted for approximately 68% of the variance explained.

The results of the attending factor analysis pointed to the existence of a much more complex four factor structure as being representative of a quality camping experience. This four factor structure is represented in the modified theoretical model represented in Figure 3. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Figure 3. Modified Theoretical Model



### ***Hypothesis 3***

As indicated previously, managers need to know what aspects of a particular service best define its quality and drive or explain visitor satisfaction. This is also true for the ADSP. Considerable literature was reviewed that has defined services in terms of their level of tangibility/intangibility, with the observation that highly intangible services pose particular challenges for marketers (Gronroos 1984; Zeithaml 1981). These challenges include the need to reduce perceived risk prior to purchase, due to the absence of tangible visible cues prior to purchase (Lovelock, et al., 1998). The presence of tangible cues post-purchase provides further cues, which remains after other elements of the service offer are consumed. It can therefore be hypothesized that tangible elements of the camping experience may stand out in individuals' perceptions and prove much more

important in terms of defining overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions than other elements pertaining to the overall visitor experience in a nature based setting. As was noted in the discussion on servicescape, this seems particularly relevant in the exploration of nature based tourism activities where the driving motivation is the actual commune with nature. The current study focuses on the more tangible elements of the camping encounter and their role in driving and/or explaining the overall satisfaction and behavioral intention constructs, therefore Hypothesis H3 was posed as follows:

- **H3: The tangible dimension of the nature-based visitor experience will prove more important in terms of explaining overall visitor satisfaction and future behavioral intention than other factors pertaining to car camping satisfaction.**

This hypothesis was investigated by the completion of two separate multiple regression analyses. Each analysis was conducted using the afore mentioned variables that were each retracted from the factor analysis (people, service, tangibles, and restrooms) and correlated with the outcome variables (overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions).

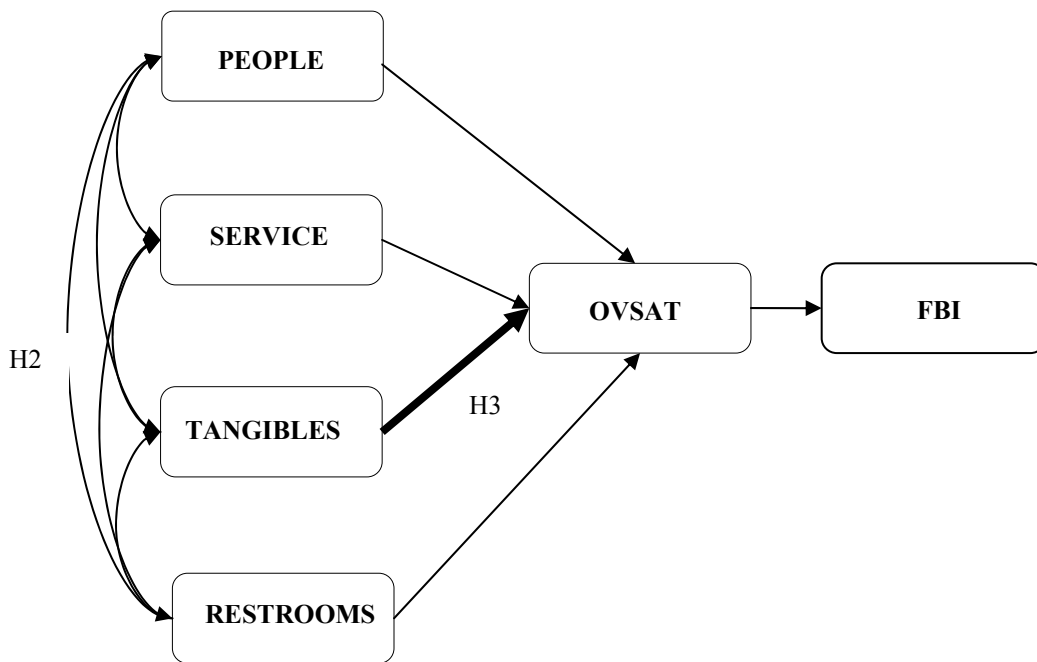
When using overall satisfaction as the dependent variable, the tangible variable did make the strongest unique significant contribution to overall visitor satisfaction, with a beta coefficient of .361 when the variance explained by all other variables was controlled for. Further details of this analysis are illustrated in Table 12.

When using FBI as the dependent variable, the tangible variable again made the strongest unique significant contribution to overall visitor satisfaction, with a beta

coefficient of .325 when the variance explained by all other variables was controlled for. Further details of this analysis are illustrated in Table 13.

As predicted, the tangible variable showed the greatest relationship to both overall camping visitor satisfaction and future behavioral intentions. Also noteworthy, in running these analyses it was noted that the restroom element played an extremely small role in both scenarios (beta coefficients of .041 and .002 respectively) and was not rendered significant in the FBI analyses. These results can also be seen in Tables 12 and 13. Based on these analyses, the model was again altered to fit the results. The modified model can be seen below in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Second Modification of Theoretical Model



#### ***Hypothesis 4***

While debate continues as to the one best way to define and evaluate visitor satisfaction, it is now pretty well accepted that quality drives visitor satisfaction, which in turn drives the consumers' future behavioral intention and/or loyalty to a particular supplier or destination. Based on the previously run factor analysis, Hypothesis 4 was thus revised and presented as follows:

- **H4: The overall quality of the visitor's nature-based camping experience, as represented by the four factor structure, is positively correlated with their overall satisfaction and subsequent future behavioral intentions represented by intent to revisit and/or recommend the nature based tourism provider to others.**

When using overall satisfaction as the dependent variable, the regression revealed quite a good fit, indicating 64.7 percent of variance explained. When using FBI as the dependent variable, the regression still revealed a good fit, although not quite as strong, indicating 20.9 percent of variance explained. Results of these analyses confirmed the view taken in Hypothesis 4.

#### **Path Analysis**

Figure 3 presents a revised pictorial path representation of three of the key research hypotheses. This model has been revised from that originally proposed within the theoretical framework section of the study due to the results uncovered in the preceding analysis of instrument factor structure. The model as originally proposed suggested that two factors (tangibles and service) would best explain camping visitor's future behavioral intentions and that this would in some way be mediated by the degree

of visitor satisfaction. The preceding factor analysis however, has proven that in this factor structure did not hold up; uncovering instead a three factor structure encompassing these two factors as well as one related to the people involved in the service process. It is with this in mind that the revised theoretical model was conceived.

Each path was first investigated via correlational analysis (Pearson's Product Moment) to attest to the strength and direction of any relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Results of this test (Tables 12 and 13) highlight positive correlations among each of the four factors and OVSAT (ranging from .041 to .361; sig. < .001) as well as positive correlations (ranging from .002 to .325; sig. < .001) between each of the four factors and FBI. The analysis also illustrates a moderate correlation between OVSAT as a moderating variable and FBI (.486, sig. < .001). These results also lend support for the proposed research model.

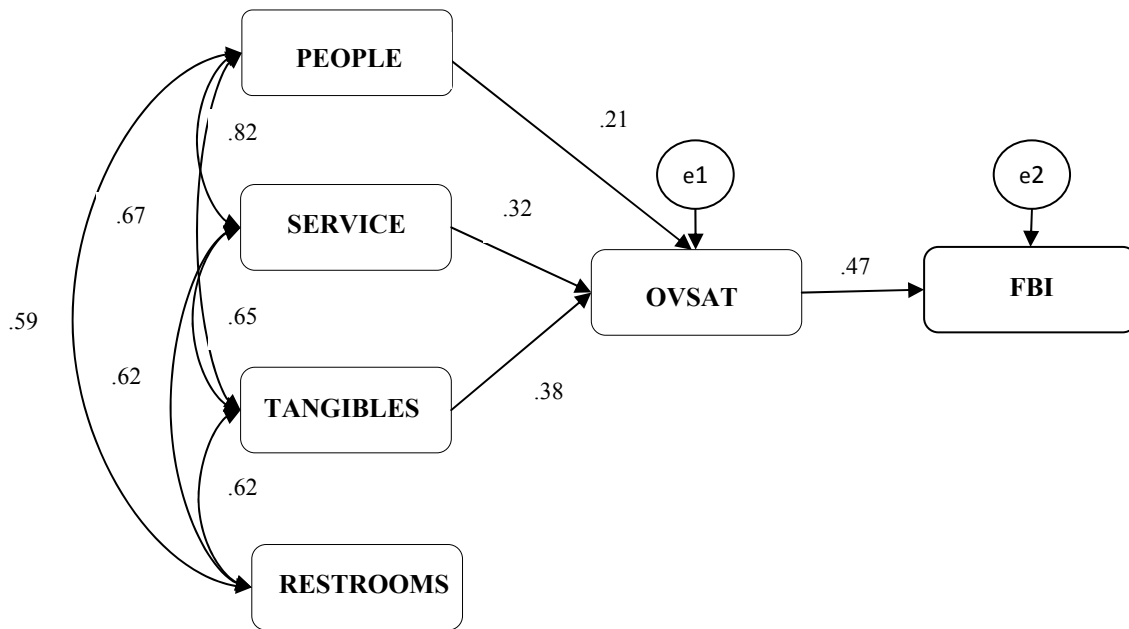
The key paths represented by the revised theoretical model were then investigated for fit. Figure 3 displays the inter-item correlations for each of the constructs. In all cases, model construct scores are representative of summated scale scores pertaining to each construct. The proposed model was assessed using AMOS version 16. The results lend support to the majority of the key relationships associated with the model. All of the hypothesized relationships were supported except that between PEOPLE, RESTROOM and FBI, which was recorded at 0.4 ( $p=.133$ ) and 0.3 ( $p=.233$ ) respectively. Similarly, the path between RESTROOM and OVSAT also displayed a very weak association at 0.3 ( $p=.122$ ). The model was evaluated by three fit measures (1) the chi square (CMIN), (2) the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and (3) the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

(RMSEA). While the chi square was found to be statistically significant (51.4;  $p=.001$ ), indicating a lack of fit, the CFI was .995 and RMSEA = .097, indicating a tentative fit for the model.

Upon further review of the text output, associated estimates and regression weights it was determined that the offending paths be removed and that the model be re-specified. The re-specified model is presented as Figure 5 with all inter-item correlations clearly shown. The model was once again evaluated by three fit measures (1) the chi square (CMIN), (2) the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and (3) the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). While the chi square was again found to be statistically significant (58.7;  $p=.001$ ), indicating a lack of fit, the CFI was an improved .994 and RMSEA a much improved .064, indicating stronger support that the data fits the model proposed.



Figure 5. Path Analysis



### Summary of Findings

This chapter has addressed the research questions created in order to gain a better understanding of the drivers of customer satisfaction and their effects on future behavioral intentions (FBI) in the context of car camping as a part of nature-based tourism (NBT). Hence, the prevailing objective of this study has been to develop and test an instrument intended to measure customer satisfaction drivers in NBT settings. It has also attempted to increase understanding of the role that satisfaction plays in FBI as it relates to this sector of the industry while defining the satisfaction construct in nature-based settings and those forces that make a real difference to the decision to revisit and/or recommend NBT environments. In doing so, it has addressed a number of central hypotheses addressing the issues of satisfaction in NBT (and its components) and FBI.

This study has shed light on the factors that are encompassed in a typical camping visitors satisfaction, including people, service, tangibles, and restrooms; it has demonstrated that the tangible factor plays the strongest role in both overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions; and it has illustrated that overall satisfaction does play a mediating role between the individual components of satisfaction and FBI. In all cases, results were found to be statistically significant in the final model. The significance of these results shall now be discussed with respect to their contribution to the literature, their implications for practitioners and the wider academic community.

**CHAPTER V**  
**SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS,**  
**AND CONCLUSIONS**

**Summary of the Research**

The superseding goals for this project have been to understand the satisfaction levels of the Alabama Department of State Parks car camping visitor satisfaction, to recognize the driving factors behind said satisfaction and to identify if indeed these drivers lead to overall satisfaction and subsequent visitor behaviors. La Page and Bevins (1981) explained the reasons behind such research best when stating that “Satisfaction monitoring offers a means of quality assurance for the visitor, an approach to performance measurement for the administration, and a rational basis for decision making about use limits and the delivery of recreation services.” (p. 6).

As highlighted earlier in the methods section, the research associated with this project involved both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research consisted of multiple focus groups, one on one interviews and a panel of experts. The results of which were used to establish a basic understanding of what was important to nature-based tourists during their camping experience. In addition, the researcher also sought to identify a link between the visitors overall satisfaction and their overall future behavioral intentions (FBI). As previously discussed in Chapter II, this is crucial for business because the higher the quality of performance and levels of satisfaction , the more likely there is to be an increase in loyalty and future visitation, which in turn leads

to greater tolerance to price increases and an enhanced reputation (Baker & Crompton, 2000). Also, research has indicated that it “costs about five times as much money, time and resources to attract new customers as it does to retain existing ones.” (Pizam & Ellis, 1999, p. 326).

The quantitative research consisted of a cross-sectional study with a sample group made up of tourists from a number of Alabama State Parks. Several variables were measured in order to assess the antecedents of visitor satisfaction, overall visitor satisfaction, and future behavioral intentions. In order to measure these phenomena survey administration was conducted over the course of one year, with intercept surveys administered to each visitor as they arrived to the campground and returned upon their departure.

This chapter will provide a brief restatement of each hypothesis and the findings related to each. Following this section a discussion on the performance of the actual measurement instrument as well as the implications for both the academic and practitioner communities will be conducted. This will be followed by a summary of the major contributions of the study, along with the recommendations for future research.

### **Overview of the Research**

The research has added to the overall understanding of customer satisfaction in nature based tourism (NBT) venues with the utilization of a new cognitive scale, developed specifically for such a venue. More specifically, the research has examined the role that the tangible and intangible aspects of service play as both drivers of satisfaction and in the formation of future behavioral intentions (FBI). The motivations for conducting research in this area have several underlying themes that have emerged

from the world of the tourism industry as a whole. Certainly one of these is the need to gain a better understanding in the formation of customer satisfaction in all segments of the hospitality industry and not least of all, in NBT. While the unique nature of services and NBT has been highlighted in Chapter II, this drive for knowledge has also been pushed by the growing economic impact that this type of tourism has had in the overall tourism industry. As this type of tourism (NBT) has grown, local and regional governments have realized the importance of maintaining these types of venues (state parks and the like) within their communities in order to increase exposure of the area and provide an important economic driver. As these parks and facilities become more competitive and as visitors become more discerning, there is a need for practitioners to have a clear understanding of what drives consumer satisfaction and future behavioral intentions.

Due to the general lack of research specifically dedicated to NBT and car camping, there has been a lack of uniform research techniques in terms of evaluating satisfaction. Researchers have struggled in their application of scales developed in other segments of the services industry to this narrow and very specialized segment of the tourism industry. With the development of a cognitive scale that is intended for use in a variety of venues this research has taken the first step in unifying the research in a concerted effort to explain the formation of customer satisfaction and future visitor behavior. While there is no doubt that the scale developed needs further testing and modification it is hoped that this project can serve as the basis for scale development specific for NBT, both in the state of Alabama, where NBT plays an increasingly important role in the economy and more broadly at the national and international levels.

## **Discussion of the Results**

The research has reviewed the relevant literature to date and has highlighted, among other things, the need for a scale developed specifically for NBT venues. The results indicated that the newly developed scale has done a good job of explaining the formation of cognitive satisfaction and has established four factors that were found to be significant in the eyes of the consumer when it comes to evaluation of their experience. In addition, the continued patronage of the visitors has been highlighted as an important factor in the continued success of the venue in terms of revenue production. Results support the idea that the most important factor may well be the tangible aspects of the experience and as such should receive special attention from the managers of the venue in order to continue their current level of success, and possibly increase it.

### ***Discussion of Hypothesis 1***

As has been highlighted previously, the conceptualization of service quality, its relationship to the satisfaction construct and methods of evaluating it have been a central theme of the tourism literature over the past three decades. While many options present themselves for the evaluation of both service quality and customer satisfaction it is widely accepted that performance only measures deliver better psychometric results in terms of both reliability and validity. For this reason the current study relied on the use of an absolute measure of performance to evaluate visitor satisfaction with car camping service provision throughout the state of Alabama. While the study relied heavily on other pre-validated models (Jaten & Driver, 1998; LaPage & Bevins, 1981) in the early stages of its development, the final measurement instrument was deemed original in its content and focus and largely untested. By way of review, the first hypothesis was:

- **H1: The car camping visitor satisfaction instrument will display sufficient psychometric performance in terms of reliability and validity.**

In order to determine the psychometric performance of the instrument, it was assessed in terms of both content and construct validity. Construct validity was assessed via the use of several focus groups, one on one interviews and an expert panel.

The instrument performed well in terms of both reliability and validity. Overall reliabilities were  $\alpha = 0.96$  for the twenty eight item satisfaction scale,  $\alpha = 0.88$ , for the four item overall satisfaction (OVSAT) scale, and for the two item *behavioral* FBI scale,  $\alpha = 0.88$ . These reliability scores clearly exceed the usual recommendation of  $\alpha = 0.70$  for establishing internal consistency of the scale. Additionally, convergence was investigated by calculating the mean score for the overall satisfaction scale and correlating (Pearson's product moment correlation) this with the mean score from the two item FBI scale. A positive correlation of 0.486 was found between overall satisfaction and FBI. Additionally, a strong positive correlation of 0.798 was found between visitor's total satisfaction and FBI. Thus indicating that Hypothesis 1 was supported.

### ***Discussion of Hypothesis 2***

As indicated by the previously reviewed literature, when it comes to the typical nature-based tourism experience, visitor satisfaction depends upon satisfying consumers on two fronts: namely through the provision of a quality natural environment and supporting service infrastructure. Nature-based operators must therefore attend to standards in both respects. Therefore, it is suggested that the actual factor structure pertaining to the typical nature based tourism experience would substantively comprise two factors encompassing the more tangible/physical natural environment (TANGIBLE)

and intangible service aspects (SERVICE) of the visitor experience. Hypothesis two was therefore presented as follows:

- **H2: A two factor structure comprising both the tangible and the intangible, service quality dimensions will accurately define visitor's perceptions of a typical nature based tourism experience.**

To test this hypothesis, a factor analysis was used to test the actual structure of the new instrument. Looking at the regression analysis, the results indicated that the pre-determined two factor structure was not supported as a four factor structure emerged. The original two factors were developed through a series focus groups and a review of the pertinent literature. These factors were service and tangibles. The new factor structure however, indicated that the additional two factors (people and restroom) should be added.

This analysis of discriminate validity was facilitated via an exploratory factor analysis using the principal components extraction technique. The results of these tests rendered the data factorable and consequently the factor analysis was generated. Results illustrated strong factor loadings along four dimensions with coefficient alpha scores ranging from 0.88 (TANGIBLES) to 0.93 (PEOPLE), which combined accounted for approximately 68% of the variance explained. The results point to a degree of cross-loading across six variables which were removed from the subsequent analysis.

Additionally, item 1 failed to make the minimum cut-off (0.40) and as such did not load on any of the four factors. A further factor analysis was then run with the compressed set of 21 variables, revealing an identical four factor structure accounting for almost 71% of the explained variance. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.



### *Discussion of Hypothesis 3*

As previously discussed, managers need to know what aspects of a particular service best define its quality and drive or explain visitor satisfaction. Thereafter they will be better positioned to deliver a more satisfying customer experience and continuously focus resources on areas in need of quality investment and/or divestment. The current study has focused on the more tangible elements of the camping encounter and their role in driving and/or explaining the overall satisfaction and behavioral intention constructs. There is considerable literature that has defined services in terms of their level of tangibility/intangibility, with the observation that highly intangible services pose particular challenges for marketers (Gronroos, 1984; Zeithaml, 1981). These challenges include the need to reduce perceived risk prior to purchase, due to the absence of tangible visible cues prior to purchase (Lovelock, et al., 1998). The presence of tangible cues post-purchase provides further cues, which remains after other elements of the service offer are consumed. It was therefore hypothesized that tangible elements of the car camping experience may stand out in individuals' perceptions and prove much more important in terms of defining overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions than other elements pertaining to the overall visitor experience in a nature based setting. As was noted in the discussion on servicescape, this seems particularly relevant in the exploration of nature based tourism activities where the driving motivation is the actual commune with nature. Hypothesis 3 was therefore presented as follows;

- **H3: The tangible dimension of the nature-based visitor experience will prove more important in terms of explaining overall visitor satisfaction and future**

**behavioral intention than other factors pertaining to car camping satisfaction.**

This hypothesis was investigated by the completion of two separate multiple regression analyses. Each analysis was conducted using the variables that were each retracted from the factor analysis (people, service, tangibles, and restrooms) and correlated with the outcome variables (overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions).

When using overall satisfaction as the dependent variable, the tangible variable did make the strongest unique significant contribution to overall visitor satisfaction, with a beta coefficient of .361 when the variance explained by all other variables was controlled for. When using FBI as the dependent variable, the tangible variable again made the strongest unique significant contribution to overall visitor satisfaction, with a beta coefficient of .325 when the variance explained by all other variables was controlled for. As predicted, the tangible variable showed the greatest relationship to both overall car camping visitor satisfaction and future behavioral intentions, therefore Hypothesis 3 was supported.

***Discussion of Hypothesis 4***

Hypothesis 4 was also related to visitor satisfaction and FBI. In 1994, Heskett et al. suggested that the weakest link in the Service Profit Chain was the link between satisfaction and loyalty. Reichheld and Teal (1996) supported their finding and suggested that the services that satisfy customers may not always be the same services that engender loyalty to service organizations. However, Oliver (1997) indicated that although satisfaction does not lead to loyalty, a customer cannot be loyal without being satisfied

with the overall services and products received. He continued by clarifying that as the customer's loyalty to a service organization strengthened, the steps necessary to form loyalty (i.e. satisfaction) became less significant. The literature also indicates that it is now widely accepted that quality drives visitor satisfaction, which in turn drives the consumers' future behavioral intention and/or loyalty to a particular supplier or destination, therefore, Hypothesis 4 was presented as follows:

- **H4: The overall quality of the visitor's nature-based camping experience, as represented by the previously proposed four factor structure, is positively correlated with their overall satisfaction and subsequent future behavioral intentions represented by intent to revisit and/or recommend the nature based tourism provider to others.**

When using overall satisfaction as the dependent variable, the regression revealed quite a good fit, indicating 64.7 percent of variance explained. When using FBI as the dependent variable, the regression still revealed a good fit, although not quite as strong, indicating 20.9 percent of variance explained. Results of these analyses confirm that Hypothesis 4 was supported.

### **Performance of Measurement Instrument**

As described in detail in the analysis section, the construct validity and reliability of the instrument used in this study was found to be well within the acceptable ranges as prescribed by modern statistical methods. The scale that was developed during the course of this project is a specialized measure of visitor satisfaction in NBT venues and subsequent FBI. The need for this scale was based on the growing economic impact of nature based tourism and the unique character of NBT. While the results indicated that

this new scale did perform well in explaining overall satisfaction and FBI, it is important to remember that this project represents the first testing of this scale, and as such, further research is needed in order to re-confirm similar results and the four factor structure.

The inclusion of the tangible variables did make a significant contribution in terms of explaining visitors' future behavioral intentions. It would seem that the tangible aspects (including the venues servicescape), do have a key role to play in the formation of future behavioral intentions and as such needs to be addressed by the managers and operators of state parks and other nature based tourism venues.

### **Major Contributions of the Study**

In summary, the work adds to the existing body of knowledge in a number of key respects:

The newly developed scale represents a specialized scale in the arena of nature based tourism (NBT). The results of this project indicate that this scale has the promise of aiding in the explanation of visitor satisfaction in these unique contexts in a very user friendly fashion. This has implications for researchers interested in assessing the performance of other tourism venues in satisfying visitors, while providing managers and practitioners the information they need to execute changes for the better. In addition, with a better understanding of visitor satisfaction and what drives its formation in NBT, overall satisfaction levels can be increased. This not only leads to a more pleasant overall experience for the visitor, but the opportunity for increased revenue for the facilities themselves. It is also hoped that the current research will aid in the execution of more research in this currently underdeveloped area.

A second contribution has been the identification of the importance of tangible variables and their ability to explain overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions (FBI). While the benefits of FBI have already been highlighted, by confirming one of its main drivers, this research has laid the groundwork for future research. In addition, this project has given the operators of parks and other NBT venues an important tool when it comes to the evaluation of satisfaction and future visitor returns. In addition, by measuring the tangible aspects of visitor satisfaction levels, efforts to increase these levels in visitors can be more focused on specific items in the scale.

### **Academic Implications**

The scale developed for this project may hold the most promise in terms of new scaling in NBT literature. As has been previously stated, NBT represents a unique service setting, and one that has received a limited amount of attention from researchers. One of the many drawbacks of this situation has been the lack of scaling designed specifically for such venues. Additionally, previous research in this area has addressed either satisfaction or FBI, but thus far, none have addressed the two components together. In order to address this issue, the current scale was developed. Results from this project indicated that the scale performed well, and represents an improvement of previously used scales in similar settings. This new scale has provided the ground work needed to expand the research in NBT by providing a flexible scale that with minimal changes that can be applied to most NBT settings. It has identified four factors that were first developed in focus group work and then confirmed through both exploratory and confirmatory statistical techniques. Another implication for academics was the results of the tangible aspects of the service and its connection to future behavioral intentions.

Based on the results of this study the higher the level of satisfaction with the tangible aspects of the experience (i.e. physical condition and appeal of the campgrounds) the more likely they are to not only continue visiting the campsites, but also to recommended visiting to other people. For academics wishing to understand NBT the research has indicated that this scale is not only statistically reliable, but an excellent indicator of future behavioral intentions.

### **Practitioner Implications**

Inherent to the research at hand are the implications specific to the Alabama Department of State Parks (ASDP). These conclusions and recommendations are based on a careful analysis of the data and represent two distinct constructs, satisfaction and future behavioral intentions. While the overall scores for individual scales of satisfaction were high, and indicated that the visitors of the park were highly satisfied in each of the scale items, it would still be recommended for practitioners to pay special attention to the tangible aspects of the parks, including the basic overall physical appeal, as these factors were found to be the most influential in visitors' overall satisfaction levels and subsequent intent to return and recommend. Additionally, due to the unknown non-response rate, the researcher cannot be sure that these high scores would have been the same had every visitor returned their respective questionnaires.

### **Recommendations**

This research opens the door to numerous areas of opportunity for future projects. First, this study can be replicated across other state parks and nature based tourism venues, as well as other segments of the tourism industry.

Certainly one of the main objectives of any future research in NBT will be the application and testing of the newly developed scale. By testing this scale multiple times and across multiple settings, its ability to measure visitor satisfaction in NBT can be furthered assessed. In addition, potential changes based on future focus group work and qualitative research may allow for an even more refined scale with increased performance. The results of this study seem to indicate that the scale has performed reasonably well and thus make it suitable for further testing. Additionally, it is recommended that further research be completed whilst the researchers are available to disburse the surveys on their own (as opposed to having them disbursed by the checkout agents). This would be helpful in determining if there is any type of non-response rate. As previously mentioned, for this particular study, visitors returned the questionnaires upon their checkout of the campgrounds. It would be more beneficial for the researcher to physically be there to understand why those who did not return questionnaires chose not to do so.

Finally, research suggests that well-traveled or seasoned visitors have a different expectation compared to visitors who are not as well traveled. Therefore, it would be of interest to the researcher to explore the differences in antecedents to satisfaction between seasoned NBT travelers and undeveloped travelers.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, three of the four research hypotheses presented in this research were supported by the resulting analysis. Inherent to these hypotheses is the idea that 1) the concept of visitor satisfaction is more complicated than anticipated in the initial focus groups, 2) the visitors overall satisfaction level is influenced by the tangible aspects of

the experience more-so than any other of the four factors and 3) in the selected state parks, it appears that the visitors degree of satisfaction is a mediating variable to their future behavioral intentions. These findings support Johnson and Gustafsson (2000) findings that quality, customer satisfaction and FBI form a chain of cause and effect that build on one another and cannot be treated or managed successfully as individual segments of the business.

In closing, this chapter has provided a detailed analysis of the results, from the both the academic and practitioner perspective. This chapter has also highlighted the major contributions of the study along with some potential weaknesses. In addition, ideas for future research have been generated with the hope of stimulating more research in the area of nature based tourism. Nature based tourism has become an important part of people's lives around the globe. This growing segment of the tourism industry contains a unique combination of goods and services. As the economic impact of this type of tourism continues to grow, both researchers and managers will need better insight into what drives the satisfaction of these visitors. It is thought that this research is a step in that direction, by not only adding to the current body of knowledge, but also through the development of the scale.



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