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Nature-Oriented Travel to Developing Countries

By

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NATURE-ORIENTED TRAVEL TO DEVELOPING COUNTRIES
BY U.S.-BASED TOUR OPERATORS

by

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ABSTRACT

A variety of nature-oriented activities in developing countries are offered by U.S.-based tour operators. However, only a few countries are visited frequently. Average firm size is less than 200 clients per year. The majority of nature-oriented tourists are between 31 and 50 years old representing various interests. Nature-oriented tour operators often utilize rural accommodations for their clients. Marketing is one of the major limitations to business growth.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of U.S. tour operators and international tourists show that special interest travel is booming and the most popular special interest tours are nature-oriented outdoor activities. One study found the following nature-oriented activity preferences among special interest tours offered by U.S. operators (numbers in parentheses indicate order of popularity): white water rafting (1), wilderness expeditions (3), hiking (4), fishing (5), trekking (9), bird watching (14), and wildlife safaris (15) (Alpine 1986). A survey of tourists leaving South Africa showed the most favorable attractions in the country to involve scenery and landscape, wildlife, and natural vegetation (Ferrario 1979). Many developing countries are beginning to capitalize on these growing trends (Dameyer 1986).

Currently, little is known about tour operators specializing in nature-oriented travel to developing countries. Information on specific activities and preferred destinations is limited. It is unclear why tour operators operate in particular locations, how they establish linkages for marketing and support, what kind of clients they seek and how they promote their businesses. Of special importance to developing countries are the criteria that attract operators to select particular destinations, and the impacts (both positive and negative) that tours have on destination communities.

Tour operators are faced with special challenges in marketing nature-oriented tourism in developing countries. The natural resource base is often controlled by government agencies which may restrict the style and amount of infrastructure development, the number of tours that can enter controlled areas, where tours can operate, the prices that can be charged, and how operators are

to advertise their services. Understanding the challenges faced by tour operators is essential to host country governments who stand to gain from increased development of their tourism sector.

This survey provides data on three important issues of international nature-oriented tourism in developing countries. It describes the nature-oriented activities and countries promoted by U.S.-based tour operators, profiles the nature-oriented tour operators and their clientele, and discusses the constraints and growth potential of this market segment.

DATA

The sample of tour operators for this study was selected from the 1987 Spring/Summer issue of the Specialty Travel Index (STI) (Specialty Travel Index 1987). Tour operators advertising nature-oriented travel in developing countries were included. Subjective judgment by the author was based on descriptive listings in the index.

Ninety-eight companies promoting nature-oriented travel in developing countries were identified. Twenty operators were dropped from the sample because they were not U.S.-based or they were repetitive advertisements by the same operator. Approximately 41% (32 out of 78) of the remaining operators participated in the survey.

NATURE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES AND DESTINATIONS

The definition of nature-oriented tourism can be very broad. For the purposes of this study, nature-oriented tourism involves leisure travel to participate in outdoor activities utilizing the natural resources of an area. The

following activities are included: wildlife safaris and wildlife viewing, river rafting, canoeing, kayaking, trekking and hiking, bird watching, nature photography, botanical study, mountain climbing, camping, and fishing. Tour operators in the study were asked to comment on other activities they considered nature-oriented. These additional activities are discussed in the results. However, most agreed upon the list of activities above as the typical nature-oriented activities offered.

U.S.-based tour operators offer a variety of nature-oriented activities in developing countries. Each of the activities listed above is provided by at least one-third of the tour operators in the study (Table 1). Trekking and hiking are promoted most often (72% of the operators). Bird watching and nature photography are promoted by more than 66% of the tour operators surveyed. Botanical study is the least popular at 31%.

The respondents also were asked to name the three countries most often visited by their tour groups for each activity. Although 30 different countries were named, only eight are visited frequently by U.S. operators. Kenya and Tanzania are named most frequently for six out of the nine major activities (Table 1). These two countries were often promoted together for tours and their popularity is greatest for wildlife safaris and mountain climbing. Kenya and Tanzania are also visited for trekking and hiking, bird watching, nature photography, and camping.

Other countries frequently visited for specific activities are Puerto Rico (rafting, canoeing, kayaking, botanical study, and camping), Costa Rica (bird watching, and fishing), Mexico (bird watching and botanical study), and China (trekking and hiking).

Table 1. Most popular nature-oriented activities^a and destinations for U.S.-based tour operators visiting developing countries.

<u>ACTIVITY</u>	<u>PERCENT^b</u>	<u>DESTINATIONS^c</u>
Trekking/Hiking	72%	Nepal (15) Kenya (9) Tanzania (9) China (9)
Bird Watching	66	Kenya (11) Mexico (11) Costa Rica (11) Tanzania (11)
Nature Photography	66	Kenya (15) Tanzania (12)
Wildlife Safaris	63	Kenya (18) Tanzania (18) Nepal (18)
Camping	60	Kenya (12) Tanzania (12)
Mountain Climbing	41	Nepal (21) Kenya (17) Tanzania (17)
Fishing	38	Costa Rica (21)
River Rafting/Canoeing/Kayaking	34	Nepal (26) Puerto Rico (21)
Botanical Study	31	Mexico (18) Puerto Rico (18)

^a Other nature-oriented activities promoted are horseback riding, cultural and archeological study, deep sea activities, spelunking, boat trips to uninhabited islands, orchid study, butterfly watching, and 4-wheel drive excursions.

^b Percent of operators engaging in each activity.

^c Countries are not ranked. The numbers in parentheses are percentages representing the proportion of tour operators listing each country among the top three destinations for a particular activity.

U.S.-BASED NATURE-ORIENTED TOUR OPERATORS

Seventy-two percent of the tour operators in this study are U.S.-owned operations, 16 percent are foreign-owned and only 3 percent are partnerships between U.S. and foreign companies. Firm size ranges from 20 to 3000 clients (based on number of clients served during the calendar year 1986). Three firms served over 1000 clients. The average number of years the companies have been in operation is seven.

The largest proportion of companies in this study make use of magazines (94%) and brochures (91%) as their primary source for advertising in the U.S. Other types of advertising utilized are direct mailing of tour information to consumers (69%), appearance at tourism trade shows or travel markets (66%), and newspaper ads (56%). Travel agents refer an average of 25% of the clients for these tour operators.

U.S. NATURE-ORIENTED TOURISTS

Nature-oriented clients are described in the survey by segmentation type, gender, age, overseas travel experience, peak travel times, and major concerns while touring developing countries. The most common profile of tourists served by these U.S.-based tour operators are outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen (Table 2). Almost 78% of the operators indicate this type of tourist as COMMON among their clients. Businessmen and women are identified almost 70% of the time among the tour operators, followed by educational groups or students, and retired couples.

Almost half of the nature-oriented clients for the tour operators in the survey are female. Two operators stated that female clients comprise two-thirds of their business.

Table 2. Profile of U.S. nature-oriented clients for tours to developing countries.

<u>CHARACTERISTIC</u>	<u>MEASURE*</u>	<u>VARIABLE</u>
Segmentation types	78%	Outdoorsmen/ Outdoorswomen
	69	Businessmen/ Businesswomen
	63	Educational groups
	63	Retired persons
	44	Researchers/ Scientists
	41	Families
Gender	51%	Male
	49	Female
Age	23%	30 years old
	52	31 to 50 years old
	25	50 years old
Tour group size	4-25	Average number of persons per group
Individual vs. group travel	68%	Percent of nature-oriented tourists who approach the tour operator as individuals rather than groups.
Previous overseas experience	69%	Percent of tour operators indicating that at least half of their clients have previous overseas experience before travelling with their company
Repeat customers	33%	Percent of repeat customers

* All percentages are weighted by firm size (number of clients in 1986).

Most clients are from 31 to 50 years of age. An average of fifty-two percent of the clients fall within this group, followed by persons over fifty years old (25%) and those less than 30 years old (23%).

Tour groups tend to be small for nature-oriented activities, between 4 and 25 persons. Of those travelers who approach the tour companies, more than two-thirds are individuals and have had previous overseas experience. Thirty-three percent are repeat customers.

Americans travel throughout the year for nature-oriented activities. The most frequent months for travel are July, August, and September (Figure 1). August is traveled most frequently by nature-oriented tourists from the U.S. to developing countries with 55% of the tours occurring during this month.

The concerns of the tourists are important to the tour operator and, indirectly, the host country government. Most U.S. tour operators (55%) find that nature-oriented clients are most concerned with the qualifications of the tour operators (Table 3). One-half of the operators found that their clients are most concerned with health and sanitation.

GROWTH CONSTRAINTS

Image is the most frequent limitation to growth (58%) expressed by the operators in this study (Table 4). A combination of bad press, lack of knowledge about the developing country by Americans, and political instability result in negative images which deter tourists from choosing these countries as vacation destinations.

One out of every four operators stated that the lack of adequate marketing analysis and research contribute to the lack of growth of their companies. Lack

Figure 1. Most frequent months of travel as stated by U.S. tour operators.

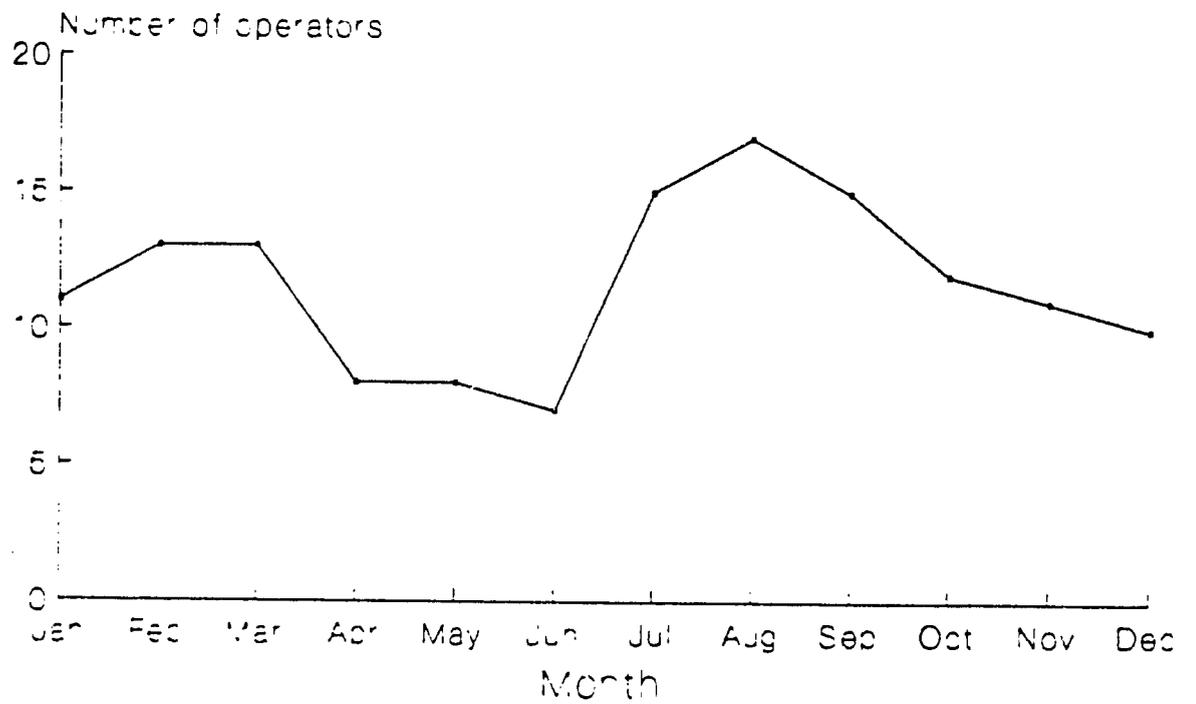


Table 3. Proportion of U.S.-based tour operators whose clients are VERY CONCERNED about the following elements during travel to developing countries.

<u>ELEMENT</u>	<u>PERCENT CONCERNED</u>
Qualifications of the tour operator	55%
Health and sanitation	50
Quality of lodging, meals, and transportation	28
Political stability	28
Host country attitudes	25
Reliability of schedules	22
Cost	22

Table 4. Elements limiting the growth of nature-oriented tourism to developing countries.

<u>ELEMENT</u>	<u>FREQUENCY*</u>
Image	58%
Marketing	26
Lack of capital	19
U.S. political relations with host country government	19
Economic changes	19
Competition	13
Self-imposed	13
Lack of interest in nature-oriented activities	6

* Percent of operators indicating a particular element as limiting.

of capital, U.S. political relations, and changing economic conditions are also frequent limitations.

One interesting factor involves the self-imposed limitation of keeping the firm size small. Many operators feel that nature-oriented tours are best accomplished in small groups, allowing more time and resources to provide personal, quality vacations.

Half of the tour operators in this study expressed problems with international air travel when conducting nature-oriented tours to developing countries (Table 5). Local tour operators and local duties present the fewest problems.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF NATURE TOURISM IN DESTINATION COUNTRIES

Nature-oriented tours can be advantageous to developing host countries due to the frequent location of their activities in rural areas. Forty percent of the operators use rural or village level accommodations during their tours (Figure 2). Of the 7 operators using luxury and international class hotels, 5 use them in combination with camping, village areas, and other hotels.

The nature-oriented tour operators in this study were asked to identify the three most common positions held by host country nationals in their operations (Table 6). Guides and interpreters were listed most often (64%). Other positions identified were drivers, porters, business managers, and local tour operators.

TRENDS IN NATURE TOURISM DEMAND

An average of eighty-one percent of the nature-oriented tours conducted in 1986 were to developing countries. Almost 80% of the operators feel the demand

Table 5. Proportion of operators having PROBLEMS with certain elements when organizing tours to developing countries.

<u>ELEMENT</u>	<u>FREQUENCY</u>
International air travel	50%
Local transportation systems	47
Political stability	44
Health and safety	38
Food services	34
Currency fluctuations	34
Lodging	25
Local service suppliers	25
Customs or visa regulations	22
Local tour operators	19
Local taxes or duties	19

Figure 2. Percent of operators using various accommodations

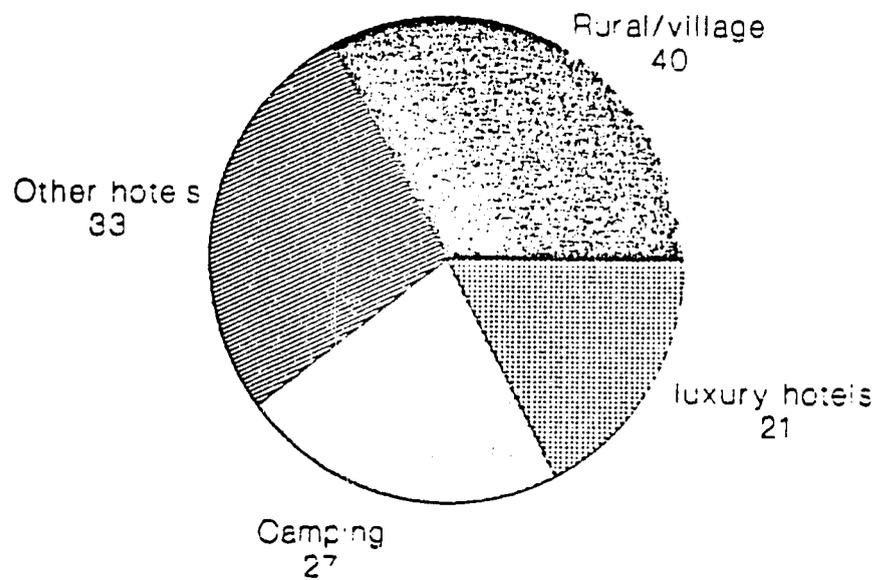


Table 6. Most frequent positions held by host country nationals with U.S.-based nature-oriented tour operators.

<u>POSITION</u>	<u>FREQUENCY*</u>
Guides/Interpreters	20
Drivers	8
Porters	8
Managers/Tour Operators	8
Cooks	6

* Number of operators listing each position as common in their company.

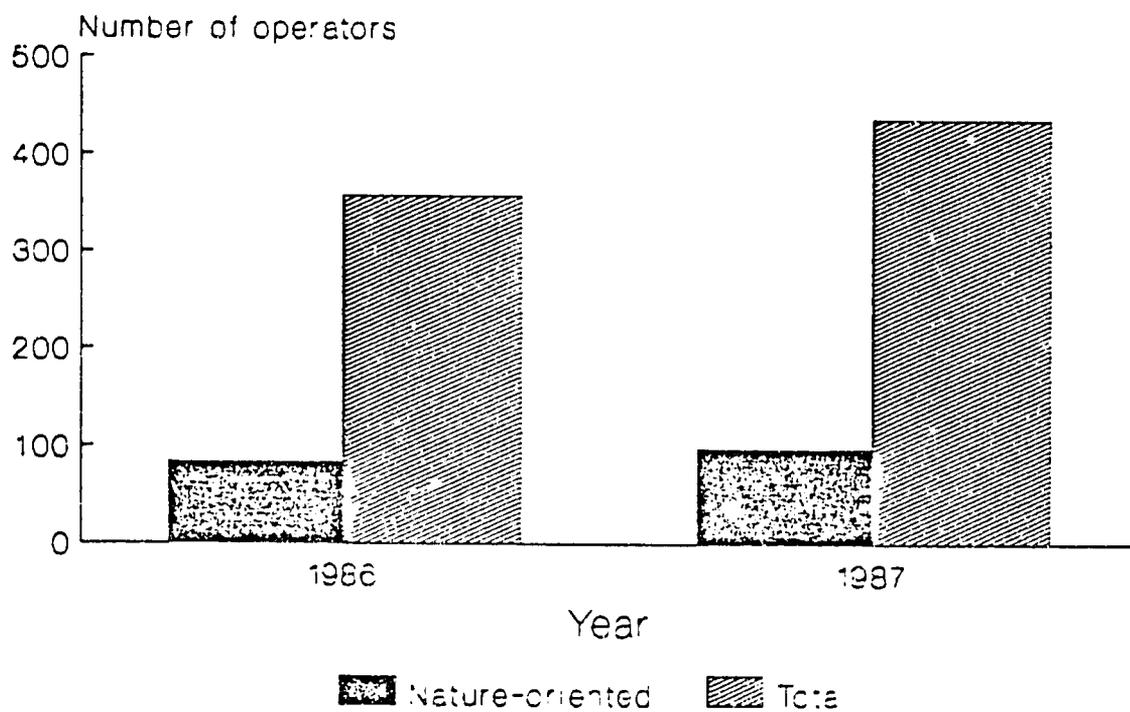
for nature-oriented travel will increase in the next five years (Table 7). The most frequent reason given for the projected increase is the desire by Americans for adventure and challenges during their vacations.

The rate of entry and exit of nature-oriented tour operators in the specialty tour business can be used as one indicator of market growth. Based on advertisements in the 1986 Fall/Winter and 1987 Spring/Summer issues of STI, nature-oriented tour operators consistently comprise approximately 23% of all specialty tour operators. Specialty tour operators increased from 357 companies in 1986 to 435 in 1987 (Figure 3). This represents a 22% increase in advertisements. Of the 98 nature-oriented operators in the 1987 issue of STI, 27% are new entries.

Table 7. Opinions of U.S.-based nature-oriented tour operators on the future demand for nature-oriented travel in developing countries.

<u>OPINION</u>	<u>FREQUENCY OF RESPONSE</u>
Demand for nature-oriented travel will INCREASE	78%
Demand for nature-oriented travel will DECREASE	0
Demand for nature-oriented travel will STAY ABOUT THE SAME	13
NO RESPONSE	9

Figure 3. Number of nature-oriented tour operators advertising in the Specialty Travel Index.



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