

HOLIDAYING WITH THE FAMILY PET: NO DOGS ALLOWED!

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Introduction

The issue of whether constraints/barriers exist within a tourism and leisure context that prevent people from meeting their desires has been extensively studied from a variety of perspectives. One of the limitations of the work to date on leisure/tourism constraints is that it has yet to be applied outside of the context of groups that have been widely regarded as subordinate and potentially discriminated against in society and to examine non-human access to leisure and tourism experiences. Within this context access to leisure and tourism experiences for dogs and their owners appears to a neglected area of research. This is despite the recognition that dogs are playing an ever more significant role in the lives of humans as close companions that break the traditional view of human-animal relations (Frohlich 2002; Salmon & Salmon 1983). It has been recognised that humans may gain a variety of psychological and health benefits from this human-dog relationship and the time both sides spend together (McHarg et al. 1995; Bauman et al. 2001; Rogers & Hart, 1993; Petnet.com 2000c). Furthermore, it has been noted that dogs also gain health and psychological benefits from spending time with their owners and through this process are less likely to develop anti-social behaviours (Beck & Katcher, 2003). Therefore, holidaying with dogs may have a variety of benefits for owners and their pets.

The scale of the dog owning population makes an analysis of both sides of the relationships' (i.e., dogs and their owners) holiday and leisure desires an important, though to date neglected, topic. Indeed, within Australia it was estimated in 2002 that there were 3,972,000 pet dogs spread across 37% of the households in the country (Bauman et al. 2001). As a result of their numbers dogs represent a significant component of the multi-billion dollar pet care industry that now exists around the globe. In addition, it is increasingly recognised that spending on pets in general and dogs in particular is no longer restricted to catering for the animals' basic needs but encompasses significant spending on a range of items previously defined as non-essential.

As a result of the scale of the pet dog population and the benefits to be gained from owners and dogs spending their leisure time together for both humans and their pets, the aim of this paper is to assess the extent to which dog owners wish to holiday with their pets and if there is a gap between this desire and reality. Based on an examination of the demand for dog-friendly holidays amongst owners and their willingness to pay for this type of experience, the second aim of this paper is to assess the potential scale of a dog-friendly tourism industry and the extent to which it is currently being catered for. The paper is based on a study of the holiday and leisure experiences of a sample of dog owners located in Brisbane, Australia.

Methods

The data required to meet the aims of this study was collected using a questionnaire survey that was distributed to a convenience sample of 311 dog owners living in Brisbane between March and June of 2004. The dog owners were approached by two research assistants, one male and one female, at 11 off-leash dog parks and 1 dog friendly beach located around the city. In order to avoid biasing the sample where more

than one owner of a particular dog or group of dogs was present in a park only one owner was asked to complete the survey. The decision to locate the data collection process where dog owners are able to freely exercise their pets was based on the suggestion that these areas act as social venues for dog owners. Consequently, the owners were likely to be relaxed whilst in these areas and therefore more likely to be willing to partake in the study. In addition to the usual questions about the representativeness of convenience samples it is recognised that the users of dog off leash parks and beaches may not be representative of dog owners as a whole. However, there is evidence to suggest these users do represent a significant portion of the dog owning population. All of the respondents were over 18 years of age and had, on average, owned a dog for 15 years. The majority of the sample (69.4%) owned one dog, whilst the rest owned two (28.9 %), three (1.0 %), or four dogs (0.7 %).

Results

95.8% of the respondents stated they would prefer to take their dog on holiday with them. One of the most popular reasons for taking a dog on holiday expressed by the owners was that it was a 'member of the family', which often included the dog being likened to a child. In addition, it was noted that the dog offered enjoyable companionship, and was frequently referred to as the owners' best friend. The owners also identified several benefits to be gained by their dogs by taking them on holiday, including making it happy and avoiding it suffering from depression or anxiety as a result of being separated from its owners. Despite the fact that only 13 respondents stated they preferred not to take their dog on holiday with them the majority of the holidays taken by the respondents between 1999 and 2004 entailed leaving their dog behind. Even in the case of holidays within Queensland, where the study was located, only 25.7% of the respondents stated they always took their dog with them. Outside of the state this number fell to just under 10% in the case of Victoria and New South Wales, and approximately 1% in the case of Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Consequently, the results indicate the existence of a significant gap between the desires and behaviour of dog owners, in terms of the nature of the holidays they take.

A potential explanation for the apparent gap in the desire to take dogs on holiday and actually doing so was explained by the owner of a Labrador and King Charles

Spaniel who stated "[we] don't take the dogs with us if going away for the weekend as facilities for them are limited/difficult to leave them if going out for a meal etc." This statement suggests there is a lack of provision for dog owners to actualise their preferred holiday behaviour (i.e., to take their pet with them). Indeed, the respondents stated that finding holiday accommodation, irrespective of its type or location, that was willing to take pets was generally 'extremely hard' and often 'impossible'. In addition to preventing people taking pets on holiday with them, a lack of accommodation willing to take their dogs may be preventing dog owners from going on holiday at all. For example, the owner of two German shepherd crosses stated "our dogs are very old (both greater than 13 years). We no longer go away for holidays as we can't leave them in care." The problem of finding accommodation that is willing to accept dogs is potentially intensified by the perceived lack of high quality information from traditional formal sources such as travel agents, tourist information centres, television/radio, and newspapers/magazines

according to the respondents. Instead, the dog owners were primarily reliant on information about dog friendly holiday accommodation from friends and the Internet.

The problem of finding dog friendly holiday accommodation is exacerbated when it is recognised that less than 900 such units are advertised on the Internet across the whole of Australia and even the largest book that has been published on holidaying with dogs in Australia can only boast a list of under 2000 accommodation units. The number of dog friendly holiday accommodation units in comparison to the size of the Australian dog owning population is further restricted when it is recognised that a high percentage of the units noted in both the books and Internet sites are campsites. The majority of the rest of the accommodation units tend to be rural and, to a lesser extent, beachside self-catering units. The limited variety of dog friendly accommodation units places a significant restriction on the nature and location of holidays available to people wishing to holiday with their dogs.

Faced with the difficulty of finding dog friendly accommodation to enable the realisation of the majority of owners' desires to take their pet on holiday with them it may not be surprising to see that 82.9% of the respondents stated they had had to compromise their holiday desires in order to be able to take their dog with them on vacation. In order to meet this desire the majority (84.1%) of the owners would be willing to pay more than 5% of the cost of holidays they had taken without their dogs if they were able to take their pets with them. Indeed, 13.3% of the respondents stated that they would be willing to pay more than 25% of the cost of holidays without pets in order to take their dogs with them.

Conclusion

The results highlighted in this paper have shown that whilst the desire to take holidays with their pets may be high amongst dog owners in Australia the actualisation of this desire is rather low at the current time. One of the main obstacles for dog owners wishing to holiday with their pets appears to be the difficulty of finding pet friendly accommodation, a problem not helped by the apparently small number of this type of unit in Australia. The result of a lack of dog friendly accommodation and the bias of this type of unit towards campsites and self-catering accommodation in rural and beachside areas appears to be that dog owners have to compromise their holiday desires in order to take their pets on vacation with them. Consequently, it may be suggested that dog owners and their pets are discriminated against, in terms of their access to tourism experiences. Whilst it may be important for the benefit of dog owners and their pets to overcome the current barriers to the fulfilment of their holiday desires it is important to recognise the potential negative impact that dogs in the holiday environment may have on non-dog owners.

Actual or potential applications

The difference between the high level of desire amongst dog owners to take their pets on vacation with them and the small percentage of people actually doing this indicates the potential existence of a gap in the tourism industry. The significant size of the dog owning population, their apparently high desire to take their pets on holiday with them, and their willingness to pay additional accommodation costs in order to be able to do this all suggests that the dog owning population could represent a significant and

lucrative tourism market. Therefore, the results of this study suggest that the tourism industry in Australia should explore how to provide dog friendly holiday accommodation on a far larger scale than is currently available. There is also a need to expand this type of provision into non-rural areas and hotels of all standards as has recently begun to occur in parts of Western Europe. This need is related to the recognition that just as in the case of the general tourist population, not all dog owners wish to take holidays in rural areas whilst staying in self-catering accommodation or on campsites.

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ABSTRACTS
of Papers Presented at the
Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research
May 17 – 20, 2005
Hosted by
Department of Recreation and Tourism Management
Malaspina University-College
Nanaimo, B.C.
Abstracts compiled and edited by
Tom Delamere, Carleigh Randall, David Robinson
CCLR-11 Programme Committee
Tom Delamere
Dan McDonald
Carleigh Randall
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and
David Robinson



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ISBN 1-896886-01-9



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