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Competitive Destination Planning: The Case of Costa Rica

by Zhaoping Liu, Sara Lo, Paula Vasconcellos, Judy A. Siguaw, D.B.A., and Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D.

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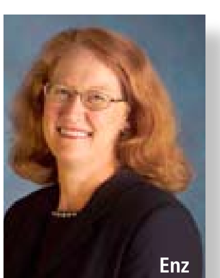
Enz

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Travelers' attitudes and activities provide a strong indication of the status of a particular destination with regard to whether it is still being discovered or whether it is headed for decline. Using Stanley Plog's long-established continuum of travelers' psychographic types as matched to their preferred destinations, this study examines travelers' habits and attitudes, using a sample of U.S. tourists to Costa Rica. An analysis of that information provides inferences about Costa Rica's status on the continuum of tourism destinations.

Although the respondent pool is relatively small and is self-selected, the results suggest that Costa Rica may be losing some of its cachet as a relatively unknown destination for venturesome travelers (known as Venturers, in Plog's continuum). Instead, the results give strong indication that development in Costa Rica has reached the point that the nation appeals to the broad mid-market of travelers, whom Plog dubs Mid-Centrics. While destination planners may at first applaud the increased arrival numbers of the Mid-Centrics, it soon becomes apparent that they spend less than the intrepid Venturer-type visitors, and their presence encourages the kind of rampant development that leads to a destination's decline. Rather than permit such development, Costa Rica's planners may consider ways to retain the patronage of Venturer-type travelers. The findings of this study have implications for other tourist destinations.

Competitive Destination Planning:

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A destination's ability to establish and maintain its market position is critical for its competitiveness, and maintaining that market position requires strategic planning to address changes in the competitive environment.[1] Such planning must be based on a clear understanding of the destination's current market position. A long-established method for assessing a destination's position was developed by Stanley Plog, a pioneer in assessing travelers' psychographics, who suggested that the type of tourists whom a destination attracts is indicative of the level of development within that destination.[2] The extent and nature of such development indicates whether the destination is rising or falling in travelers' estimation. The purpose of this report is to explore how tourist bureaus and destination planners might use readily obtained data on tourists' travel habits and preferences to reveal their destination's life-cycle position. With market information in hand, a tourist destination can make informed choices about appropriate development strategies.

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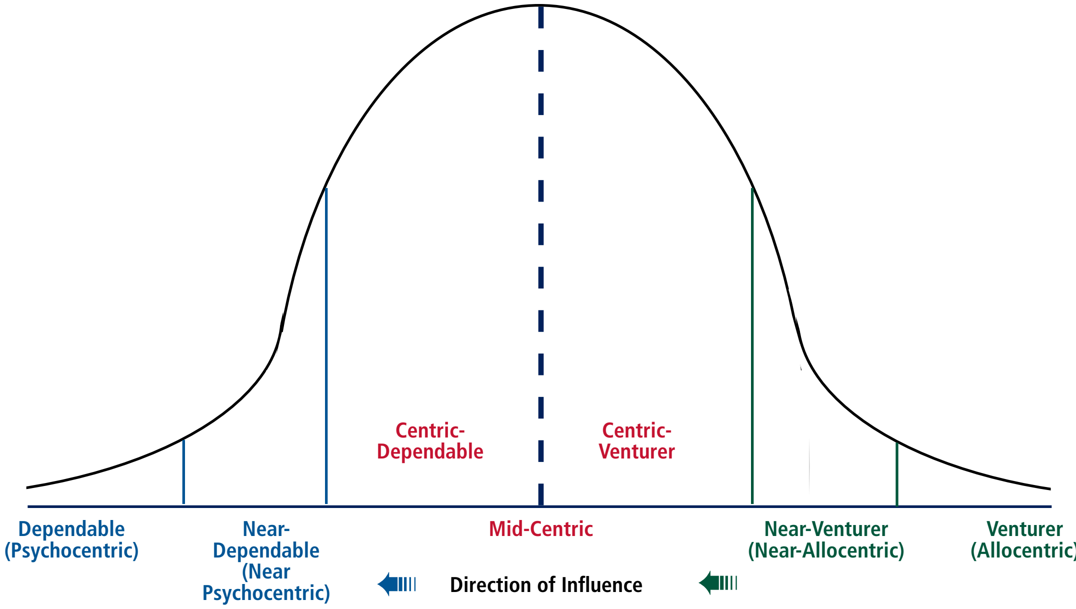
[1] See, for example: T. Knowles and S. Curtis, "The Market Viability of European Mass Tourist Destinations: A Post-Stagnation Life-Cycle Analysis," *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1999), pp. 87-96.

[2] S.C. Plog, "Why Destination Areas Rise and Fall in Popularity: An Update of a *Cornell Quarterly* Classic," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (June 2001), pp. 13-24.

Exhibit 1

Psychographic personality types



Source: S. C. Plog, "Why Destination Areas Rise and Fall in Popularity: An Update of a *Cornell Quarterly* Classic," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly,* Vol. 42, No. 3 (2001), pp. 13–24.

Our exploration focuses on Costa Rica, which is by any measure an attractive destination that is growing in popularity. Bordered on the east by the Caribbean Sea and on the southwest and west by the Pacific Ocean, Costa Rica has one of the most extensive and well-developed national park systems in Latin America.[3] A privately operated aerial tram, designed to allow visitors to travel by cable car through the canopy of the rain forest, draws a large contingent of travelers.[4] The nation's beauty has made Costa Rica one of the most popular tourism destinations among Central America's countries. Indeed, it hosts far more international visitors than any of its neighbors (namely, Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama).[5] Most international tourists to Costa Rica come from North America and Central America, with the United States being the dominant source market.

Costa Rica began developing a global reputation as a tourist destination during the 1980s, particularly after then-president Óscar Arias Sánchez won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. Prior to this period the nation's hotel industry was relatively small, but as demand grew, many Costa Ricans decided to enter the hotel business. Most of these new hotels were owned and managed by inexperienced investors who learned the business by trial and error. Some of the new hotels were run by multinational chains that operated in Costa Rica using expatriate staff and management from their global operations. In the intervening years, local investors asked foreign hotel operators such as Marriott to work with them as joint partners. This model has worked so well in Costa Rica that it has been replicated in other countries in the region, including Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama—each with majority local shareholders, a minority stake by Marriott, and a strong training and development component. While Costa Rica may be riding the crest of popularity now, research has shown that tourist destinations follow a predictable life cycle of growth and decline if development goes unplanned and unchecked.[6] To extend its life cycle, Costa Rica must have greater knowledge of its international visitors.

The Destination Life Cycle and the Changing Traveler Profile

Plog's categorization (shown above), which matches travelers with destinations based on the travelers' personality types and the destination's life-cycle phase, provides a valuable

[3] T.L. Gall, *World Encyclopedia of the Nations*. (Farmington Hills, NJ: Gale, 2004).

[4] C. Enz, C. Inman, and M. Lankau, "Strategic Social Partnerships for Change: A Framework for Building Sustainable Growth in Developing Countries," in *Innovations in Cross-Cultural Management*, ed. P. Christopher Earley and Harbir Singh (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2000).

[5] World Tourism Organization, *Yearbook of Tourism Statistics* 2005 Edition.

[6] Plog, *op. cit.*

An analysis of Costa Rica's international positioning provides lessons that apply to every destination.

framework for this study. Plog identified a continuum of five personality types, ranging from careful Dependables on one end of the travel spectrum to intrepid Venturers on the other end. Three other groups fall within the continuum, namely, Near-Dependables, Mid-Centrics, and Near-Venturers.[7] Most destinations experience a cycle of discovery, development, and decline that roughly fits with the travel preferences of the five main groups that Plog identified, as we explain next.

End of the story. The travel preferences of the Dependables and Near-Dependables roughly correspond to a destination in decline. Dependables typically limit themselves in their intellectual sources and contacts; are unadventurous, cautious, and conservative in their thinking and spending habits; prefer popular brands and locations; desire little activity; and emulate the choices and behavior of others rather than making an original choice. In addition to traveling well-worn paths, Dependables prefer comfortable, familiar brand names for lodging and food service. A similar group, the Near-Dependables, are less conservative in their travel habits, but still prefer destinations that are safe and similar to home. Based on an analysis of a national United States sample, 2.5 percent of the population belongs to the Dependables category, while Near-Dependables constitute 16 percent of the United States population.[8] See Appendix A for a profile of our survey's respondents with comparisons to the United States census data where available.

This side of paradise. At the discovery end of the life cycle are the little-visited locations favored by Venturers. Members of this group travel frequently to explore the world around them; take relatively long trips; spend more money per day than does the average traveler; prefer unusual, undeveloped destinations; avoid crowded, touristy places; accept unconventional kinds of accommodations; enjoy participating in local customs and habits, but avoid events staged for tourists; prefer free, independent travel; enjoy activity when traveling; prefer authentic local arts and crafts; and seek new travel experiences each year.[9] The presence of Venturers as a dominant percentage of tourists indicates that the destination is in the introductory or discovery stage of the life cycle. Venturers constitute approximately 4 percent of the United States population.[10]

Like the Venturers, Near-Venturers, who encompass 16 percent of the U.S. population,[11] are also excited about the new destinations that they learn of from their Venturer friends. The Near-Venturers, however, prefer greater comfort when they travel than Venturers do. They initiate the development of the area because they ask for more services, such as hotels, restaurants, and shops.[12] Near-Venturers map to the exploratory stage of the destination life cycle.

In the middle of the travel market are the Centrics, who are willing to visit destinations that are developed but not yet touristy or overrun by travelers. The travel tales of Near-Venturers encourage Centric friends who have some Venturer leanings to visit the new destination. Once the location has an infrastructure (built to meet the needs of the Near-Venturers), Mid-Centrics are willing to visit. Because there are far more Centrics, consisting of approximately 62 percent of the U.S. population,[13] than Near-Venturers, arrivals at the destination increase dramatically. The presence of large numbers of Mid-Centrics indicates that the destination has moved into the mature phase of the life cycle.

As Plog notes: "Up to this point, everyone seems happy at the destination. Tourism growth continues unabated, property values rise as hotels continue to pop up, more local residents have jobs, tax receipts have increased, some run-down areas have been cleaned up, and most residents believe that they have discovered the perfect industry. … Local politicians and tourism officials congratulate themselves because they think they are pretty smart to have attracted or created

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] S.C. Plog, "The Power of Psychographics and the Concept of Venturesomeness," *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2002), pp. 244-251.

[9] Plog (2001), *op. cit.*

[10] Plog (2002), *op. cit.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Plog (2001), *op. cit.*

[13] Plog (2002), *op. cit.*

Appendix A

Profile of Survey Respondents Compared to U.S. Population

	Survey respondents		U.S. population*
Age:			
		Under 20 years	28.6%
18-25	2.68%	20-24	6.7%
26-35	23.21%	25-34	14.2%
36-45	15.18%	35-44	16.0%
46-55	33.93%	45-54	13.4%
56-65	20.54%	55-64	8.6%
66+	4.46%	65+	12.4%
Gender:			
Male	47.75%	49.1%	
Female	52.25%	50.9%	
Marital Status:			
Single	10.91%	27.1%	
Married	81.82%	56.6%	
Divorced	6.36%	9.7%	
Widowed	0.91%	6.6%	

	Survey respondents	U.S. population*
Educational Attainment		
Less than High School	1.82%	19.6%
High School	0.91%	28.6%
Some College	5.45%	21.0%
Associate Degree	0.91%	6.3%
Bachelor Degree	38.18%	15.5%
Graduate Degree	52.73%	8.9%

Race/Ethnicity (survey only)			
White	93.75%		
Black	2.68%		
Hispanic	3.57%		
Number of children in household (survey only)			
Zero	67.89%	Three	4.59%
One	9.17%	Four	4.59%
Two	12.84%	Six	0.92%

Survey respondents		U.S. population*	
Annual Household Income		**Annual Household Income**	
Under $25,000	1.03%	Under $25,000	28.6%
$25,000-39,999	4.12%	$25,000-34,999	12.8%
$40,000-49,999	5.15%	$35,000-49,999	16.5%
$50,000-59,999	2.06%	$50,000-	
$60,000-74,999	1.03%	74,999	19.5%
$75,000-99,999	4.12%	$75,000-99,999	10.2%
$100,000-149,999	19.59%	$100,000-149,999	7.7%
$150,000-200,000	19.59%	$150,000-199,999	2.2%
Over $200,000	43.30%	Over $200,000	2.4%

Source for U.S. population data: U.S. Census Bureau, "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000," http://factfinder.census.gov/ (as viewed January 15, 2006).

Appendix B

Survey Respondents' Travel Preferences and Habits

I'd prefer to start the trip with no preplanned or definite timetables so I can make my own decisions.

Strongly Agree	6.09%
Agree	22.61%
Neutral	31.30%
Disagree	28.70%
Strongly Disagree	11.30%

What region(s) of the world have you traveled to in the past that you are reluctant to travel to since September 11, 2001? (Check all that apply).

None	49.53%
Middle East	37.38%
Africa	14.02%
Western Europe	10.28%
Asia	9.35%
Eastern Europe	8.41%
Central America	2.80%
Pacific Rim	1.87%
South America	1.87%
Oceania	0.93%
Antarctica or Artic	0.93%
Caribbean	0.93%
Other	0.93%

What are your primary concerns regarding international travel? (Select all that apply.)

Unsanitary water or food preparation	66.67%
Acts of terrorism	49.07%
Petty crime (e.g., theft)	33.33%
Aggressive panhandlers or beggars	32.41%
Poor medical facilities	28.70%
Physical violence	25.00%
Communication difficulties	17.59%
Dishonest merchants	11.11%
Other	3.70%

Since September 11, 2001, I feel insecure when traveling internationally.

Strongly Agree	4.35%
Agree	15.65%
Neutral	20.00%
Disagree	40.00%
Strongly Disagree	20.00%

When traveling for leisure, in general are you most interested in:

Touring or sightseeing	31.21%
Beach or waterfront	22.70%
Ecotourism	22.70%
Adventure sports	11.35%
Visiting friends	6.38%
Night life	0.71%
Other	4.96%

what appears to be a never-ending, expanding business."[14] At this point, however, the Venturers have moved on to other, less-developed destinations, with the Near-Venturers—and, indeed, many of the Centrics—soon to follow.

There's still plenty of tourist business, however. Centrics who lean toward Dependable attitudes are slow to try other places (preferring repeat visits to favored destinations), while tour companies begin to develop packages for the apprehensive Dependable crowd, which seeks a high level of creature comforts as they travel. Development at the destination continues with the addition of more hotels and tourist shops, but also ubiquitous fast-food chains, video arcades, movie theaters, and other entertainment venues.

[14] Plog (2001), p. 19.

Soon the destination has lost its distinctiveness and has the same appearance as every other town—whether in a tourist area or not. The popularity and commonality of the destination attracts the Near-Dependables and the Dependables. But members of this low-spending, relatively inactive group visit only for short periods and spend little money (in part because many have purchased a package). Since the largest group of Centrics has moved on, the base of potential tourists has become substantially smaller and the destination is populated with a less-profitable type of traveler. Over time, fewer visitors arrive at the destination each year, and they spend a declining amount of money during the time they are there.[15]

[15] Plog (2002), *op. cit.*

Other analytical approaches. Plog's research on the life cycle of a destination has been substantiated by other studies,[16] although some dispute the validity of the life-cycle model.[17] Moreover, it is important to consider other approaches to tourist destination life cycles. Most notably, Butler developed a model that has been heavily used in tourism development research.[18] Butler suggests that tourist demand for resort destinations will follow a life cycle course resembling a logistic S-curve in which tourism arrivals expand through six stages, consisting of exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and then either decline or rejuvenation.[19]

Another approach, taken by Enz and colleagues, explored the life cycle of strategic partnerships.[20] That framework embraces the relationship over time between the business-operating orientation of foreign companies, usually multinational organizations that enter an emerging nation, and the economic-development orientation of a country (i.e., outside push versus inside pull for development). Four different models for building strategic partnerships emerge from this framework, to wit, contractual exchange, joint partnerships, limited social covenants, and integrated social covenants.

Applying Plog's analysis. Although Plog's life-cycle theory is not without controversy, it does provide an appropriate framework for analysis. While other life-cycle frameworks can help inform various aspects of strategic planning, Plog's life cycle focuses on changing market demand, and hence appears more relevant for examining the predominant type of traveler journeying to a destination. In the study reported here, we explore the validity of Plog's research findings, using survey results of the travel habits and preferences of United States travelers to Costa Rica.[21] To do so, we subdivided a sample of travelers to Costa Rica into two opposing consumption groups so that we could compare their behavior. From these results, we can infer trends regarding Costa Rica's life-cycle position and the nature of any changes in that position. Plog assigned Costa Rica to the Near-Venturer psychographic position in 2001 and again in 2004.[22] We believe it will be helpful for the nation's tourism officials to determine how this positioning might be changing and to explore whether shifts in market demand make it necessary to revise their strategic plans. This research not only investigates consumer options for travel to Costa Rica but seeks to determine whether and how the profile of travelers to this destination may be different from Plog's 2004 assessment.

The Costa Rica Study

This study was conducted by two undergraduate students with the assistance of two faculty members and a doctoral student. The students designed and developed a 46-item questionnaire to capture consumer attitudes. This report is based on an analysis of those data. This project was conducted with the support of the Cornell Center for Hospitality Research and the Costa Rican Hotel Association.

Self-administered surveys were sent to 1,382 North American travelers to Costa Rica whose e-mail addresses were obtained from the Costa Rican Hotel Association and some of its affiliated hotels. Responses were received from 122 participants.[23] Of those 122 respondents, 84 percent had traveled to Costa Rica for leisure on their most recent visit, 3 percent traveled for business, and 11 percent combined both business and pleasure (2 percent didn't give their travel purpose). Since leisure travelers predominated, we eliminated the respondents who were traveling solely for business or failed to answer the travel-purpose question, leaving 116 respondents.

Given Plog's classification of Costa Rica as a destination for Near-Venturers, we would expect to find that travelers to Costa Rica are well educated, spend considerable discretionary income on travel, are adventurous with their choices of activities and accommodations, eschew the use of travel agents and tours, take extended trips, and travel on their

[16] See, for example: D.A. Griffith and P.J. Albanese, "An Examination of Plog's Psychographic Travel Model within a Student Population," *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (1996), pp. 47-51.

[17] For example, see: B. McKercher, "Are Psychographics Predictors of Destination Life Cycles?," *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2006), pp. 49-55; S.L.J. Smith, "A Test of Plog's Allocentric/Psychocentric Model: Evidence from Seven Nations," *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (1990), pp. 40-43; and Stephen W. Litvin, "Revisiting Plog's Model of Allocentricity and Psychocentricity…One More Time," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (August 2006), pp. 254–260.

[18] Examples of research using the Butler framework include: D. Buhalis, "Marketing the Competitive Destination of the Future," *Tourism Management*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2000), pp. 97-116; Y. Karplus and S. Krakover, "Stochastic Multivariable Approach to Modelling Tourism Area Life Cycles," *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (2005), pp. 235-253; S.E. Moss, C. Ryan, and C.B. Wagoner, "An Empirical Test of Butler's Resort Product Life Cycle: Forecasting Casino Winnings," *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2003), pp. 393-399.

[19] R.W. Butler, "The Concept of a Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for a Management of Resources," *Canadian Geographer*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1980), pp. 5-12.

[20] Enz *et al., op.cit*.

[21] Plog (2001) *op. cit.*; S.C. Plog, *Leisure Travel: A Marketing Handbook* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004).

[22] Plog (2001) *op. cit.*; Plog (2004), *op. cit.*

[23] Given that typically 15 percent to 30 percent of a hotel chain's database is incomplete or inaccurate, a conservative estimate of the surveys that actually reached the intended target would be 1,121, yielding a response rate of 10.9 percent. See: S.A. Butscher, "Limited Loyalty Programs Create Strategic Databases," *Marketing News*, Vol. 31, No. 13 (October 27, 1997). Furthermore, internet surveys generally report low response rates. See, for example: M.P. Couper, "Web Surveys: A Review of Issues and Approaches," *Public Opinion Quarterly,* Vol. 64 (2000), pp. 464-494.

Exhibit 2

Educational attainment

	Percentage U.S. Census (Year 2000)	Percentage U.S. Travelers to Costa Rica
High school diploma and lower	48.2	2.7
Some college, associate or bachelor's	42.9	44.6
Graduate	8.9	52.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000," http://factfinder.census.gov/ (as viewed December 15, 2005).

Exhibit 3

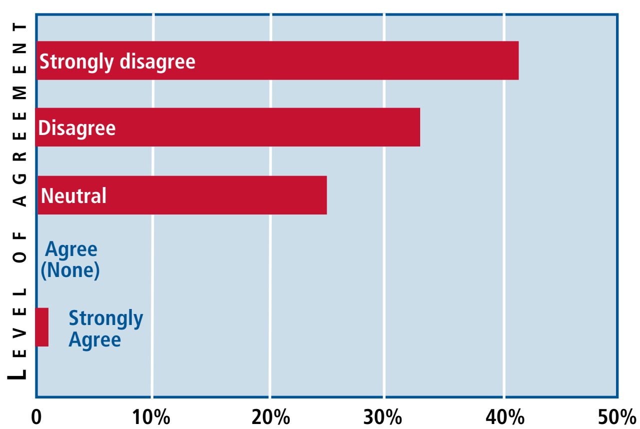
Median household income

U.S. Census (Year 2000)	U.S Overseas Leisure Travelers	U.S. Travelers to Costa Rica
$35,000–49,999	$91,900	$150,000–200,000

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000," http://factfinder.census.gov/ (as viewed December 15, 2005); U.S. Department of Commerce, ITA, Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, "2004 Profile of U.S. Resident Traveler Visiting Overseas Destinations Reported Form: Survey of International Air Travelers," http://tinet.ita.doc.gov/, as viewed January 15, 2006.

Exhibit 4

Prefer to travel to countries where the people belong to my ethnic group?



own at the destination. In the following, we describe our findings and identify whether our results are consistent with the Near-Venturer personality type.

The Traveler Profile

In keeping with Plog's Near-Venturer profile, the American leisure tourists surveyed are affluent, college educated, middle aged, and married without children living at home. Also consistent with that profile, both the education level and income of the U.S. leisure travelers surveyed skewed toward the high end.[24] Over 90 percent of the respondents have a bachelor's degree or graduate degree. Exhibit 2 shows that the proportion of U.S. travelers to Costa Rica with graduate degrees is significantly greater than that of the general population of U.S. residents.

Income levels also fell into Plog's Near-Venturer category. More than 80 percent of those surveyed have an annual household income of over $100,000, and among these, more than half have an annual income over $200,000. As Exhibit 3 indicates, the median household income of respondents in this study is between $150,000 and $200,000. This sample is clearly an affluent group of travelers with incomes higher than both average Americans and typical U.S. overseas leisure travelers.[25]

Travel Preferences

People with adventuresome personalities want to explore the world in all of its diversity, and they feel comfortable in cultures where they do not speak the language.[26] The travelers' responses to the travel-preference questions in our study suggest that the respondents are comfortable with traveling in countries with different languages or cultures (See Appendix B on the preceding page for additional travel-preference data.) Following their general travel pattern, 99 percent of respondents do not mind traveling to countries with different ethnic groups (see Exhibit 4). Exhibit 5 shows that 87 percent of those surveyed do not care about language differences between their native country and the destination. This finding is congruent with Plog's description of Venturer and Near-Venturer travelers.[27]

Exhibit 6 suggests that about 70 percent of those surveyed do not prefer a guided tour. This finding is in accordance with adventuresome travelers' predilection to

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[24] Plog (2001), *op. cit.*

[25] U.S. Census Bureau, "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000," http://factfinder.census.gov/ (as viewed January 15, 2006); U.S. Department of Commerce, ITA, Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, "2004 Profile of U.S. Resident Traveler visiting Overseas Destinations Reported Form: Survey of International Air Travelers," http://tinet.ita.doc.gov/ (as viewed January 15, 2006); and Plog (2001), op. cit.

[26] Plog (2002), *op. cit.*

[27] Plog (2001), *op. cit.*

rely on their own judgment regarding what they do at the destination and to demonstrate a strong preference for free, independent travel.[28] In the only facet that failed to agree with Plog's Venturer-type profile, only 29 percent of the survey respondents preferred to travel with no preplanned or definite timetables, while almost 40 percent of the survey respondents indicated that they would prefer a timetable for their trip. We suspect that this finding portends the arrival of Centric-type travelers to Costa Rica.

Trend of Market Growth

In Plog's samples, the dispersion of the five psychographic types closely followed a normal distribution curve.[29] Plog's model also suggests that as a destination follows the typical shift from Venturers to Centrics, more travelers will be attracted to the destination because there are more Centrics than Venturers. Statistics in Exhibit 7 (overleaf) reveal that the number of U.S. travelers to Costa Rica is increasing, again indicating what we believe is a Centric shift. Despite the interruption in travel after the 9/11 terrorist attack, the number of U.S. tourists to Costa Rica increased 30 percent from 1999 to 2003, a rate that exceeds the growth of travel to Costa Rica by travelers from all nations. As a result, the market share of U.S. travelers as a proportion of the total travelers also grew between 1999 and 2003. Because Ventures and Near-Venturers constitute only 20 percent of the United States population,[30] we believe that some of the large numbers of U.S. tourists journeying to Costa Rica are Centric types.

General Travel Patterns

The sample's frequency of travel fits solidly in the Near-Venturer profile. Exhibit 8 (also on the next page) indicates that a large proportion of those surveyed are frequent travelers. Almost half of them travel three to five times domestically per year, and nearly 30 percent of them travel more than five times domestically on an annual basis. Three-fourths of the respondents report traveling internationally once or twice per year. More than one-fifth of those surveyed travel internationally more than twice a year.

The respondents' travel patterns shade toward Centric habits, however. When traveling internationally, almost 90 percent of the respondents usually go with other people instead of traveling alone. The bulk of the respondents (75%) travel with their spouses or partners, and the rest travel with friends, children, or business associates. Traveling with others, such as family members, is consistent with the travel patterns of Centrics with Venturer tendencies and Near-

Exhibit 5

Prefer to visit a location where the spoken language is the same as my native language?

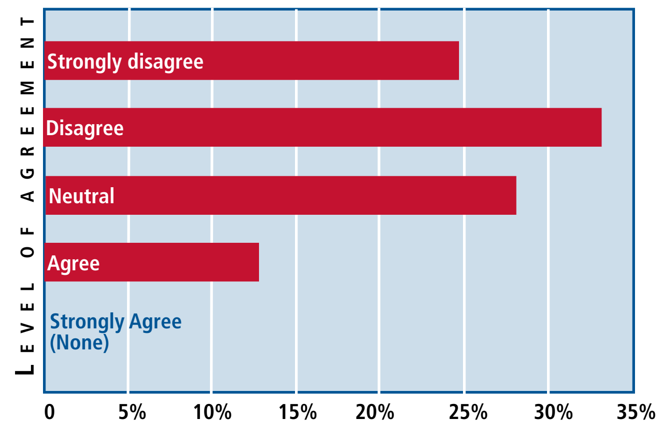
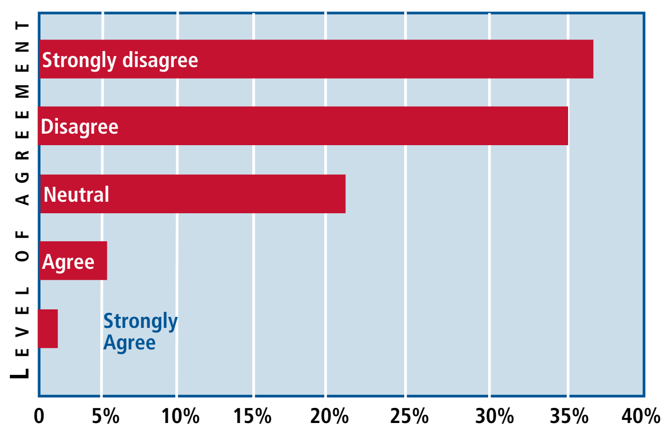


Exhibit 6

Prefer to be on a guided tour when traveling in a foreign country?



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[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Plog (2002), *op. cit.*

[30] *Ibid.*

Exhibit 7

Tourism to Costa Rica

	1999	2003	Change 1999–2003	U.S. market share 1999	U.S. market share 2003
Total non-resident tourists to Costa Rica	1,031,585	1,238,692	20.08%	-	-
U.S. tourists to Costa Rica	392,556	510,751	30.11%	38.05%	41.23%

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, ITA, Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, "2004 Profile of U.S. Resident Traveler visiting Overseas Destinations

Exhibit 8

Respondents' travel patterns

General travel purpose	Business	12.1%
	Leisure	69.8
	Equal amounts	18.1
Annual domestic travel frequency	Less than 3 times	22.0
	3-5 times	48.3
	6-10 times	14.9
	11-20 times	10.5
	Over 20 times	4.4
Annual international travel frequency	Never	2.6
	1-2 times	75.9
	3-5 times	14.7
	Over 5 times	6.9
Willingness to travel alone internally	Alone	10.3
	With business associates	1.7
	With spouse or partner	75.0
	With friends	6.9
	With children	6.0
Most-visited international regions	Africa	2.8
	Caribbean	17.4
	Middle East	1.8
	Western Europe	39.5
	Antarctica/Artic	0.0
	Central America	23.9
	North America	5.5
	South America	1.8
	Asia	3.7
	Oceania	0.9
	Eastern Europe	0.0
	Pacific Rim	0.9
	Other	1.8
Amount of money willing to spend on an international leisure trip	Less than $1,000	0.0
	$1,000-$2,499	21.1
	$2,500-$4,999	40.4
	$5,000-$7,499	14.0
	$7,500+	24.6

Exhibit 9

Length of stay in Costa Rica

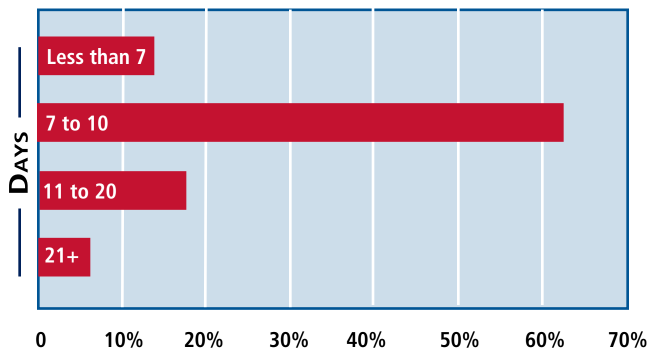
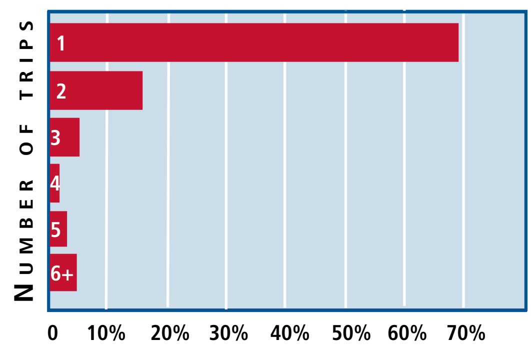


Exhibit 10

Number of trips to Costa Rica



Venturers.[31] The respondents' typical destinations are even more strongly Centric.[32] The top three most often visited international regions among the respondents are Western Europe (39.5%), Central America (23.9%), and the Caribbean (17.4%). The least visited places are Oceania (0.9%), the Pacific Rim (0.9%), Eastern Europe (0.0%) and Antarctica or the Artic (0.0%).

Although the travelers to Costa Rica spent what seems like a substantial amount of money, consistent with Venturer types, we judge that their overall spending was more of a Centric nature. As noted in Exhibit 8, about 80 percent of the respondents are willing to spend more than $2,500 for an international leisure trip, and about 25 percent of the respondents intend to spend more than $7,500 for a similar trip. A willingness to spend large sums of discretionary income on travel is consistent with more venturesome travelers, but the amount spent by the majority of the survey respondents was relatively low, considering that it included airfare, lodging, meals, activities, ground transportation, and the like for a week-long trip.

Activities in Costa Rica

The respondents' fairly conservative travel activities and moderate length of stay were typical of Centric travelers.[33] The majority of the travelers sampled are first-time visitors to Costa Rica, and they reported liking Costa Rica more than any other Latin American destination that they had visited. The respondents traveled to Costa Rica mainly for ecotourism and its unspoiled environment (see Appendix C on the next page for additional information on the Costa Rica travel experience). Consistent with their travel purposes, the primary activities of those travelers are ecotourism, tourism and sightseeing, and beach and waterfront activities.

Exhibit 9 depicts the length of stay in Costa Rica among the North American travelers who completed our survey. Based on statistics for all international tourists to Costa Rica in 2002, the average length of stay in Costa Rica was eleven days.[34] Our survey respondents seem to follow that pattern. Although these visitors may stay in Costa Rica for as few as three days or as long as 90 days, over half of them (63%) stay between seven and ten days. Seventeen percent chose to stay for eleven through 20 days, while 14 percent stayed in Costa Rica for less than a week. Only 6 percent spent more than three weeks in the country.

Frequency of Visits to Costa Rica

Exhibit 10 shows the number of trips the respondents have made to Costa Rica. As we indicated above, nearly 70 percent of the respondents reported traveling to Costa Rica for the first time. Travelers who have visited Costa Rica two or more times constitute less than 15 percent of the total sample. The fact that few travelers have been to Costa Rica more than once is more in line with the Near-Venturer destination positioning, as Plog noted that adventurous travelers rarely return to the same location.[35] But, as noted previously, the sheer mass of travelers from the U.S. indicates that many of these first-time visitors would have to represent the Centric category.

Rank of Latin American Countries

The fact that Costa Rica was ranked as the number-one destination among Latin American countries for the respondents' leisure travel indicates its possible status as a Centric

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[31] Plog (2001), *op. cit.*

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] Plog (2001), *op. cit.*

[34] "Tourists' Average Length of Stay & Spending Per Night," www.costarica.com (as viewed October 11, 2005).

[35] Plog (2001), *op. cit.*

Appendix C

Survey Respondents' Assessment of Costa Rica

Why did you choose to visit Costa Rica?

Ecotourism	73.04%
Unspoiled environment	46.96%
Recommendation	40.87%
Beaches	28.70%
Location	27.83%
Safe environment	26.96%
Attractions	20.00%
Price	20.00%
Package deal	5.22%
Other	5.22%
No choice—business trip	5.22%

What were your primary activities during your visit?

Ecotourism	86.96%
Touring and sightseeing	55.65%
Beach and waterfront	54.78%
Adventure sports	31.30%
Visiting friends	8.70%
Night life	6.09%
Business meeting	4.35%
Other	1.74%

What areas need the greatest improvement?

Roads	70.65%
Ground transportation	17.39%
Airports	11.96%
Criminal activity	8.70%
Accommodations	5.43%
Tourist information	4.35%
Night life	3.26%
Restaurants	3.26%
Safety	3.26%
Attractions	2.17%
Cleanliness	2.17%

Note: **The above three questions permitted multiple responses.**

Overall, rate your accommodations.

Poor (1) to Excellent (7)

Mean: 6.3 Std Dev: 0.86

Was your travel experience consistent with your image or perception of the country?

Definitely not (1) to Definitely yes (7)

Mean: 6.0 Std Dev: 1.3

Overall, how satisfactory was your trip?

Very unsatisfactory (1) to Very satisfactory (7)

Mean: 6.6 Std Dev: 0.8

Would you return to Costa Rica?

Definitely not (1) to Definitely yes (7)

Mean: 6.5 Std Dev: 1.0

If visiting Costa Rica in the future, would you be interested in visiting other Central American countries?

Definitely not (1) to Definitely yes (7)

Mean: 6.0 Std Dev: 1.4

Would you recommend Costa Rica to a friend?

Definitely not (1) to Definitely yes (7)

Mean: 6.7 Std Dev: 0.9

Please rate the degree to which you feel travel to Costa Rica offers value.

Very poor value (1) to Very good value (7)

Mean: 6.1 Std Dev: 1.2

Would the addition of a $15 arrival tax have any affect on your decision to travel to Costa Rica versus some other country?

Definitely not (1) to Definitely yes (7)

Mean: 1.7 Std Dev: 1.4

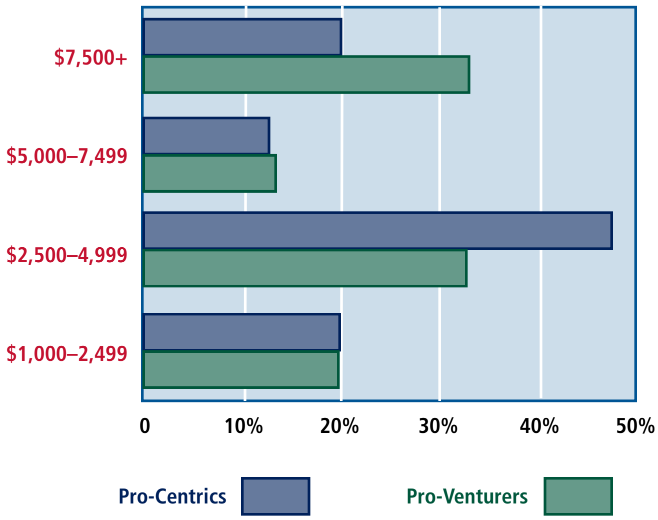
What is your satisfaction level with the current $23 departure tax when leaving Costa Rica?

Very unsatisfactory (1) to Very satisfactory (7)

Mean: 4.3 Std Dev: 1.8

Exhibit 11

Intended spending on international leisure travel



destination, especially since the respondents chose the Caribbean Islands as their number-two destination, followed by Mexico and Belize.[36] Far down the list are El Salvador and Honduras, which could be characterized as Venturer-type destinations.

Booking and Transportation in Costa Rica

Although trip planning and booking patterns seem to be closer to Centric profiles than to those of Venturers, the respondents' patterns are mixed. When planning their trip, 44 percent of the respondents typically booked directly with the hotel, and 33 percent booked their own air travel. On the other hand, travel agents handled 39 percent of hotel rooms and 40 percent of transportation bookings. An interesting phenomenon is that despite the considerable role that travel agents play in securing lodging and transportation, they are not considered an important information resource by our respondents. Only 6 percent of these tourists ranked travel agents as the strongest information resource. Instead, the most influential information resources are recommendations from friends or family—a common pattern for Centric travelers, given that Venturers prefer to rely on their own judgment for travel.

Transportation

Ground-transportation preferences seem to indicate the growth of Centric travel to Costa Rica. The four principal forms of ground transportation used by the tourists are tour bus or van (25.9%), rental car (25.9%), taxi (22.4%), and private vehicle (15.5%). Only around 10 percent of the respondents choose public buses, other ground transportation, or walking. Plog specifically noted that Venturers preferred to obtain a car to make their own way around a destination.[37] In contrast, the largest portion of the respondents preferred tour buses or taxis, again indicating the arrival of less-adventurous travelers in Costa Rica.

Intention to Return

Perhaps the strongest indication of the Centric tendency among our respondents is their strong support of the idea of another visit to Costa Rica. Most of the American tourists in the sample would like to return to Costa Rica. Using a seven-point Likert scale, the average score for intention to return is 6.50 (with more than 70 percent who will definitely return).

Forecasting Future Travel Patterns by Subgroup Analysis

Our survey results indicate that this sample of U.S. leisure travelers to Costa Rica comprised a mix of Centrics and Near-Venturers. To refine our analysis, we divided respondents into two psychographic positioning groups on the basis of their travel preferences. Using three preference questions, we grouped respondents according to whether their preferences were more aligned with a Venturer psychographic position (whom we call Pro-Venturers) or with Centric characteristics (dubbed Pro-Centrics). Pro-Venturers prefer to travel to destinations with different ethnic groups, prefer destinations with different languages, and dislike guided tours (showing Venturer characteristics). In contrast, Pro-Centric respondents prefer to travel to countries where people belong to their own ethnic group or speak the same native language. We were able to assign 86 respondents to one of those sub-groups, while the remainder, who fit neither of these psychographic categories, were excluded from further analysis.

Plog's model concluded that as a formerly remote, undiscovered destination becomes better known and more developed, an increasing number of travelers who show Mid-Centric preferences will arrive.[38] By the same token we would expect to see Pro-Centric tendencies among our respondents if, in fact, Costa Rica's positioning is moving from Near-Venturer to Mid-Centric.

Plog's model predicts that Centric-type travelers tend to "spend less per capita at a destination."[39] Our survey results, in Exhibit 11, show that the Pro-Centric respondents do, indeed, intend to spend less on leisure travel than will the Pro-Venturer respondents. The percentage of Pro-Centrics who intend to spend more than $7,500 on an international

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] *Ibid.*

Exhibit 12
Booking channel preferences

	Internet travel discount website (e.g., Expedia.com)	Travel agent	Directly through hotel	Total
Pro- Venturers	4 (5.2%)	12 (15.6%)	24 (31.2%)	40 (52.0%)
Pro-Centrics	4 (5.2%)	24 (31.2%)	9 (11.7%)	37 (48.0%)
Total	8 (10.4%)	36 (46.8%)	33 (42.9%)	77 (100%)

Note: Booking options with fewer than four responses per cell were deleted.

Exhibit 13
Ground transportation preferences

	Taxi	Tour Busor Van	Rental Car	Private Vehicle	Total
Pro- Venturers	9 (11.7%)	7 (9.1%)	15 (19.5%)	7 (9.1%)	38 (49.4%)
Pro-Centrics	10 (12.9%)	18 (23.4%)	7 (9.1%)	4 (5.2%)	39 (50.6%)
Total	19 (24.6%)	25 (32.5%)	22 (28.6%)	11 (14.3)	77 (100%)

Note: Ground transportation options with fewer than four responses per cell were deleted.

leisure trip is only 20 percent, much lower than that of Pro-Venturers (33%).

Also in our study, more Pro-Centrics book their lodging and transportation through travel agents. About 65 percent of the Pro-Centrics book their primary lodging through travel agents, but only 30 percent of the Pro-Venturers do so. Likewise, a higher percentage of Pro-Venturers (60%) book directly through hotels or airlines than do Pro-Centrics (24%). Plog suggests that Centrics "often look to authority figures for guidance and direction in their life."[40] Since the Pro-Centrics generally express stronger tendencies toward Centric psychographic behavior than the Pro-Venturers do, more Centrics take the "safe" choice and book through travel agents. A chi-square test of differences between the two respondent groups revealed statistically significant differences in booking channels between the Pro-Centrics and the Pro-Venturers (chi-square = 10.72, $p < .005$, see Exhibit 12).

As Plog's model predicted, more adventurous people "prefer to be on their own on international trips," and they like using private vehicles so that they have greater mobility and freedom of choice.[41] Our study presents a similar result. The proportion of Pro-Venturers who rented cars is almost twice that of Pro-Centrics. At the same time, the percentage of Pro-Centrics using tour buses or vans is nearly three times that of Pro-Venturers. Again a test for differences between these two groups revealed statistically significant differences in their mode of ground transportation (chi-square = 8.60, $p < .04$, see Exhibit 13).

When asked to rank the influence of various information sources on travel and sightseeing decisions, Pro-Centrics listed more types of key information sources than Pro-Venturers did. In addition to the three categories selected by both of the groups (i.e., friends and family, travel books, and travel agent), Pro-Centrics also cited newspaper articles, promotional brochures, the internet, and film. One possible reason for the increase in information sources used by the Pro-Centrics may be that a developed destination receives wider media coverage (from fam trips, among other things) and, therefore, travelers will be influenced by a greater number of information sources.

40 *Ibid.,* p.15.

41 *Ibid.*

Conclusions

Using Plog's psychographic model as an indicator of the life-cycle position of Costa Rica, we can estimate the nation's current positioning and identify appropriate strategies for it to remain a vital tourist destination. Further, while this study focuses on Costa Rica, the implications of the research extend to any destination.

Our analysis of the travelers' behavior and preferences in this study shows that Costa Rica is becoming a travel destination for Mid-Centrics, while Venturer-type travelers seem to be moving on. This shift should serve as a warning to Costa Rican officials that they need to pay attention to the possibility that they are allowing excessive and perhaps inappropriate development. Given Costa Rica's notoriety as a successful ecotourism destination, these findings may also alert other destinations that recognize they are following a path similar to that of Costa Rica. Plog notes that "the ideal psychographic positioning for most destinations lies somewhere in the middle of the Near-Venturer segment. A destination at this point has the broadest positioning appeal possible because it covers the largest portion of the psychographic curve."[42] Given that a fair number of our respondents had Venturer tendencies, Costa Rica may still be in or near that sweet spot. However, the fact that we identified a substantial number of Centric-type travelers may indicate that Costa Rica is already losing this prime position and should consider taking proactive steps to review its destination-planning and -development initiatives. Again, Costa Rica's success has been viewed as one to emulate, but nations that are pursuing ill-considered development should take note. In that light, countries that are attempting to develop their tourism industry should examine their own tourist personality profiles to identify and track their positioning on Plog's destination life cycle.

Among the research findings yielded by this study, the following stand out. First, a large proportion of the U.S. travelers whom we surveyed visited Costa Rica for ecotourism or its unspoiled environment. In keeping with that travel purpose, their major activities focused on ecotourism, sightseeing, and beach and waterfront activities. The travel patterns we found indicate that marketing towards the niche segment of U.S. eco-tourists may be a more productive strategy for Costa Rica than targeting the mass travel market. Focusing on ecotourism will help Costa Rica's travel planners to avoid the continued slide toward becoming just another Dependable destination. Moreover, all tourists will benefit from the enrichment and improvement of ecotourism products.

Tourist interest in and emphasis on enjoying the unspoiled environment means Costa Rica should take to heart Plog's warning that "…most destinations' managers don't understand that they continue to shoot themselves in the foot by allowing unfocused development to trample the once-beautiful areas that so delighted the Venturer-type travelers."[43] Thus, mandates for controlled growth should be legislated now to avoid the over-development that drives the most profitable tourists to seek other destinations. Some mandates for consideration include the protection of extensive natural areas that will continue to attract Venturers and Near-Venturers. Beyond controlling inappropriate development, a marketing focus should be placed on the physically demanding exploration-type activities that are enjoyed by the tourists who are willing to spend the most money. Such marketing communication would help ensure that the most desirable tourist segments develop and maintain the right perceptions about the destination.

Limitations of the Study

Because our analysis is based on a small number of respondents, the results may not be representative of all U.S. leisure travelers to Costa Rica. In addition, the respondents appeared biased toward those who patronize upscale hotels and resorts, indicating the potential existence of sample bias. Nevertheless, the study may provide valuable information regarding U.S. tourists' preferences and spending habits in Costa Rica and reveal effective marketing strategies to the Costa Rican travel industry.

In conclusion, this survey of leisure tourists to Costa Rica has revealed how a sample of attitudes and beliefs can also reveal a potential shift in the psychographic profile of travelers to a destination. Applying a framework such as that provided by Plog, a destination's strategic planners can identify whether changes in their tourist mix will damage their destination's competitiveness. Further, such analysis permits a destination to design marketing strategies to focus on their desired consumer base, rather than allow a slide into decline.

Suggestions for Future Research

We already mentioned the controversy regarding the validity of Plog's life-cycle analysis. To assist in resolving this controversy, we suggest that this study be replicated so as to test the Butler life cycle, thereby allowing a comparison between the two frameworks. Such a comparison would assist tourism organizations in making more informed choices about assessing their own point in the destination life cycle.

Researchers may also want to conduct a broader study to ascertain whether different locations generate the same reactions from these types of travelers. Such information would allow destination planners to use the information to create experiences for each type. ■

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[42] *Ibid.,* p. 20.

[43] *Ibid.,* p. 24.

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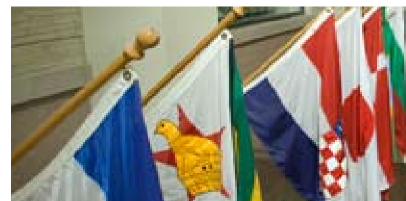

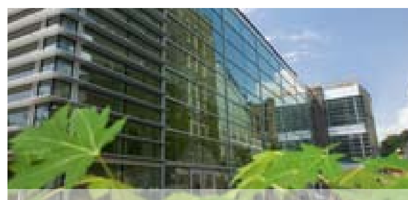

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