

Conference Paper

Attitudes and Preferences of Local Visitors Toward Ecotourism Sites in Bahrain

Habis Alsamawi

Department of Mass Communication, Tourism, and Fine Arts, College of Arts, Bahrain University, Kingdom of Bahrain

Abstract

The tourism industry has become one of the most considerable economic sectors in the world. Gulf countries especially Bahrain included tourism as one of the most important exports that will help to diversify the country GNP dependence on oil exporting only. The main concern of ecotourism is to encourage the local inhabitants to involve in tourism activities, and stresses on conservation of nature by educating the visitors how to protect and respect the culture visited. This article is a behavioral-oriented study that investigates and explains the preferences of tourists toward selected tourism sites in Bahrain. It is composed in twofold: first, it presents the research approach and the selection of the analyzed sites; second, it presents the findings concerning tourists' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, tourism participation rates, and preferences toward tourism quality and levels of satisfaction. Data were collected by means of questionnaire interviews. 706 questionnaires were analyzed. Findings demonstrated the importance of the tourists' concerns in tourism planning process. The study also shows that variations in preferences and attitudes rates resulted from the differences in socioeconomic characteristics of tourists.

Keywords: Bahrain, Behavioral Approach, Ecotourism, Tourism Planning, Attitudes, Preferences

Corresponding Author:

Habis Alsamawi

Received: 18 September 2018

Accepted: 10 October 2018

Published: 15 October 2018

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E© Habis Alsamawi. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons](#)[Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Sustainability and Resilience Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Bahrain is an archipelago of 51 Islands; with a total area of 771 square kilometers. It is the land was blessed with various geographical attributes, including a remarkable number of natural springs, which irrigated the fertile north and western belts for centuries (Samawi and Al-Sayyed, 2014). The country offers a fascinating blend of eastern and western cultures as high rise buildings vie for space with more traditional dwellings and ancient traditions and historical sites mix with modern developments

 OPEN ACCESS

and cosmopolitan living. Bahrain's population of around 1.42 million in 2017 consists of a significant percentage of expatriates (% 52) from all over the world, with high density of population around 1850 person per sq.km (www.cio.gov.bh, 2017).

Bahrain is rich in history and ancient civilizations have only recently been discovered by international archaeologists. Over the past decades, major archaeological work has been undertaken across Bahrain by both local and international teams. The results of those excavations produced seminal research in the settlement history of Bahrain from the first prehistoric sites and glorious Dilmun settlements, burials and temples to the extraordinary Tylos cemeteries and Islamic sites. The inscription of two Bahraini sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Qal'at Al-Bahrain, the Ancient Harbor and Capital of Dilmun in 2005 and Pearling, Testimony of an Island Economy in 2012) and the tentative listing of the Burial Ensembles of Dilmun and Tylos is a clear recognition of Bahrain's enduring past (Bahrain Authority for culture & Antiquities, 2017).

The tourism industry has become one of the most considerable economic sectors in the world (Brakk, 2005). GCC countries, especially Bahrain, included tourism as one of the most important exports that will help to diversify the country's GNP dependence on oil exporting only. However, little research has been done to highlight the driving factors of tourism and its impact on economic and cultural development (Nowak, Sahli and Sgro 2005), or focused on ways to outweigh these negatives through a cautionary management of tourism and increasing tourist willingness to pay, and ultimately tourism receipts (Mowfo and Munt, 2009; Cooper and Hall, 2011). Brau and Cao (2006) pointed out the key issue of how to assess the transformation of tourist sites and destinations as the result of a rational attempt to respond to tourist attitudes.

Bahrain is experiencing rapid growth in tourism facilities, despite limited resources, physically and in labor force. In a study done by World Tourism & Travel Council (WTTC, 2017), about the economic impact of tourism on the Gross Domestic Product GDP in Bahrain, they found the direct contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in Bahrain in 2016 was \$1447 million, which represents 4.2% of GDP. This present is forecasted to increase by 1.5% in 2017. These results are a reflection of the economic activity generated by industries such as hotels, travel agencies, airlines, restaurants, leisure activities, and shopping. The total contribution of travel and tourism to GDP was \$ 3553 million (10.4% of GDP) and is expected to grow by 3% in 2017. The study showed that travel and tourism in Bahrain generated 30,000 jobs directly (4.1 % of total employment, but the total contribution of travel and tourism was 78,000 in 2017, (10 %) of total employment.

The year 2015 is set to be a milestone for sustainability in Bahrain, as governments are called upon to adopt the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The new agenda is transformative, people-centered and with bold and ambitious targets. The proposed sustainable development goals, comprise 17 goals. That will frame the global development agenda for the coming fifteen years. Tourism can contribute to sustainable development by minimizing poverty, hunger and offering more job opportunities for local communities (UNWTO, 2015).

2. Study Methodology

A common theme in tourism, recreation and natural attractions research has been to understand the preferences of individuals regarding the choice selection of destination. Several behavioral models have been developed that address these perceptions - behavior relation (Szell and Hallett 1V, 2013). These general linear models of attitudes and behavior focused on single behaviors. The benefits of this approach approved to be valuable to understand the social psychology of individuals.

Some studies has emphasized the role of NGOs in developing tourism, and preserving the environment (Butcher, 2007), also it helped decision makers to develop strategies and marketing policies to attract sizable waves of tourists and recreations. Therefore, tourism planners and marketers have recognized the need to target homogenous components of a heterogeneous market as well as the individual perception or the market as a whole.

Behavioral oriented research in tourism focuses on the analysis of the attitudes, preferences, motivations and satisfactions of tourists towards the various tourism sites. This approach of study may help to inform tourism planners of the activities preferred by their clientele. Najjar, Donnell and Samawi (1992) emphasized the importance of showing what users prefer rather than what recreation and tourism managers believe users prefer. The value of tourism sites exist only in the minds of tourists.

3. Sample of the Study

Data base for this study was part of data collected in (2014) in conjunction with the assessment of tourist views on six Eco tourists sites in Bahrain. The data was collected by the means of questionnaire interviews. 706 questionnaires were distributed to recreations and tourists at various resorts, clubs, hotels and beaches. These sites are Al- Bander resort, Hawar Island, Al- Hamala beach; Marina Club, Yacht Club and the

Sailing club (Figure 1). In this study the data was analyzed by tabulating the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of tourists as well as their preferences and evaluations of the recreational activities within the six sites.

This study analyzed questionnaires distributed at the following six sites:

1. Al- Bander Resort which is popular destination for relaxation. It is located near Sitra Bay, it has a good facilities related to beach activities, 44 chalets and 36 cabanas, 5 restaurants, marina and 10 swimming pools, and interesting beach, health club, water sports. Al- Bander attracts more than 75000 visitors yearly.
2. Bahrain Sailing Club is located in Al Jazayer Beach, few kilometers away from Al Areen Wildlife Park. It attracts people who enjoyed water sports; it has many facilities for swimming and skiing activities.
3. Bahrain Yacht Club which is located on Sitra Bay close to Al- Bander, the club attracts visitors and members who enjoyed water sports facilities, such as swimming, fishing, and diving. Besides other facilities such as restaurants and cafeterias that attracted many recreationist in summer time.
4. Hawar Resort, is situated 24 km away from the southeast of Bahrain mainland. The site is a 45 minute exciting boat ride away. On the site, there are 60 spacious accommodation units, besides restaurants and café and many other outdoor activities.
5. Marina Club. It offers marine facilities and many water sport activities such as boating, swimming, scuba diving and other services such as restaurants.
6. Al Hamala Beach, which is located near Al Jezra village on the way to King Fahd causeway. This site attracts visitors who enjoy swimming, fishing, and diving.

The 706 questionnaires were distributed among the six sited unevenly, due to the variation of size: Al-Bander resort (26.8%), Hawar Island (19.1%), Al- Hamala Beach (18.8%), Marina club (12.9 %) Yacht club (12.7%) and the Sailing club (9.6 %).

4. Questions of the Study

The study presented a number of questions in order to identify the characteristics and preferences of the ecotourism sites in Bahrain. These include:

1. What are the preferences of recreational activities in Bahrain?

2. What is the degree of satisfaction towards ecotourism activities in Bahrain?
3. What are the means to educate tourists about the concept ecotourism?
4. What are the levels of interest in Knowing about ecotourism in Bahrain?
5. What are the levels of interest in taking part of ecotourism in Bahrain?

5. The Importance of the Study

With a growing interest to spend leisure time in nature related facilities and increasing awareness on environment, ecotourism has become one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry in the world (UNWTO, 2001). The declaration of the year 2002 as International Year of Ecotourism by World Tourism Organization reflects the importance of ecotourism in the global industry. It provides better linkages, reduces Leakages of benefits out of a country, creates local employments, creates the multiplier effect and fosters sustainable development. The main aim of developing tourism in Bahrain is mainly to encourage local communities through the creation of sustainable income-generating tourism activities, while conserving the sensitive ecological and cultural resources in their environments (WTTC, 2017).

5. Marina Club which is situated in Manama city, so close to Bahrain

6. Literature Review

Szell and Hallett IV, (2013), the study focused on attitudes and perceptions of local residents and tourism toward protected area of Retezat national park- Romania. Romania was one of the first countries to use scientific actions for the protection of its natural forests, and Retezat National Park is one of Romania's oldest national parks, the results of the study showed that local residents have low levels of awareness and concern, and hold negative perceptions of conservation within the national parks, due to restrictions imposed on access to natural resources. Approximately 75% of tourists stated that they would support conservation within Retezat National Park by paying higher entrance fees, while 64% of local residents stated that they are not in favor of supporting conservation efforts within the protected area. Thus, significant differences between local residents and tourists are evident. The study found out that tourists have significantly more positive attitudes and would be more willing to pay to support conservation efforts within the protected area when compared with local residents.

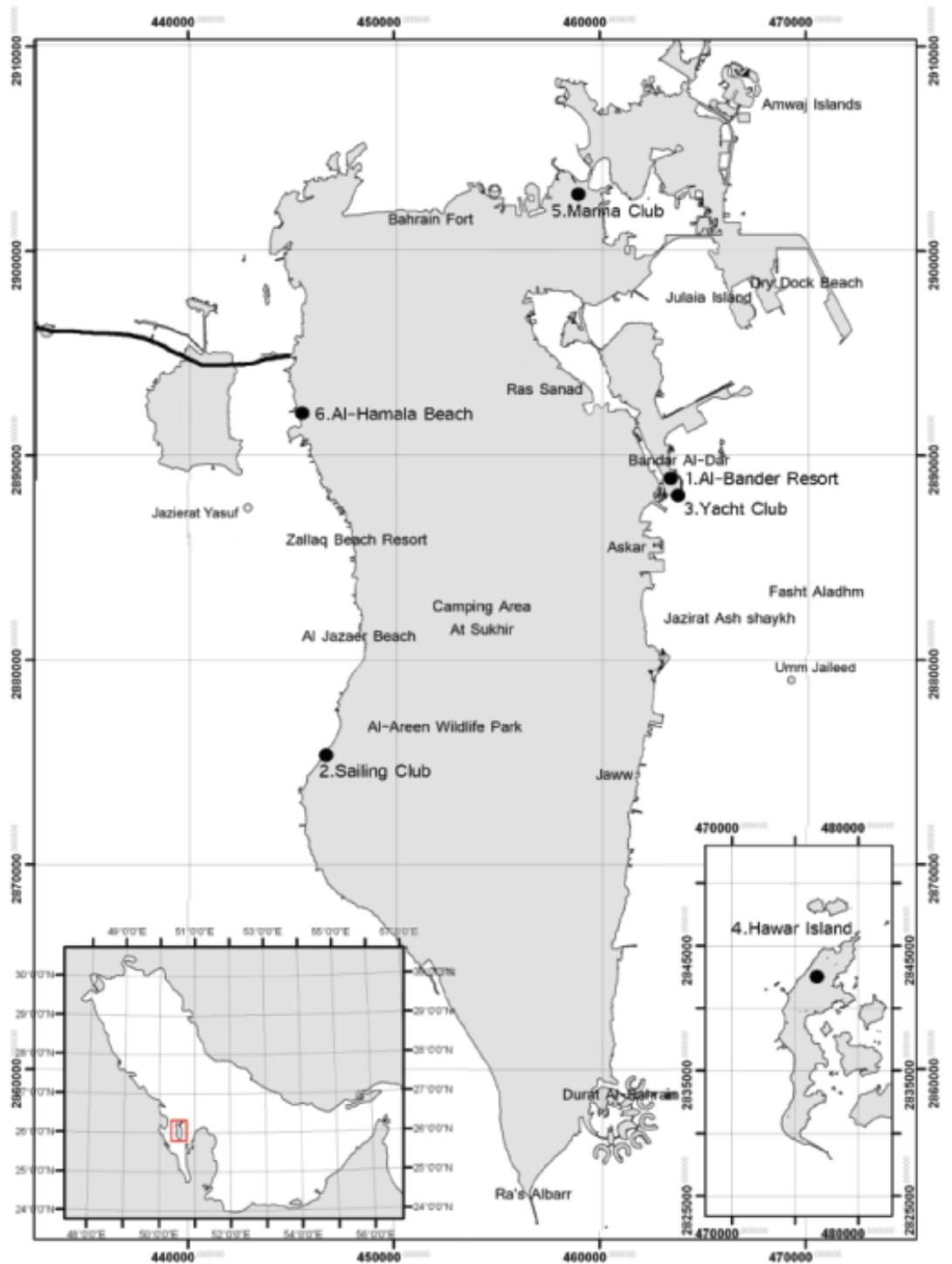


Figure 1: Tourist Study Areas in Bahrain.

Biru, Tessema and Urge, (2017). The aim of the study was to understand the perception and attitude of local people towards livestock wildlife interaction in order to optimize both livestock production and biodiversity conservation in protected areas in Awash National Park in Ethiopia. An Interview to 180 randomly selected households,

re Awash National Park, Ethiopia presenting ethnic groups living around the park, was conducted from August to December 2015 using a semi-structured questionnaire. The study found out that 73% of the households would be ready to live in harmony with the park. However, 85% of park staff considered the community as a threat, due to high livestock grazing pressure and illegal park resource use. Overall, community attitude towards wildlife significantly varied due to educational level, income source, and distance of household from the park. The majority of respondents showed positive attitude towards wildlife, implying a better chance to mobilize the community for conservation activities in the park. Thus, expansion of formal and adult education as well as livelihood diversification strategies that could benefit the pastoral community to improve community attitude towards wildlife so that both wildlife conservation and livestock production can be optimized.

Manu and Kudder, (2012), about Community-Based Ecotourism and Livelihood Enhancement in Sirigu, Ghana. The general aim of the study is to ascertain the livelihood enhancement opportunities brought in the wake of Ecotourism development in Sirigu whilst the specific objectives were to: Identify the income generating and assess the participation of female and focus on the role of stakeholders.

Data was gathered using tools such as interviews, questionnaire administration while secondary data was obtained from the Ghana Tourism. A sample size of 440 respondents was obtained from the community making use of both purposive and simple random sampling techniques. One of the recommendations suggested by the study is to held awareness campaign to target Ghanaians to help stimulate domestic tourism. This will increase domestic arrivals at the destination leading to increase in revenue in the community.

Chiutsi and others about the theory and practice of ecotourism in Southern Africa, (2011). The ecotourism theory suggests that economic development and natural resources conservation are compatible goals. Accordingly, recent definitions of ecotourism have centered on conservation, education, ethics, sustainability, impacts and local benefits as the main variables.

The study uses the data and experiences of two Southern African countries, South Africa and Zimbabwe to assess the practice of ecotourism. The evaluation criteria hovered on issues to do with the theoretical frameworks informing ecotourism development, ecotourism Effects on communities, conservation practices, employment and financial sustainability of the ecotourism ventures.

Through this study, it can be concluded that lack of consensus on what ecotourism represents has led to many tourism products and services designed under the banner

of ecotourism, yet they represent everything against conservation and communities' development.

7. Characteristics of the Sample

706 questionnaires were analyzed; however the size of population varies among analyzed variables due to the missing answers for different questions. Table 1 shows selected demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the surveyed sample. The sample population was mainly dominated by males (64.6%) and within the age category of young adults: (51.4 %) were 19-35 years old; married (57.9 %); Bahraini (45%); highly educated (45.5 % with college degree; and 22% with graduate degree); and represent the lower middle income population (41.6 %) earn less than 500 BD; and 26.9 % earn between 500 BD and 1000 BD. These findings reflect the fact respondents were chosen as leaders of their groups and that most visitors came in family groups. The data in Table 1, also suggest that visitors to these sites are generally well educated, family-oriented young adults, who represent a low-to-middle income, Bahraini population who may not be able to afford the costs of other fancy private outdoor ecotourism sites and resorts. Thus, the analyzed sites can be remarked as recreational sites for local tourism and can be supported or subsidized by the government. The non-Bahraini visitors represent the expatriates who work in Bahrain (13% Asians, 17.4 % Europeans; 6.4 % Americans; and 9.9 % Arab Nationals), and can be included within local tourism. The small percentage of non-Bahraini Gulf states nationals (8.3%) are mainly from Eastern Saudi Arabia; besides others from the other Gulf States.

To foresee the level of the recreation use likely to be placed upon the ecotourism sites, it is useful to analyze the travel behavior of visitors in order to gain an understanding of how often visitors use recreation facilities and determine the variables that most affect the frequency of use. Literature suggest that typical tourists now consider travel distance and road network as the most important factors in the selection of recreational site, especially during the weekends, holidays in summer. In this study (table 2), was found that the majority of respondents were driving their own car (78%), 58% undertaking short day trips during the weekends, and 30% during holidays to proximate resort like to Al-bander Resort. These high percentages as indicated in Table 2 are largely a function of the accessibility of the analyzed sites and the time and mode of transportation. Families prefer to have a one day trip during weekends and holidays as opposed to the time need for extended trips (19% for two day trips; and 11% for 3 and more day trips).

TABLE 1: Demographic and socio-economic variables.

Variables		Count	%
Gender	Male	456	64.6
	Female	250	35.4
Marital status	Single	265	37.5
	Married	409	57.9
	Others	32	4.6
Age in years	Less than 18	38	5.4
	19-35	363	51.4
	36-59	285	40.4
	60 and over	20	2.8
Education Level	Less than high school	45	6.4
	High school	184	26.1
	Graduate	322	45.5
	Post graduate	155	22
Monthly Income/BD	Less than 500	262	41.6
	501-1000	169	26.9
	1001-1500	92	14.6
	1501 and more	106	16.9
Family size	Less than 2	62	8.8
	3 to 5	389	55.1
	6 and more	255	36.1
How many people accompanied	None	222	31.5
	One	94	13.3
	Two to four	315	44.6
	Five and more	75	10.6
Nationality	Bahrain	318	45
	Asians	92	13
	Europeans	123	17.4
	Americans	45	6.4
	Gulf States	58	8.3
	Arabs	70	9.9
Occupation	Military	61	8.7
	Students	83	11.8
	Professional	126	17.8
	Officer	70	9.9
	Private	237	33.6
	Business	94	13.3
	Others	35	4.9

Table 2 also shows that recreation participation in Bahrain is common during the four seasons of the year with slight concentration during summer 40%.

TABLE 2: Travel Behavior of Visitors.

1. Number of visits:	No.	%
Less than 3 times	265	56
4-10 times	142	30
11 and more	68	14
2. Group structure:		
Alone	161	34
With family	213	45
With friends	101	21
3. Mode of Travel		
By car	551	78
Bus	193	
Paid Boat	89	12
Private Boat	47	7
4. Season of Visit		
Summer	282	40
Autumn	141	20
Winter	134	19
Spring	148	21
5. Days of Visit		
weekends	409	58
Holidays	212	30
Week days	85	12
6. Length of Stay		
One day	496	70
Two days	135	19
Three and more	75	11

8. The Study Results and Discussions

Question 1: What are the preferences of recreational activities in Bahrain?

The opportunity for several outdoor activities and services within the site appears to be a key factor because the most popular activities of respondents were swimming 71%, sports 42.4%, picnicking 35%, boating 29.3 %, sightseeing 26.1 %, photography 25.6 %, and fishing 23.8%. These activities reflect the recreational orientation of the

TABLE 3: Preferences of Recreational Activities in Bahrain.

Activities	Frequencies	Preference %
Sightseeing	184	26.1
Hickling	102	14.4
Picnicking	247	35
Sports	299	42.4
Swimming	501	71
Sunbathing	147	20.8
Boating	207	29.3
Water Ski	127	18
Photography	181	25.6
Bird watching	64	9.1
Fishing	168	23.8

Bahraini society toward the sea and open space as well as the geography and climate of Bahrain (table 3).

Question 2: What is the degree of satisfaction towards tourism activities in Bahrain?

TABLE 4: Levels of Satisfaction (%).

Items	Frequency	Degree of Satisfaction %
Entrance Fee	405	57.3
Parking	415	58.8
Picnicking	395	55.9
Restrooms	286	40.5
Cleanness	335	47.5
Staffing	376	53.2
Road Signs	327	46.3

A level of satisfaction towards services (Table 4) at the site found to be important to understanding the nature of the recreation participation. Respondents were not satisfied with the sites which lacked clean restrooms 40.5 %, lack of road signs 46.3 %, and the general cleanness of the site 47.5%. The next level of satisfaction of facilities were the number of professional staff 53.2%, picnic facilities 55.9 %, the entrance fee 57.3%,and parking facilities 58.8%.

Question 3: What are the means to educate tourists about the concept of ecotourism?

TABLE 5: Awareness of Ecotourism Objectives among tourists in Bahrain.

Means of Education	Frequency	%
Family & friends	577	81.7
TV Radio	29	4.1
Newspaper & Journals.	44	6.2
Social Media	30	4.3
Government Issues	26	3.7
Total	706	100

The six tourist sites are located on the coast of Bahrain, and thus rich with marine biology and natural plants. Therefore, the study included questions regarding the awareness of Bahraini recreationists towards ecotourism. The awareness and knowledge of ecotourism will help in protecting the physical environment of Bahrain. A lack of community awareness and negative attitude towards ecotourism is likely to lead to depletion of the environment through mass tourism. Table 5, illustrated the Bahraini tourist awareness, knowledge and interest in ecotourism. About 81.7% of the sample population reported that they got the knowledge of the concept of ecotourism through conversations with family members and friends. Only a small number of respondents reported a significant knowledge of the concept through social media (4.3%), or listening and watching an educational program in the media outlet (4.1%) or reading an article in newspaper or journal (6.2%) or receiving a flier from any governmental source (3.7%). These findings suggest a lack of the government role in educating the community about ecotourism.

Question 4: What are the levels of interest in Knowing about ecotourism?

TABLE 6: Levels of Interest in Knowing about Ecotourism.

Level of Interest	Frequency	%
Very interested	94	13.3
Interested	235	33.3
Fair	153	21.7
Not Interested	224	31.7
Total	706	100

Table 6 shows the level of interest in knowing more about ecotourism. 31.7% of respondents were not interested in knowing about ecotourism, while 21.7% were interest is fair in participating in ecotourism with reasons given as lack of time, lack of information, and busy with more important issues relating to jobs, housing, education and food availability. Those whom interested is around 33.3% and serious interest 13.3% in knowing and learning about ecotourism.

Question 5: What are the levels of interest in taking part of ecotourism?

TABLE 7: Level of Interest in Taking Part of Ecotourism.

Levels in Taking Part	Frequency	%
Very Interested	229	32.4
Interested	364	51.6
Fair	90	12.7
Not Interested	23	3.3
Total	706	100

Table 7 shows the levels of interest in taking part of ecotourism. 51.6% of respondents are interested in taking part of ecotourism, and 32.4% are very interested in becoming involved in ecotourism, 12.7% have fair interest, while only 3.3% showed no interest. The optimistic interpretation of these findings suggests a bright future for ecotourism and constantly demand for more of governmental and private sector for ecotourism. This support can be achieved through improving all means of media which help in improving the level of awareness and interest in ecotourism among residents as well as among local tourist in Bahrain.

9. Conclusion

There is low level of awareness and interest in ecotourism among local communities in Bahrain. This study proved the above mentioned statement and identified the factors which affect tourist perceptions and preference in choosing recreational sites. It also clearly shows variations in perceptions and preferences related to variations in the demographic and socioeconomic background of tourists.

This type of study is fundamental to tourism and recreation planning as a dynamic incremental process that affects the spatial structure of the economy, and the preservation of the environment as a national wealth. The ecotourism has a supply side

and demand side, and focuses on the protection of the biodiversity of tourism and recreation sites. This can be achieved by implementing environmental laws that regulate the proper use and enjoyment of these sites without damaging the natural plants and living species. Laws alone are not enough or invoking them. There should be an environmental and cultural ecology of these sites by local residents and visitors alike.

The demand side focuses on the market side of tourism, the consumers, their perceptions, preferences and awareness of tourism sites. In addition, the focus on appreciation of the physical environment and willingness to respect, and protect the environmental and cultural ecology of these sites. This can be achieved through education, awareness, value systems and customer provider combined ethics.

Ecotourism sites must be viewed as attractions to sustain the environment and entertain tourists with a sense of environmental and cultural ecology. As much as we are concerned about human rights, we must also become concerned about environmental rights. If the focus of satisfaction is limited to one side, definitely the other side will be the loser.

References

- [1] Bahrain Authority for culture and Antiquities (2017), our year of Archaeology, Bahrain.
- [2] Biru, Yihew, Tessema, Zewdu K. and Urge. Mengistu, (2017), Perception and attitude of pastoralists on livestock-wildlife interactions around Awash National Park, Ethiopia: implication for Biodiversity conservation, *Ecological Processes*, 6:13.
- [3] Bran, R. and Cao, D. (2006) Uncovering the Macrostructure of Tourists' Preferences. A Choice Experiment Analysis of Tourism Demand to Sardinia, Social Science Research Network Electronic paper Collection, the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei Notedi lavoro series Index (<http://www.feem.it/pub/publications/wpapaers/default.htm>).
- [4] Butcher. Jim (2007), *Ecotourism, NGOs and Development*, Routledge, New York, USA.
- [5] Chutsi, Simon and Others, 2011. The theory and practice of ecotourism in Southern
- [6] Africa, *Journal of Hospitality Management and Tourism* Vol. 2(2) pp. 14-21.
- [7] Cooper, Chris and Hall, C. Michael (2011), *Contemporary Tourism: an In International Approach*, Routledge, New York, USA.
- [8] Manu, Isaac and Kuuder, Conrad-J.Wuleka, (2012). Community-Based Ecotourism and Livelihood Enhancement in Sirigu, Ghana, *International Journal of Humanities*

and Social Science, Vol. 2 No. 18; October.

- [9] Mowforth, Martin and Munt, Ian, (2009), *Tourism and Sustainability: Development, globalization and new tourism in the Third World*.Routledge, Third edition, NY, USA.
- [10] Najjar, Y., Donnell, R. and Samawi, H. (1992) *Recreational Preferences among State Park Users in New England: A Case Study of the Massachusetts State Park System*, *Studies in New England Geography*, Keene, New Hampshire.
- [11] Nowark, J., Sahli, M., and Sgro. P. (2005) *Tourism, Increasing Returns and Welfare*, in Lanza A., Marleandya, A. and Pigiara F. (eds.) *The Economics of Tourism and Sustainable development*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, U.K.
- [12] Samawi, Habis and Al-Sayyed, Hashem (2014), *Marine Tourism in Bahrain: Trends and Prospects*, *Jordan Journal of Social Science*, Volume (7), No. (1).pp. 9-32.
- [13] Szell, Andrrea,B.and Hallett 1V, Lucius F.(2013) *Attitudes and Perceptions of Local Residents and Tourists toward the protected area of Retezat National Park, Romania*, *International Journal of Humanities and social Science*, Vol.3, No.4,pp 18-34.
- [14] UNWTO, 2015, booklet about Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- [15] World Travel & Tourism Countries WTTC (2015), *Travel and Tourism: Economic Impact 2015*.
- [16] www.cio.gov.bh, 2017.