

Hospitality and Competitiveness in Protected Areas: evidences from a multiple case study

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Abstract

This study analyzes hospitality relations between the management of protected areas and the stakeholders involved, focusing on the influence they have on the competitiveness of destinations. The objects of study are three protected areas located in the northeast region of Brazil: Lençóis Maranhenses National Park, Jericoacoara National Park, and Delta do Parnaíba Environmental Protection Area. A multiple-case study was developed using qualitative and quantitative methods: semi-structured interviews, unsystematic observation, and survey. We verified a relationship of dependency between stakeholders, such as tour guides and travel agencies, and the management of these places, through the commitment to the rules provided for their accreditation as the basis of service provision. Hospitality relations between the host and stakeholders involved with tourism favor mutual trust by influencing directly both management conditions of the protected areas and perceptions of competitiveness of destinations. The results also show that hospitality relations affect positively visitors' intention to return.

Keywords: Hospitality; Stakeholders; Services; Competitiveness; Protected areas.

Resumo

Hospitalidade e Competitividade em Áreas Protegidas: evidências de um estudo de casos múltiplos

Este artigo analisa as relações de hospitalidade entre a gestão de unidades de conservação e seus *stakeholders* envolvidos com o turismo, com ênfase em suas possíveis influências na competitividade dos destinos. Os objetos de estudo são três áreas protegidas localizadas no Nordeste brasileiro: Parque Nacional dos Lençóis Maranhenses, Parque Nacional de Jericoacoara e a Área de Proteção Ambiental Delta do Parnaíba. Foi desenvolvido um estudo de casos múltiplos, com abordagens qualitativa e quantitativa, tendo como fontes de evidências entrevistas semiestruturadas, observação assistemática e *survey*. Verificou-se que há uma relação de dependência de *stakeholders*, como a dos condutores de turismo com

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a gestão desses locais, por meio do compromisso com as normas previstas pelo credenciamento como base para a prestação do serviço. As relações de hospitalidade entre o anfitrião e seus *stakeholders* ligados ao turismo favorecem a existência de um ambiente de confiança mútua, influenciando diretamente na capacidade de gestão das unidades de conservação e na percepção de competitividade dos destinos. Foi comprovado também que as relações de hospitalidade reforçam as intenções de retorno dos visitantes.

Palavras-chave: Hospitalidade; *Stakeholders*; Serviços; Competitividade; Áreas protegidas.

Resumen

Hospitalidad y Competitividad en Áreas Protegidas: evidencias de un estudio de casos múltiples

Este artículo analiza las relaciones de hospitalidad existentes entre la gestión de las áreas protegidas y las partes interesadas que participan en el turismo, con énfasis en la influencia de la competitividad de los destinos. Los objetos de estudio fueron tres áreas protegidas ubicadas en la región Nordeste de Brasil: Parque Nacional dos Lençóis Maranhenses, Parque Nacional de Jericoacoara y Protección del Medio Ambiente Área de Delta. Un estudio de casos múltiples se desarrolló con abordajes cualitativos y cuantitativos, y con las siguientes fuentes de evidencia: entrevistas semiestructuradas, observación sistemática y encuesta. Los resultados revelan la existencia de una relación de dependencia entre las partes interesadas en la gestión de estos sitios, tales como los guías turísticos y las agencias de viaje, con respecto a las normas establecidas para la acreditación como base en la prestación del servicio. Las relaciones de hospitalidad entre el anfitrión y sus grupos de interés relacionados con el turismo favorecen un ambiente de confianza mutua, influyendo directamente en la capacidad de gestión de las áreas protegidas y la percepción de competitividad de los destinos. Se reveló que las relaciones de hospitalidad refuerzan las intenciones de retorno de los visitantes.

Palabras clave: Hospitalidad; Grupos de interés; Servicios; Competitividad; Áreas protegidas.

INTRODUCTION

The complexity of the administration of protected areas (PAs) is marked by a constant interaction between their managers and the tourism production chain. It is expected a continuing need for strategies directed at the service management of these spaces, especially of those intended for public use, which are disputed by different stakeholders' actions and interests. Are the relationships between these subjects marked by hospitality? Can hospitality be one of the competitiveness factors of tourist destinations?

Based on these initial considerations, this article analyzes possible hospitality relationships between protected areas and their tourism-related stakeholders, together with their influence on destination competitiveness. Three propositions were investigated: (P1) tourism-related services in the PAs are influenced by the relationships established with stakeholders; (P2) hospitality relations established with PA stakeholders favor an environment of mutual trust capable of influencing these tourist destinations management

and competitiveness; and (P3) hospitality relations reinforce PA visitors' return intentions.

This research was developed at the regional level, in PAs that abide by national policies and under the administration of the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMbio). We opted to investigate protected areas in the states of Maranhão, Piauí, and Ceará, due to the offer of similar tourism services aimed at integrating with nature, wind and water sports, as well as the sunny beaches and landscapes.

The empirical study is supported by theoretical reflections on hospitality, services, competitiveness, protected areas, and stakeholder management.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hospitality, services, and competitiveness

Hospitality can be conceptualized in different ways. Some authors understand it as the relationship between the host and the people hosted (Baptista, 2002; Camargo, 2003; Lashley, 2004).

On the other hand, according to Cruz (2002), it is noteworthy that the sense of hospitality expands beyond people's gathering, comprising the notion of quality of the spatial conditions expressed in the infrastructure of the host site. In agreement with Cruz', there are Grinover's (2002, p. 35) ideas, which argue that the city becomes more hospitable when "the user can easily 'read it', and its constituent elements are perceived and interpreted without much effort." Cruz (2002, p. 40) adds that some places become more hospitable than others due to how the socio-spatial dimension is organized to welcome visitors. Also, according to the author, one should consider the concept of "tourist hospitality" to describe the preparation of places based on hospitality through private strategies and public policies with tourist structures and assistance services. Thus, components of spontaneity and artificiality are often combined. Cruz (2002, p. 46) explains: "in addition to the cordiality in the contact between host and visitor, and the necessary tourist infrastructures, the tourist hospitality also encompasses a multitude of infrastructures and services." Basic infrastructures are water, wastewater treatment network, electric power, and phone services, which influence the hospitable conditions at the site, as the location could be considered the main object of tourism consumption. The phenomenon of "tourist hospitality" is the result of the socio-cultural, professional, political and spatial nature of hospitality (Cruz, 2002).

In this article, hospitality is understood as a phenomenon perceived by people hosting and being hosted, who, according to their life experiences, can attribute meaning to tangible aspects in this welcoming, such as the infrastructure of spaces.

Wada (2003) states that hospitality is fundamental to the tourist business because it contributes to understanding the role of the host. After all, hospitality is a service (Cruz, 2002), adding a human aspect to the professional element.

Recent studies indicate that hospitality influences both relationship optimization, and a consequent improvement of organizational strategies. Lugosi

(2008, p. 148), for example, concludes that “it is in the social encounter, sometimes between provider and client, but often between consumers themselves, that environments become hospitable.” In other words, harmonious relationships between managers, employees, and customers are foundational to the existence of an organization that relies on hospitality to provide its services.

Consequently, the organization, with all its employees, must fully understand the products they offer, and to whom such services are being offered (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2014). There are internal and external factors that influence product composition in an organization. Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2014, p. 22) introduce the term “service package” to designate the “set of goods and services [provided] in an environment.”

Organizations should also consider the significance of the so-called “moment of truth,” which is the moment when interaction takes place between the client and the service provider, and where each plays a role, over the environment prepared by the organization (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2014). More than that, this service encounter enables the consumer to experience and evaluate the quality of the service. Such experience and evaluation happen through the comparison between the service received versus customer expectations, and the assessment of quality versus the same subjects’ previous experiences (Hunt & Ivergard, 2015).

Different ways of measuring the quality of service delivery are applied as a cornerstone for the leverage of competitive advantage. Wada and Moretti (2014) note that all of them were somehow inspired by SERVQUAL, proposed in the 1980s as a pioneer quality measurement scale. However, there is a lack of understanding of the host by existing measurement scales. According to the authors, “hospitality could be a valuable construct that supports quality services, with the expected consistency and consequent competitive advantage of the organization making use of” the above concept (Wada & Moretti, 2014, p. 102).

Ritchie and Crouch (2010) provide a broad view of the determining factors for a destination’s competitiveness. Through qualitative research, the authors adapt the Destination Competitiveness/Sustainability Model to the Brazilian reality, taking as a basis the perceptions of North American tourist destinations’ managers. In this model, micro and macro environments are taken into consideration. Macro environments encompass groups related to economics, technology, ecology, legal and political developments, sociocultural issues, and the demographic environment. Within the microenvironment, factors related to consumers, suppliers, international facilitators, competitors, destination culture, and other different audiences (media, government departments, financial institutions, residents, citizen action groups) are mentioned (Ritchie & Crouch, 2010).

Ritchie and Crouch’s (2010) contribution approaches the context of this article once the authors define hospitality as an element that deserves attention on the reflection on tourism destination competitiveness. The authors argue that

The operating sectors of tourism are responsible for delivering high quality, memorable experiences. Care must be taken, however, to wrap these experiences in a warm spirit of hospitality. Quite simply, it is not enough to deliver all the

attributes of an experience in a cold and detached manner. Each individual visitor must feel that they are more than a source of cold cash revenue for the business or destination. Rather, visitors have a natural human desire for warm acceptance as they seek to enjoy the range of experiences the Destination has to offer. As such, the challenge facing destinations is to deliver their experiences in a way that enables the visitor to believe they are welcome; that they are truly a guest. (Ritchie & Crouch, 2010, p. 1.059)

In this sense, validating the perception of the demand over services provided by the host is a way of approaching hospitality as one of the determining factors for the competitiveness of an organization (Wada & Moretti, 2014) and of a tourist destination (Ritchie & Crouch, 2010).

Tourism in protected areas and stakeholder management

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) launched a concept for protected areas that is currently used by researchers and governments. The Brazilian Ministry of Environment, for example, has adopted the IUCN concept, which translates as “land and/or sea areas especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and its associated natural and cultural resources, managed by legal instruments or other effective means” (Ministério do Meio Ambiente, 2012).

Protected areas, also called PAs (Lopes & Vialôgo, 2013), comprise different classifications and possibilities for tourist and recreational uses. Whitelaw, King, and Tolkach (2014) classify protected areas based on two major variables: biodiversity and visitation level. It is a proposal whose dimensions are both independent and interconnected, focusing on tourist visits in relevant areas to generate revenue, while protecting the ecological characteristics. Tourism activities will, however, depend on the environmental value attributed to a protected area zone. As an example, the higher use/lower environmental ratio of parks makes it possible to invest in picnic sites where visitors pay for services such as parking and, in some situations, low-impact housing services.

Differently, in areas where there is a higher environmental value, the options available for tourism use are restricted. However, Whitelaw, King, and Tolkach (2014) understand that it is possible to leverage funds for the maintenance of protected areas by collecting tickets and offering guided tours and other activities, if they are compatible with high-value zones. In the case of visitations, the responsible organizations require appropriate licensing and training for tourism exploitation.

The protected area management model is crucial for the conservation of local resources (Sarfati & Sano, 2012) and should consider its stakeholders' actions, which vary according to the environmental, cultural, social, political and economic contexts of the site, region and country (Imran, Alam, & Beaumont, 2014). As a possible response to this complexity, Moore and Weiler (2009) warn about the need for partnerships for tourism governance in protected areas. According to the authors, collaboration, participation, and stakeholder engagement in tourism is a central issue that directly involves the inclusion

of surrounding communities (Raimundo, 2008). These concepts attempt to address the “limited capacities; reduced services; and declining budgets for tourism management in protected areas, as well as for other management needs” (Moore & Weiler, 2009, p. 129).

In countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States, New Zealand and those in the United Kingdom, the private sector is a major partner in managing tourism in protected areas. This aims at perceived efficiency gains and responds to the decrease in confidence regarding government investments (Moore & Weiler, 2009). With the increase in the number of protected areas, such occurrence is typical and urgent, which challenges the sources of government resources directed to sites maintenance (Eagles et al., 2012).

The adoption of the management model will depend, among other issues, on the governance philosophy. There are different academic positionings on the matter. More (2005 cited by Eagles, 2009) states that it is common to think of state appropriation as the most efficient means for social equity. Dixon and Sherman (1990 cited by Eagles, 2009), however, believe that private enterprises can offer better financial efficiency in the administration of protected areas.

Protected areas management deals with a multitude of stakeholders. The complex tourism activity in the spaces in question should consider the implementation of relationship management to identify and resolve gaps with each stakeholder. This is an ongoing process that involves “stakeholders’ interests that may differ from each other and/or the goals of sustainable tourism” (Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2015, p. 92).

The term stakeholder has been prominent in the theory and practice of organizations since the late twentieth century (Bryson, 2004). A classic concept of the term was put forward by Freeman (1984, p. 46), and states that a stakeholder is “any group or individual that can affect or be affected by the accomplishment of an organization’s purpose.” Bryson (2004) argues that considering individuals and groups that do not exercise power over the organization is a matter of democracy and social justice and, therefore, all interests must be part of an inclusive approach of stakeholders.

In Freeman’s opinion (1984, p. 53), it is ideal to think of stakeholder management because of “an organization’s need to manage relationships with its various stakeholders in an action-oriented way.” Managing stakeholders involves different perspectives and possibilities but identifying the individuals and groups that influence the development of an organization is a universal procedure for any approach (Bryson, 2004).

Stakeholder identification should be understood from a rational perspective, pointing to perceived interests. In the second moment, the implicit or explicit management processes used in the relationship with these stakeholders are identified and, finally, the set of transactions or bargains between the organization and stakeholders is understood. An organization’s stakeholder management capacity is directly linked to its ability to consider these three levels of analysis. Such a process provides for the implementation of organizational strategies, as a stakeholder who previously seemed to have little influence on the organization’s results becomes strategically managed (Freeman, 1984).

METHODOLOGY

Research context

This article analyzes the possible hospitality relations between the administration of protected areas and their tourism-related stakeholders, together with their influence over destination competitiveness. To this end, three PAs considered the main tourist attractions that comprise the Route of Emotions across the states of Maranhão, Piauí, and Ceará, were chosen as the *locus* of this research: Lençóis Maranhenses National Park, Delta do Parnaíba Environmental Protection Area, and Jericoacoara National Park.

The Lençóis Maranhenses National Park was created by Decree No. 86,060, of June 2, 1981; and has an area of 155 thousand hectares (600 sq. mi), including 90 thousand hectares (347 sq. mi) of dunes and lagoons across three municipalities of the state of Maranhão: Barreirinhas, Santo Amaro, and Primeira Cruz (Ministério do Turismo, 2017).

Delta do Parnaíba Environmental Protection Area (EPA) was created on August 28, 1996. Currently, this PA covers approximately 3,031 km² (over 32,600 sq. ft) across municipalities of the three states that integrate the Route of Emotions, them being: Luís Corrêa, Morro da Mariana, and Parnaíba in the state of Piauí; Araioses and Tutoia in the state of Maranhão; and Chaval and Barroquinha in the state of Ceará (Ministério do Turismo, 2017).

Jericoacoara National Park, in turn, is the most recent of the three, being founded in February 2002. This PA covers an area of 8,850 hectares (over 34 sq. mi), across the municipalities of Cruz and Jijoca de Jericoacoara, the latter posing as the main gateway for tourist visitations (Ministério do Turismo, 2017).

Therefore, this study is developed in the context of regional tourism, contemplating “a subspace composed of a set of municipalities, comprising a certain set with certain characteristics” (Sarti & Queiroz, 2012, p. 10). In other words, and agreement with Tomazzoni (2012), it is noted that the cultural, economic, and political-administrative aspects define the configuration of a region, permeating the most diverse interests of its social agents.

In Brazilian territory, ICMBio is responsible for the administration of protected areas. According to the institute itself (Ministério do Meio Ambiente, 2015, p. 34), in recent years the agency has faced budgetary and personnel constraints that negatively impact the “operationalization of its decentralized bodies and, consequently, its mission.”

Method

This study was outlined through a multiple-case study. As the term suggests, this method contains more than one case, considered more robust studies involving both resources and longer times, and the logic of literal and theoretical replications (Yin, 2010). Yin (2010) recommends the adoption of a research protocol, aimed at guiding the researcher in data collection.

For data collection, *a priori* categorization was elaborated based on the theoretical framework. To Bardin (2011, p. 147), the categorization

is an operation of classifying constitutive elements of a set by differentiation, and then by gender regrouping (analogy), according to previously defined criteria. Categories are headings or classes which bring together a group of elements (record units; in this case, content analysis) under a generic title; such grouping is based on the elements common characteristics. (Bardin, 2011, p. 147, own translation)

Field procedures followed three sources of evidence, respectively: semi-structured interviews, unsystematic observation, and survey. The techniques were implemented to assess the three propositions of the study (Chart 1).

Chart 1 – Correlation between propositions and techniques adopted

Proposition	Research technique
P1 – Services related to tourism in PAs are influenced by relationships established with stakeholders	Semi-structured interviews Unsystematic observation
P2 – The hospitality relations established with the PA stakeholders favor an environment of mutual trust that can influence the management and competitiveness of these tourist destinations.	Semi-structured interviews
P3 – Hospitality relations reinforce PA visitors' return intentions	Semi-structured interviews Survey

The categorization served as an interview script applied to protected area managers and their stakeholders. During the interviews, each manager was presented with a map with the possible key stakeholders of their administration and asked whether they agreed with the suggestion on the map. At the time, each manager was asked to point out stakeholders regarded as the most relevant, who became our group 2 of respondents. In all, nine interviews were conducted, that is, three with managers and six with stakeholders.

All respondents were initially contacted by telephone. The interviews were authorized through a signed term, recorded and transcribed. The content of this source of evidence has been addressed through thematic analysis, which “consists in the discovery of ‘cores of meaning’ that make up communication, and which presence or frequency of appearance may mean something to the analytical objective chosen” (Bardin, 2011, p. 135). The subjects analyzed were the same ones used in conducting the interviews, through the *a priori* categories, emphasizing the examples mentioned by the interviewed subjects.

The unsystematic observation, in turn, allowed to complement the analysis of the support infrastructure for the provision of tourist services/visitation. In this kind of observation, “the researcher must be aware of what should be observed. Once the focus of the observation has been defined, the second step is to identify the participants in the situation, following the description of the conjuncture in which the phenomenon develops” (Dencker & Viá, 2001,

p. 148). This observation was guided by some *a priori* elaborated categories, the same ones used during the interviews. However, the analysis of the interviews provided new subcategories for this stage of the research protocol, such as tourist signage, access infrastructure, cleaning, first aid/rescue services, tourist information/visitor station, toilets, accessibility for people with disabilities or reduced mobility, etc. The visitation to the PAs took place between October 24 and November 7, 2016, with the collection of field notes and photographic records (Alves, 2011).

After the analysis of the interviews and the unsystematic observation, a questionnaire was developed for the survey source of evidence, which was applied to people who have visited one or more of the protected areas under analysis. The first step was to conduct a pre-test with a group of 30 respondents on January 16 and 17, 2017. After some adjustments, there were 430 respondents via an online form on the SurveyMonkey website (<https://pt.surveymonkey.com>). The link to access the questionnaire was shared on Facebook and WhatsApp social media between January 18 and 24, 2017. The sample was not based on the three PAs' annual collective of visitors, as the results are not intended to compare the number of people who claimed to have visited the park(s) and/or the environmental protection area(s). On the contrary, they mean to identify as main evidence, regardless of which PA was visited, the perceptions about the remarkable moments of hospitality, and whether those influence visitors' intentions to return. The graphs and percentage of responses were automatically generated by the SurveyMonkey website.

RESULTS

Managers' perceptions

The organization of tourist activity in national parks happens differently than in environmental protection areas. According to respondents' answers, the management plan is the legal instrument guiding visitations in the PA, except in the EPA investigated, which differs from the parks precisely by the absence of this document.

All respondents pointed out management issues. One of them being the lack of human resources, of which consequences are: poor flow and time management at both entries and circulation areas within the park; activity overload; poor maintenance of the existing structure at the park entrance; irregular occupations and attractions degradation – contamination; and the difficulty in establishing institutional dialogue with government agencies.

PAs' management deals daily with a series of issues considered a priority by the institute. Therefore, the concept of hospitality is not part of their planning, nor thought in their daily actions.

Respondents believe that a physical structure at the entrance of the park or environmental protection area, with the presence of ICMBio employees as a means of visitor control or even the institute's office, would be a way of welcoming the newcomers. However, respondents state that the structure of the units they manage themselves does not offer such conditions.

The EPA chief mentions that ICMBio's presence during visitor's reception would be a way to ensure a secure source of information, like a visitor center or tourist information center. Likewise, it was reported by two managers that certain PA spaces should be flagged.

Regarding security, one of the managers believes that, currently, the hospitality between ICMBio and the visitor occurs "*through the ordinance that establishes the criteria for accreditation*" of tourist services – conducting visitation, sightseeing, transportation. Thus, ICMBio's hospitality would be the guarantee for visitors to hire a safe service with authorized companies, upon the condition that certain requirements be met. The same interviewee acknowledges "*it would be ideal to have a visitation structure, bathroom, cafeteria, which would provide greater comfort to the tourist.*"

All respondents agreed to nominate the following stakeholders: tourists; NGOs; city, state and federal governments; universities; tourism agencies; hotels; the local community; and employees. Each manager, however, added their stakeholders: Port authorities and *Toyoteiros* cooperatives, for the Lençóis Maranhenses National Park; volunteer professionals, the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa), tourism drivers, and Brazilian Service of Support for Micro and Small Enterprises (Sebrae), for the EPA Delta do Parnaíba¹; and Sebrae, the Brazilian Ecotourism and Adventure Tourism Trade Association (Abeta), and banks, for Jericoacoara National Park².

The tourism services provided by the private sector are the same in the three protected areas: transportation – driving – of the visitors, food, and lodging. Perceptions that hospitality relationships are considered in service delivery vary among managers. But as noted, these services are provided by businesses and residents, not by ICMBio.

The hospitality between ICMBio management and stakeholders occurs when there is joint work, which consequently stimulates destination competitiveness. In one report, it was pointed out that, to the PA, hospitality is a factor as important as the natural and cultural attractions that make up its landscape. In the same way, there is a perception that PA management is as responsible for its competitiveness as its stakeholders since hospitality must originate from everyone involved, including ICMBio itself. In the respondents' opinion, hospitality is the basis for dialogue and partnership.

The involvement of the community, businesses, and governments in favor of PA tourism is perceived by managers through the PA advisory board. One of the ways to maintain a dialogue with its main stakeholders is the advisory board, which, in the report of Parque dos Lençóis' manager, was comparable to a "*great hospitality center for all involved, since the board provides a space for all these elements. . . that will try to meet the interests of everyone involved in park management.*"

However, the same manager reports cases of companies that promote tours, but do not cooperate with the conservation of the unit, acting without their consent. Cases of hospitality, inhospitality, and even hostility were mentioned. The manager of the Lençóis Maranhenses National Park reported, for example,

1. The interviewee was requested to add two stakeholders, but listed four, instead (11/02/2016).

2. The interviewee was requested to add two stakeholders, but added three, instead (11/03/2016).

that not all tourism agencies seek dialogue with ICMBio management to tailor their services to the *“possibilities available at the park.”* The interviewee emphasizes that respecting the PA standards, embodied in the management plan, is a way of establishing hospitality relations with management and explains that their management is available for dialogue with these companies, but this is not always reciprocated, mainly because interests between the groups diverge.

Stakeholders' Perception

Stakeholders interviewed perform different professional activities. There are representatives of civil society, public agencies, and private initiative. The heterogeneous profile of this group reflects the varied perceptions of its operation, contribution, and relationship with ICMBio management.

Just as the means of action and contribution vary according to the stakeholder, hospitality relations established between this group and ICMBio are perceived at different points. In some cases, it is found that stakeholders' interests are crucial to their analysis of hospitality. For some, hospitality with the management of ICMBio is a condition for their business survival. According to one of the stakeholders at the Lençóis Maranhenses National Park, for example, in the face of discussions about the privatization of public use of this PA, ICMBio has positioned itself as a partner of transport providers. The interviewee explains that, through a decree created by the institute, the driving of visitors will remain under the responsibility of residents of the Barreirinhas municipality, provided certain rules are followed.

However, not all service providers that maintain relations with ICMBio are grateful for this, as highlighted by the interviewee's report. This gratitude is also due to the host's willingness to dialogue with their stakeholders, understand their interests, analyze the viability of demands, and value the services provided by local companies.

Respondents state that the hospitality relationships established at the PAs between service providers and visitors favor service quality, customer satisfaction, and reduced visitation impact. One of the stakeholders stated that *“since we have a highly differentiated welcome, this becomes one of the main attractions of the region. I believe that having a tourism infrastructure is as important as having natural attractions.”*

Dialogue and partnerships are necessary to make this happen, as evidenced by one of the interviewees: *“I believe that through regular meetings. . . with the head of the National Park meeting us so that we can. . . show what's going on during the tours, and the tourist complaint.”*

All stakeholders agree that hospitality relationships can influence the PA's competitiveness. One of them warns about the negative effects of the lack of hospitality: *“In fact, from my point of view, we have suffered this consequence. This amateur tourism that doesn't mature, this lack of ethics, this lack of responsibility, this lack of security.”*

The six stakeholders agree with the statement that their relationship with ICMBio management contributes to the competitiveness of the investigated destinations. As one interviewee states, hospitality has to do with the visitor's perception of the service purchased, and this is crucial for their

return and preference over other destinations. Even if the services are not offered by the same company, as they are many – lodging, food, tours across PA attractions – *“they are all connected,”* as reported. Following this logic, everyone is equally responsible for the good relationship they establish with each other and with customers.

The “connection” between stakeholders is exemplified in a tone of discontent with the current situation of the Route of Emotions by one of the EPA’s interviewees, who still does not perceive a close dialogue between representatives of public bodies, private sector, and civil society on the route. There are only divergent interests on the one hand, and disinterest on the other. It was also informed that the lack of dialogue is common across the three units of the Route of Emotions, and there is also dispute for the best reputation among the stakeholders in each state – Maranhão, Piauí, and Ceará –, each claiming that their state provides the best tourist offer. This statement makes sense when analyzing the interview of one of the Jericoacoara National Park’s stakeholders, who attributes some of the route’s success to the park.

Even with the recognition that hospitality relations are favorable to competitiveness, partnerships and dialogues are not frequent among the stakeholders themselves.

Unsystematic observation

The field notes analyzed in this subsection highlight some aspects of ICMBio’s office infrastructure, visitation structure, and the services offered by tourist transportation companies in both parks and the environmental protection area.

Each PA has its headquarters, except for the EPA, which shares space with the management of other public agencies. Similarly, all office locations are not visually close to the access to major attractions. In other words, visitors access protected areas without noticing the presence of government agency management.

During the observation days, no obvious control of visitors’ entry and service providers was found. All three administrations own vehicles for the operationalization of the work within the PAs, however, some are defective. Concerning the EPA, the supervision of visitors flow and service providers becomes more unfeasible due to the fact it is a “territorially open!” area, and it does not have any management plan. In Jericoacoara, however, watchtowers were observed in some park entrances, but in a precarious state – part of the structure was broken and grazed – and apparently disabled (Figure 1).

With few exceptions, the trails and attractions of the Jericoacoara National Park PA are unmarked.

There are no sanitary facilities – except in Delta do Parnaíba, where there are restrooms inside the boats–, no accessibility for people with disabilities or reduced mobility, no spaces/baskets for solid waste collection nor first aid posts in any of the attractions inside protected areas.

No food or drinks are commercialized within the public areas of Parque dos Lençóis Maranhenses and EPA Delta do Parnaíba. These services are provided by the tour operators themselves, and there are occasional street vendors at the Jericoacoara National Park.

Figure 1 – Watchtowers at Jericoacoara National Park

Source – Personal archive (2016)

The services mentioned are provided by some companies that operationalize visitations. As a result, some actions are improvised while others are previously planned, such as the provision of appropriate containers or objects for the collection of solid waste generated during tours, as well as the provision of first aid kits. In general, it was found that the main visitor services are offered by the companies that sell the tours.

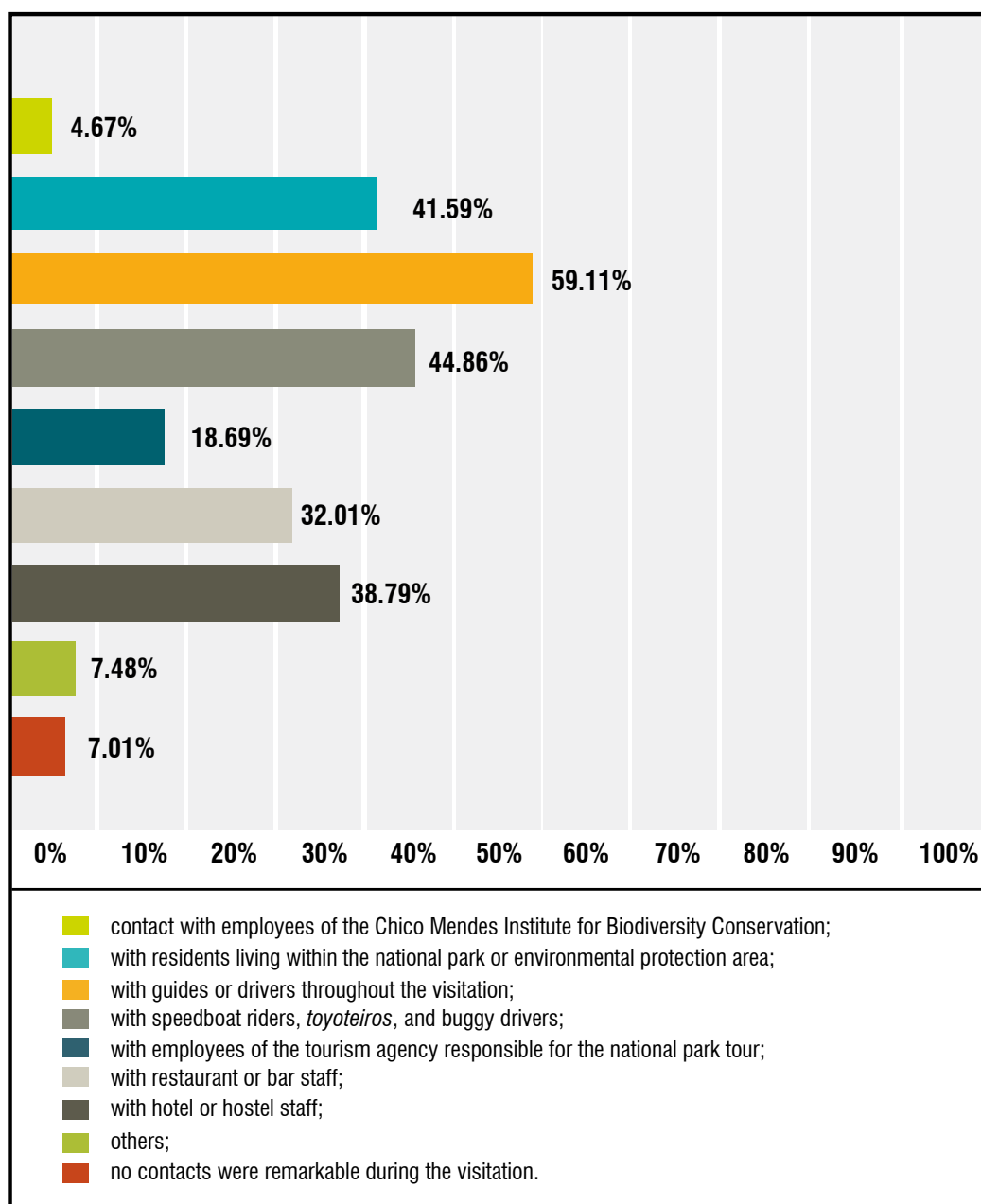
Survey

Survey respondents have a diverse profile in terms of age and household income. The predominant age group is of people between 21 and 30 years old (49.77%), in contrast to the lower percentage, young people under 20 years old (4.44%). The number of respondents that informed their earnings increases according to the amount; for example, 1.64% said they have no income, while those who earn over R\$ 8,800.00 lead, with 34.43%. That is, the majority declares to obtain more than ten minimum wages monthly (in reais). On the other hand, education is split between subjects who own postgraduate degrees (45.65%), and undergraduate degrees (45.18%), with a percentage difference of less than 1% (0.47%). Those who have attended high school make up to 9.18%, and there was no respondent at the elementary level.

When asked about visiting other PAs, most reported they did (46.28%), corresponding to almost half of the total respondents. In turn, 116 people (26.98%) were unsure, and 115 (26.74%) have never been to other protected areas.

The most striking contacts during the visitation, according to the respondents, were with guides or drivers (59.11%), motorboat riders, *toyoteiros* and *buggy drivers* (44.86%), and with residents living inside the parks and the EPA (41.59%) (Graph 1).

Graph 1 – Outstanding hospitality contacts during visits to the PAs

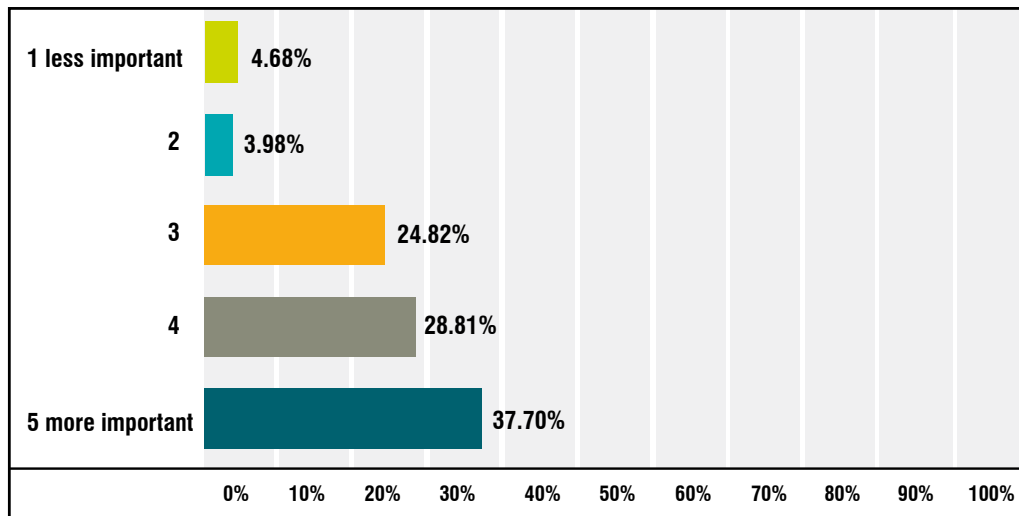


Source – Survey data (2017)

Therefore, we found that hospitality is more noticeable within protected areas. Services that are usually provided at times unconnected to visits to attractions, such as lodging, food, and agency, are less perceived as outstanding, all below 40%; and few respondents (4.67%) identify ICMBio as a host, leading to the assumption that no contact is made between agency staff and most visitors, or existing contacts are not as striking as the others.

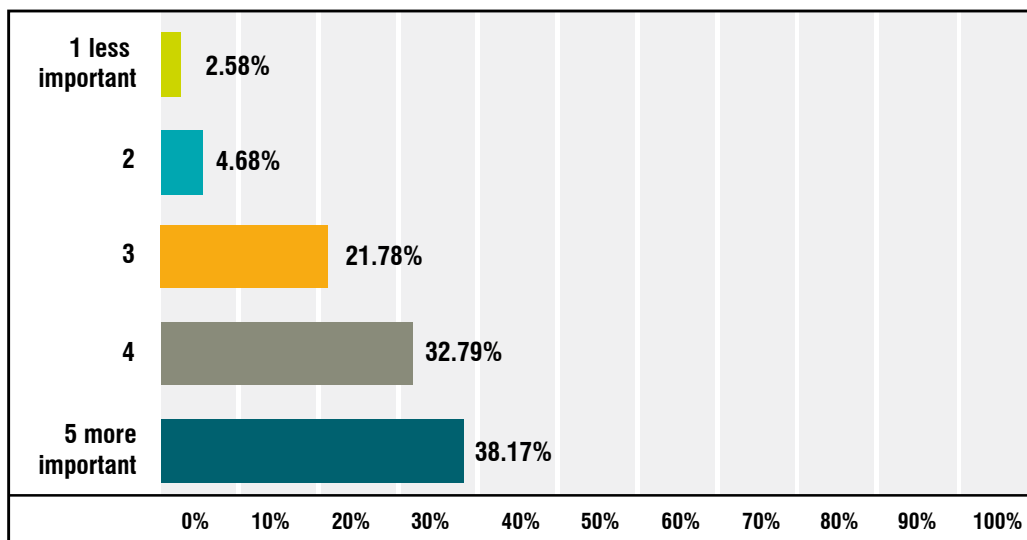
Contacts that make hospitality relations between service providers and visitors remarkable are crucial for most visitors (66.51%) to return to these protected areas and recommend their visit to friends and relatives (70.96%) (Graphs 2 and 3).

Graph 2 – Influence of hospitality on visitor behavior (intention to return)



Source – Survey data (2017)

Graph 3 – Influence of hospitality on the probable recommendation of destinations to friends and relatives



Source – Survey data (2017)

These data result from the sum of scores 4 and 5 on a Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 to 5 where (1) represents no influence on the visitors' return and their recommendation to other people, and the last (5) represents a strong influence.

DISCUSSION

The tourism visitation services in the national parks and EPA investigated are partially determined by the relationships ICMBio's management has established with the stakeholders. Even so, the three administrations, concerned about the conservation of protected areas, determine – or recommend, as happens

in the EPA – which spaces are appropriate for visitation. A stakeholder from EPA Delta do Parnaíba commented that there is a proposition that the work inside this protected area should respect ‘exclusion zones’, determining the spaces appropriate for visitation. Such proposal is supported by scientific knowledge on territorial planning. In the tourism literature, there is the study by Whitelaw, King, and Tolkach (2014), for whom the tourist visitation level should be established in accordance with the biodiversity level; that is, inside appropriate zones, protecting the PA’s ecological characteristics, and suggesting observation of the opposite but complementary pairs: high visitation/low biodiversity and low visitation/high biodiversity.

The three managers converge in considering their stakeholders’ attitudes in the environmental context. The head of the EPA and the head of the Jericoacoara National Park, in turn, extend this concern to the PA’s cultural, social, political and economic dimensions, as suggested in the scientific literature of the industry (Imran et al., 2014).

Respondents’ view that partnerships are critical because of ICMBio’s limited human and financial resources is consistent with the observation of Moore and Weiler (2009), for whom the state has limited capacities and declining budgets for the management needs of these areas. ICMBio itself (Ministério do Meio Ambiente, 2015) recognizes in a document available online that management costs are constantly increasing, making it difficult to maintain the existing structure.

Managers also manifest a concern concerning the formalization of partnerships for the management of tourism uses of each protected area. No systematic way of managing the interests of the parts involved has been found, regardless of the existence of conflicts, and the advisory board of the parks and EPA being a common bridge to facilitate de dialogue with the stakeholders. It is a challenge to be faced by organizations, as found in the scientific literature (Bryson, 2004; Freeman, 1984) and field findings.

Stakeholder mapping and their interests, as Freeman (1984) proposes, provides support for the implementation of organizational strategies. Something like this proposal was mentioned in the interview by the head of EPA Delta do Parnaíba:

This [situation] is like a Venn diagram, which is a methodology we work with, only that we work with people/service providers who are closest and who are farthest. . . . This way we can see exactly who is the most prioritized. We deal with this subject in workshops.

However, the limited human and financial resources of this PA make it difficult to advance its strategies.

There is a relationship of interdependence between PA’s managers and stakeholders for the provision of services that combine the conservation of visited areas with visitors’ satisfaction. The challenge for those involved is to assemble and deliver a “service package” in a harmonious way (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2014); that is, the conditions for visitation established by the parks must be disclosed to customers – visitors by the service providers, because these are territories where the primary objective is the conservation

of their biodiversity. Therefore, stakeholders must comply with the rules, even if they are not constantly monitored.

According to Ritchie and Crouch (2010), hospitality is one of the factors that lead to the competitiveness of a tourist destination, mainly because it is allied to the consumer's experience and subject satisfaction – the moment of truth and meeting of services (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2014; Hunt & Ivergard, 2015). To serve as evidence of this statement, this article presents the perceptions of the interviewed subjects – managers and stakeholders – as well as the survey responses that consider hospitality one of the determining factors to recommend friends and relatives to visit the protected areas that constitute the Route of Emotions.

Another point for discussion is that respondents hardly perceive ICMBio as a striking host since little contact is established between the visitors and the PA management collaborators under study. The findings brought to light by the survey are corroborated by the perception of the interviewed managers, especially the speech of the head of the Jericoacoara Park, who believes that some stakeholders are unaware of ICMBio's existence, role, and relevance.

The concept of hospitality is perceived in different ways by managers and stakeholders. In their fields, some understand that hospitality is an attitude of welcoming someone with care and professionalism, looking for partnerships. Indeed, the essence of hospitality is a human phenomenon, demonstrated in interpersonal encounters (Baptista, 2002), human acts exercised in spaces and times (Camargo, 2003), and built relationships (Lashley, 2004).

However, managers and some stakeholders mentioned the idea that hospitality in a PA can also be “mediated” by infrastructure, such as signage, roads and access trails quality, and toilets, among others. This is crucial in choosing one destination over another, as emphasized by the interviews. This perception meets the postulates of authors such as Grinover (2002) and Cruz (2002). The latter speaks of a tourist hospitality which encompasses not only the friendliness of the host and the guest but also infrastructure and various services that compound the tourism product.

Thus, the interviewees' statements allow us to infer that hospitality relations contribute to the competitiveness of tourist destinations through the satisfaction of visitors with the services provided, both in the reception given by professionals and in the operationalization of local infrastructure.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we analyzed the relationships between the administration of protected areas and their stakeholders, with emphasis on the subjects' perceptions of the existence or absence of hospitality relations between them. Evidence of hospitality was sought as an element of competitiveness through a multiple-case study in three areas of the Route of Emotions administered by ICMBio: Lençóis Maranhenses National Park, Delta do Parnaíba Environmental Protection Area and Jericoacoara National Park.

The three propositions raised *a priori* were ratified. As an exception, the first of them was partially ratified, as it was found that not all tourism services

provided by stakeholders, such as lodging facilities, are influenced by the relationship established with ICMBio. For tourism practices inside the territory of the national park, however, there is a relationship of dependence between stakeholders and the administration of the sites, having the compliance to the norms foreseen by the accreditation as a base for the rendering of the service.

The study contribution advances by noting that the hospitality relations between ICMBio and its tourism-related stakeholders favor an environment of mutual trust, directly influencing the abilities of the PA management and destination competitiveness (P2). Evidence to it is that, according to the interviewees, the relationship must be a “two-way street”; that is, everyone should perform their activities by agreements established in contracts and meetings of the advisory board. The absence of one of the parties involved builds up dissatisfaction among other stakeholders and a breach of trust towards the host of the relationship – ICMBio managers.

It was also proved that the visitors, when perceiving the services rendered as hospitable, demonstrate intentions to return to the PA (P3). Despite this being noted by the ICMBio management and its stakeholders, there is dissatisfaction regarding visitors’ reception infrastructure issues and some service providers’ disregard for the rules – as it happens in the national parks – which stands a subject of reflection for those involved in tourist activity.

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