

**PERCEPTIONS OF RISK IN IRELANDS EMERGING ADVENTURE TOURISM  
INDUSTRY**

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# **PERCEPTIONS OF RISK IN IRELANDS EMERGING ADVENTURE TOURISM INDUSTRY**

## **Abstract**

Adventure tourism is a subset of tourism that is rapidly growing in popularity. Fáilte Ireland initiatives such as the designation of Adventure Hubs and the recent Tourism Adventure and Activity Forum demonstrate the Irish government's recognition of the potential of this phenomenon as an instrument of economic development. Risk is a central element of the adventure tourism experience. In fact it has been proposed that the pursuit of risk is often the central motivation of adventure tourists. However risk is subjective and as a result the perceptions of tourists in this respect represent vital elements both in the marketing and in the production of experiences.

Adventure tourism providers currently use a variety of different techniques to manipulate the levels of risk as perceived by their customers. However these techniques tend to be ad hoc with no common or coherent strategies in place. There currently exists an apparent lack of awareness of the role and significance of the management of tourists' perceptions of risk. Strategies should be developed to fill this gap in management practice. However this is a complex topic and research in this area is still in its infancy. Researchers have an important role to play in achieving a greater understanding of tourists' perceptions.

This paper aims to discuss the importance of managing perceived risk in the adventure tourism industry and the current use of such management strategies. This will be achieved through the examination of existing research and the presentation of preliminary empirical research findings. The preliminary study was conducted as part of an undergraduate study carried out at I.T. Tralee.

## **Adventure Tourism**

Various authors have attempted to define adventure tourism. Some have been quite precise in their attempts such as Buckley (2006) who uses the term to mean "guided commercial tours where the principal attraction is an outdoor activity that relies on features of the natural terrain, generally requires specialised sporting or similar equipment, and is exciting for the

tour clients” (p.1). Others have been more ambiguous illustrating the breadth of this concept. Millington et al (2001) for example define adventure travel as “a leisure activity that takes place in an unusual, exotic, remote or wilderness destination. It tends to be associated with high levels of activity by the participant, most of it outdoors. Adventure travellers expect to experience various levels of risk excitement and tranquillity and be personally tested. In particular they are explorers of unspoilt, exotic parts of the planet and also seek personal challenges” (p.67). The U.S. based Adventure Travel Trade Association (2010) appear to have one of the most vague but all-encompassing definitions stating that adventure travel may be any tourist activity including two of the following three components: a physical activity, a cultural exchange or interaction, and engagement with nature. A broad definition will be assumed for the purposes of this research in order to avoid restrictions.

Adventure tourism is a rapidly expanding sector of the tourism industry internationally (Bentley et al, 2006). This expansion is due firstly to a desire among tourists for unusual holidays, different from the traditional beach package holiday and secondly to the increase in opportunities available as a result of the increasing commercialisation of the industry (Buckley, 2006). The Irish government has become increasingly aware of what it terms this “high yield segment” (Fáilte Ireland, 2009). At their Tourism Adventure and Activity Forum (2009) Fáilte Ireland claimed that adventure and activity tourism was worth €1.2 billion in 2008. They also highlighted the further advantages of these activities including the attraction of tourists to rural locations to help even the spread of tourism development throughout the regions and the generally longer stay and higher spend of adventure tourists. As further evidence of their belief in the potential of this industry Fáilte Ireland have invested over €21 million in the last four years.

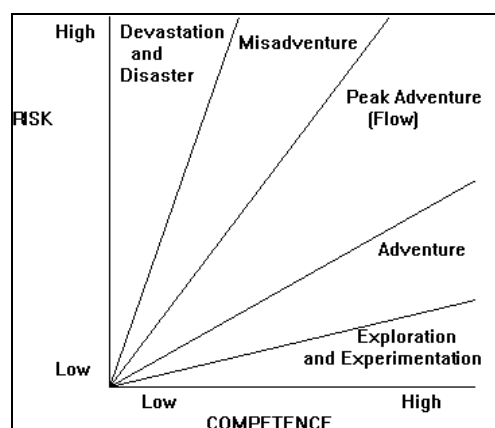
### **Risk and adventure tourism**

Risk is a major element of the adventure tourism sector. Risks in the industry are very real, and lack of proper management of risks can lead to tragedy, as evidenced by the Glenridding Beck and Lyme Bay water sports tragedies in the UK, where adventure turned to misadventure, leading to several deaths. There are obvious risks involved in both operating a business within the adventure tourism sector and being an adventure tourist. Commercial operators take steps to minimise these risks, as is evidenced by the various risk assessments, equipment inspections, safety audits, certification, etc. which all adventure providers partake in. However risk is a vital part of the experience. In fact it has been proposed that the pursuit

of risk is often the central motivation of adventure tourists. According to Ewert (1989), the “deliberate seeking of risk and uncertainty of outcome” (p.8) is an important characteristic of adventure recreation and risk takes on a central role in participants’ satisfaction with the experience. More recent authors have challenged his findings however most tend to conclude that the desire to participate in such activities may decrease if risk is absent.

Taking this into account are adventure tourism operators in danger of removing the very element which makes their product appealing to the public by minimising the risks (i.e. making it ‘too safe’)? The concept of ‘flow’ as proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1977), and the Adventure Experience Paradigm as suggested by Martine and Priest (1986) both suggest that there is an optimal level of risk which brings about greatest satisfaction with an adventure experience. The concept of peak adventure within the Adventure Experience Paradigm suggests that there is a peak level of enjoyment attained during adventure sports which balance competence and risk (see figure 1). Despite this theory being almost 25 years old, Bailie (2006) reiterates its relevance in today’s industry “.our aim is usually NOT to continually reduce risk, but to get the right balance between benefits , hazards and controls, the so called ‘Triangle of Risk’” (p.15). The management of real risks through risk assessment etc. is key to ensuring that the adventure tourism provider does not allow the client to stray into the area of misadventure or disaster. According to Mortlock (1984) Misadventure is characterized by a person choosing or being forced to participate in challenges beyond his/her capabilities, resulting in negative emotions (fear, hurt, etc.), possibly injury and even ultimately death.

**Figure 1:** The Adventure Experience Paradigm



*Source: Martin and Priest, 1986; Priest, 1990, 1999*

The management of risk should be seen as a tool to move the client from exploration and experimentation into the area of peak adventure (flow). It must be recognised that the client's experience is subjective. "Adventure may mean different things to different tourists. What fills one person with fear fills another with boredom and vice versa" (Buckley, 2006, pxvii). While many adventure tourists may not have prior experience and competence in the sport, it is still this peak enjoyment which activity providers need to access to ensure customer satisfaction. Fluker (2005) refers to this as the "no prior experience needed" aspect of adventure tourism.

### **Perceived Risk**

Is there a difference between 'risk' and 'perceived risk'? Cater (2006) suggests that while real risks are quantifiable and statistical in nature, perceived risks are more emotive and "profoundly qualitative". Cater found that 94% of a sample of adventure tourists rated the possibility of serious injury as very low or completely non-existent, how does this equate to the idea of risk seeking behaviour, and adventurous experience? Individuals' perceptions of risk are influenced by a complex interaction of a number of factors. Key factors include an individual's past experiences, media presentations, vicarious experiences and a predisposition to anxiety (Davis-Berman et al, 2002). Davis-Berman also notes that while adventure sports leaders and instructors are trained to become experts in the evaluation of real risk and its management, they receive little or no training in the management of perceived risk and anxiety management.

There are a wide range of methods and factors that can alter levels of perceived risk. These may be looked at in two separate categories, marketing and 'in the field' methods. Marketing materials such as websites and brochures are often the first point of contact that a client has with a business, and as such can be a key determinant in the initial levels of perceived risk associated with an activity. The use of images and wording within marketing materials can be used strategically to increase or decrease levels of perceived risk. 'In the field' strategies are ones which take place during the activity, and again may be used to either increase or decrease the clients levels of perceived risk. Environmental factors can be skillfully employed by instructors to heighten the thrill factor, and levels of perceived risk, or to calm a nervous customer (by lowering levels of perceived risk).

## **The preliminary study**

The results of an undergraduate thesis have provided some preliminary data with which to provide a deeper understanding of the practical implications of perceived risk in the Irish adventure tourism industry. Interviews were chosen as the best method of qualitative data collection for the purposes of this research. The interviews were a mix of the 'interview guide', 'standardised open-ended' and standardised closed questioning interview approaches as described by Cohen et al (2007). The variety of adventure sports available in the adventure tourism market is very wide and is ever increasing. For the purposes of this study a range of sports that reflect different environments and challenges were chosen, namely ski-mountaineering, sea kayaking, scuba diving, hill walking and mountain biking. A sample of five adventure tourism operators was used. Although small, this number allowed a spectrum of adventure sports to be examined and resulted in the development of an overall picture of the management of perceived risk in the industry. A purposive sampling method was used. Participants chosen were in a management role in a business that had adventure tourists as a large percentage of their business. The companies chosen also had a high level of interaction between customers and management allowing for potential perceived risk management strategies to be implemented in a variety of ways. The resultant qualitative data was analysed using a coding process as proposed by the grounded theory approach.

## **Initial Perceptions of Risk**

Within the results of this study the authors found a wide variety of initial perceptions of risks reported. The research found that the perceptions of the customers towards the risk involved in the activity were quite frequently not in line with the actual risks involved. Only one candidate felt that clients had a level of perceived risk that closely matched the level of real risk involved with the adventure tourism product in question. Table 1 illustrates the relationship between the perceived and real risks associated with eight different activities according to the interviewees. Kayaking for example, is characterised by a higher real risk which means that according to this interviewee it is actually more dangerous than participants perceive it to be.

**Table 1:** Initial Perceptions of Risk

Activity	Participant perception of risk
Kayaking (AM5)	Perceived risk < Real Risk
Rock Climbing (AM5)	Perceived risk > Real Risk
Mountain biking (AM5)	Perceived risk < Real Risk
Scuba Diving (AM3)	Perceived risk = Real Risk
Surfing (AM2)	Relatively high level of Perceived
Windsurfing (AM2)	Low level of Perceived risk
Sea Kayaking (AM4)	High level of Perceived risk
Ski Mountaineering (AM1)	Varying levels of initial Perceived

The low level of perceived risk associated with windsurfing illustrated above is reiterated by the interviewee in the following quote.

*“... the customers don't see risk , they just don't see it..”* (Windsurfing / Surfing Provider)

As a result of this perception instructors need to stress the dangers of the activity. The authors posit that sport specific knowledge or education plays a key role in customer's initial levels of perceived risk. The research found that in 3 out of 5 of adventure managers' responses, lack of knowledge around the sport in question by the customer was a contributing factor to increased levels of perceived risk. Prior knowledge was suggested by a number of the adventure providers as a contributory factor to perceived risk levels, the need for a truthful relationship with their clients was also a point which was highlighted.

*“I suppose the whole thing of like generally ... with diving if they are going to do it they have kinda looked into it a little bit and they have an idea of what the risks are like..”* (Scuba Diving Adventure Provider)

Examining the above suggestion of scuba diving business owner that prior knowledge of the risks involved leads to an accurate level of perceived risk it may be observed that adventure tourism providers should indeed be up front about the risks involved. This honest and upfront approach to risk awareness may lead to initial levels of perceived risk which are not artificially high due to external forces. One such example of this is the British Mountaineering Council's (BMC) participation statement, as seen below. This statement is displayed in a prominent position in most public indoor climbing walls in the UK and displays an honest, and easily understandable, approach to risk education.

*“The BMC recognises that climbing and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions”* (British Mountaineering Council)

The authors note that while no managers actively sought to hide the dangers of the sports to their clients, many did not actively seek to heighten awareness of them either.

*“Rather than advertise that it could be risky oh you could fall off and bump your nose on a surf board or you could fall off under a windsurfing sail and feel like you are drowning, but your not. We wouldn’t advertise that it is high risk or high adventure.”*  
(Surfing Adventure Provider)

### **Managing perceived risk**

A frequency analysis of comments, relating to the alteration of perceived risk levels by respondents, showed that providers mentioned factors, which related to decreasing the perceived levels of risk 24 times (68.7%) and for issues related to increasing perceived risk, just 11 times (31.4%).

*“...the perceived risk you know you can manage that, you can down play it, you never lie about it but you can down play it so people are calmer than they necessarily would be if they felt really exposed to all the risks...”* (Ski Mountaineering Provider)

All interviewees were seen to use informal perceived risk management within their businesses, both to increase and decrease levels of perceived risk among their clients. 4 out of 5 of the research participants used the words ‘trust’ or ‘reassure’ in relation to their interaction with clients, words which lead to decreased levels of perceived risk. While they aimed to build up this relationship of trust, research also found that 4 out of 5 of the candidates used the environment around them to increase the levels of perceived risk among their clients. All of these respondents noted that although the level of perceived risk for the clients was increasing, there was no change to the level of actual risk.

*“If I think someone is out in a kayak and they are getting bored and they aren’t finding it exciting or ya then I will take them maybe from the calm sheltered water to*

*maybe some choppier water. So they would get more of a thrill but in fact they aren't in more danger or real risk."* (Sea kayaking provider)

Interviewees were also questioned with regard to the importance of the role which instructors play within the adventure tourism product, specifically in perceived risk management. There was disagreement within the interviewees as to whether perceived risk management was something which was integral to instructor training programmes, but all agreed that a good instructor would be a skilled manager of perceived risk .

The research results illustrate that there are a number of different strategies being used by the interviewees in relation to image choice and its effect on risk perceptions, within their marketing. It is also notable that one of the respondents reported to have previously used more extreme images associated with the sports but had since moved to a less extreme strategy. Marketing images used ranged from the aspirational, to the realistic, to images which aimed to decrease perceived risk associated with the adventure product.

All of the adventure managers interviewed discussed, unbidden, real risk and their management of it at some stage in the interview process. This clearly shows a focus on, and constant vigilance to, the management of real risks within adventure tourism providers. As a result of the commercial (and thus economic) importance of creating quality adventure experiences it must be recognised that the area of real risk management leads directly to the discussion on the management of perceived risk. Clearly the focus on real risk is vital to the viability of outdoor adventure providers, as is the management of perceived risk. Hall (1992) discusses the balancing act, which is the provision of adventure tourism, in relation to maintaining a balance of real and perceived risk, and matching this to the skills and needs of the participants. This balancing act was evident in the results of this research as 4 out of 5 of the respondents used the environment within which they operate to increase the perceived risk to clients (in order to increase enjoyment of the experience), while maintaining an acceptable level of real risk.

## **Conclusion**

This research has observed that perceived risk management is happening within companies who provide to the adventure tourism market. The results show that one hundred percent of the managers interviewed used techniques which aimed to manipulate the perceived risk levels of their clients. While all of the managers discussed perceived risk management, none

of the candidates had a specific management strategy. This ad-hoc approach to perceived risk management was evident throughout the interviews. The authors propose that a more formal management strategy, within adventure tourism operators, would be of benefit not only to the providers but also to the customers. This formalisation of strategies would also allow for a strategy to be uniformly implemented within the company, and would also allow for clearer staff training on the issue.

While perceived risk management was evident in one hundred percent of the interviews the way in which perceived risk was managed, and where that management took place, varied widely. Two distinct fields of management presented themselves: management through marketing and management 'in the field'. All of the participants reported using a variety of techniques from both areas. Some of the techniques used in each of the areas are summarised below.

#### Marketing

- Professionalism during customer contact
- Marketing visuals chosen
- Language usage in advertising

#### In the field

- 'Pushing'
- Use of environment
- Language
- Education

Techniques such as those above should be included in any management plan. Those in the area of marketing, influence customers initial levels of perceived risk. Methods used 'in the field', may be seen to allow providers to give their customers that experience of 'peak adventure' or 'flow'.

However this research shows that there is a lack of clear and defined management strategies in place for the management of perceived risk in adventure tourism products among the providers examined. The research also shows the importance of customers' perceptions of risk, on product choice and purchase, and also on customer satisfaction. Adventure providers

would benefit from developing a clear strategy for all aspects of their perceived risk management.

The following points are suggested as a brief checklist towards better management of perceived risks within an adventure tourism business.

- Show professionalism in company/client contacts.
- Seek to understand the desired level of perceived risk of clients.
- Use 'pushing' to heighten level of perceived risk and so provide 'peak adventure'.
- Do not push clients into 'misadventure'.
- Be honest in all dealings with clients.

The paucity of research on perceived risk in adventure tourism has been noted within this research paper. This paucity is especially notable within the Irish adventure tourism sector.

The results highlight the need for further research within the area of perceived risk in adventure tourism. One of the key pieces of research should be a quantitative analysis of the perceived risk levels of customers who partake in adventure tourism activities and their opinions on perceived risk management. This research should take place in the Irish market to allow for population specific factors to be analysed. This research may then be compared against the research of Fluker (2005) which provides an Australian perspective on the topic. Further research should also be conducted into the effects of image use in marketing and relationship to risk perception. Image selection for websites and marketing was highlighted within this paper but was largely uninformed by research.

The management of perceived risk should be an intrinsic part of outdoor instructor training. Within the results of this study the skill level of instructors was noted to vary widely with regards to perceived risk management. Future research should address the formality with which perceived risk management is addressed in instructor training.

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