

## A Thoughtful Journey Toward Sustainable Choices: Can Mindfulness Enhance Behavior Intent?

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### The Problem

As the tourism industry continues to develop, support for sustainable development is necessary from both destinations and consumers. If built or offered, do consumers intend to behave sustainably while on vacation?



### The Research

Arizona State University (ASU) partnered with Sedona Chamber of Commerce & Tourism Bureau on research aimed to: (1) understand the presence of mindfulness among those who travel and (2) test a hypothesized positive relationship between mindfulness and behavior intention to be sustainable. The research question was: does mindfulness add to a traveler's likelihood to behave sustainably in a visited destination with active sustainable initiatives?

Sedona was a perfect place to conduct this research as they are in the process to be fully certified by the Global Sustainable Tourism Certification (GSTC) program, one of the world's leading travel credentials. This certification criteria requires many dimensions of sustainability to be fulfilled by a destination. Using some of the GSTC standards and Sedona's input, The ASU Center for Sustainable Tourism created customized measures of sustainable behaviors available to Sedona visitors.



An online survey was implemented with individuals who requested destination information (in person, phone or web) from the Bureau from January 1, 2016 to June 28, 2016. Some respondents had already visited Sedona (60%) and were asked specific questions about their exposure to or pursuit of sustainable practices in Sedona.



Additionally, to those who visited Sedona and those who did not, questions on their intent to behave sustainably while on any vacation were asked. Questions to measure mindfulness inherent of individuals were asked using a scale developed by mindfulness scholars.

### The Findings

Individuals who responded to the survey scored high on the mindfulness scale. Across 7 items testing mindfulness levels, a composite score of 6.0 out of 7.0 was computed. Stronger mindfulness characteristics included a desire to “explore and discover new things” and “wanting interest captured,” whereas a weaker scored item was “wanting to feel in control of what is going on around a person.” Almost all (98%) respondents evaluated Sedona to be an eco-friendly destination.

For those who visited Sedona, hiking and being in nature went hand-in-hand with practicing “Leave No Trace.” One out of five tourists saw evidence or felt their spending in businesses remained in the local economy. Two other sustainability programs currently offered in Sedona are Dark Sky opportunities and environmentally friendly lodging. Both had customers, but the more common response was “neutral” suggesting an opportunity for more promotion, education and certification of green lodging.

#### Sustainable options sought after by Sedona tourists (high to low):

- Leave No Trace at parks and on trails (73% strongly agreed)
- Businesses where spending is retained locally (20% strong agreed)
- Int'l Dark Sky designation
- Lodging based on environmental practices

For all respondents, the same top two vacation sustainability practices emerged as important for any vacation – Leave No Trace at parks and on trails, and locally owned businesses (retail, attractions) with environmental conservation practices. An additional item tested was low impact transportation (public transit, bike share or group buses) but it received a low score in destination selection.

Overall, mindfulness when correlated with intent to act sustainably on vacation was positive but weak ( $r=.17$ ). When mindfulness and other variables (attitude, social norms, extent of controlling one's own behaviors) were included in a regression equation to estimate their association to the intent to act sustainably on any vacation, the statistical results showed positive significant influences. In a second equation, mindfulness and the same other variables were estimated with **actual sustainable behaviors in Sedona**, mindfulness was found to be a significant influence along with control, but not attitude or social norms. These results suggest that by attracting mindful tourists, higher visitation and likely spending can occur at attractions, lodging and other businesses. This in turn will strengthen and grow Sedona's reputation as a truly globally recognized sustainable destination and community.

Special thanks for Michelle Conway and Jennifer Wesselhoff