

Exploring perspectives and expectations of southern El Yunque National Forest visitors



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Overview

The goal of our project is to identify the range of motivations, perceptions, expectations, and experiences of visitors to the southern side of El Yunque National Forest, with a focus on the Rio Sabana Recreation Area and the surrounding community of Cubuy, Naguabo.





Acknowledgements

Sponsors

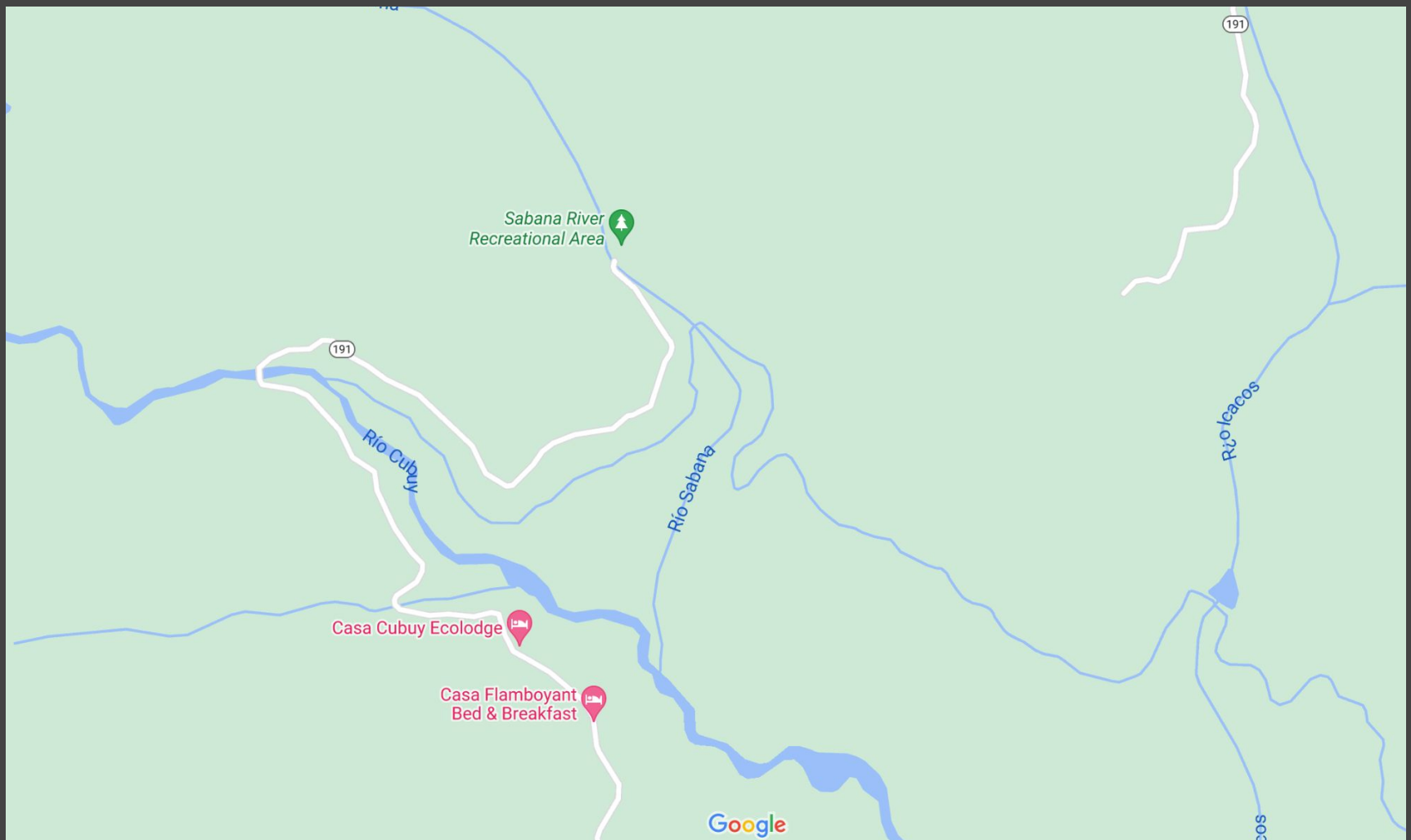
Pedro Rios, United States Forest Service
Gabriela Morales-Nieves, United States
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Advisors

Professor Leslie Dodson
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Mariny Vázquez
Marianne Kavanaugh LaForce
Matthew Cobb Kavanaugh
Ricky Miranda
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The Rio Sabana Recreation Area

- August, 2021: recreation area co-management proposal
 - In process of being approved
- Existing information about visitor motivations and experiences is limited

Research Questions

What do social media posts reveal about tourists' attitudes toward EYNF?

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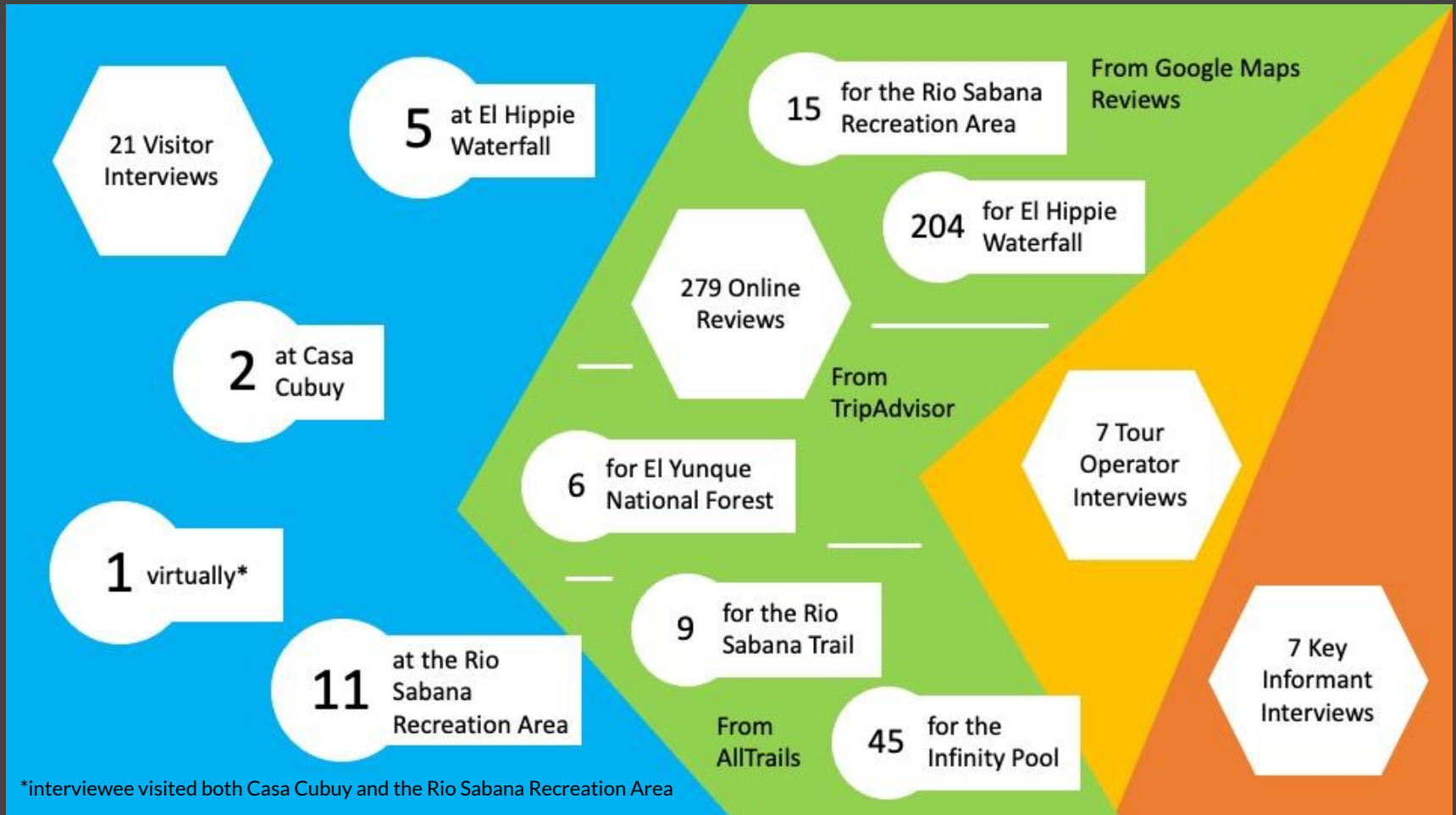
What kinds of experiences do tour operators perceive as desirable to their customers?

What can we learn about visitors from the insights of USFS employees, community leaders, and business owners?

3

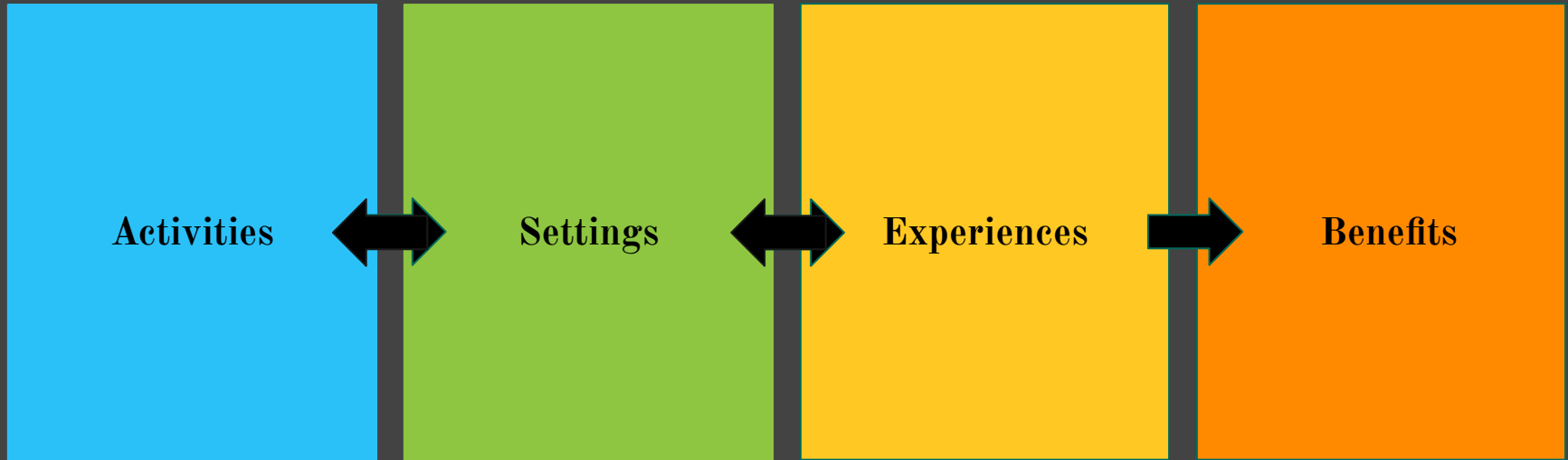
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What are the motivations and experiences of visitors to Cubuy and the Rio Sabana Recreation Area?



The Recreation Demand Hierarchy

(Adapted from Driver and Brown, 1978)



Cochrane's Typology of Tourists

Tourist type	Demographic and behavioural characteristics	Preferences for facilities and experiences
Elite	Rich, perhaps sports or entertainment celebrity, CEO of major company, or royalty. Willing to pay large sums for exclusivity.	Need top-class facilities and services, e.g. luxury lodges / camps, rapid transport connections and good communications, good-quality wildlife and wilderness experiences.
Special Interest	Dedicated to a particular hobby, fairly adventurous, often wealthy, prepared to pay to indulge hobby and have others organise logistics. Travel independently or with a small group of like-minded others.	May have little interest in culture unless part of the tour focus or hobby. Require special facilities, e.g. fishing-boats, bird-guides, dive equipment. May have active involvement, e.g. research project. Accept discomfort and long travel where necessary to achieve aims.
General Interest	Often prefer security, company and convenience of group tour, although increasingly travel as individuals on tailor-made itinerary with a tour operator. Relatively wealthy, often active, perhaps busy professionals with limited time. Includes expatriates resident in developing countries.	Keen on nature/wildlife when not hard to see, and on easily-accessible cultural aspects. Need facilities and organised activities for 'soft' adventure and accessing park, e.g. easy hiking trails, whale-watching, low-grade white-water rafting. Dislike travelling long distances without points of interest. Need good amenities, although may accept basic conditions for short periods.
Backpacker Plus	Often experienced travellers and generally in a well-paid job or career; may have taken sabbatical to travel for longer periods.	Genuinely desire to learn about culture and nature, and require good information. Accept basic facilities, but prefer more upmarket accommodation when available; can pay for additional services to facilitate and intensify experiences.
Backpacker	Travel for as long as possible on limited budget, often taking a year off between school/university and starting work. May join organised project for all or part of the trip.	May perceive rigours of local transport, cheap accommodation, etc. as travel experience rather than understanding local culture. Enjoy trekking and scenery, but often cannot visit remote areas because of expense. Require low-cost facilities.
Mass	Often inexperienced at travelling, prefer to travel in large groups, may be wealthy. Includes cruise ship passengers and some safari tourists.	Like superficial aspects of local culture, enjoy natural scenery and wildlife if easy to see. Need good facilities, and will only travel far if in comfort.
Explorer	Individualistic, solitary, adventurous. May be relatively well-off but prefer not to spend much money.	Require no special facilities; reject purpose-built tourism facilities in favour of local ones.

Research Question 1

What do social media posts reveal about tourists' attitudes toward EYNF?

Online Reviews



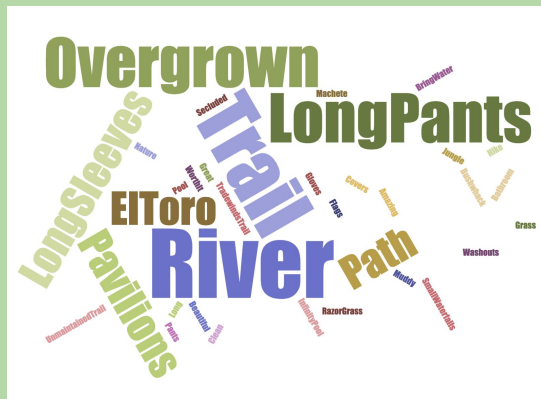
Frequency Analysis:

Rio Sabana Recreation Area



Collected from Rio Sabana Recreation Area
Reviews from Google Maps

Rio Sabana Trail



Collected from Rio Sabana Trail Reviews
from AllTrails

Infinity Pool Trail



Collected from the Infinity Pool Trail Reviews from AllTrails

Words/Phrases to Investigate

Rio Sabana Recreation Area

Facilities are Detrimental
Abandoned
Children

Rio Sabana Trail

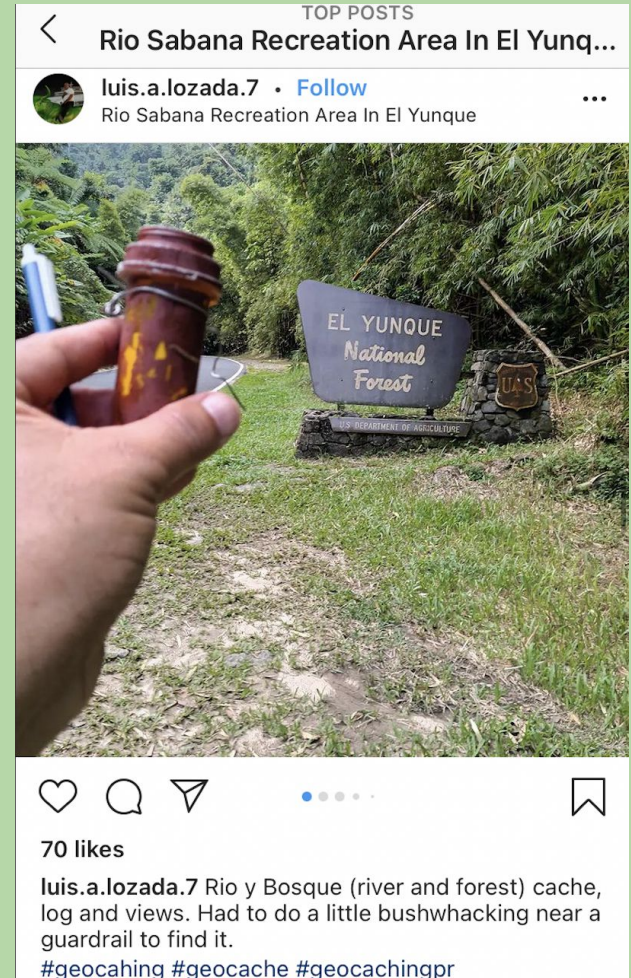
Secluded
Unmaintained Trails
Worth It

Infinity Pool Trail

Rewarding
Risky
No Signs

Specific Interests

- Experienced spiritual connection with nature, individually and through therapeutic forestry programs
- Participated in plant identification and education workshops
- Explored El Hippie Waterfall and petroglyphs with a local guide
- Played card games and dominoes in the pavilions
- Hiked the Rio Sabana Trail
- Hiked the Infinity Pool Trail
- Geocached



Differences in Experiences

Six of the nine written reviews of the Rio Sabana Trail mentioned that it is overgrown.



2 de enero de 2021

Senderismo

Fangoso

¡Excelente!

Loved it. Make sure to have long sleeves and long pants. It's muddy but with the right gear you won't have trouble. Enjoy!



December 30, 2019

Hiking

Bugs

Muddy

Washed out

We were only one kilometer. there is a path but a machete is needed and the jungle covers all parts of the path



Research Question 2

What kinds of experiences do tour operators perceive as desirable to their customers?



Interview Length	Total Interviews
10-20 min	7

Nature-Based Tourism Companies

PR Paradise Tours

Enchanted Eco Tours

Las Tortugas

Other Tourism Companies

Get Shopped PR

Clue Murder Mystery

PR Historical Building Drawings

Puerto Rico Tourism Company



Findings

- Less demand for southern El Yunque
 - Guides believe not enough attractions/activities
 - Guides believe not maintained enough
- Guides see El Yunque tourists interested in areas more developed for tourism

“Don’t want to go and risk something happening”

For tourism, the south side “needs more investment”



Findings

- Preference for smaller, specialized, or educational tours
 - 4/7 tour guides prefer specialized/educational
 - Better for both tourist and guide



"Small tours are better for customers because they are more private"

People want to "understand what [they] see" and is "why people like these tours"

"wanted to be a teacher" and sees that being a guide as accomplishing that

Research question 3

What can we learn about
visitors from the insights of
USFS employees, community
leaders, and business owners?



Key Informant Interviews

Pedro Rios, USFS Ecosystems
Management Team Leader &
Forest Planner

Gabriela Morales-Nieves,
USFS Land Management
Planner

Marianne Kavanaugh
LaForce, co-owner of Casa
Cubuy

Myrna Tirado, USFS Realty
Specialist (Special Uses)

Mariny Vázquez, Cubuy
community leader

Ricky Miranda, co-owner of
Casa Flamboyant

Matthew Cobb Kavanaugh,
co-owner of Casa Cubuy



Findings

Mariny Vázquez

- Tourism is changing: millennials want experiences
- Visitors to the south are seeking a different experience than those to the north

- Community-based tourism is the tourism of the future
- Currently, tourists are “ghosts” to community
- Community wants to understand who comes to the southern side of El Yunque



Findings

Mariny Vázquez, continued

- The south needs a market where it is promoted
 - South would focus on “slower” tourism
- Currently, south mainly has informal tours

Findings

- Community and visitor demand drives creation of new amenities
- Interaction of tour operator and visitor demand influences how and where tour operator and other permits are distributed
- Road trips



Research Question 4

What are the motivations and experiences of visitors to Cubuy and the Rio Sabana Recreation Area?

Visitor Interviews

Activities



Settings



Experiences



Benefits



El Hippie Waterfall

Couples and older people

Thurs, Nov 4
10:00 am – 1:00 pm

Mon, Nov 5
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm

Rio Sabana Recreation Area

Couples, dogs, large groups

Sat, Nov 6
10:30 am – 2:00 pm

Friends, families, smaller groups

Mon, Nov 15
11:00 am – 12:00 pm

Sat, Nov 20
1:00 pm – 4:00 pm

Casa Cubuy

Man (visited with his girlfriend)

Sat, Nov 17
3:30 pm – 3:45 pm
(virtually)

Friends, small groups

Sat, Nov 20
Throughout the day

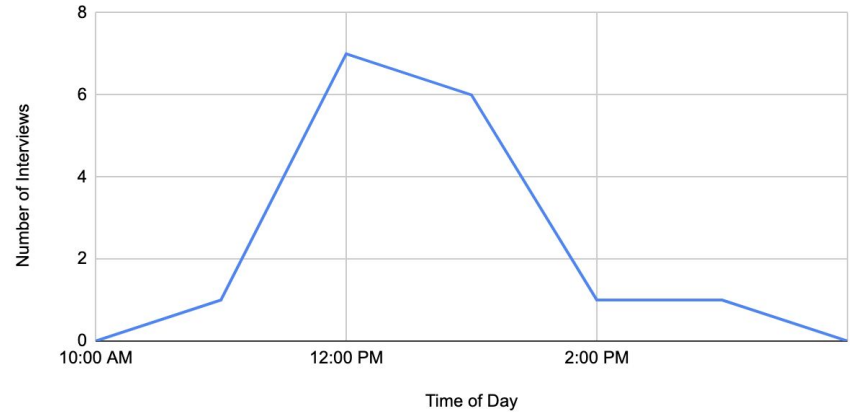
Findings:

Visitor Interviews

Our setting is Rio Sabana Recreation Area and El Hippié:

- Saw and interviewed a variety of groups
 - Families, dog walkers, friends, elderly, etc.
 - Majority of people we saw and interviewed came in the middle of the day
-

Number of Interviews at the Rio Sabana Recreation Area and El Hippié Waterfall vs. Time of Day



Young Vacationing New Englander

Activity

- Swam
- Read by river
- Ate lunch on rocks
- Explore the river
- Socialized
- Hiking

Setting

- Private Casa Cubuy river
- Rio Sabana Recreation Area
- Casa Cubuy
- Hiking trail

Experience

- Satisfied with relaxing by the river
- Enjoyed nature
- Frustrated with trail
- Interacted with new people

Benefit

- Escaped from the demands of being an innkeeper
- Reconnected with Puerto Rico



Man Retired to Cubuy

Activity

- Walks

Setting

- Streets of Cubuy
- Rio Sabana Recreation Area path
- gate was open

Experience

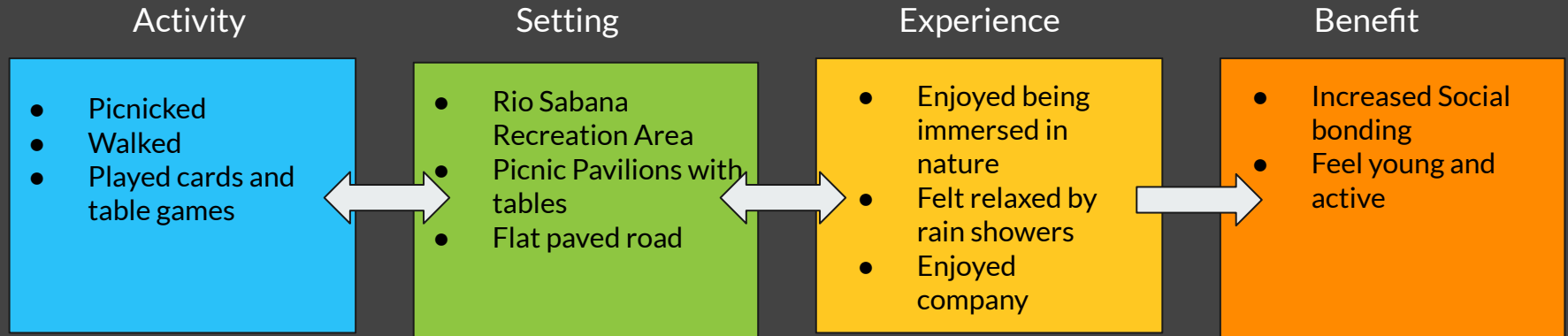
- Loves the nature and the walks
- 20-30 cars disrupted peace

Benefit

- Peace and tranquility of the forest calms him after the many years of doing a high stress job



Group of Senior Citizens (Online Review)



Activities

Hiking
Picnicking
Swimming
Relaxing
Birdwatching
Plant
Identification
Playing games

Settings

RSRA:
Calm River
Overgrown Trail
Picnic Pavilions
Paved Pathway to
Recreation Area
El Hippie:
Waterfall
Swimming Hole

Experiences

Refreshed and
relaxed
Hungry
Enjoyed challenge
of overgrown trail
Discouraged by
overgrown trail
Interacting with
new people
Cars disrupt peace
Gazebos were lively

Benefits

Bonding with
friends and family
Exercise
Overcame fear
Escaped from
outside world
Feeling
accomplished
Expanding sense of
social connection

Cochrane's Typology of tourists



Visitor Type	Demographic and Behavioural characteristics	Preferences for facilities and experiences
Exclusive	Willing pay a lot for a secluded area and special experience, exclusive, small weddings/engagements, willing to explore but mostly stay at bnb, mostly relax	High-end location, “secret” recreation opportunities (ie swimming holes, waterfall, hiking trails), enjoy small tours with local guides
Tranquil	By themselves or with one other person, want to connect with the forest in a quiet and meditative way	Concerned about visitors being noisy and playing loud music in the recreation area, somewhat maintained trails
Social	Usually with family (kids and/or elderly), not particularly adventurous, may be from Naguabo, typically day trippers	Picnic area, easily accessible river, accessibility for those with physical limitations, safe activities, food and beverage options, clear directional/informational signs
Hiker	20s to 50s, although may come in family groups, come for short to mid length hikes,	Well maintained trail, clear trail signs and markers, relatively level terrain, casual hike/stroll, dog friendly spaces, clear directional/informational signs, food and beverage options, water bottle filler
Hiker-Plus	Physically fit, looking for a specific hike/destination and are willing to travel for it	Challenging trails, marked but not necessarily well maintained, trail leads to specific location (mountain top, waterfall, swimming hole, look-out point), water bottle filler
Special Interest	Dedicated to a specific hobby, travels in small groups of people with shared interests, range is age, fairly adventurous	Housing for a few days near their interest, small local tours, informational signs about flora, fauna, and history, food and beverage options

Note:
Typologies
adapted from
Cochrane

Exclusive

- Willing to pay a lot of money for a special experience
 - Like private trails, swimming holes and waterfalls
 - Usually from the U.S. and Europe
 - Interested in small local tours
-



Tranquil



- Come to the forest for a quiet and meditative way to connect with nature
- Are often by themselves or with one other person
- Concerned about visitors being noisy and playing loud music in the recreation area

Social

- Visit the Rio Sabana Recreation Area to swim in the calm river, have picnics in the pavilions, and relax
 - Usually in larger groups and multigenerational families
 - May bring dogs
 - Not particularly adventurous, just interested in exploring the recreation area
-



Hiker



- Interested in short to mid distance hikes
- Hike for exercise, to explore, and to connect with nature
- May come with family/dogs
- Range in ages
- Prefer groomed trails and directional signs



Hiker Plus



- Come for mid to long distance hikes
- Hike the Infinity Pool Trail and Rio Sabana Trail
- Usually groups of able bodied, experienced adult hikers
- Looking for a specific location/ hike and willing to travel for it (Infinity pool)



Special Interest

- Have a specific motivation/hobby that brings them to the forest
- Birdwatching
- Nature education
- Geocaching
- Petroglyphs
- Waterfall chasing
- Interested in small tours with local guides





Limitations

- Language Barrier
- Day of week/Time of day
- Time of Year - Not peak tourist season
- No central meeting location

Key Findings and Conclusion

Visitors have a wide range of motivations and experiences in southern El Yunque

Tour operators believe that tourists prefer

- experiences, smaller and specialized or educational style tourism, and areas more set up for tourism

We see the most frequent tourist types as being tranquil, social, and hiker



Areas for future research

- Explore appropriate entrepreneurial and tourism development opportunities connected to the Rio Sabana Recreation Area as related to our findings
 - Find how sustainable and local business opportunities can be applied to the Rio Sabana Recreation Area
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Thank you

Questions or Comments?

