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## What motivates consumers to engage in ecotourism?

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**Abstract.** *This study examines motivations of consumers to partake in ecotourism. The global ecotourism sector has grown faster than any other tourism sector as people are becoming more aware of the damage they are causing to their planet. Thus, it is crucial to understand the reasons why consumers want to undergo an ecotourism experience. Through distributing and collecting 223 questionnaires from individuals that have previously been on an ecotourism holiday, the study confirms ecotourist characteristics and motivations. The findings identified an emerging market of younger ecotourists aged between 21 and 30. Their motivations to go on an ecotourism holiday were then examined and presented in the form of recommendations for ecotourism businesses enabling them to better penetrate their market. Additionally, the motivations of ecotourists as a population were identified and the findings found that they correlated with previous findings, indicating that a combination of push and pull motives were essential, specifically focusing on self-development influences, such as 'to have an authentic experience', or 'to gain a new perspective', as well as natural and cultural attributes of the destination, such as 'to feel close to nature', 'to experience the environment whilst causing minimum damage' and 'to interact with different cultures'.*

**Keywords:** *ecotourism, nature-based tourism, sustainability, motivation, consumer perspective.*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32523/2789-4320-2023-3-377-386>

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**Introduction.** 'Ecotourism' whose definition is often used interchangeably with nature-based tourism, has become a popular phenomenon, with its growth exceeding that of any other tourism sector [19]. The movement towards ethical travel has presented itself alongside technological advances and an increasing number of people have the means to spend more [17]. 2019, in particular, provoked a global movement towards a more sustainable planet as people of all ages, backgrounds, social classes, and influential presences came together to fight against climate change [11]. From Prince Harry to Greta Thunberg, Sir David Attenborough to the striking school children from 200 different nations, there was a significant effort in protecting planet earth [24]. Though ethical and responsible travel is more expensive, often less comfortable, and can greatly limit travel plans, there is a growing portion of travellers who are looking for an authentic and unique experience. Interacting with the local communities in the destination, as well as having a key focus on benefiting residents and the destination [28].

After David Attenborough's 'Blue Planet II' was released in 2017, there was a significant rise in sentiment for protecting the planet and its wildlife [30]. Since then, travel companies have started to consider the welfare of animals and as a result, major tour operators like Virgin Holidays, TUI, STA Travel and Kuoni, have scrapped activities that consist of elephant riding, elephant shows, attractions like the Tiger Temple in Thailand and events like the Pamplona Running of the Bulls, as well as collaboration with hotels or other accommodation sectors that feature captive dolphins and whales [31]. In addition to the increase in animal welfare awareness,

70% of people believe that travel companies should ensure that holidays help the local people and the economy [1].

It is evident that within today's society there is an increased demand for ethical travel which considers both a destination's environmental protection as well as support for local communities. It is imperative to monitor this current trend to achieve the aspirations of the traveler and thus meet consumer demand. Furthermore, monitoring such ecotourist motivations will indicate the movement in trends, highlighting influential factors which connote to this demand. Bearing this in mind the following research project *will thus investigate the current motivational factors for going on an ecotourism holiday.*

**Problem definition and background.** The origin of ecotourism is still unclear but has been dated back as far as 1965 with Hetzer describing this area of tourism as "the intricate relationship between tourists and the environments and cultures in which they interact" [10]. This can be portrayed as an overly broad definition of ecotourism and, today, could overlap with various other forms of alternative tourism, such as wildlife tourism, nature-based tourism, and adventure tourism. The position of ecotourism, and where it fits within the tourism industry can be described as a sub-set of nature-based tourism, which is, in turn, a sub-set of outdoor tourism which is under the bracket of alternative tourism [25].

Since Hetzer's original definition, there have been several developments, with key researchers [10] creating more precise definitions to pinpoint exactly what ecotourism is. However, each definition varies and there is a general lack of common agreement on aspects such as the level of responsibility, education, culture, engagement with nature, and the location of which ecotourism takes place. The main principles that are carried throughout most definitions include: an interest in nature, involves some sort of contribution to conservation (via physical labour or financial means), a reliance on the experience to take part in a park or a protected area, and to benefit the local people. However, the importance of education is also becoming key with Fennel [10] believing the notion of learning about nature first-hand, which is mirrored by the Ecotourism Australia [9] believing that a person needs to experience the natural areas to "foster environmental and cultural understanding". On the other hand, Page and Dowling [27] consider that ecotourism is primarily inspired by the natural history of the area, and its indigenous culture.

With an increasing volume of people having the financial means to travel alongside the development within technology, the desire to travel has increased [12]. However, the ecotourism sector is leaps and bounds above any other sector in the tourism industry, with The International Ecotourism Society [32] stating that ecotourism has been "the fastest growing sector of tourism" in the last 30 years. Ecotourism has become a buzz word due to the frequency in which the term has been used coinciding with an enhanced popularity as the sector contributes to at least 7% of global tourism demand [4]. This rapid growth is expected to continue for the next two decades, with global spending on the ecotourism sectors increasing at a higher rate than the industry as a whole [21].

Eagles and Higgins [8] identified three factors that explain the increased awareness of protecting the environment. The first is the belief that nature is all connected and for some people there is a 'calling to the wild' where they can reconnect with nature, away from their busy urban lives. Secondly, there has been increased environmental teaching within schools, which has encouraged the next generation to broaden their horizons [5]. And finally, there has been a huge growth of environmental media, with Planet Earth and Blue Planet being two of the most significant players. Media has a significant influence on a person, with a vast amount of research proving that media has and continues to play a crucial part in informing the public [26]. Furthermore, Ostman [26] identified that news media promotes pro-environmental behaviour in adolescents through raising their awareness of environmental issues. This is observed as they adapt their everyday life to apply pro-environmental attitudes. This has been supported by the recent changes in society, such as making efficient use of resources, escalation in conserving biodiversity and putting actions in place to tackle climate change.

In the way that ecotourism activities and products vary, so do the ecotourism markets. They are not homogeneous [33]. Ecotourism can appeal to a wide range of travellers, of different ages, social status and interests. Because the ecotourism bracket is so wide, it is quite difficult to identify a specific ecotourism market. For example, Holden and Sparrowhawk [14] conducted research of ecotourist in the Annapurna region of Nepal and identified that due to the quality of facilities in the area and the requirement to walk between resting points the tourists tended to be young. Various ecotourism activities will create differences in ecotourist characteristics, making it difficult to pin-point a single age group. Furthermore, ecotourist characteristics appear to change over time with Eagles and Cascagnette [7] discovering that ecotourists tend to be older, travelling widely even in their eighties. Whereas, more recently when Morais et al. [23] conducted research on visitors to Iona National Park in Angola in 2018, they identified that there was little difference between the various age groups. This is also mirrored by Sumanapala et al. [29]'s research in Sri Lanka.

Gender has also been discussed, with frequent changes in whether ecotourists are predominantly male or female. Meric and Hunt [22] conducted research on 424 North Carolina travellers and identified that only 27% of the randomly selected respondents were male, with the remaining 73% being female travellers. However, the proportion of male to female ecotourists varies greatly, showing a more levelled results in Kim Lian Chan and Baum's research [16]. Collecting statistics on ecotourists can be difficult because it largely depends on the traveller's self-definition of their purpose or activity. Initial studies showed that ecotourists were predominantly male, well educated, wealthy and long staying [25].

Laarman and Durst cited in [33] identified different levels of ecotourism depending on the ecotourist's dedication towards the experience that is measured through the physical effort involved during the experience, and the level of interest in the natural attraction. They believe that the classic 'Hard-Core' ecotourist has a much deeper level of interest and tend to engage in specialized ecotourism travel. Whereas soft ecotourists have more of a casual interest and subsequently engage in ecotourism as a whole.

There has been a great deal of research into the motivations of ecotourists, with various academics discovering a range of motivational factors [3;5;18]. In their seminal study, Eagles [6] surveyed Canadian Ecotourists and discovered that, compared to general tourists, ecotourists were motivated by the 'attractive natural features of the destination'. However, the general Canadian tourist were more motivated through internal push factors, such as 'being together as a family' or 'visiting friends and relatives.' Maleski [20] agreed, discovering that the nature related travel motives, such as 'get a better appreciation of nature', 'experience the peace and tranquillity of a natural environment', 'feel close to nature', 'be outdoors', 'see wildlife in its natural habitat', 'and viewing scenery', were considered higher by ecotourists compared to general tourists [15].

Maleski [20] identified that the two least important motivations towards ecotourism as 'meeting new people' and 'experiencing something new'. This contradicts Meric and Hunt's research [22] who concluded that ecotourists "want to learn about nature, be physically active, meet people with similar interests, learn new outdoor skills and see as much as possible given the available time". It is possible that since Meric and Hunt's research [22] times have changed and Maleski's research [20] shows a more modern approach to ecotourism motivations. Nevertheless, this is an important element of change that needs to be taken into consideration in current research. These key motivating themes have also been identified in the more recent study in Guayas, Ecuador, by Carvache-Francho et al [3]. Both studies suggest that although there are nature and eco attributes that contribute to why tourists want to go on ecotourism holidays, there are also just as important general and personal attributes that need to be considered.

Previous research tells that there is a significant importance within nature and wildlife experiences, and consequently, tour operators and other ecotourism businesses have ensured that natural settings and wildlife opportunities are made clear within their marketing portfolios by portraying images of iconic, tranquil and scenic destinations that provide an unspoilt

environment in which to experience wildlife first-hand [5]. However, as Maleski [20] discussed, and as seen from the research conducted by Kim Lian Chan and Baum [16] and Carvache-Francho et al [3] it is important for ecotourism businesses to not limit themselves by simply marketing nature and wildlife experiences because the general and personal tourist motives apply here also. Thus, including phrases such as ‘family-friendly break’ and ‘a place to escape and relax’ will increase efficiency.

An additional point that should be highlighted from previous research is that the environment and the destinations natural attributes has more of a pull effect on the ecotourist compared to being able to benefit and interact with the local people [20]. Ecotourists are evidently attracted by the nature aspect and there has been little evidence to indicate that the local communities are considered a great motivating factor. Therefore, the question must be asked: how do the above motives for ecotourism differ from nature-based tourism or wildlife tourism?

**Methodology.** The aim of this research was to gather data from people that have previously been on an ecotourism holiday. Therefore, the population of this study were ecotourists, and the elements creating the population were the characteristics of an ecotourism holiday, of which the participants must have been on. This warranted the adoption of quantitative research design and its specific data collection tool i.e., a questionnaire. There were no other considerations to narrow down the population further and consequently a probability sampling method was decided upon. This sampling method allowed the researchers to collect data from a random selection of the entire population; therefore, selection bias was avoided as all ecotourists had an equal opportunity to take part in the study. The researcher will then be able to draw conclusions for the whole population [2].

The questionnaire was designed based on the literature review. It included measures developed from the literature which intended to determine the extent to which different attributes of holidays could influence motivations of ecotourists to make a trip. The attributes were related to Self-Development, Relaxation, Functional Attributes, Social Attributes, Exclusivity, Nature and Culture.

The questionnaire was distributed through email and social media as the viral nature of both increased the sample size of the study. To ensure that only ecotourists took part in this study, the questionnaire was dispatched through the ecotourism tour operator that one of the authors had previously worked at. This was a small-to-medium-sized enterprise (SME) located in Dorset, UK, generally attracting, but not limited to, an older market of travellers due to the increased price of ecotourism. The company agreed to assist in sharing the questionnaire with current and past clients through their newsletter, of which had over 3,000 subscribers. In total, 223 samples were collected and analysed in the summer 2020. The Table below shows the main features of the sample.

Variables		Frequency (N=223)	Percentage of sample %
Gender	Female	141	62.9%
	Male	81	36.2%
	Prefer not to say	1	0.4%
Age	18-20	31	14%
	21-30	51	23%
	31-40	16	7%
	41-50	33	15%
	51-60	40	18%
	61-70	40	18%
	70 plus	12	5%

Secondary School	Secondary School	13	6%
	A-Levels	21	9%
	Undergraduate	64	29%
	Graduate	117	52%
	Other	9	4%
Income <i>Incorporates missing 7 values</i>	£0-£9,999	25	11%
	£10,000-£19,999	13	5%
	£20,000-£29,999	16	7%
	£30,000-£39,999	47	20%
	£40,000-£49,999	37	16%
	£50,000-£59,999	45	19%
	More than £60,000	51	22%
Job Role <i>Incorporates missing 4 values</i>	Student	56	25%
	Unemployed	3	1%
	Manual Labour	12	6%
	Managerial	38	17%
	Professional	73	33%
	Retired	28	13%
	Self Employed	3	1%
Other	8	4%	

**Findings.** The questionnaire included Likert-scale measures to identify what made tourists want to go on an ecotourism holiday. The Likert scale that the researchers created measured the level of agreement, from Strongly Disagree, to Strongly Agree. This was coded from 1 to 5, with 1 having a strong disagreement, and 5 having a strong agreement. 3 identifies the middle option, which is neither agree nor disagree, and consequently, when talking about the mean value, anything higher than 3 conveys that the participants have a higher level of agreement, and any mean value closer to 1 conveys that the participants have a lower level of agreement.

The three highest motivation variables for participants were ‘to enjoy new experiences’, ‘to see wildlife without hindering their day-to-day life’ and ‘to interact with different cultures’ (which can be found in the following Table). These were a mixture of push and pull motives identifying that the destinations attributions (pull motives), both natural and cultural, were a significant motive for ecotourists, but an individual’s personal interests also contributed to their motivation to go on an ecotourism holiday. This corresponded to what previous researchers [3; 16; 20] had found.

Variable (Self-Development)	Mean	Std. Deviation
I go on ecotourism trips to challenge my abilities	3.57	1.05
I go on ecotourism trips to enjoy new experiences	4.54	0.57
I go on ecotourism trips to have a more authentic experience	4.40	0.68
I go on ecotourism trips to gain a new perspective	4.26	0.79
I go on ecotourism trips to learn more about the destination	4.40	0.69
Variable (Relaxation)	Mean	Std. Deviation
I go on ecotourism trips to get away from the daily routine	4.17	0.79
I go on ecotourism trips to mentally relax	4.00	0.92
I go on ecotourism trips to physically relax	3.35	1.14
I go on ecotourism trips for a sense of freedom	4.34	0.72
Variable (Functional Attributes)	Mean	Std. Deviation
I go on ecotourism trips because a tour operator can arrange an itinerary for me	3.57	1.14

I go on ecotourism trips because there was a good deal	3.39	1.08
I go on ecotourism trips because all my transfers are included	3.26	1.17
<b>Variable (Social Attributes)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
I go on ecotourism trips to spend time with family and or friends	3.73	1.10
I go on ecotourism trips to make new friends	3.64	1.03
I go on ecotourism trips to get to know the local people	4.04	0.84
I go on ecotourism trips to meet people with similar interests	3.80	0.93
<b>Variable (Exclusivity)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
I go on ecotourism trips because I enjoy sharing photos of my holidays on social media	3.01	1.40
I go on ecotourism trips to enjoy taking part in an exclusive trip	3.72	0.96
I go on ecotourism trips to be able to tell family about my exclusive experience	3.44	1.14
I go on ecotourism trips to impress others	2.29	1.29
<b>Variable (Nature)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
I go on ecotourism trips to feel close to nature	4.39	0.70
I go on ecotourism trips to explore the unknown	4.46	0.63
I go on ecotourism trips to go back to basics (away from the digital world)	3.95	1.09
I go on ecotourism trips to experience the environment whilst causing minimum damage	4.44	0.68
I go on ecotourism trips to see wildlife without hindering their day to day life	4.56	0.57
<b>Variable (Culture)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
I go on ecotourism trips to interact with different cultures	4.50	0.73
I go on ecotourism trips to ensure local communities are benefiting	4.25	0.66
I go on ecotourism trips to help benefit the local economy	4.27	0.76
I go on ecotourism trips to try new food	4.04	0.95
I go on ecotourism trips to learn about historical sites	4.11	0.86

The standard deviation is shown in the following Table. Standard deviation identifies the variation of responses collected in the questionnaire. A high standard deviation value suggests that the responses vary greatly between participants, whereas a low standard deviation value means that participant responses are in agreement and there is no excessive fluctuation in participant's answers [13].

Not only is the standard deviation relatively low for the self-development section, but the mean value is also relatively high, indicating that most of the participants believe that the self-development motives play an important part as to why they went on an ecotourism holiday. This is also true for the nature motives and cultural motives, who both have low standard deviation and high mean values.

The collected data on ecotourist characteristics revealed that there were similarities compared to previous research conducted on ecotourists, disclosing that the core category of ecotourists remained to be well-educated and have a high annual income. However, the age of ecotourists had become much more varied and a new market trend is emerging as an increasing amount of the younger generations (21-30-year-olds) going on ecotourism holidays.

After analysing data collected on what motivated ecotourists to go on ecotourism holidays, the research was able to identify that the main modern day ecotourist motivations consisted of a combination of push and pull factors specifically, self-development (push factor), and the destinations natural and cultural attributions (pull factors). Though there was slightly more of a

pull towards natural attributes than cultural attributes, ecotourists would still consider them as a key motivation. Both motivating factors were essential in encouraging tourists to travel on an ecotourism holiday.

Since identifying that there was a potential new market trend of younger ecotourists it was important to identify whether different age groups had different motivations. From the data collected, the researchers were able to identify that younger ecotourists wanted to escape their day to day lives and have a sense of freedom when on their holiday. This was reciprocated by the fact that they wanted to get away from the digital world, of which their daily lives revolved around. Due to the age and annual earnings of these younger tourists, they were looking for a good deal and are eager to tell their family about their experiences. In contrast, people aged 51-70 had much higher annual earnings, therefore, were willing to pay for an exclusive ecotourism holiday. Additionally, with the average retirement age in the UK sitting around 62-65 years they have not got as much as a busy daily routine compared to younger tourists and consequently this is not a major motivating factor.

**Conclusions.** From the findings of this study, it is possible to deduce what motivates younger ecotourists, a new emerging market trend into the sector. These motivations are essential for ecotourism businesses to understand so that they can produce and advertise products and services that will attract this new market. The following recommendations can be offered to sustain motivation of ecotourists.

Ecotourism businesses targeting younger generations should make sure to let their audience know that this is a chance for them to meet new people, whether it is in group trips or interacting with the local people. Producing momentum, such as videos and selling condiments for them to take home will mean that tourists are able to go home and show their families and friends exactly what they got up to. This is an important factor for the younger generation who have not travelled as widely as the older generation. Examples could include Vanilla pods from Madagascar or spices from India. Promotion of products and services is a chance to escape the norm, do something different and to get away from the digital world that the younger generation are normally stuck in. With an increasing amount of younger people spending money on holidays instead of saving for mortgages, ecotourism businesses targeting younger generations are in the perfect position to attract business. However, younger people do not have the budget that older generations have and therefore promoting deals and discounts will increase the likelihood of them purchasing a product or service.

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### **Что мотивирует потребителей заниматься экотуризмом?**

**Аннотация.** В этом исследовании изучаются мотивы потребителей для участия в экотуризме. Глобальный сектор экотуризма растет быстрее, чем любой другой сектор туризма, поскольку люди все больше осознают ущерб, который они наносят своей планете. Таким образом, крайне важно понять причины, по которым потребители хотят получить опыт экотуризма. Путем распространения и сбора 223 анкет от людей, которые ранее были в экотуристическом отпуске, исследование подтверждает характеристики и мотивацию экотуризма. Результаты выявили развивающийся рынок молодых экотуристов в возрасте от 21 до 30 лет. Их мотивы отправиться в экотуристический отпуск были затем изучены и представлены в виде рекомендаций для предприятий экотуризма, позволяющих им лучше проникнуть на свой рынок. Кроме того, были выявлены мотивы экотуристов как популяции, и результаты показали, что они коррелируют с предыдущими результатами, указывая на то, что сочетание мотивов отталкивания и притяжения было важным, особенно с упором на влияние на саморазвитие, например, «получить подлинный опыт». или «получить новую перспективу», а также природные и культурные атрибуты места назначения, такие, как «чувствовать себя ближе к природе», «познавать окружающую среду, причиняя минимальный ущерб» и «взаимодействовать с различными культурами».

**Ключевые слова:** экотуризм, природный туризм, устойчивость, мотивация, потребительский взгляд.

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### **Туристерді экотуризммен айналысуға не ынталандырады?**

**Аңдатпа.** Бұл мақала тұтынушылардың экотуризммен айналысу мотивтерін қарастырады. Жаһандық экотуризм секторы кез келген ортаға келтіретін зиян туралы көбірек ұғынуда. Сондықтан да, тұтынушылардың экотуризммен алатын тәжірибесінің себептерін түсіну өте маңызды. Бұрын экотуристік демалысқа қатысқан адамдардан 223 сауалнаманы сараптау мен бағалау арқылы экотуристердің мотивтері мен мотивациясын анықтауға мүмкіншілік берді. Нәтижелер 21-30 жас аралығындағы жас экотуристердің дамып келе жатқан жаңа нарығын анықтады. Сонымен қоса, олардың экотуристік демалыспен қызығушылық себептері зерттелді, және экотуристік кәсіпорындарға өз кәсібін дамытуға мүмкіндік беретін ұсыныстар жасалды. Сонымен қатар, экотуристердің мотивтері анықталды және алынған нәтижелер олардың алдыңғы нәтижелермен корреляциялық ұқсастықтарын көрсетті, бұл экотуризмнің ынталандырушы және туристердің мотивтерімен үйлесімі маңызды екенін көрсетті, әсіресе «шынайы тәжірибе алу» немесе «жаңа перспектива табу» сияқты өзін-өзі дамыту факторларына назар аудара отырып., «табиғатқа жақынырақ сезіну», «қоршаған ортамен аздап зиян келтіру арқылы танысу» және «әртүрлі мәдениеттермен өзара әрекеттесу» сияқты табиғи және мәдени атрибуттардың бар екенін көрсетті.

Түйін сөздер: экотуризм, табиғи туризм, тұрақтылық, мотивация, тұтынушылық перспектива. Түйін сөздер: экотуризм, табиғат туризмі, тұрақтылық, мотивация, тұтынушылық көзқарас.

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