

The Influence of Wildlife Watching Experience on Tourists' Connection to Wildlife Conservation Caring and Awareness

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Abstract : One of the aims of wildlife tourism is to educate visitors about the threats facing wildlife, in general, and the actions needed to protect the environment and maintain biodiversity. Annually, millions of tourists visit natural areas and zoos primarily to view flagship species such as rhinos and elephants. Venues rely on the inherent charisma of these species to increase visitation and anchor conservation efforts. Expected visitor outcomes from the use of flagships include raised levels of awareness and pro-conservation behaviors. However, the role of flagships in wildlife tourism has been criticized for not delivering conservation benefits for species of interest or biodiversity and producing negative site impacts. Furthermore, little is known about how the connection to a species influences conservation behaviors. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge by extending previous work exploring wildlife tourism to include the emotional connection formed with wildlife species and pro-conservation behaviors for individual species and biodiversity. This paper represents a substantial contribution to the field because (a) it incorporates the role of the experience in understanding how tourists connect with a species and how this connection influences pro-conservation behaviors; and (b) is the first attempt to operationalize Conservation Caring as a measure of tourists' connection with a species. Existing studies have investigated how specific elements, such as interpretation or species' morphology may influence programmatic goals or awareness. However, awareness is a poor measure of an emotional connection with an animal. Furthermore, there has not been work done to address the holistic nature of the wildlife viewing experience, and its subsequent influence on behaviors. Results based on the structural equation modelling, support the validity of Conservation Caring as a factor; the ability of wildlife tourism to influence Conservation Caring; and that this connection is a strong predictor of conservation awareness behaviors. These findings suggest wildlife tourism can deliver conservation outcomes. The studies in this paper also provide a valuable framework for structuring wildlife tourism experiences to align with flagship related conservation outcomes, and exploring a wider assemblage of species as potential flagships.

Keywords : wildlife tourism, conservation caring, conservation awareness, structural equation modelling

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