

31 Cold as Ice? Arctic tourists' epiphanies and connection to wildlife

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Introduction

Wildlife tourism is expected to produce conservation benefits for species observed during a trip. This is due, in part, to the unique wildlife encounters that occur during such trips. It is hypothesized that the more unique and rare animal encounters in the wild are, the more likely tourists will be to realize heightened emotional states.

Previous studies have explored tourists' emotional connection to wildlife (i.e., conservation caring) and environmental epiphanies as two constructs to evaluate the effect of wildlife tourism experiences. Furthermore, these constructs are shown to have a direct positive influence on conservation behaviors. This study investigated tourists' conservation caring and environmental epiphany levels during a 10-day wildlife viewing cruise through the Svalbard Islands (Norway).

The purpose of this study is to explore 1) if arctic tourism is capable of stimulating an environmental epiphany; 2) the emotional connections (i.e., conservation caring) arctic tourists form with wildlife, and 3) the relationship between environmental epiphanies and conservation caring.

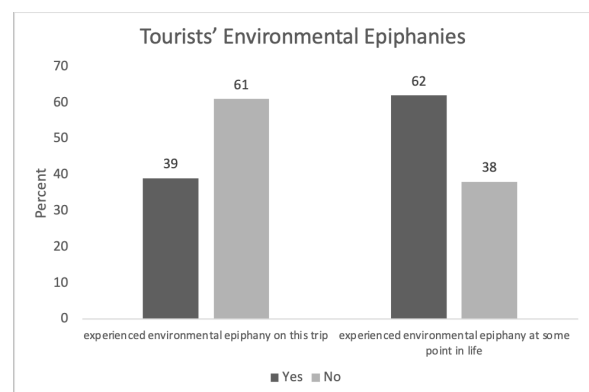
Methods

This study was conducted aboard Lindblad Expedition's National Geographic Explorer during a ten-day arctic cruise in June 2019. The expedition, entitled Land of Ice Bears: An In-Depth Exploration of Arctic Svalbard, was offered in joint partnership between Lindblad Expeditions and the National Geographic Society. The partnership's educationally oriented marine expedition voyages encourage guests to interact with and learn from scientists, naturalists, and researchers while exploring remote natural environments. The June 2019 expedition involved a total of 142 guests, 14 field staff, and two Grosvenor Teacher Fellows. Data were obtained from 72 tourists on-board during the return voyage.

Results

Participants were asked to identify the animal to which they formed the strongest connection during the expedition. Walrus were the most commonly reported animal to which tourists reported a connection at 52%, polar bears were the second most common at 33%, all other species were each less than 5% (arctic fox 1.6%, bird 3.2%, lichen 1.6%, reindeer 3.2%, whale 4.8%). Tourists reported developing strong emotional connections to polar bears and walrus. There was no difference in conservation caring scores between species.

Environmental epiphanies were realized by 39% of tourists during this trip. Additionally, 62% of tourists reported having had an environmental epiphany at some point in their life. Tourists who experienced an environmental epiphany on this trip had significantly higher ($t(56) = -3.16, p = .003; \eta = .34$) conservation caring scores ($6.77 + 1.31$) than those who did not experience an environmental epiphany ($5.46 + 1.63$). Tourists who had previously experienced an environmental epiphany also had significantly higher ($t(55) = -2.88, p = .006; \eta = .36$) conservation caring scores ($6.34 + 1.23$) compared to those who had never experienced an environmental epiphany ($5.17 + 1.83$).



Discussion

Previous studies have shown conservation caring to be a strong predictor of pro-conservation behaviors, which are often a desired tourist-based outcome of ecotourism. Thus, higher levels of conservation

caring would increase the likelihood of tourists performing pro-conservation behaviors. This study has found that arctic tourists who experienced environmental epiphanies formed stronger emotional connections with observed wildlife, regardless of species, and had higher conservation caring levels than tourists who did not experience an environmental epiphany. As conservation caring is a predictor of pro-conservation behaviors, it would imply that these tourists would be more likely to engage in desired pro-conservation behaviors. Overall, this study has provided empirical support for the ability of ecotourism to effectively cultivate the conservation psychology constructs of

environmental epiphanies and conservation caring. Both constructs have been shown to predict pro-conservation behaviors. This supports the claim that ecotourism is capable of providing experiences that fundamentally connect people to nature. Such connections are known to be strong positive predictors of pro-conservation behaviors. Furthermore, these outcomes function independent of the congruence between tourists' expectations and experiences. This could help to alleviate pressure on operators to provide specific wildlife encounters and/or violate management policies surrounding human-wildlife encounters.