

## 61 Media representation of nature, mass ecotourism, and the visitor experience

Julius Arnegger<sup>1,2</sup>, Marc Herz<sup>3</sup>, J. Michael Campbell<sup>4</sup>, <sup>1</sup>West Coast University of Applied Sciences, Germany. <sup>2</sup>DITF - German Institute for Tourism Research, Germany. <sup>3</sup>Kleinundpläcking GmbH, Germany. <sup>4</sup>University of Manitoba, Canada

The soft or mass ecotourism sub-field makes up a large percentage of the ecotourism sector in many regions worldwide. This sub sector is generally characterized by larger group size, lower environmental commitment, and higher levels of service standards when compared to traditional “hard” ecotourists (Weaver, 2001).

It has been argued that this popularity is driven in large part by representations of nature in popular media such as documentaries and magazines (Lemelin, 2006). Generally, any form of media may play a salient role in tourism contexts, i.e. raising expectations toward destinations, trips or tourism experiences, which may not be met in reality (Michalkó et al., 2015). Thus, while media has the potential to positively impact people’s expectations, perspectives and attitudes it also implies the danger of overpromising. Individuals with unrealistic expectations are hence more likely to experience some form of disappointment (Bramwell, 1998).

These general notions can be expected to be specifically relevant in nature-based settings, in that tourists’ expectations may be highly influenced by curated representations of nature and wildlife. In turn, expectations are generally assumed to impact satisfaction which is a main driver for positive behavioral outcomes such as intention to re-visit and positive word-of-mouth (Faerber et al., 2021). When applied to wildlife tourism experiences we assume that the more the held image (shaped by media consumption) differs from objective reality, the greater will be both the tourists’ expectation and his/her disappointment.

The present study examines the relationship between visitors’ pre-trip expectations and post-trip satisfaction of a mass ecotourism nature experience as a function of previous involvement in nature activities and organizations, and consumption of wildlife and nature-based media. To test our conceptual model (Figure 1) and hypotheses using structural equation model, we conducted a survey with actual visitors (N = 526) on harbor seal (Phoca

vitulina) watching boat tours in the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea National Park in Northern Germany. These tours fit the main characteristics of mass ecotourism, i.e. a standardized product marketed to a large number of customers, with a low focus on environmental learning and physical activity.

The survey procedure was divided into two stages using a self-administered questionnaire. In the first stage (pre-tour), visitors were asked to provide their degree of eco-media usage, their personal eco-involvement (the degree to which nature/wildlife play a role in their lives) and their pre-tour expectations. In the second stage (post-tour) visitors rated their post-tour experience and behavioral intentions after the tour.

The following hypotheses were postulated:

H1: Mass ecotourism experiences lead to disappointment among participants.

H2a: Higher degree of eco-media usage leads to higher expectations of ecotourism trips.

H2b: Higher degree of eco-media usage leads to lower experience ratings of the actual ecotourism trip.

H3a: Higher degree of personal eco-involvement leads to higher expectations of ecotourism trips.

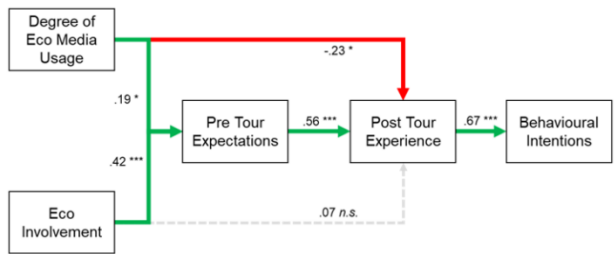
H3b: Higher degree of personal eco-involvement leads to lower experience ratings of the actual ecotourism trip.

H4: Visitors’ pre-trip expectations determine their post-trip experience.

H5: Better ecotourism trip experience leads to more positive behavioral intentions toward future ecotourism trips.

To analyze visitors’ satisfaction, we compared pre-tour expectations with post-tour experience on an intraindividual level. We assessed expected level of emotions, learning and experience (pre-tour) with their actual perceived level of emotions, learning and experience after the trip (post-tour). All measures significantly decreased after the tour, confirming H1. With regard to

learning, the difference between pre-tour expectations ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) and post-tour evaluation of the experience ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .87$ ) was highest among the three measures ( $t(525) = 9.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ).



Note: Completely standardized coefficients shown | \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; n.s. = not significant  
Fit indices:  $\chi^2 = 370.30$ ; d.f. = 70; RMSEA = .092; SRMR = .087; NNFI = .912; CFI = .932; GFI = .906; AGFI = .859

Figure 1: conceptual model

Results further show that eco-media usage significantly increases visitors' pre-tour expectations ( $\beta = .19$ ;  $p < .001$ ), confirming H2a (cf. Figure 1). Thus, a larger degree of eco-related media usage leads to significantly higher expectations toward nature/wildlife tourism experiences. However, eco-media usage has the contrary effect on the post-trip evaluation: here, we find that eco-media usage has a significant negative effect ( $\beta = -.23$ ;  $p < .001$ ), confirming H2b. It shows that consuming a higher degree of eco-related media content leads to a lower mass ecotourism trip experience. When looking at the effects of eco-involvement, we find that in parallel to eco-media usage a higher degree of personal eco-involvement again leads to higher pre-tour expectations ( $\beta = .42$ ;  $p < .001$ ), confirming H3a. In contrast, personal eco-involvement did not have a significant effect on visitors' post-tour

experience ( $\beta = .07$ ; n.s.), rejecting H3b. It, thus, appears that visitors' personal involvement in nature and animals leads to higher expectations before the mass ecotourism trip. Yet, in contrast to eco-media usage this involvement appears to mitigate the potential disappointment of the mass ecotourism trip experience, as visitors with a higher personal involvement may be able to more accurately evaluate the experience and put it in perspective.

Confirming hypothesis H4 we find that visitors' pre-trip expectations significantly determine their post-trip experience ( $\beta = .56$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Finally, we find that higher post-trip experience significantly increases visitors' behavioral intentions ( $\beta = .67$ ;  $p < .001$ ), confirming H5. Visitors who rate their experience of the mass ecotourism trip better have a higher intention to repeat the tour, go on more nature or wildlife tours or recommend the tour to others.

In line with common ecotourism definitions the study confirms that tourists regard environmental learning as a key component of ecotourism experiences, including in mass ecotourism settings; a low focus on environmental learning thus leads to significant disappointment.

The results further confirm that nature media consumption can lead to unrealistic expectations and disappointment. Both in terms of marketing measures and development of nature-based tourism offers, tour operators should take these findings into account in order to adequately manage experiences.

## References

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