



Visitors' values and environmental learning outcomes at wildlife attractions: Implications for interpretive practice



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Zoo visitor values, reflective engagement and environmental behaviour are examined.
- Frequent visitors ascribe higher importance than others to universalism values.
- Universalism-nature and universalism-animal are linked to reflective engagement.
- Reflective engagement is positively related to post-visit environmental behaviour.
- A values-based approach to the design of visitor interpretation is proposed.

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ABSTRACT

Wildlife tourism attractions, such as zoos and aquariums, are expected to play a major role in promoting environmental learning in society. This paper applies a refined version of Schwartz's (1992) Value Theory to develop a better understanding of zoo and aquarium visitors' personal values, and the impact of their values on their reflective engagement, learning, and self-reported changes in post-visit environmental behaviour. Findings revealed that personal values are related to post-visit environmental behaviour through the process of on-site reflective engagement. The findings highlight the importance of using a values-based approach to visitor interpretation, one that engages a broader range of visitors and enhances the impact of a wildlife tourism experience on visitors' environmental learning and post-visit behaviour.

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1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations World Tourism Day forum coined the phrase “one billion tourists – one billion opportunities” to highlight the tourism industry's potential to influence people's environmental behaviour (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2016). Popular captive wildlife and ecotourism attractions such as zoos and aquariums (Frost, 2011; Grajal, 2013; Higginbottom, 2004) annually host approximately 700 million visitors worldwide (World Association of Zoos and

Aquariums [WAZA], 2016); are a major motivation for tourist visitation (Higginbottom, 2004); and are thus ideally placed to educate visitors about the need for animal and environmental conservation.

The environmental and conservation education role of zoos and aquariums is clearly supported and articulated by the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) who envision that “zoos and aquariums with their unique resource of live animals, their expertise, and their links to field conservation will be recognized as leaders and mentors in formal and informal education for conservation” (WAZA, 2005, p. 35). Not surprisingly, therefore, the achievement of environmental and conservation education goals is an integral part of most zoo and aquarium mission statements (Luebke & Grajal, 2011). These commonly highlight the provision of visitor experiences that:

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- foster life-long environmental and conservation learning;
- facilitate personal reflection on environmental actions; and
- encourage the adoption of environmentally sustainable behaviours (Grajal, 2013; Mann & Vernon, 2013; Penning, 2011).

Studies in both captive and non-captive wildlife tourism settings have demonstrated that observing and interacting with animals can enhance visitors' environmental knowledge and attitudes, and positively impact on their intentions to engage in sustainable environmental behaviour (Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011). Such impacts have been attributed to a number of factors including on-site environmental interpretation, opportunities to observe wildlife, and feelings of empathy or emotional connection with the animals encountered (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011; Meyers, Saunders, & Birjulin, 2004; Zeppel & Muloin, 2007). Notwithstanding this, a vocal anti-zoo lobby is increasingly disputing zoo and aquarium claims that these popular wildlife tourism attractions advance their visitors' environmental learning, challenging them to *demonstrate* the positive impact that they have on their adoption of environmentally friendly practices (Marino, Lilienfeld, Malamud, Nobis, & Broglio, 2010; Milstein, 2009). It is possible, therefore, that the long-term survival of zoos and aquariums as tourist attractions will depend on their ability to convince governments and the general public that their net effect on the world's non-human species is a positive one – that through keeping animals in captivity they are indeed able to influence visitors' environmental learning and behaviour, thereby helping to protect and conserve habitats and populations of animals in the wild.

Research studies show that visitors' environmental behavioural intentions increase as a result of a visit to a wildlife or ecotourism attraction (Ballantyne & Packer, 2011; Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011; Ballantyne, Packer, Hughes, & Dierking, 2007). For many years this has been used as an indication of success, however, there are few studies that measure and convincingly demonstrate that many visitors translate their intentions into the adoption of environmentally responsible behaviours in the weeks and months after their visit (Ballantyne & Packer, 2016; Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011; Hughes & Ballantyne, 2013; Hughes, 2013; Smith, Broad, & Weiler, 2008; Smith, Weiler, & Ham, 2011). In fact, in many cases, it seems intentions are not good indicators of the extent to which visitors are likely to make long-term changes to their environmental behaviour. To illustrate, Ballantyne, Packer, and Falk (2011) surveyed visitors at four wildlife tourism sites and found that although 33% expressed a strong desire to protect and conserve the environment, four months later only 7% had taken action. Likewise, Hughes (2013) found that the majority of families exiting a turtle rookery attraction fully intended to adopt conservation behaviours ranging from recycling to clean-up activities. Three months later, most had not done so. This intention-behaviour gap has been reported in a number of wildlife tourism studies (Adelman, Haley-Goldman, & Falk, 2001; Ballantyne & Packer, 2011; Dierking et al., 2004; Lueke & Grajal, 2011; Smith et al., 2008).

Despite this, there is evidence that some visitors do, in fact, adopt environmental behaviours as a result of their wildlife tourism experiences. Factors that have been found to contribute to visitors' long-term environmental learning outcomes include their motivation to learn, reflective engagement during the visit to a wildlife or ecotourism experience, and post-visit reinforcement of learning (Ballantyne, Packer, Hughes, & Gill, 2017; Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011). Visitors' level of prior engagement in sustainable environmental behaviours is another factor that is a strong predictor of the long-term learning impact of a visit to a wildlife or ecotourism attraction. These findings suggest that wildlife experiences in zoo and aquarium tourist attractions largely impact on those who are

already environmentally aware and involved in undertaking environmentally sustainable action (Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011).

Zoos and aquariums are at risk of being accused of “preaching to the converted” (Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011) rather than engaging with, or attracting, visitors who are not interested in environmental issues and/or motivated to undertake sustainable environmental action. Indeed, although unintentional, it is often the case that wildlife tourism experiences and interpretation materials in zoos and aquariums are designed by environmentally committed individuals to engage like-minded visitors. Accordingly, it is argued that the visitor experience and interpretation design process may work to limit the conservation education impact of wildlife and ecotourism attractions. Clearly, therefore, zoo and aquarium tourist attractions must demonstrate that they are able to successfully reach, engage and influence a broad spectrum of the population. To achieve this, visitor experience and interpretation design needs to move from a “one size fits all” approach towards the adoption of an approach that is more inclusive and considerate of the broad range of individual differences.

For zoo and aquarium wildlife tourism attractions to attract a more diverse visitor cohort, and engage them in environmental learning experiences, they need to obtain a better understanding of how their visitors perceive, experience, process and subsequently act upon their visit. Thus far, most research has focused on measuring the immediate proximates of behaviour, such as motivations, environmental orientations, prior learning and on- and off-site visitor experiences (Adelman, Falk, & James, 2000; Ballantyne & Packer, 2011; Ballantyne et al., 2017; Doering & Pekarik, 1996; Falk & Adelman, 2003; Falk & Storksdieck, 2005). However, key aspects of a visitor's self-concept and identity that may explain these proximates, in particular the role of personal values in predicting and explaining an individual's environmental behaviour, have rarely been considered.

It is contended that zoo/aquarium visitors' personal values play a central role in influencing their receptiveness to, and engagement with, on-site conservation messages and education experiences, which in turn influences the adoption of post-visit environmentally sustainable behaviour. Accordingly, this research examines zoo and aquarium visitors' values, and explores the influence of their values on their engagement with conservation education experiences during the visit, their environmental learning as a result of their visit, and their subsequent adoption of environmentally responsible behaviours after the visit. Suggestions are made for how a values-based approach can be applied to improve the design of wildlife tourist experiences and interpretive materials that are more engaging and effective for a wider range of potential visitors.

1.1. What are values?

Values are defined as trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in the lives of individuals (Schwartz, 1992). Values, as broad life goals, are at the core of a person's self-concept and identity. They define who the person is and determine how they interact with the world (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). They indicate what matters in life, directing attention and serving as guides to attitudes and behaviours (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Values have been related to major life decisions, as well as everyday behaviours, including the use of environmental products (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003).

The most widely used conceptualisation of values is that of the Schwartz (1992) Value Theory (Parks-Leduc, Feldman, & Bardi, 2015). In this theory, values form a circular motivational continuum. This continuum has been partitioned into 10 basic values (Schwartz, 1992). Evidence supporting this circular structure has been found in hundreds of samples in over 75 countries (Schwartz,

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