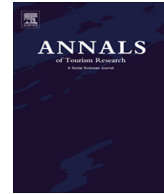




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# Measuring environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour



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### ABSTRACT

This study reveals substantial variation in estimates of the proportion of tourists behaving in an environmentally sustainable manner. Results indicate that the variation is explained by (1) definitions of environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour including—or not including—intent to protect the environment and (2) the use of either unprompted open-ended or prompted closed questions. The latter are associated with respondent's tendencies to respond in a socially desirable way, thus artificially inflating the occurrence of environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour by as much as 74 per cent. Unprompted open-ended questions are not susceptible to social desirability bias. Future studies into environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour should measure actual observed behaviour. If this is not possible, unprompted open-ended approaches are recommended.

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### Introduction

Tourism activity affects destinations in many ways: economically, socially and environmentally. The present study focuses on the environmental dimension of sustainability in tourism. Tourism has a range of well-documented negative environmental consequences (Gössling, 2002; UNWTO & UNEP, 2008). Few governments take regulatory action to prevent such negative effects, possibly

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because it may reduce tourism demand, and simultaneously tourism revenues. Tourism industry also tends not to self-regulate, possibly because implementing environmentally sustainable measures increases operating expenses. Absorbing increased operating cost is particularly challenging for small and medium businesses typical for the tourism industry. Therefore, tourists may represent the most promising target when attempting to increase the environmental sustainability of tourism. Tourists can help to reduce this negative impact by making environmentally sustainable vacation decisions and behaving in an environmentally sustainable manner while at the destination.

In order to learn about environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour and assess the effectiveness of measures targeted at increasing the level of this behaviour by tourists, it is necessary to have clarity on what defines tourist behaviour which is environmentally sustainable. It is also necessary to be able to measure such behaviour validly. It is best, of course, to measure actual behaviour. Often, however, this is not viable either because it would be prohibitively expensive to observe the behaviour of large number of tourists or because there may be ethical considerations preventing such observation. As a consequence, researchers are frequently forced to rely on reported behaviour. It is for this reason that the present paper focuses on reported environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour. Specifically, the paper aims (1) to draw attention to the divergence of estimates about environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour, (2) identify reasons for this divergence and (3) arrive at recommendation to reduce it in future studies.

The paper is structured as follows: first previously used definitions of environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour are reviewed and—based on this review—a justification for the definition underlying the present study is provided. This definition contains intention to protect the environment as a key defining characteristic of environmentally sustainable behaviour. Next, a bibliographical study is conducted which provides insight into how environmentally sustainable tourism has been measured in the past and reveals that estimates about the occurrence of such behaviour vary dramatically. After that, an empirical survey study with 1039 respondents is conducted to determine the causes of this variation. Finally, based on the findings from the empirical study, recommendations about how to validly measure environmentally sustainable tourism in the future are provided.

The significance and key contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating the lack of agreement on the extent to which tourists engage in environmentally friendly behaviour and identifying the key reasons for the wide range of estimates using social psychological theories as the basis of understanding environmentally significant behaviour as well as the causes of socially desirable responding in survey studies.

Furthermore, the study is of theoretical importance because it proposes the first explicit definition of intended environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour. This definition has implications for measurement and for the development of interventions aimed at increasing environmentally sustainable behaviour among tourists. Findings are of immediate practical relevance as they will strengthen the validity of future research into environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour.

## **Environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour**

Environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour is tourist behaviour which does not negatively impact the natural environment (or may even benefit the environment) both globally and at the destination.

A number of different theories offer explanations for environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour. Empirical evidence (Klöckner, 2013; Kormos & Gifford, 2014) suggests that the Theory of Environmentally Significant Behaviour (Stern, 2000) is particularly suitable in this context. This theory postulates that people's personal norms directly affect environmentally sustainable behaviour. Personal norms, defined as the "sense of obligation to take pro-environmental action" (Stern, 2000, p. 3) develop if people are aware of environmental problems (awareness of consequences) and believe to be responsible for alleviating such problems (ascription of responsibility). As opposed to attitudes, moral obligation is believed to remain relatively stable over time (Conner & Armitage, 1998), thus possibly representing a more suitable leverage point for achieving behaviour change.

Studies by Dolnicar and Leisch (2008) and Dolnicar (2010) provide empirical evidence for the association of personal norms and environmentally sustainable tourist behaviour (e.g. saving water,

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