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# Annals of Tourism Research

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## The attitude–behaviour gap in sustainable tourism



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 23 July 2013

Revised 13 December 2013

Accepted 17 May 2014

Available online 16 June 2014

#### Keywords:

Environmentally sustainable tourism

Cognitive dissonance theory

Qualitative research

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates why people who actively engage in environmental protection at home engage in vacation behaviour which has negative environmental consequences, albeit unintentionally. The environmental activists participating in the study were highly aware of the negative environmental consequences of tourism in general, but all displayed an attitude–behaviour gap which made them feel uncomfortable. Participants did not report changing their behaviour; instead, they offered a wide range of explanations justifying their tourist activities. Gaining insight into these explanations contributes to our understanding of why it is so difficult to motivate people to minimize the negative environmental impacts of their vacations, and represents a promising starting point for new interventions to reduce environmentally unsustainable tourism behaviours.

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### Introduction

Tourists generally have positive attitudes towards the environment, and do not wish to behave in ways that negatively impact the environment (Dolnicar, 2004; Wurzinger & Johansson, 2006). Social psychological theories explaining why humans behave in certain ways, such as the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985), postulate that attitudes—among other factors—affect behaviour. Yet, in the context of environmentally sustainable behaviour, having a positive attitude does not emerge as a good predictor of making environmentally sustainable vacation choices. A distinct attitude–behaviour gap exists in environmentally sustainable tourism (Becken, 2004; Bergin-Seers & Mair, 2009).

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As part of investigating different research questions in a range of study contexts, several studies have identified possible reasons for this gap, including: claiming that there are no alternatives to current behaviours; that other issues are of greater importance (Becken, 2007; Buckley, 2011; Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, & Withmarsh, 2007); using escape and relaxation as an excuse for disregarding environmental considerations (Wearing, Cynn, Ponting, & McDonald, 2002); not having the information required to choose vacation options that come at a low environmental cost (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2013); buying offsets or using credits of smaller footprints from everyday life, or behaving in an environmentally friendly way at home (Becken, 2007; Buckley, 2011); being too busy to change one's behaviour (Lorenzoni et al., 2007); blaming others (Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010); having faith in technological solutions (Gössling, Haglund, Kallgren, Revahl, & Hultman, 2009; Lorenzoni et al., 2007); denying responsibility (Gössling et al., 2009); displacing responsibility (Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2010); emphasizing the job creation benefits of carbon emitting industries (Becken, 2007); and arguing that there is negligible impact from personal behaviour (Gössling et al., 2009; Lorenzoni et al., 2007). None of these studies, however, identifies a comprehensive list of reasons for the attitude–behaviour gap in environmentally sustainable tourism, or develops a systematics of reasons. This is the aim of the present study.

Specifically, the present study aims to produce a better understanding of the attitude–behaviour gap in the context of environmentally sustainable tourism. The investigation focuses on environmental activists because they are known to have pro-environmental attitudes (Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999) and have a demonstrated willingness to engage in behaviours that help the environment. We may expect, therefore, that environmental activists will demonstrate the smallest attitude–behaviour gap, if any at all. This paper investigates the following research questions:

- (1) Are environmental activists aware of the negative environmental consequences of their vacation behaviour?
- (2) Is there an attitude–behaviour gap among environmental activists in the tourism context?
- (3) If so, how do environmental activists feel about this attitude–behaviour gap? And do they attempt to reduce the gap?

The study primarily contributes to the understanding of environmentally unsustainable vacation behaviour. The insights gained may form the basis of developing targeted interventions in the future which aim at reducing vacation behaviours that come at high environmental cost.

## **Theoretical background**

Several theories and concepts have been used in the past to explain behaviours that cause harm to the environment and therefore need to be considered as possible bases for the present study, which focuses on the attitude–behaviour gap in the context of environmentally sustainable tourism.

### *Theory of planned behaviour*

The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985), an extension of the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), postulates that attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioural control affect people's intentions to behave in certain ways which, in turn, lead to actual behaviour. The theory of planned behaviour has frequently been used as a basis for investigating environmentally sustainable behaviour in general (Anable, Lane, & Kelay, 2006; Bamberg, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2003; Chen & Tung, 2010; Fielding, McDonald, & Louis, 2008; Kalafatis, Pollard, East, & Tsogas, 1999; Shaw, Shiu, & Clarke, 2000) and environmentally sustainable tourism behaviour in particular (Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010; Han & Kim, 2010; Ong & Musa, 2011), showing great promise in explaining behavioural intentions. Critics of the theory of planned behaviour argue, however, that behavioural intentions do not translate into behaviour, and several empirical studies have demonstrated that this link is indeed relatively weak (for example, Bergin-Seers & Mair, 2009; Bickmann, 1972; McDonald, Oates, Alevizou, Young, & Hwang, 2012; McKercher & Tse, 2012).

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