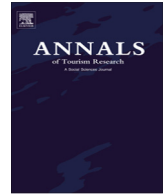




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# Tourists' accounts of responsible tourism



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### ABSTRACT

Responsible tourism' has become an established area of tourism research and practice and is typically understood as a broad set of tourist interactions that engage with and benefit local communities and minimize negative social and environmental impacts. Extant research however has adopted a largely top down approach to understanding responsible tourism that has marginalized the voices of tourists. This study investigates tourists' own accounts of responsible tourism experiences, finding that these intersect with but also deviate substantially away from established conceptions of the phenomenon. We show that tourists' accounts can be delineated according to the extent to which they display inner-versus outer-directed goals, and the degree of involvement in responsible tourism as a cultural identity.

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## Introduction

'Responsible tourism' has become an established area of tourism research and practice. Although it shares much in common with 'sustainable tourism', 'eco-tourism', 'ethical tourism' and other related forms of socially conscious tourism practice, the label of 'responsible tourism' is by far the most favoured industry term. Evidence suggests that tour operators are almost five times as likely to use 'responsible tourism' as any alternative label (SNV, 2009). This is reflected in the provision of tourism

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products specifically branded as 'responsible' experiences and targeted at a distinct market niche seeking to engage in more responsible forms of tourism (Goodwin & Francis, 2003).

Recent economic conditions may have stalled the previously rapid growth of this niche, but it retains a significant, albeit small, share of the overall tourism market. It currently accounts for more than \$180m of business in the UK (Co-operative Group, 2012) and internationally appears to have weathered the economic downturn relatively better than many other forms of tourism, meaning that it is still 'a relatively good time to be providing a responsible holiday' (SNV, 2009: 21).

The meaning of responsible tourism, both in theory and practice, has been the subject of considerable debate. Amongst practitioners, there are several industry protocols on responsible tourism, which look to define its key principles and practices. For instance, the 2002 Cape Town Declaration characterizes responsible tourism in terms of: (i) minimizing impacts; (ii) generating economic benefits for host communities; (iii) involving local people in decision making; (iv) conserving natural and cultural heritage; (v) providing meaningful connections between tourists and local people; and (vi) being accessible and culturally sensitive (World Tourism Market Responsible Tourism, 2013). As Caruana and Crane (2008) have shown, such constructions of responsible tourism by industry actors also help define the meaning and possibilities for responsible tourism among consumers. That is, consumers of responsible tourism do not exist as a pre-defined category waiting to be discovered, but that conceptions of responsible tourism articulated by the industry are the contours around which market segments are drawn.

Whilst we might expect marketers to reinforce a particular perspective in order to segment their customers and make responsible tourism products readily identifiable and easy to communicate to the market, we should not assume that consumers necessarily integrate these typified constructions of responsibility so passively, nor uniformly. Indeed, consumers are readily able to interpret, transform and contest the meanings of the products, services and brands they experience (Holt, 2002). To date, however, whilst there is a great deal of research emerging in the field of responsible tourism, the majority is focused on either business perspectives such as marketing and CSR initiatives (Manente, Minghetti, & Mingotto, 2012), or the extent to which businesses live up to their promises (Frey & George, 2010), or on locals or host perspectives (e.g. Sin, 2010). By contrast, there are relatively few studies of tourists' own perspectives on responsibilities (Mahrouse, 2011). For instance, whilst Stanford (2008: 258) highlights the importance of placing 'the visitor at the center of the responsible tourism debate by exploring what it means to be a responsible tourist' she still takes an industry perspective to interview supply side perspectives on the value of responsible tourists' actions.

As a consequence, there is a real dearth of knowledge of tourists' own understandings of responsible tourism or indeed of how tourists construct their own activities as 'responsible'. We suggest that without this knowledge, we may be laboring under a fundamental misunderstanding of the consumer's beliefs about what it means to be responsible, how they reconcile their touristic actions as responsible or irresponsible, and the extent that there is homogeneity in how responsible tourism is interpreted by the tourism market.

This study therefore seeks to examine tourists' own accounts of responsible tourism, with a view to developing a more bottom-up conceptualization of the phenomenon. Our evidence suggests that although some tourist's accounts do adhere to a standard interpretation of responsible tourism as promulgated by the industry, the concept of responsible tourism is actually far from coherent, stable or uncontested. Consumers construct their experiences of responsible tourism in a variety of unexpected ways that, at times, deviate from the conventional view to such an extent as to appear almost contradictory. Thus, rather than confirm the existence of a single 'tribe' of responsible tourists united by a coherent, shared cultural ethos, the findings suggest significant heterogeneity in consumer conceptions of responsible tourism. Our analysis both describes this heterogeneity, and seeks to account for it in terms of the underlying drivers and identifications of tourists.

## Responsible tourism and responsible consumers

The concept of 'responsible tourism' has been extensively researched over a long period. More than twenty five years ago, Krippendorff recognized that tourists were becoming more complex in their

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