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# **A Proposed Investigation into Core Value Systems as Predictors of Ecotourist Choice and Behaviour**

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## **Abstract**

*Humanity has been in the grip of increasing instances of global ecological degradation and local individual inaction, paradoxically coupled with higher interest in and growing concern about environmental issues. The economic market has recognised this growing interest and realised that “eco” and “green” can sell almost anything these days (Wight, 1993). The tourism industry has by no means been immune to this phenomenon, with ecotourism representing the fastest growing sector of the travel industry worldwide, generating billions of dollars annually (Page & Dowling, 2002). However, systematic empirical research into ecotourists and their psychological motivations is scarce, and what has been done is primarily descriptive in nature rather than explanatory (Fennell, 1999). The theoretical framework presented in this paper suggests that ecotourists, especially those who choose more authentic experiences, may hold stronger pro-environmental value systems and feelings of care towards the natural environment than mass tourists or even ecotourists who engage in less authentic experiences. Further it is proposed that these pro-environmental value systems may be predictive of both choice of product and behaviour in situ. The theoretical framework presented here represents the first part of a larger study being conducted on the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia.*

Key words: ecotourist, ecotourism, pro-environmental values, value systems, value basis theory

## **Introduction**

Social researchers have reported that environmental issues are considered among the most urgent for humanity and the planet, and that some 85% of the developed world's population considers these issues to be the number one cause of concern (Wight, 1993). Coupled with increasing concern, there has also been a corresponding growing worldwide interest in the natural environment and a “greening” of social processes reflected in a global rise in Green political parties, and the incorporation of sustainability and environmental accountability into the strategic focus of more and more organisations (Page & Dowling, 2002; Weaver, 2001a; Wight, 1993). The economic market too has recognised that “eco” and “green” marketing campaigns can sell almost anything. For example supermarket shelves are full of so-called eco-friendly products such as soap powder, dishwashing liquid, recycled paper products and toilet paper, plastic bags that rapidly break down into harmless compounds, recyclable shopping bags, and recyclable packaging. This greening of the market should not be considered simply a fad but instead represents an undercurrent pervading many business sectors including tourism (Page &

Dowling, 2002, p. 20). In the last few years there has been a proliferation of advertising in travel and tourism with references to ecotravel, ecotour, ecoexpedition, ecoadventures and ecotourism (Wight, 1993). Ecotourism has emerged as the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry worldwide, increasing up to 30% per annum, representing approximately 20% of international travel, and generating around \$20 billion US annually, all in line with a general “greening” of the consumer (Fennell, 1999; Page & Dowling, 2002; Weaver, 2001a; Wight, 1993). There is considerable collective power resting in the hands of the individual ecotourist in terms of the quality and nature of the tourism product offered and also on the impact on the places being visited. However, there has been surprisingly little empirical research regarding tourists’ decision-making in terms of ecotourism packages or their behaviour in the tourism setting.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Ecotourism has been consistently defined as a form of nature based tourism, where the focus of the tourism experience is the natural environment, and sometimes the cultural environment. In addition, environmental learning and appreciation is an expected outcome of the interaction of the tourist and the environment, and environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability are the goal (Weaver, 2001a, 2001b; Weaver & Lawton, 2002a). Embedded in this perspective is the notion that to understand and appreciate natural attractions implies a desire to ensure that the integrity of those attractions is not undermined (Rolston, 1991; Weaver, 2001a, p. 105), a perspective that may not be shared by tourists engaged in some other forms of nature-based activity. Ecotourism can then be differentiated from other nature-based activities that are more leisure oriented such as the “3S” form of sun, sand and sea, as well as a range of adventure oriented activities such as trekking, climbing or rafting (Weaver, 2001a; Weaver & Lawton, 2002b). The motivations to engage in these latter forms of nature-based activity may have more to do with enjoying a hedonistic experience of relaxing in the sun and gaining a tan or seeking experiences that offer a memorable experience with some degree of risk and personal challenge (Weaver, 2001a, p. 105), than with preserving the natural environment.

One form of classification has ecotourism activities placed along a virtual spectrum ranging from hard to soft, with hard ecotourism emphasising an intense, personal and relatively prolonged authentic wilderness experience or other experience within an undisturbed natural venue. Conversely, soft ecotourism emphasises short-term mediated experiences with nature that are often just one component of a package of other tourism experiences (Weaver, 2001a; Weaver & Lawton, 2002b, pp.362-363). Harder ecotourism activities tend to be specialised, focus on lower levels of consumption of resources, services and facilities, and are undertaken entirely for ecotourism purposes. Conversely softer ecotourism experiences tend not to be specialised, are often less authentic, and can be part of a general tourism experience providing higher levels of consumption of resources, services and facilities (Weaver & Lawton, 2002b, p. 363).

## **Who is the ecotourist ?**

Systematic empirical research regarding ecotourists and their psychological motivations is scarce, and what has been done is primarily descriptive in nature (Eagles, 1992; Fennell, 1999). Such research has tended to categorise types of activity that tourists prefer or engage in as a basis for arguing that the eco-tourist market is not an homogenous one (Fennell, 1999, 2001; Page & Dowling, 2002). While this may be a somewhat useful observation from a marketing point of view, there has been very limited investigation into tourists' underlying value systems and psychological orientations towards the environment as an actual explanation of their choices or behaviour (Fennell, 1999; Page & Dowling, 2002). Some research has reported that ecotourists may hold stronger pro-environmental values and attitudes than the general population (Luzar, Diagne, Gan, & Henning, 1995; Weaver & Lawton, 2002a). On the other hand, other researchers have stated that there is no real empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that ecotourists are any more or less pro-environmentally committed than the general population (Fennell, 2001; Sharpley, 2001). If Fennell (2001) and Sharpley (2001) are correct on this point, then it could be inferred that tourist behaviour is influenced more by eco-sell or the "greening" of the marketplace (Wight, 1993), than pro-environmental values *per se*.

The limited work identifying the motivations of ecotourists has revealed that many have distinct, clear and probably stronger travel motivations than mass tourists and have strongly held views on what is desirable in travel (Eagles, 1992; Page & Dowling, 2002). Most are interested in nature in its own right, in learning about nature in wilderness [i.e. *in situ*] (Eagles, 1992; Page & Dowling, 2002), and do not seek luxurious accommodations, food, or nightlife, but are happy to accept and appreciate local conditions, culture and food (Eagles, 1992, p.6). These preferences could reasonably be supposed to demonstrate a preference for interests that tend towards a transcendence of self. Ecotourists have also been found to be less interested in gambling, amusement parks, nightlife, big cities, watching sports, doing nothing, indoor sports, shopping and resort areas than mass tourists (Eagles, 1992, p. 6). This finding could be viewed as an indicator that ecotourists may not be interested in pursuing activities that promote hedonism and self-enhancement. The structure of preferences for certain activities and relative disinterest in others could perhaps provide some evidence that ecotourists may hold more self-transcendent value orientations than other types of tourist. It is also important to understand the values of different types of ecotourist given the degree of heterogeneity within this group (Fennell, 2001).

## **Core values as predictors of attitudes and behaviour**

Core values, defined as the important guiding principle type, have been demonstrated to predict context specific attitudes and behaviours well and are central to our sense of self (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1994). The number of core values that a person holds is likely to be relatively small when compared to the myriad of lesser values learned throughout life and assigned to individual objects and things (Bilsky & Schwartz, 1994;

Rokeach, 1973, p. 4). Values, in the sense of behavioural standards, are cognitive constructs which have an “oughtness” quality to them, are hierarchically organised in terms of importance to self, and are relatively stable across the lifespan but are not unchanging (Feather, 1995; Rokeach, 1973). In addition, values are not affectively neutral. That is, people usually feel very strongly about their important values (Feather, 1995, p.1135; Rokeach, 1973). Based on the preceding literature, the first proposition of this study is:

**P1:** Stronger feelings of care towards the natural environment will be positively related to those values reflecting stronger pro-environmental value orientations.

### **Environmental value systems**

Stern and Dietz and others (Stern & Dietz, 1994; Stern, Dietz, & Kalof, 1993; Stern, Dietz, Kalof, & Guagnano, 1995) sought to investigate a values basis for environmental concern and attitudes. Their resulting value basis theory was developed from Schwartz’s (1977; 1994) theory of universal value systems and the norm activation model of altruism. Stern and Dietz’s theory proposes and has found some empirical support for the existence of three basic environmental value orientations: biospheric, socio-altruistic and egoistic (1994). The former two value orientations predict more pro-environmental behaviour than the latter (Stern & Dietz, 1994; Stern et al., 1993). The biospheric value orientation is related to a self-transcendent value cluster identified by Schwartz (1994), which includes the value types of universalism and benevolence. Some of the individual values associated specifically with the biospheric orientation identified by Stern *et al* (1994; 1995) as guiding principles in people’s lives are unity with nature, protecting the environment, preventing pollution, respecting the earth, and a world of beauty (Stern & Dietz, 1994). The socio-altruistic orientation also comes primarily from Schwartz’s (1994) self-transcendent cluster and includes individual values such as equality, social justice, being helpful, being loyal, and belief in a world at peace. Stern *et al*’s (1994; 1995) egoistic orientation is based on Schwartz’s self-enhancement value cluster, with individual values including authority, social power, wealth, and being influential. Values as strong determinants of most behaviour, are not necessarily dependent on situational context (Rokeach, 1973), and have been shown to be predictors of context specific attitudes and motivators for behaviours and choices including leisure pursuits such as travel and tourism (Pitts & Woodside, 1986; Rokeach, 1973). Thus, if core values have a strong influence on behaviour including choices concerning travel and tourism, then the second proposition of this study is:

**P2:** Tourists who choose more authentic ecotourism experiences have stronger pro-environmental value orientations and feeling of care towards the natural environment than those who choose less authentic ecotourism experiences or “3S” experiences.

## **Pro-environmental values influencing the choices and behaviours of the ecotourist**

Luzar *et al* (1998) reported that environmental values and attitudes influence travel decisions, and ecotourists who have more ecocentric attitudes (an indicator of pro-environmental value orientations) have been found to prefer businesses that are environmentally friendly, and also expected knowledgeable personnel who instil a sense of trust and confidence in their expertise (Page & Dowling, 2002, p. 92). Presumably this type of ecotourist would consider sustainability and environmentally responsible policies and practices to be an important factor when choosing a destination, and would also be careful to minimise their impact on destinations. In view of this, the third proposition of this study is:

- P3:** Tourists who hold stronger pro-environmental value orientations and feelings of care towards the natural environment are more likely to conserve resource use and behave in environmentally responsible ways in both the tourism setting and also when at home.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

From an economic perspective it is important for marketers and policy makers in tourism to be able to identify psychological variables, such as value systems, as motivators of choices and behaviours, which will accurately define the different ecotourist markets (Fennell, 1999). Tourism packages of experiences can then be tailored to better suit the needs, motivations and expectations of the tourist (Fennell, 1999, 2001). Additionally, interpretation is an inherent component of the ecotourism experience and highly valued by the tourist (McArthur, 1993; Robbins & Greenwald, 1994). While psychographic characteristics are of most use to the interpreter to enable communication to be tailored to the audience, it is those very characteristics that are rarely collected or made available to the industry (McArthur, 1993). Previous research has found that the lucrative ecotourism market is not an homogenous one, and that most definitions of the ecotourist have tended to focus on destination type and/ or socio-demographic variables, or simply on preferred activities (Ballantine & Eagles, 1994; Page & Dowling, 2002; Weaver & Lawton, 2002a). These developed typologies, together with others in ecotourism research, have been supported by very little empirical data (Weaver & Lawton, 2002a; Fennell, 1999). They have also tended to “muddy” the waters between the motivations of the ecotourist and the characteristics of the ecotourism product, as they have been based largely on observations of tourist behaviour (and some demographic variables), rather than on the reasons for that observed behaviour (Page & Dowling, 2002; Weaver & Lawton, 2002a). This type of research then simply represents a collating and categorisation of observations (i.e. behaviours). Conversely, the present study is seeking to use of the theory of values to explain those observations/ behaviours and hopefully be in a better position to predict them.

The next stage of the study is empirical testing of the three propositions linking pro-environmental value orientations, their affective component (ie. environmental ethic of

care), and consumer pro-environmental choices and behaviours. The results of this research will help address the present lack of understanding of the motivators, behaviours, and choices of consumers of ecotourism products. Without this understanding and with increasing levels of visitation, preservation and conservation of the natural assets on which this burgeoning ecotourism industry depends will become increasingly problematic.

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