

Ecotourism Perception and Engagement Classification Among Residents of a Nature City in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

It is very important to study the behavior of people who have gone to and continue to visit nature-based attractions to learn about their appreciation to nature and the actions they take to help out in protecting them, given that tourism has been linked to environmental degradation as a sector that is prone to overconsumption, resulting in significant waste and pollution. Guided by a descriptive research design and employing a quantitative research approach, the researchers determined the perception and level of engagement of 383 people on ecotourism activities adapted from the Shallow-Deep Model of Ecotourism by Acott et al (1998) used in the Classification Framework on Ecotourism by Alampay and Libosada (2005), resulting in determining whether they are passive or active eco-tourists engaging in shallow or deep ecotourism. Findings serve as an indicator of the position of Filipinos as advocates for ecotourism since the respondents, of all people, are expected to have a strong positive perspective and deep engagement on ecotourism, being from a place that is known for its natural resources, as well as being used as a guide for ecotourism managers and educators in coming up with an effective environmental education program.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Eco-tourists' behavior, Environmental Practice, Filipinos

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a problem that all people have taken seriously as it has severely affected their lives, but if there is something that has been a challenge for several decades, it would be the achievement of environmental conservation and sustainability. Studies suggest that environmental deterioration has been a problem that the planet has been facing for so many years, but still humans tend to neglect it, and what is worse, is the fact that it has led to many serious phenomena that have made life difficult, such as Climate Change. Climate Change is the changes in earth's dynamics, particularly the temperature. The American Association for the Advancement in Science (2009) explains that observations from throughout the world show that climate change is really happening, and rigorous scientific study shows that greenhouse gases released by human activities are the major cause. Numerous human activities have been observed to be the reasons why it continuously occurs; deforestation, pollution, and tourism among others. Tropical forest trees, like other green plants, absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere and emit oxygen during photosynthesis. They also carry out the opposite process, known as respiration, but when forests are growing, photosynthesis exceeds respiration, and the excess carbon is stored in tree trunks, roots, and soil; thus, when forests are cut down, much of that stored carbon is released back into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, resulting in global warming, one of the many facets of climate change (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2021). Meanwhile, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (2022), pollution released into the atmosphere can cause climate change; these pollutants, which include greenhouse gases, are commonly referred to as climate forcers. The presence of ozone in the atmosphere heats the temperature, but different components of particulate matter can either warm or chill the climate. As a result, the more contaminated the air, the greater its impact on climate change. Baloch et al (2022) added that a significant percentage of individuals see socioeconomic benefits such as job and business opportunities, and infrastructural development from tourism development, and growth. However, the natural and environmental capital is seen to be steadily deteriorating. Along with the social environment, social vulnerability is reported as a result of overuse of land, intrusion from other cultures, and pollution in air and water as a result of traffic congestion, accumulation of solid waste, sewage, and carbon emissions, which are significantly higher when people move from one place to another.

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It is clear that humans are the main perpetrators. Therefore, humans are the key to stopping environmental degradation. But to do this, a series of activities must be done; tourism cannot be stopped, obviously provided that it has positive economic benefits, however, the observation of ecotourism that promotes responsible tourism is a must to ensure minimal negative impacts of tourism to the environment, as well as culture. It is also important that people possess a positive environmental attitude and a high level of environmental engagement to ensure the once enforced, ecotourism will really be embraced and practiced by people. Makian and Hanifezadeh (2021) argued that environmental impacts of tourism remain a challenge due to the poor education among host communities, as well as the low level of awareness among tourists on ecotourism issues. Therefore, with people having a lack of knowledge towards it, possessing negative environmental attitudes, and the low level of engagement, the achievement of the purpose of ecotourism cannot be guaranteed, hence, motivating the researchers to conduct this study. Beginning with Filipinos, the researchers have attempted to classify people based on their ecotourism perception and engagement, guided by the classification framework by Alampay and Libosada (2005), which was designed based on the Shallow-Deep Model of Ecotourism by Acott et al (1998). The local community of Los Baños, Laguna was selected as the primary locale as this municipality is known as the Special Science and Nature City of the Philippines, making their behavior critical in this area; if these people who are living in a town that is perceived to embrace environmental conservation and sustainability, have poor attitude and low engagement, then, what more can we expect from those from other places that do not promote ecotourism the way the said town should be promoting it.

The researchers have attempted to accomplish the following specific research objectives:

1. To determine the perception and engagement levels of the respondents towards ecotourism activities based on the Shallow-Deep Model of Ecotourism by Acott et al (1998).
2. To classify the respondents based on their ecotourism activities perception and engagement using the Classification Framework on Ecotourism by Alampay and Libosada (2005)

Theoretical Framework

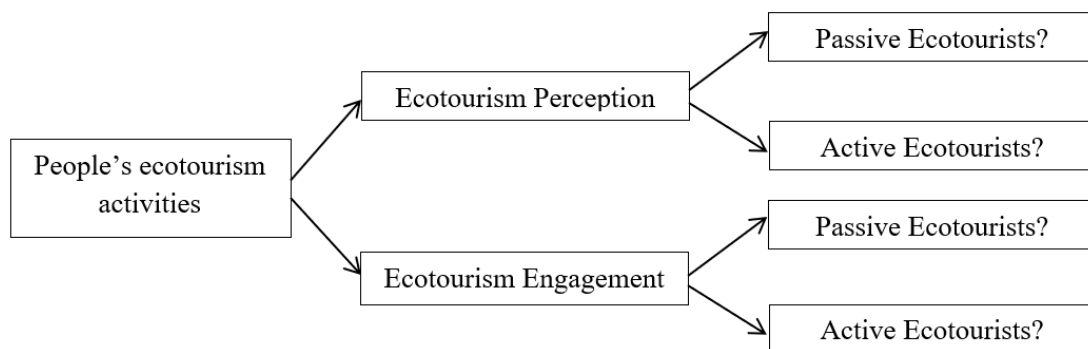


Figure 1. Researchers' made framework inspired by the classification framework on ecotourism by Alampay and Libosada (2005)

Using this Classification Framework, Ecotourists could be classified as either passive Eco-tourists or active Eco-tourists based on their ecotourism perception and engagement.

Literature Review

According to Upadhaya et al (2022), more than 70% of Nepalese people are interested in ecotourism activities, and their interests are influenced by their age, academic degree, and employment. Local residents in the research region viewed ecotourism as having major benefits on infrastructure development and knowledge base expansion. Moreover, the socioeconomic and demographic features of local people impacted their perceptions of the effects of ecotourism. Meanwhile, in a research involving local communities surrounding Lake Natron in Tanzania, Abeli (2017) discovered that, while the majority of local inhabitants regard Lake Natron as significant in boosting their wellbeing, many do not have the same favorable attitude toward the area's long-term protection. Ecotourism as a conservation and development strategy at Lake Natron which has not assisted local communities in reducing resource exploitation and has failed to play a major role in ensuring local people's livelihoods. While the number of visitors visiting and staying around Lake Natron, particularly in the Engaresero village, is growing, the community has little influence over current tourism companies and benefits little from the cash generated by these businesses. Moreover, as compared to other

economic activities such as livestock husbandry, the majority of local inhabitants in the communities surrounding Lake Natron either do not create revenue or earn minimal income from other ecotourism related activities, thus, this is recorded as one of the probable reasons for the negative environmental attitude. Lower Kinabatangan in Sabah is no exception; according to Chan et al (2021), local residents realized that the area has significant potential to be developed as a sustainable ecotourism destination and to produce economic gain. Despite this, there is limited participation of local communities in ecotourism development and responsible tourism practices; the socioeconomic demographic of the local community shows that only 42.4% of respondents have work related to tourism activities, with a lack of capital and knowledge in tourism activities being identified as the main barriers to local participation in ecotourism development. These data were consistent with the findings of Gumede and Nzama (2020), who discovered that local communities adjacent to the Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, had not been actively participating in ecotourism development processes, particularly those undertaken in rural settings, due to a variety of socioeconomic factors, including a lack of necessary skills, thus, people must have the knowledge and skills towards ecotourism first, before they could develop a positive attitude and high level of engagement. Students at a Chilean institution, on the other hand, have a favorable attitude toward the environment, particularly in terms of recycling, water use, and energy consumption (Heyl et al, 2013). Overall, the students have a positive attitude toward the environment since they care about nature and are aware of the causes of its degradation; however, this is not reflected in their behaviors, particularly the frequency with which they participate in conservation-related activities and events. In the case of the municipality of Sareyn, Iran, it was found that during peak season, inadequate infrastructure and inadequate management can result in unfavorable perceptions regarding the environmental effects of tourism. This perception includes concerns about overcrowding and littering, indicating awareness towards environmental risks associated with tourism.

Abun and Racoma (2017) researched people's environmental attitudes and behaviors in Ilocos Sur, Philippines, with a focus on Catholic school employees. They discovered that these employees believe that nature is only important when it helps humans meet their survival needs, and that they are confused if humans have power over nature. Moreover, they lack comprehension of how to respect and use nature, as well as knowledge of environmental issues and potential hazards, resulting in an unknown level of personal conservation intention and likelihood of action.

Clearly, there is an overwhelming number of studies that has confirmed environmental attitude and engagement of people from various parts of the world. Some studies say people have a positive environmental attitude, while some revealed a negative perception, however, if there is information that is consistent in all studies cited, it is the poor level of environmental engagement among people due to their lack of knowledge and skills towards environmental/ecotourism practices. Additionally, the researchers also noticed the lack of studies that has involved places that are critical in the area of ecotourism, particularly in the Philippines, as well as attempts to classify people based on their ecotourism perception and engagement using suggested models aside from determining their level of attitude and engagement, hence, research gaps that this study has attempted to fill.

Methodology

Following a descriptive research design and utilizing a quantitative research approach, the researchers were able to gather, analyze, and interpret data for this study. Through number scales, data were measured and interpreted. The researchers selected a local community in the province of Laguna, Philippines, and it was chosen to be the subject for this study since it is known to be the Special Science and Nature of the Philippines, indicating that this is one of the many places in the country that embrace environmental-friendly practices. With this, inhabitants of this place are expected to have a strong positive perspective and deep engagement on ecotourism for said reasons, hence, the results of this study could be used as an indicator of the attitude of Filipinos as a whole, because if people who live in a place that promotes ecotourism display poor practices, then what more can we expect in the case of those who live in places that are highly urbanized. Out of the total population, which is 115,353 based on the 2020 Census of the Philippines Statistics Authority, the sample size was computed with a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence level, resulting in 383 needed respondents for this research. To qualify as respondents, people must be at least 18 years old during the this study, and must have visited an ecotourism/cultural-heritage tourism destination at least once in the last five years.

The research instrument used was created based on the study of Acott et al (1998), and Alampay and Libosada (2005), where the questions that were used to categorize people based on their ecotourism perception and engagements were inspired from. It is a survey composed of 11 questions, 3 of which were asked to determine the respondents' demographic profile, 4 were designed to learn about their ecotourism activities perception, and the other 4 were to know their engagement practices. To measure the people's perception and engagement, a four-point scale was used whereas; 1-Strongly Agree, 2-Agree, 3-Disagree, & 4-Strongly Disagree. It was done using Google Docs, distributed through direct messaging in a social media platform, and recorded a 100% response rate from all people that had been asked.

Frequency and percentage were computed to classify respondents in terms of their demographic profile, while mean scores were computed to measure their perception and engagement.

Table 1. Likert Scale Interpretations on Respondents’ Perception and Engagement on Ecotourism Activities

Survey Responses	Perception and Engagement Interpretations	Ecotourism Activities Interpretation	Scale
Strongly Disagree	Active Eco-Tourists	Deep Ecotourism	3.26-4.00
Disagree	Somehow Active Eco-Tourists	Somehow Deep Ecotourism	2.51-3.25
Agree	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	Somehow Shallow Ecotourism	1.76-2.50
Strongly Agree	Passive Eco-Tourists	Shallow Ecotourism	1-1.75

Results

Table 2. Respondents’ Ecotourism Activities Perception

Statements	Mean	Descriptive Meaning
I believe that witnessing cultural traditions being followed, watching cultural performances such as dance and music, and seeing artifacts displayed are enough for me to learn about and experience the culture of a community	1.70	Strongly Agree
I believe that there is nothing wrong in limiting oneself to preferring standardized services and consuming food and drinks that have foreign influence when travelling to ecotourism destinations.	1.85	Agree
I think that the only way for natural preservation (preventing wild disturbance and endangerment, and avoiding incidents of deforestation and all types of pollution, among others) to succeed, is to ban humans from access to such natural areas/resources.	2.22	Agree
I believe that natural resources only exist and are only valuable because humans need it. Nature was made for humans to use, and this is also the reason why humans must take good care of it.	1.90	Agree

Table 2 shows that respondents strongly believe that witnessing cultural traditions being performed, watching cultural performances/shows, and seeing artifacts displayed are enough to experience the culture of a community. While they believe that seeking standardized services and consuming food with foreign influence is totally fine when visiting ecotourism destinations, as well as with the statement that banning humans is the only way towards nature conservation, and with the statement explaining that natural resources only exist for the benefit of humans. This is synonymous with the result of the study by Abun and Racoma (2017) involving Employees of Catholic Schools in Ilocos Sur, Philippines, which determined their belief towards nature as something that only exists for humans, hence, without its benefits to humans, it won’t be valuable at all.

Table 3. Respondents’ Ecotourism Activities Engagement

Statements	Mean	Descriptive Meaning
In my previous experiences visiting nature-based and cultural-heritage destinations, I tend to settle with just observing local people perform traditions, watching cultural shows, and looking at artifacts displayed.	1.76	Agree
When I go to nature-based and cultural-heritage destinations, I tend to stay in modern hotels and eat in restaurants that follow foreign-influenced service standards, and serve foreign cuisines.	2.48	Agree
When I go to nature-based and cultural-heritage attractions, I tend to distance myself from places or things that could be fragile instead of learning how to handle them properly (e.g. not getting close to wildlife/animals, not talking to indigenous people, not getting involved in environmental practices, etc)	2.28	Agree
In my previous experiences visiting nature-based and cultural-heritage destinations, I tend to show appreciation only to natural resources that have benefits to me as a human. I do not engage myself in things in nature that I think aren’t connected to my existence as a human being.	2.52	Disagree

Table 3 presents that respondents tend to settle with just observing local people performing traditions, watching cultural shows, and looking at artifacts displayed, whenever they visit ecotourism destinations. They also stay in modern hotels and eat in restaurants that follow foreign-influenced service standards, and serve foreign cuisines. Moreover, they choose to distance themselves from places or things that could be fragile instead of learning how to handle them properly, so they could be sure that their actions

won't result in any negative repercussions, however, one positive practice that we determined is done by the respondents based on their response to the survey, is that they do not just focus themselves on learning about how beneficial natural resources are to humans, as they also try to learn about how each resource is beneficial to each other. This result is a little bit inconsistent with their perception, provided that they perceive nature as something that only exists for the use of humans, but when they visit ecotourism destinations, they tend to put their attention on appreciating nature more than on its benefits to humans, but also how it helps in other things, like for example, contributing in the survival of other species.

Table 4. Respondents' Classification Based on Their Ecotourism Activities Perception and Engagement When Grouped According to Age

Age Group	Ecotourism Activities Perception	Interpretation	Ecotourism Activities Engagement	Interpretation
18-27	1.92	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	2.32	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists
28-37	2.05	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	2.27	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists
38-47	1.50	Passive Eco-Tourists	1.83	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists
48-57	1.25	Passive Eco-Tourists	1.50	Passive Eco-Tourists

Table 4 shows that in terms of the respondents' ecotourism activities perception, younger people recording higher mean scores have a deeper interpretation, though not deep enough to be considered as active Eco-Tourists, but still closer to being, with the right interventions, compared with older people that were classified as Passive Eco-Tourists. While, in terms of Ecotourism Activities Engagement, the same case applies. Younger people are only considered somehow passive, while older people are really passive eco-tourists. This indicates that the older people get, the less engaged they become in ecotourism practices.

Table 5. Respondents' Classification Based on Their Ecotourism Activities Perception and Engagement When Grouped According to Sex

Sex Group	Ecotourism Activities Perception	Interpretation	Ecotourism Activities Engagement	Interpretation
Female	1.99	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	2.34	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists
Male	1.81	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	2.13	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists

Table 5 presents that both sex groups, male and female can be classified as somehow passive eco-tourists in terms of their ecotourism activities perception and engagement, however, it is noticeable that the mean scores recorded on their engagement are slightly higher than their perception.

Table 6. Respondents' Classification Based on Their Ecotourism Activities Perception and Engagement When Grouped According to Highest Educational Attainment

Age Group	Ecotourism Activities Perception	Interpretation	Ecotourism Activities Engagement	Interpretation
Doctorate Degree Graduate	1.75	Passive Eco-Tourists	1.25	Passive Eco-Tourists
Master's Degree Graduate	1.81	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	1.63	Passive Eco-Tourists
College Graduate	1.93	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	2.40	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists
Secondary Education Graduate	1.94	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	2.30	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists
Primary Education Graduate	1.87	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	2.23	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists

This indicates that mostly their perception and their practice when they visit ecotourism destinations are shallow ecotourism practices, but not all the time, since they are considered not really passive, and that both sex groups tend to display a less shallow

appreciation towards nature and culture when they are already in the destination compared to what they have in mind before or during the travel.

Table 6 shows that in terms of ecotourism activities perception, college and secondary education graduates possess the less shallow interpretation towards nature conservation and cultural education and protection, while doctorate degree graduates have the shallowest perception, being considered passive eco-tourists, while, when it comes to their engagement, the same case applies. College graduates and secondary education graduates tend to display a deeper practice of ecotourism, while those who have postgraduate degrees engage in shallow practices when they visit ecotourism destinations. The mean scores also indicate that, from primary education to college education, the higher educational attainment a person has, the deeper their perception and engagement toward ecotourism activities gets, but afterwards, it gets shallower as one obtains a higher level.

Table 7. Respondents’ Overall Classification Based on Their Ecotourism Activities Perception and Engagement

Statement	Ecotourism Activities Perception	Interpretation	Ecotourism Activities Engagement	Interpretation	Ecotourism Activities Interpretation
People’s Ecotourism classification based on perception and engagement	1.92	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	2.26	Somehow Passive Eco-Tourists	Somehow Shallow Ecotourism

Based on the overall results, respondents are considered to be somehow passive eco-tourists taking on somehow shallow ecotourism activities, but since, according to Alampay and Libosada (2005), eco-tourists could either be passive or active, meaning that they fall under the category of being passive eco-tourists that engage in shallow ecotourism.

Conclusion

In reference to the results, the researchers hereby conclude that people believe they can learn about the culture of a place just by spectating; they choose to learn by watching cultural acts, observing locals performing traditions, and looking at artifacts displayed in museums. They also think that it is fine to prefer standardized services, and consuming food and drinks that have foreign influence when travelling to ecotourism destinations, in fact, when they visit nature-based and cultural and heritage destinations, they tend to stay in modern hotels and eat in restaurants that follow foreign-influenced service standards, and serve foreign cuisines. Banning humans from access to natural areas/resources is perceived to be the only way to ensure conservation and sustainability as they tend to distance themselves from places or things that could be fragile instead of learning how to handle them properly. Moreover, people think that natural resources only exist and are only valuable because humans need it, however, this contradicts their practice in learning more about the environment aside from its benefits to humans. These findings lend credence to Su and Wall’s 2018 study, which explains that people engage in tourism to appreciate natural scenery, including wild animals, to enrich knowledge of an area’s natural and cultural attributes, to raise environmental awareness among both tourists and residents, to promote resource and environmentalism, to respect and safeguard native culture, and to enhance physical and mental well-being. However, it is merely superficial or poor, and does not actually suit the demands of any of these beliefs. Lastly, despite residing in a town that embraces environmental-friendly practices, the respondents possess a negative ecotourism perception and a low level of ecotourism engagement, which classify them as Passive Eco-Tourists engaging in Shallow Ecotourism. Gumede and Nzama (2020) supported these findings with their study that shows even people who live in ecotourism-inclined areas are not actively participating in ecotourism development processes, particularly those carried out in rural areas, due to a variety of socioeconomic factors, including a lack of necessary skills. This, however, contradicts Heyl et al. (2013)’s discovery that people have a favorable attitude toward the environment, particularly in terms of recycling, water use, and energy consumption, but supports its conclusion in terms of environmental engagement, which explains that people’s attitude, particularly the frequency with which they participate in conservation-related activities and events, are not reflected in their actions.

The researchers hereby suggest that laws on the appointment of Tourism Managers or Officers in cities and municipalities must always be reviewed to ensure that the responsibility to enforce responsible travel is given to someone who has the ability and qualifications. Qualifications on the other hand must not be generic or universal; each city and municipality must have specific criteria in the appointment of a tourism manager or officer depending on the demand of the place, especially places that play a vital role in protecting nature-based destinations as well as preserving culture and heritage. Provided that aside from being an area of study, the environment, and heritage and culture are also part of people’s lives that cause their survival and forms their unique identity as part of a community, these must be included in the subjects offered in all education levels, from basic education to

postgraduate studies, whether the course is in the field of environmental management, heritage studies, and cultural development or not. There must be programs organized down to the community levels that focus on environmental emergencies awareness, and understanding towards heritage and cultural significance as well; people need to be well informed about the repercussions of their actions towards the environment, so they may develop a sense of consciousness on what they should do and what they shouldn't. Moreover, in particular, older people, especially those who are in their 40s and beyond, must be more exposed to discussions about the environment and culture since their ecotourism perception and engagement were consistently lower than of those who are younger. Likewise to those who have postgraduate degrees compared to those who have only accomplished less in the context of formal education. Since it is also given that the academic community also plays a very important role in the transition of people from being passive eco-tourists to becoming active ones, activities such as, but not limited to, educational tours, must give more emphasis to actual engagement in environmental-friendly practices and cultural traditions rather than the usual set up of taking students to places in order to witness cultural traditions being practiced, watch cultural performances such as dance and music, and see artifacts displayed, as this practice only leads to a shallow environmental and cultural understanding. Students, while they are young, must be encouraged to communicate with local people to learn about their way of life, and they should be motivated to observe practices such as following the 10 commandments of ecotourism. Lastly, to uplift the awareness of people towards environmental sensitivity, the development and distribution of Information Education materials (IEC) for sustainable tourism is suggested.

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