



# Intention to visit and willingness to pay premium for ecotourism: The impact of attitude, materialism, and motivation



Magnus Hultman<sup>a,\*</sup>, Azadeh Kazeminia<sup>b</sup>, Vahid Ghasemi<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Leeds University Business School, Maurice Keyworth Building, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

<sup>b</sup> Luleå University of Technology, 97187 Luleå, Sweden

<sup>c</sup> Department of Social Science, Isfahan University, Iran

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from the theory of planned behavior and post-materialism assumptions, this study investigates and uncovers key antecedents of the intention to engage in ecotourism and to pay premium prices for the experience. A conceptual model incorporates environmental beliefs, attitudes toward ecotourism, behavioral indications, and willingness to pay premium (WTPP), in combination with materialism and general tourism motivation. Samples of Swedish and Taiwanese tourists empirically test the assumptions. Findings reveal attitudes and environmental beliefs connect positively with intention and WTPP; however, materialistic values exert a negative effect. The results also disclose diverging moderating effects on the environmental beliefs – attitude linkage, depending on the type of tourism motivation guiding the tourist. The research findings offer key insights on what drives consumer behavior in the context of ecotourism.

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## 1. Introduction

Ecotourism – that is, “travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas” (Orams, 1995, p. 4), is growing at a rate almost three times faster than general tourism (Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010). Ecotourism currently constitutes more than 7% of the global tourism demand, accounting for approximately \$100 billion annually (Center for Responsible Travel, 2011).

Responding to the current industry growth, sustainable tourism research investigates both the demand and supply sides of the phenomenon (Sharpley, 2006; Weaver & Lawton, 2007). Demand side studies examine ecotourism consumer preferences (Khan, 2003), motivations (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008), and psychological, behavioral, and demographic characteristics (Kerstetter, Hou, & Lin, 2004).

Notwithstanding these efforts, extant literature remains fragmented and unbalanced, focusing on individual relationships rather than more integrated frameworks (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). Additionally, little cohesive research exists to explain why tourists engage in ecotourism activities and pay premium prices for the opportunity. Paradoxically, ecotourism offerings have higher prices and often less comfort than

mass tourism offerings. Tourism administrators need a reliable estimation of ecotourists' demand and willingness to pay (WTP) to craft more effective pricing strategies. Typically, the price for sustainable tourism offerings (e.g., national parks, biological reserves) does not reflect traditional competitive markets; instead, consumer's WTP drives the pricing policy.

To address these gaps in extant research, this study offers an integrative framework incorporating antecedents to willingness to pay premium (WTPP) for ecotourism. The framework draws from the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) to formulate the influence of ecotourism attitude on ecotourism intention and WTPP. The study evaluates the effect of materialistic values by means of Inglehart's (1981) post-materialistic values framework. The study also investigates the effects of tourism motivation, to enhance the predictive power of the applied theories in the ecotourism context.

This study's contribution to the extant literature is fourfold. First, this study demonstrates how ecotourism attitudes drive tourists' WTPP for ecotourism. Attitude shapes favorable intentions as well as exerts a direct affective impact, an effect not addressed specifically in the literature. Second, this study expands knowledge on the role of social values in ecotourism behavior. Results elucidate materialism's effect on environmental beliefs, ecotourism attitudes, intentions, and WTPP decisions. Third, the study investigates tourism motivation's moderating effects in forming ecotourism attitudes. Fourth, to ascertain the model's robustness and to address common criticisms of relying on single samples and behavioral intention as a proxy for actual behavior, two culturally distinct samples and longitudinal data validate the findings. Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 113 343 8655.

E-mail addresses: M.Hultman@leeds.ac.uk (M. Hultman), azadeh.kazeminia@gmail.com (A. Kazeminia), v.ghasemi@tr.ui.ac.ir (V. Ghasemi).

## Conceptual model

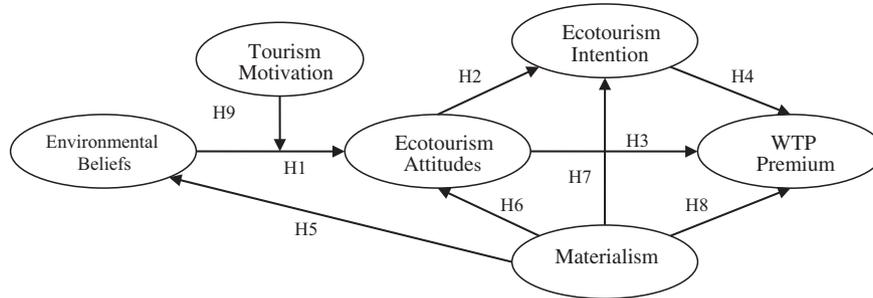


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Beliefs, attitudes, and intentions

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) is a widely used framework for explaining and predicting how attitudes form intentions toward certain behaviors (Armitage & Conner, 2001). TPB suggests that people develop attitudes toward a behavior from their “evaluation of the consequences of engaging in the behavior weighted by [their] beliefs that the behavior will lead to these consequences” (Baumgartner & Pieters, 2008, p. 367). Attitudes precede behavioral intentions, or the extent to which people plan to exert effort to conduct an action, and they are the most immediate and prominent determinants of actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

In the current context, ecotourism intention refers to tourists' intentions to engage in ecotourism in the near future and signals their WTPP and actual purchase of ecotourism activities. In turn, intention is a function of positive attitudes toward ecotourism and pro-environmental beliefs. Extant research provides strong support for such presumptions, demonstrating a positive relationship among ecotourists' behaviors, intentions, and attitudes toward consuming environmentally responsible tourism (e.g., Lee & Moscardo, 2005; Sharpley, 2006).

Specifically, findings indicate that greater awareness and environmentally favorable attitudes positively affect intentions for future ecotourism practices, visiting green accommodations (Han et al., 2010), and choosing travel destinations (Lam & Hsu, 2006). Changing environmental attitudes and increasing environmental education and mass media spur tourists' tendency to adopt environmentally sound behavior (Sharpley, 2006).

Although, TPB effectively predicts intention and behavior in various settings, the theory is not without criticism (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001). Researchers challenge the model for not sufficiently capturing the affective aspects of attitude. Specifically, traditional TPB stresses belief-based evaluations of a behavior's benefits and costs and offers merely a cognition-oriented account of attitude. This narrow view does not account for attitude's indirect effect through intention (Ajzen, 1991). Attitudes involve affective and cognitive components. Affective components refer to emotions and drives engendered by the prospect of engaging in ecotourism; cognitive components are the extent to which tourists evaluate ecotourism's outcome as beneficial and advantageous (French et al., 2005). This study focuses on the affective component because the literature on emotions suggests that emotions influence decisions indirectly through cognitive components and directly affect final decisions (Slovic et al., 2004). Ajzen and Driver's (1992) findings related to leisure activities demonstrate that the WTP for tourism alternatives reflects people's perceived affect associating with the activity. Along these lines, Dolnicar and Leisch (2008) find that

moral satisfaction and responsibility strongly predict environmentally friendly tourism behavior.

This study incorporates the affective influence of attitude by hypothesizing direct linkages between favorable attitudes toward ecotourism and WTPP for ecotourism alternatives, and an indirect linkage mediated by intention. This framework further examines how environmental beliefs connect with favorable ecotourism attitudes. Conceptualizing environmental beliefs draw from the new environmental paradigm (NEP). NEP addresses general awareness of the adverse consequences of environmental conditions and details fundamental views of the human relationship with nature (Luo & Deng, 2008; Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999).

**H1.** Environmental beliefs relate positively to ecotourism attitudes.

**H2.** Ecotourism attitudes relate positively to ecotourism intention.

**H3.** Ecotourism attitudes relate positively to WTPP for ecotourism.

**H4.** Ecotourism intentions relate positively to WTPP for ecotourism.

### 2.2. Value orientation: materialism

Values represent the “enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to [its] opposite” (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). Consumer researchers view values mainly as abstract social cognitions creating decision processes and helping people to “store and guide general responses to classes of marketing stimuli” (Kahle & Xie, 2008, p. 577). Values act as prototypes, depending on which mid-range attitudes and behaviors are produced. In an environmentalism context, the value-beliefs-norm theory suggests that values indirectly form pro-environmental behavior by spurring favorable environmental beliefs and attitudes. Empirical research demonstrates that values and indirect effects exert a direct affective influence on consumer behavior (Allen & Ng, 1999).

Consequently, values govern tourists' pro-environmental beliefs and attitudes toward ecotourism attractions, while bearing directly on ecotourism intention and WTPP (Stern et al., 1999). Extant research congruently illustrates that values predict general travel behavior (Pitts & Woodside, 1986), destination choice, activities, preferences, and trip length. Values also mediate other factors on tourists' behavior (e.g., socio-demographics) (see: Hedlund, Marell, & Garling, 2012). Personal values also influence tourists' tendency to participate in pro-environmental tourism consumption, though limited empirical evidence exists (Blamey & Braithwaite, 1997).

Materialism constitutes a value orientation that significantly influences environmentalism (Kidd & Lee, 1997; Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008). Specifically, Inglehart's (1981) post-materialistic value approach

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