



# Modelling attitudes to nature, tourism and sustainable development in national parks: A survey of visitors in China and the UK



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- A causal relationship of attitudes is found.
- The relationship links nature, tourism and sustainable development.
- Anthropocentric or ecocentric values are identified.
- They have a significant influence on attitudes to sustainable development.
- These attitudes to nature can also be used to predict attitudes to tourism.

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## ABSTRACT

This research undertook a visitor survey in two protected areas in different cultural contexts, namely China and the UK, to explore whether the value a person attaches to the environment influences their attitude towards sustainable tourism development in national parks. Structural equation models were developed with data from 597 and 368 questionnaires collected in Jiuzhaigou National Scenic Area, China and the New Forest National Park, UK respectively. The results suggested that anthropocentric or ecocentric values significantly influence people's attitudes to tourism and sustainable development. The same structured causal relationship was found in both samples, between people's attitudes towards the natural environment, conservation and tourism in a national park context.

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## 1. Introduction

National Parks are important places for experiencing nature, including for example, nature tourism and ecotourism (Fennel & Nowaczek, 2010). Whether the rationale for a park's designation was principally for aesthetic purposes, conservation, recreation or tourism (Frost & Hall, 2009a), they are popular tourist attractions. However, the over-development of tourism in many national parks is causing serious concern about the natural environment (Eagles & McCool, 2002; La Page, 2010). Yet many park managers in the world are under increasing pressure to provide more visitor facilities and accommodation, and to provide different types of activities to meet the growing demand of visitors (Huang, Deng, Li, & Zhong, 2008). Whilst the tension between the requirements of recreation and the needs for conservation have been recognised (Barros, 2005), it is

acknowledged that in some developing countries, it is the user fees and other tourism related revenues, which provide the funding for conservation in the parks (Eagles et al., 2013). As Page and Connell (2009) recognise, there is a symbiotic relationship between tourism and the environment, with each dependent on the other. More specifically, there can also be 'commensal' relationships in which tourism benefits and the environment are unharmed or 'parasitic' relationships in which tourism not only exploits nature, but also is damaging to it.

The sustainable development of tourism is now acknowledged globally (Connell, Page, & Bentley, 2009) and has become a research focus over recent decades (e.g. Clarke, 1997; Gössling, Hall, & Weaver, 2009; Liu, 2003; Robinson, Swarbrooke, Evans, Long, & Sharpley, 2000; Swarbrooke, 1999). Clarke (1997, p. 224) argues that 'sustainable tourism is not an inherent characteristic of any existing form or situation, but a goal that all tourism must strive to achieve'. However, Buckley (2012, p. 534) states that mainstream tourism is still 'far from sustainable'. Any movement towards attainment is dependent not only upon the industry and other key

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stakeholders but also the demand side, namely the tourists (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005). Yet, there is a limited literature in this area contributing to an understanding of tourists' attitudes to tourism and sustainable development. Also, much of the research on sustainable development is based on traditional attitude theory, in which attitudes are measured on behavioural dimensions. Furthermore, studies on attitudes are often measured individually, rather than acknowledging 'the complex and multidimensional issues' (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012, p. 777) that contemporary tourism researchers contend with and accordingly this study recognises attitudes as interconnected.

The human–nature relationship is fundamental in resource management. Schroeder (2007, p. 293) states that 'people's judgements about the acceptability of different kinds of human activity in natural environments often seems to stem from an underlying sense of how humans are related to non-human nature'. Schultz, Shriver, Tabanic, and Khazian (2004) suggest that there is a connection between people's attitude towards nature and their attitudes towards environmental issues. 'The degree to which an individual associates him or herself with nature is directly related to the type of attitudes that he/she develops' (p. 39). It is also argued that an individual's beliefs about nature and the human role in it are a fundamental component of a person's belief system in relation to the environment (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000). Stern and Dietz's (1994) value-basis theory suggests that there is a causal relationship between perception of the environment and the value a person attaches to it. Holden (2008) agrees that how the environment is perceived influences the use of the environment as a resource. Therefore, how a person perceives the environment may be consequential in their support for sustainable tourism. Thøgersen and Olander (2002) tested a causal relationship between values and behaviour in terms of sustainable consumption and found that value priorities are causally important for sustainable consumption. Whilst their study researched normal daily consumption, it implies that a specific form of consumption, such as tourism, may be similarly influenced. In the related field of outdoor recreation, research recognising the influence of values on recreation behaviour (Jackson, 1986) suggests that the way we attach meaning to the natural environment is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomena (King & Church, 2013; Macnaghten & Urry, 1998).

Two fundamental attitudinal perspectives in relation to the natural environment have been recognised as both contemporary and pervasive (Milfont & Duckitt, 2004). One, an 'anthropocentric' perspective, (first identified in the 1860s) represents the idea that humans are the centre of the universe (Campbell, 1983). Anthropocentrism considers humans to be the most important life form, and other forms of life to be important only to the extent that they can be exploited (Kortenkamp & Moore, 2001; Page & Connell, 2009). In contrast, the second, ecocentrism is defined by Page and Connell (2009, p. 641) as 'the view that nature must be preserved for its intrinsic values'. As Fennel and Nowaczek (2010, p. 242) state: 'Ecocentrism encapsulates a nature-centred system of values'. Although often overlooked, Thompson and Barton (1994) note that individuals of both ecocentric and anthropocentric persuasions can express positive attitudes towards environmental issues. They may be concerned about protection of the environment and support its conservation, but for different reasons (Schultz & Zelezny, 1999). An anthropocentric person supports environmentalism in consideration of the benefits it may offer people, whilst an ecocentric person may support the same causes but their inspiration is nature centred.

Attitudes to the natural environment are consequently influential in determining how environmental resources are used (Bruun & Kalland, 1995; Holden, 2008; Schultz et al., 2005) and La

Page (2010) asserts that it was this that led to environmental protection and measures such as the introduction of national parks. If therefore the use of national parks and the consequent environmental issues are shaped by people's attitudes towards the environment, then a deep rooted exploration of how nature is perceived should be undertaken. Tourists' environmental attitudes have been discussed in various studies (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Ryan, Hughes, & Chirgwin, 2000); however, it seems that limited research has been undertaken on how environmental attitudes translate into support for conservation and sustainable tourism development. Settings such as national parks have been shown to be useful in examining people's pro-environmental attitudes (Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013). Therefore, this paper identifies a structured, causal relationship between attitudes to nature, the environment and tourism from the responses of visitors in a national park context.

Researchers suggest that attitudes develop within a normative or value-based context (Bell, Greene, Fisher, & Baum, 2001) and attitudes to the natural environment have therefore developed geographically and historically. Holden (2008 p. 26) argues that a cultural group 'often reveals distinct variations in how they view nature, supported by their spiritual and religious beliefs which influence our interaction'. It has been suggested, for example, that there may be considerable variation between the Eastern and Western perceptions of nature (Sofield & Li, 2007; Wen & Ximing, 2008). In China, a key teaching of Taoism is of the 'unity of man and Heaven', and Confucian pragmatism suggests either 'obey nature and to protect it, or to transform nature and utilise it' (Wen & Ximing, 2008, p. 573). In western cultures, such as in Britain, the traditional Judeo-Christian perspective and 'the Bible's most persistent environmental message is that God confers human dominion over nature' (Kay, 1989 p. 214). The data collection for this research was therefore undertaken in China and the UK so that these cultural differences would be evident.

Sustainability has been represented as 'an edifice supported by the "three pillars" of economic growth, environmental protection, and social progress' (Schoolman, Guest, Bush, & Bell, 2011, p. 68) and sustainability research therefore incorporates concepts from multiple disciplines and reflects broader social and political thinking. Sustainable tourism is predicated in the belief that economic growth and environmental quality are not mutually exclusive and research is grounded predominantly in the areas of tourism impact, sustainability assessment, development, planning and visitor attitudes and behaviour (Lu & Nepal, 2009). This study contributes to the theoretical advancement of sustainable development in national parks by considering the latter area. First, it identifies the casual relationships between nature attitude, tourism, conservation and sustainable development and provides a novel model revealing the interrelated attitudes to sustainable development. Secondly, it demonstrates that the differing attitudes to nature (anthropocentrism and ecocentrism) cause different attitudes towards sustainable development in national parks, validating Stern and Dietz's (1994) value-basis theory in a tourism context. Then, through using a survey of visitors to protected areas in both China and the UK, the study also shows that the framework can be applied to different cultural groups. Finally, the study discusses important implications for the management of national parks and other areas of conservation value, contributing to practice.

The paper begins with a brief general discussion of attitudes and related psychological constructs before considering specific attitudes towards the natural environment, conservation, tourism and sustainable tourism development in national parks. Thereafter, the contexts for the research, Jiuzhaigou National Scenic Area in China and the New Forest National Park in the UK are discussed.

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