



Original Research Article

The effect of priming, nationality and greenwashing on preferences for wildlife tourist attractions

Tom P. Moorhouse^{a, *}, Neil C. D'Cruze^{a, b}, David W. Macdonald^a^a Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, Recanati-Kaplan Centre, Tubney House, Abingdon Road, Tubney, OX13 5QL, UK^b World Animal Protection, 222 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8HB, UK

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ABSTRACT

Many wildlife tourist attractions (WTAs) have negative impacts on animal welfare and species conservation. In the absence of regulation, raising standards requires tourists to create market pressure by discerning the likely impacts of WTAs, and choosing to attend those with benefits. We created a novel, experimental survey to examine whether priming tourists to engage with the ethical dimension of their choice of WTA may stimulate them to prefer WTAs that are beneficial for wildlife.

Our experimental survey comprised 10 mock webpages, mimicking promotional materials for existing types of WTA, five designed to represent beneficial (“good”), and five detrimental (“bad”) WTAs. WTAs were presented in random order via an online platform to 3224 respondents - 1614 Chinese in China, and 1610 English speakers in Australia, Canada, UK, and USA - who rated their preference for each. Prior to the survey 1610 respondents, stratified by country, were “primed” by asking them introductory questions about WTAs’ likely impacts.

Primed English-speaking respondents were a mean of 4.1 times more likely to select lower likelihoods of attending bad WTAs, compared with control (unprimed) respondents. Priming had a smaller effect on Chinese respondents, making them 1.5 times more likely to select lower likelihoods of attending bad WTAs. Priming made all respondents more likely to select high likelihoods of attending good WTAs, but the effect was larger for Chinese respondents (2.0 times more likely) than English-speaking respondents (1.2 times more likely).

After the survey respondents were shown ratings of each WTAs’ welfare and conservation impacts, and asked to re-assess each WTA. English speaking respondents were 5–13 times more likely to select lower likelihoods of attending bad WTAs after seeing the ratings, while Chinese respondents were 3–4 times more likely to do so.

We conclude that respondents were able to discern beneficial from detrimental WTAs, and preferred beneficial WTAs when primed to consider the likely impacts of WTAs on wildlife conservation and animal welfare, but that the effect of priming was smaller for Chinese respondents. We recommend prominently hosting accurate information on the likely impacts of WTAs in the fora in which tourists are making their decisions, to direct tourist revenue away from WTAs with poor standards, and towards those that improve individuals’ welfare, and/or support species conservation.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: tom.moorhouse@zoo.ox.ac.uk (T.P. Moorhouse), NeilDCruze@worldanimalprotection.org (N.C. D'Cruze), david.macdonald@zoo.ox.ac.uk (D.W. Macdonald).

1. Introduction

Wildlife tourist attractions (WTAs) comprise non-zoo, non-hunting attractions that offer opportunities for tourists to interact with specific taxa of non-domestic animals, either in captive or wild settings, and a large proportion is likely to be detrimental to species conservation and/or individual animals' welfare (Moorhouse et al., 2015). Moorhouse et al. (2015) examined a subset of 24 types of WTA (representing half of the 48 types they identified, including those offering direct interactions with tigers, lions and dolphins in captivity, trekking to observe gorillas and gibbons in the wild, visiting bear-bile, sea-turtle and civet coffee farms, viewing rehabilitated or rescued animals, or watching wildlife-based shows such as 'snake charming' or 'dancing' macaques), and estimated that these collectively were likely to have negatively impacted the animal welfare status of 230,000–550,000 individual animals (e.g. through inadequate diet and husbandry, constant demands for tourist interaction, or the training required to ensure tourist safety or create performances), and that 120,000–340,000 animals were utilised in WTAs likely to reduce the conservation status of their wild populations (e.g. through sourcing animals via routes that encourage the capture of individuals from the wild). Only six of these WTA types (involving 1500–13,000 individual animals) were likely to have net positive impacts on both species conservation and individual animal welfare. (N.B. the ranges given represent the best overall estimates available; Moorhouse et al., 2015.) These 24 types of WTA were attended by an estimated 3.6–6 million tourists per annum, of whom 2.3–3.7 million (~60%) were likely to be supporting, through patronage and whether knowingly or not, attractions that had negative impacts on animal welfare and species conservation (Moorhouse et al., 2015).

In the absence of global regulation, or of any universally accepted accreditation scheme, attempts to raise standards at WTAs rely upon creating a "green market" to reward WTAs that have benefits for wildlife with increased tourist revenue, and penalise, through decreased attendance, those with detrimental standards (e.g. Moorhouse et al., 2017). If tourists were able to perceive the likely impacts of WTAs from activities listed in WTAs' promotional materials, and then choose to avoid those likely to be detrimental to wildlife, this would create an economic incentive for WTAs to raise their standards. The aim of our study was to examine the reactions of tourists to descriptions of WTAs with either beneficial and detrimental impacts, in order to assess what strategies could be used to create such a green market.

Fundamental to the ability of any green market for WTAs to function is that tourists must care sufficiently about WTAs' animal welfare and species conservation deliverables to affect their market choices. At present the percentage of tourists - from any nationality or demographic group - likely to value positive animal welfare and/or species conservation deliverables, and to value these sufficiently to influence their choices, is unknown. Studies suggest that the majority of 'Western' (Northern European and Northern American and/or native English speaking) wildlife tourists appear to accept most uses of animals, so long as they consider the animals' wellbeing to be adequately cared for (Fennell, 2012; Shani, 2009; see Moorhouse et al., 2017; for further discussion), but also that most value WTAs that provide positive conservation, education and animal welfare impacts (e.g. Lück, 2003; Shani, 2012; Ballantyne et al., 2009). The attitudes of Asian wildlife tourists are relatively unstudied, but have been described as differing from Western attitudes (Cong et al., 2014; Tao et al., 2004) – for example Chinese attitudes have been described as giving humans' experiences a hierarchical priority over those of non-human animals (Suntikul et al., 2016; Qingming et al., 2012). This hierarchical world-view and (the Western understanding of) environmentally sustainable behaviour do not have to be contradictory (Suntikul et al., 2016), and a number of studies have found similar attitudes among Western and Chinese wildlife tourists (Buckley et al., 2017), in favour of preserving environments and respecting wildlife (Packer et al., 2014; Suntikul et al., 2016).

The above does not imply that any particular world view is 'correct' with respect to wildlife tourism, but highlights tourists' nationality as a potentially crucial, and understudied, candidate factor influencing their attitudes to, and perception of, standards at WTAs. China is the world's leading outbound tourist market, over double the size of the next largest (the USA) and growing 4% in 2016 to a total expenditure of US\$ 261 billion (Unwto, 2017). Tourists from the USA comprise the second largest outbound market, increasing 8% in 2016 to US\$ 122 billion (Unwto, 2017). Of the eight remaining top 10 outbound tourist countries, three are native English speakers: the UK (fourth, US\$ 64 billion in 2016), Canada (sixth, US\$ 29 billion) and Australia (seventh US\$ 27 billion and the remaining five countries were France (US\$41 billion), Germany (US\$81 billion), South Korea (US\$27 billion) and Hong Kong (US\$24 billion)) (Unwto, 2017).

A suit of additional factors may interact to affect the choices even of tourists who do value animal welfare and conservation deliverables (Moorhouse et al., 2017). First, tourists may lack information needed to align their choices with their values. For example they may be unaware that negative consequences could occur, or not be sufficiently expert to gauge the likely outcomes of their decisions (Moorhouse et al., 2017). Secondly tourists may disengage from the ethical (relating to their values and actions) dimension of their choice (Sezer et al., 2015) and so, by avoiding or disguising the moral implications of the decision, permit themselves to behave in a self-interested manner (Tenbrunsel and Messick, 2004). This could occur due to the extreme attractiveness of the interactions offered by WTAs (e.g. swimming with dolphins, bottle feeding lion cubs) (Shani, 2009; Curtin, 2006; Curtin and Wilkes, 2007), such that tourists' desire to experience the activity outstrips their desire to act in accordance with their values (i.e. the "want self" is gratified at the expense of the "should self", *sensu* Bazerman et al.,

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