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From Experiences to Responsibility: A Qualitative Exploration of How Adventure Tourism Shapes Sustainable Tourist Behavior.

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KEYWORDS

Adventure tourism, sustainable behaviour, experiential learning, environmental awareness, thematic analysis, responsible tourism, behavioural transformation

ABSTRACT

Adventure tourism has become a significant part of the world tourism industry due to its focus on experiential interaction, physical engagement, and involvement in environmental and cultural contexts. Although its development has been instrumental in supporting economic growth, there have been some issues associated with environmental sustainability and tourist conduct that should be considered. The current research is focused on the analysis of adventure tourism experiences' impact on the formation of sustainable behavior among tourists. In this respect, qualitative research methodology will be used, implying the application of secondary data based on literature reviews, case studies, and industry reports. The results show that adventure tourism leads to increased environmental awareness because of firsthand experience with natural ecosystems, improved emotional bonding with nature, experiential learning, and socially inspired responsibility. Such activities play a role in shifting the balance of the tourist behavior towards more responsible activity. The significance of context is mentioned in relation to interaction with culture and social groups. This research adds value to the body of literature through the presentation of the positive impacts of adventure tourism and its experiential nature. The paper discusses the theoretical aspects of behavioral transformation through experience

1. INTRODUCTION

The world tourism sector has undergone considerable change in the last ten years as there has been an increased move towards experiential and niche tourism away from mass tourism. Of these, adventure tourism has become one of the fastest growing segments and that has seen growing demand to have authentic, immersive, and physical engagements. The World Tourism Organization of the United Nations (UNWTO, 2022) estimates a worldwide adventure tourism to be about US\$683 billion annually and it is estimated that the adventure tourism will exhibit a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of more than 15%, which is much higher than other traditional tourism sectors. This development indicates a shift in consumer tastes, specifically among Gen Z and millennials travellers who value experiences over materialism. Trekking, mountaineering, scuba diving, wildlife exploration, extreme sports are common activities part of adventure tourism which often occurs in natural and remote locations. Not only such environments are ecologically sensitive, but also susceptible to human interferences. The activities associated with tourism are the main sources of greenhouse gases (Gössling and Peeters, 2015) and transportation, accommodation, and consumption of resources are the main contributors to the emission level of about 8 to 10% globally. In addition, the rapid growth of the tourism sector has caused problems like loss of biodiversity,



pollution, and cultural disturbances, which are of concern in terms of sustainability.

It is against this background that the element of sustainable tourist behaviour has taken centre stage. Sustainable behaviour can be described as activities that cut down on environmental degradation, honouring the local cultures, and adding on to host communities. Nevertheless, with the growing appeal, the attitude/behaviour gap is very high, with tourists showing interest in the sustainability, but not acting on it (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2014). This disparity makes it obvious that the conventional methods of raising awareness are rather limited and more effective ways of affecting the behaviour have to be offered.

Adventure tourism provides a special possibility to deal with this problem. As a contrast to traditional tourism, it deals with a firsthand contact with natural landscapes and local residents, which preconditions the emergence of an experiential learning and an emotional experience. Research findings indicate that people who participate in nature and adventure tourism activities have a tendency to display responsible behaviour towards the environment, which is 30% to 40% higher than that of mass tourism (Weaver, 2011).

Besides, adventure tourism can be considered under Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory since such travel involves hands-on experience, and tourists may learn through reflecting on what they observe and experience. For example, if they witness any environmental degradation, they can learn not to degrade their natural surroundings in the future. Besides, social interaction with locals and other travellers can help develop certain sustainable practices through socialization. However, there is still a need for extensive research on how adventure tourism influences tourist behaviour and contributes to sustainability. There are studies focusing on the impacts of adventure tourism on environmental issues. Thus, this paper aims at examining how adventure tourism affects sustainable tourist behaviour based on the thematic analysis of secondary data.

The main aim of this research is to investigate how adventure tourism influences sustainable tourist behaviour due to experiential, emotional, and social reasons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The recent focus on sustainability in the tourism industry has given rise to renewed academic interest in the understanding of the impact of tourist experiences on environmentally responsible behaviour. Adventure tourism specifically has come out to be an influential trigger in promoting behavioural change based on its experiential and immersion features (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2014). The literature that is available points to the interrelations between experience, motivation, emotional engagement and social responsibility and their relevance in determining sustainable tourist behaviour.

One of the dimensions that are important in the interpretation of this relationship is role of tourist experience. Wu et al. (2022) state that there is a direct and positive effect of tourist experience on an environmentally responsible behaviour. As their research confirms, meaningful and engaging experiences can increase environmental awareness of tourists and motivate them to take pro-environmental measures. This observation is consistent with the experiential learning theory, which implies that by being exposed to natural settings, tourists can learn more about ecological concerns and internalize ecologically viable behavior. According to Pattaray (2025), when tourists visit ecotourism sites in Indonesia, they form sustainability-tuned gestures, especially when they are on hands-on activities surrounding the environment and culture. Such experiences serve as a platform of resisting in which the tourists can redefine themselves as unreluctant spectators into accountable agents.

Another key attribute, which determines sustainable behaviour in adventure tourism, is motivation. In their study, Orden-Mejia et al. (2025) claim that the factors that affect tourists' perception of quality and overall satisfaction to a considerable extent are their motivation, such as the desire to experience novelty, self-development, and the connection to nature. These in their turn, lead to allegiance and introduction of sustainable practices. They find that tourists who have perceived high-quality experiences that enhance their personal intrinsic motivations have a higher chance of becoming long-term committed to sustainable tourism. According to Carvache-Franco et al. (2022), such motivations as environmental appreciation and cultural curiosity have close links with repeat visitation and the responsible behaviour. This shows that sustainability is not merely an ethical factor but also a factor that can determine the level of satisfaction and loyalty of tourists. Learner role of adventure tourists will give additional knowledge of behavioural change. Akaho (2024) defines adventure tourists as cross-boundary-learners who gain the knowledge and skills by giving an experience to different environments and cultures. This is a process of learning that transcends the classroom and includes emotional and experiential aspects of learning. Adventure tourism is thus an informal learning of environment where the tourists acquire consciousness environmentally and develop adaptive behaviours. This point of view supports the notion that experiential learning can be more effective than conventional awareness initiatives in enhancing sustainability (Akaho, 2024).

Social responsibility and destination-level factors are also important in influencing tourist behaviour in addition to individual experiences. Maki et al. (2023) highlight the importance of destination social responsibility in influencing tourists' perceptions and actions. They also in their research hypothesise that tourists will embrace responsible behaviour when the destinations have committed to sustainability in their policies and practices. This also receives an endorsement

in a study conducted by Baena and Cerviño (2024) who posit that sustainability has emerged as a critical factor influencing the destination preferences of tourists. Contemporary travellers are becoming more open to choosing their destinations according to their ethical needs which implies that tourism consumption is becoming less informal.

Recent studies have also focused on the use of technology and innovation to enhance long-term sustainable behaviour. Majid et al. (2025) discuss the possibilities of chatbots in promoting sustainable travel. Their results suggest that electronic tools may be useful in advising the tourist behaviour through offering real-time data, advice and encouragement of a sustainable option. This underscores the dynamic aspect of sustainability in tourism where technological interventions are identified as supplementary to experiential learning to make responsible behaviour more meaningful.

Moreover, the literature lays more stress on emotional involvement to propel sustainable actions. Emotions, which are seen as awe, empathy and connection to nature, are more apt at causing behaviour change. Given that adventure tourism inherently involves an element of emotionality, the connection between experience and responsibility gets enhanced even further (Wu, et al., 2022). This is because the interaction within the community allows the tourists to understand and appreciate the principles of sustainable living and culture.

The relationship between all these variables in terms of how they contribute to the development of sustainable behaviour among adventure tourists still lacks sufficient attention in the scientific literature. As mentioned earlier, most research focuses on the individual contribution made by one of these factors, and not enough work has been done to examine the interconnection between all three of them (Baena and Cerviño, 2024). This is what prompted me to undertake this study and conduct a thematic analysis of the literature on the matter.

The literature indicates that adventure tourism possesses considerable promise as a tool for facilitating sustainable behaviour among tourists based on experiential learning, motivational factors, emotions, and social influences. Nonetheless, there is a need for additional research to explore the dynamics involved in this relationship and develop an appropriate framework.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research aims to take qualitative research approach in examining the effect of adventure tourism experiences on sustainable tourist behaviour. The aspect of a qualitative design is also appropriate because the focus of the research is to gain knowledge of the perceptions, experiences, and behavioural changes in the research, which is not possible with quantitative design. The research is oriented towards the interpretation of patterns and meanings based on existent literature instead of quantification of variables.

Data Collection

The study relies on the secondary research, which is carried out based on a broad spectrum of valid academic and industry sources. They are peer reviewed journals, sustainability reports, publications of case studies concerning adventure tourism and environmentally responsible behaviour. The most recent works by Pattaray (2025), Wu et al. (2022), Orden-Mejia et al. (2025) and others have been identified as key sources to make sure that the information is up-to-date, topical, and academically sound. Secondary data provide an opportunity to use a variety of geographical settings and opinions and increase the overall understanding of the research.

Data analysis: Thematic Analysis

The data collected are analysed through thematic analysis, a popular qualitative method to identify, analyse and interpret a pattern of a text data. The analysis is systematic, i.e. it includes (1) becoming familiarized with the data, via repetitive reading; (2) initial coding of pertinent concepts based on what relates to tourist experience and sustainability; (3) detection of recurrent themes; (4) review and turbo of themes; and (5) interpretation of findings in accordance with the research aim.

Both important themes as environmental awareness, emotional engagement, experiential learning, and social influence, can be extracted by the use of this method which can explain the effect of the adventure tourism on sustainable behaviour. Thematic analysis will be most applicable in the study since it can be used to obtain a structured yet flexible interpretation of the complicated qualitative data.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Theme 1: Environmental Awareness Through Direct Exposure

One of the most important discoveries made in the study is that contact with nature increases environmental awareness among tourists. Adventures usually take place in vulnerable ecosystems, including forests, coral reefs, and mountain landscapes, where signs of environmental degradation are more obvious. Experiencing activities such as trekking and diving enables tourists to identify threats to the environment such as biodiversity loss, pollution, and changes in the weather caused by global warming.

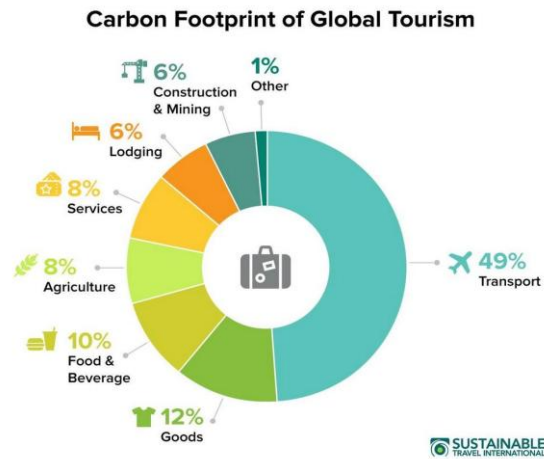


Figure: Carbon Footprint of Global Tourism

Source: Rethinking the Future, 2026

Previous research demonstrated that experiential contact with nature has a positive effect on responsible behaviour in terms of increased awareness and sense of personal responsibility (Wu et al., 2022). As noted by Pattaray (2025), environmental degradation is better understood by ecotourists who interact with natural conditions directly. This confirms the general findings that exposure to environmental problems has an especially significant impact on raising people's awareness (Gössling et al., 2020). Moreover, studies have associated nature tourism with the development of pro-environmental attitudes through situational learning and observation (Weaver, 2011). Consequently, tourists become more prone to engage in practices that include reducing waste and advocating for conservation. Thus, the environment itself serves as a strong motivator for sustainability.

Theme 2: Emotional Connection and Attachment to Nature

Emotions form an important component in fostering sustainable tourist behaviour. The emotions elicited by adventure tourism experiences include awe, thrill, and reverence towards nature, resulting in psychological affinity towards the environment. These emotions play an essential role in determining sustainable behavioural change.



Figure: Protecting the Natural Environment

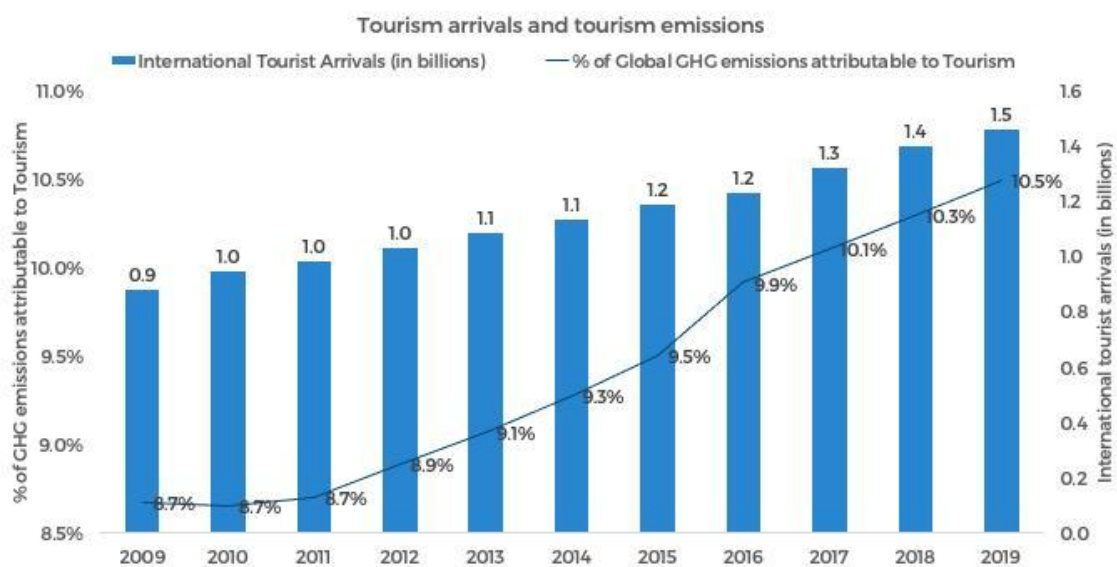
Source: Ledsham, 2023

According to Wu et al. (2022), emotional connectedness to nature is a better predictor of sustainable behaviour compared to knowledge. Also, Akaho (2024) proposes that adventure tourists foster an emotional comprehension of their surrounding environment, which fosters environmental responsibility. Moreover, emotional involvement deepens individual interpretations of sustainability, thus making them more effective (Pattaray, 2025).

In addition, the experience economy approach reinforces this notion, where emotionally compelling experiences create enduring impacts on behavioural changes (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Furthermore, environmental changes elicit emotions that greatly impact individuals' pro-environmental decisions and actions (Scott et al., 2019). Therefore, emotions act as an important channel that converts tourism experiences into sustainable behaviour.

Theme 3: Experiential Learning and Skill Development

Adventure tourism fosters experiential learning, an integral process for instilling sustainable behaviour among tourists. Unlike passive tourism, adventure tourism is an active process, giving tourists an opportunity to interact with the environment. Such interactions, including hiking, camping, and survival exercises, enable people to learn firsthand about the need to conserve resources.



Source: UNWTO, Nature Climate Change, World Bank

Figure: Sustainability in Travel

Source: Arora, 2021

According to Akaho (2024), adventure tourists may be regarded as cross-boundary learners, who acquire knowledge from engaging with different settings. Indeed, the idea of adventure tourism is consistent with the tenets of experiential learning, which involves learning by doing (Kolb, 1984). It should be noted that empirical research also proves that experiential learning is essential for fostering environmentally responsible behaviour as it fosters greater awareness and involvement (Wu et al., 2022).

Additionally, experiential learning enables tourists to undergo transformative learning, whereby they assess their values and actions in relation to the new experiences. For example, managing scarce resources while engaged in outdoor activities helps reinforce the idea of sustainability and the responsible use of such resources. Thus, experiential learning is instrumental in both raising environmental awareness and promoting behavioural changes.

Theme 4: Social Influence and Cultural Interaction

Social and cultural interaction has proved itself to be one of the important factors influencing the sustainability of tourists' behaviour. Adventure tourism implies participating in some group activities and interactions with locals, which provides an opportunity for tourists to learn socially through experience.

Such interactions allow tourists to observe sustainable behaviour practiced by locals through conservation of resources and other sustainable practices of lifestyle. There have already been confirmed the positive effects of destination-level social responsibility on the tourists' perception and their behaviours that are more responsible (Maki et al., 2023). In addition, sustainability becomes more relevant for tourists' selection of destinations due to ethical consumption of travellers (Baena and Cervino, 2024). Social and cultural interactions increase tourists' satisfaction and help adopt sustainable behaviour



(Carvache-Franco et al., 2022).

It is known that people tend to replicate other people's behaviour especially when in group contexts (Gössling et al., 2020). Therefore, the mentioned process turns into a self-reinforcing loop. Overall, social influence and cultural interaction are key motivators for adopting sustainable behaviour by tourists.

Theme 5: Behavioral Transformation and Long-Term Impact

Combining environmental awareness, emotional connection, experiential learning, and social influence results in behavioural change that emerges as the most valuable aspect of adventure tourism. Engaging in meaningful and immersive activities helps tourists develop sustainable behaviours over the long term.

Per capita CO₂ emissions from international commercial passenger flights, tourism-adjusted, 2022

International aviation emissions are allocated to the country of departure, then adjusted for tourism.

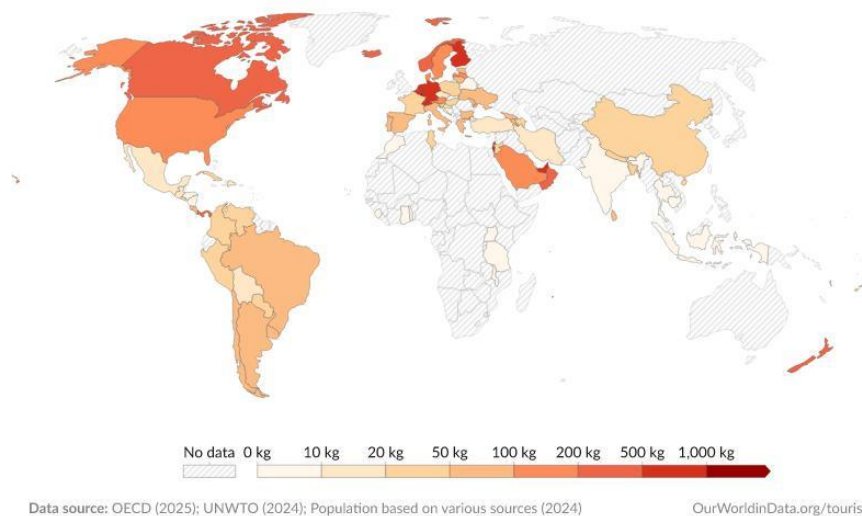


Figure: Emission from Tourism

Source: Herre and Samborska, 2025

Adventure tourism experiences that provide high-quality experiences have been proven to enhance the loyalty of tourists and their commitment to sustainable behaviour, especially if motivated intrinsically (Orden-Mejía et al., 2025). Moreover, the experience itself can help foster environmentally conscious behaviour even beyond the scope of traveling (Wu et al., 2022). Behavioural change is heavily reliant on the emotional and experiential involvement of tourists that contributes to sustainable behaviour over time (Scott et al., 2019). Besides, technologies can be used to facilitate sustainable behaviours by directing tourists' actions (Majid et al., 2025).

The evidence of such behaviour change includes reducing the consumption of products, conserving energy resources, and patronizing ethically run companies. Thus, adventure tourism becomes a way to promote sustainable behaviour over a long period.

Discussion

The findings show that adventure tourism has a multidimensional effect on sustainable tourist behaviour as a combination of experiential, emotional, and social aspects. Importantly, the research indicates that engaging with natural environments has more power in changing attitudes compared to awareness-raising efforts, thus overcoming the well-known problem of attitude-behaviour gap in tourism studies (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2014). In essence, experiential learning is identified as one of the key processes involved because tourists learn about sustainability as they participate in various activities rather than observe them (Kolb, 1984; Wu et al., 2022).

However, an important finding is that results depend on the context. For instance, even though emotional engagement and social effects can be used to promote sustainability, their effect will wear off if tourists are not constantly reminded of them after their return home (Scott et al., 2019). Moreover, although adventure tourism has some potential in transforming people's behaviour, such tourism is not necessarily sustainable and, in many cases, contributes to the problems related to sustainability goals (Weaver, 2011). Consequently, a very important conclusion is that the experience alone is not sufficient. Indeed, experience should be integrated with policy making, destination management, and technology interventions (Majid et al., 2025).



CONCLUSION

The current study provides an extensive exploration of the impact of adventure tourism experiences on sustainable tourist behaviour by conducting a qualitative thematic analysis of secondary literature. The results support the notion that adventure tourism acts as a strong motivator for tourists to engage in sustainable behaviour. This conclusion can be drawn from the fact that adventure tourism involves three elements – environmental contact, emotional connection, and social engagement – that are essential for influencing tourists' actions.

The study also highlights that the relationship between experience and behavior is not linear or guaranteed. Despite the fact that most tourists have become more environmentally conscious and have started behaving in a sustainable manner, their behaviour will not persist without the involvement of other factors as governmental policies, destination management, and post-trip activities.

Importantly, the research is useful in filling the attitude-behaviour gap since meaningful experience can lead to lasting behavioural change if accompanied by both emotional and social elements. In general, adventure tourism is an excellent means for encouraging sustainable practices, although such success depends on how the activity is responsibly designed, regulated, and coordinated among stakeholders.

The research limits with the use of primary data, making it difficult to conduct a direct analysis of behavioural change and make accurate conclusions about the findings presented. Without primary data, context is lost, potentially overlooking regional differences in tourist behaviour. Moreover, the use of qualitative analysis might affect the accuracy of the results due to bias.

Future research in the area can benefit from the collection of primary data for the validation of behavioural outcomes. It would be worthwhile to investigate how sustainable behaviour persists over time through longitudinal studies. Comparative studies in different areas and digital interventions for sustainability practice are other possible avenues for future research.

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