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Animal Welfare in Ecotourism

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Authors CLW and SMM managed the literature searches. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The negative welfare experienced by some animals within the tourism trade has been well publicised across various mediums, from modern scientific literature and industry audits to public outcry on social media. However, options for sustainable, enjoyable and responsible animal based tourism do exist. The difficulty lies in providing sufficient and effective information to tourists to allow them to make decisions to visit attractions which match their 'eco' conservation and animal welfare expectations. Through the highlighting of successful fieldwork case studies, impactful discussions and future research can be pursued.

Keywords: Ecotourism; animal welfare; conservation; educational elements.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is an ever-growing category of tourism, and one with many promising avenues in terms of conservation. However, since the terms conception in the 1980s [1] there have been continuous issues arising from a lack of regulation as to what exactly constitutes as 'ecotourism' or 'eco-friendly'. 'Eco'-tourism as should be environmentally and culturally sensitive, have a direct positive impact on conservation and/or the local people, and are sustainable [2]. Well-intending tourists may be inclined to believe their activities are environmentally neutral, or aid conservation, without questioning the legitimacy of 'eco' claims or labels [1]. One industry where this is particularly prevalent is within animal based tourism. Part of the complexity in this industry is due to the wide range of activities and species it covers [3], from bird watching, to carriage rides, to trophy hunting, to swimming with dolphins and safaris. It is understandably difficult for tourists to assess the appropriateness of an activity, and whether it will have any negative impacts on an animal's welfare or related conservation [4,5,6]; amongst experts it would prove difficult to effectively review the sheer number of activities and species on such a scale. The study of animal welfare in tourism activities is thankfully a growing field, despite the complexities of the interdisciplinary research. Discussed throughout are a few notable programmes and studies, creating a brief overview of promising welfare research on animals in the tourism trade.

2. DISCUSSION

Whilst the demand for animal tourism attractions continues to rise, a variety of approaches have emerged to combine effective industry regulations and impactful tourist education; with greater understanding of fieldwork case studies and their suggested improvements, industry stakeholders can look to better aid tourists in where to invest their time and money.

In the Seychelles, there has been a collaborative effort between tourism businesses to ensure their seasonal whale shark watching trade is low-impact and sustainable [7]; pro-active management has created effective communication between all levels of the industry, from boat operators to conservation agencies and tourism companies. A code of conduct was created for all whale shark encounters, which

has been effective in preventing individuals offering 'closer' or 'better' encounters than competitors. By controlling the disturbances to the whale sharks, it minimises the extent to which whale sharks will associate tourist boats with negative experiences, thereby increasing the reliability of future viewing instances. The Seychelles have been subsequently highly influential in developing codes of conduct for whale shark watching in other countries [8].

Bach and Burton [9], working with habituated bottlenose dolphins Monkey Mia, Western Australia, found that 80% of resort visitors readily accepted a decreased probability of a dolphin interaction when welfare concerns were communicated to them effectively; this provides a promising platform for managing animal-visitor interaction. Even when allowing for some of these visitors holding a pre-existing interest in animal welfare (or conservation, if welfare concerns are particularly based on reproductive success, for example), the 80% figure still stands as encouraging; the fact is, preaching to the converted whilst reaching the disengaged or ignorant is no harm done [10,11].

In Santorini, Greece, tourists are faced with many opportunities to take donkey rides or use donkey taxis; as a sole source of income for many local people this can lead to compromising the welfare of the animal, in terms of number of rides per day or taking unsuitably heavy tourists. The 'Take STEPS' programme (from The Donkey Sanctuary, a British Charity with backing from the Association of British Travel Agents and the Cruise Lines International Association) was created as simple way to communicate with tourists ('Safety: Will you be escorted by a conductor at all times during the ride? Thirst: Does the animal have access to fresh, clean water? Equipment: Is the saddle or bridle of good quality or is it causing sores or discomfort? Pounds: Are you an acceptable weight for this animal to carry? Shelter: Does this animal have access to shelter during rest break?' [12]. It provides an animal welfare checklist which is announced before disembarking cruise ships and available in App form [12]. 'Care for Petra', a Jordan run initiative linked to the Brooke working equid charity, is a similar but more multifaceted responsible tourism campaign [13]. Posters and leaflets request that tourists do not take artefacts home, do not buy from child workers and consider animal welfare before riding a donkey. Ticket offices for tourism attractions continuously show a short educational cartoon with the same

message. Both charities report a notable change in tourist behaviour since these interventions started, however neither have yet published official figures on the projects [12,13].

The working equid examples provide a simple way for tourists to assess animal welfare and sensibly make the tourists consider their own safety as well. Aspects of these programmes are familiar to the Farm Animal Welfare Council 5 Freedoms for animals (FAWC). Although the FAWC framework is not perfect [14,15] it is a highly accessible due to its non-technical terminology. It also avoids subjectivity and bias in assessments due to its accompanying list of provisions (Table 1), rather than relying on strict (and sometimes arbitrary) measurements, ranking systems or assessments based solely on an animal's physical health.

Where industries must be careful in transplanting this type of framework into animal based tourism is firstly its focus on *farm* animals, as the same interventions and provisions for wild animals may not always be appropriate [18,19]. Secondly, from a more anthropocentric view, there is the risk of an imperialistic-style enforcement of western values on other countries, which may not be directly applicable nor helpful in effectively advancing animal welfare [20,21]. Duffy and Moore [22] raise this issue when considering global frameworks for elephants in tourism, effectively highlighting the risks of creating power struggles between stakeholders and underestimating the uniqueness of each tourism product and/or location; avoiding a disconnect between 'governing' body and those 'on the ground' is fundamental for welfare practices to be successful and impactful. This is not to suggest that the development of culturally appropriate frameworks is impossible however; Brooke's initiative discussed previously certainly appears

to find a balance between educating tourists, holding working equid owners accountable for animal welfare whilst providing support, and being culturally sensitive.

When reviewing more high-value animal based tourism ventures, these tend to occur in more environmentally sensitive areas. These activities will focus on guaranteeing a 'close-up' and immersive animal experience for a tourist, for example through safaris or scuba diving. Russel [23] investigated tourist experiences in Tanjung Puting Reserve in Indonesia, which allows tourists to view their rescued and rehabilitated orangutans, providing essential revenue. The study showed a distinct disconnect between tourists and the animals they are viewing. In the reserve, some tourists described the rescue orangutans as 'children', wanting to hold, 'cuddle' and play with the primates as much as possible. This detracts from the overall message of the reserve, that orangutans are wild animals which need to be protected in their natural habitat. Additionally, there could be serious welfare implications for both humans and orangutans, via disease transmission or injury. For the photography-focused tourists, they were disappointed by the orangutans in the reserve, wanting to photograph wild orangutans (or any other wild 'exotic' animal/s); this led to requesting that the guided tours go deeper into the forest habitat than recommended. Distancing rehabilitated orangutans from human activity is essential, for preventing injury and to successfully return them to independent life in the wild [24]. Here educational elements need to give tourists the full picture; this way they can see their experience as a productive conservation activity, rather than objectifying and commodifying the orangutans, and perhaps have a better understanding as to *why* restrictions are in place for forest excursions.

Table 1. The five freedoms and five provisions for promoting farm animal welfare [16,17]

Freedoms	Provisions
1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition	By providing ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour
2. Freedom from discomfort and exposure	By providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease	By prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
4. Freedom from fear and distress	By ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering
5. Freedom to express normal behaviour	By providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind

The disregard of regulations is a wide spread industry issue. In Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Mountain gorilla tracking tourism provides essential funding for conservation and provides stable jobs for local people. Due to the risk of disease transmission between humans and great apes, there is a recommended distance of 7 metres between the tourists and gorillas (the approximate distance of a human sneeze). However, the average distance at this park was found to be just 2.76 metres [25]. Some of this was explained by approaches by the gorillas, but the vast majority of breaches were due to tourists attempting to get a better view in the dense foliage, not understanding the importance or reasoning behind the stated distance. Poor education of guides and the acceptance of bribes to take tourists closer to wild apes has also been suggested as an influencing factor [25]. The seriousness of these approaches cannot be understated; a 24-year study on respiratory disease in wild chimps found that infections caused by human viruses had an almost 20% mortality rate [26]. Human welfare may also be at risk in these scenarios, as although potentially habituated to human visitors, these populations of apes are still wild and can be unpredictable, or due to their physical strength could easily injure a tourist by accident. As a demand for these types of excursion continues, and as they provide a notable financial income, an approach must be taken to educate tourists that whilst efforts are made to enhance their experience, the welfare and conservation of wild ape populations needs to take precedence; without effective safeguards the industry is ultimately unsustainable.

3. CONCLUSION

The more we learn from studies on animal and other forms of eco-tourism, the better the industry can be at providing effective interventions to better educate consumers. The demand for eco-tourism will persist for the foreseeable future, and there is real educational and monetary value in using this avenue to be honest with tourists about the risks of their activities and the real threats facing the habitats they are seeking to enjoy.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest, also in terms of financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence their work.

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