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COMMENTARY

How virtual representations of ecotourists' experiences on social media may shape meanings and preferences: insights for future research complementing visitation data

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The opportunity to spot charismatic megafauna in the wild, such as large-bodied mammals, has been promoted in ecotourism marketing to attract visitors and represents a popular wildlife-watching activity in African protected areas. However, increasing evidence shows that ecotourists' preferences to visit protected areas may be more diverse, expanding beyond charismatic megafauna. The wide-scale analysis carried out by Eyster, Naidoo, & Chan (2022) in Sub-Saharan Africa by using revealed preference methods identifies factors explaining higher visitation, as a proxy for protected areas' attractiveness. The results contribute to the literature, especially by identifying areas and species which are more likely to attract more visitors and be affected by both positive and negative impacts of ecotourism. The authors raise important questions regarding the need to further understand these impacts, which may include receiving higher revenues to support management but also neocolonial pressures, according to different contexts.

Eyster, Naidoo, & Chan (2022) found that beyond charismatic megafauna, areas with high bird diversity may also attract more visitors. Birdwatching is a growing niche in nature-based tourism attracting bird enthusiasts to diverse locations worldwide. In more remote and rural areas where charismatic megafauna do not occur (e.g., either naturally or as a consequence of human activities), birdwatching ecotourism may represent an important economic activity that could help align biodiversity conservation goals with rural development (Biggs *et al.*, 2011). However, the authors point out that other unmeasured park attributes or reasons may be driving visitation and the outcome of their models. Triangulating various sources of information (e.g., quantitative and qualitative information from surveys, and in-depth interviews) may contribute to complementing visitation data. This includes integrating insights from how preferences and perceptions are constructed in virtual social environments, such as social media platforms.

Content shared on social media (e.g., images, videos, and texts) has been used as a cost-efficient proxy for understanding a wide set of people-nature interactions, including ecotourists' preferences, visitation, and broader experiences in protected areas (Teles da Mota & Pickering, 2020). Place-specific content from social media (e.g., geotagged photographs) could help unveil how factors of attractiveness found by Eyster, Naidoo, & Chan (2022) interplay with the plurality of reasons underpinning visitation at more local scales, for example, by assessing whether bird diversity or birdwatching activities are reflected in social media content posted in relation to bird-rich areas. Moreover, social media data could provide further insights into complementary results by unveiling emerging preferences and meanings which may not be detected through visitation data. In this sense, virtual social environments have profound influence on the way tourism is mediated, by searching, rating, and sharing about destinations and experiences. Through the creation of content and interaction with it, tourists are increasingly becoming agents on the circulation of visual representations, coproducing how places are perceived, experienced, and constructed (Jansson, 2018). However, social media carry inherent biases that may distort perceptions of places and values of nature. As systems of images, discourses, and practices, tourists' imaginaries are assemblages of meaning-making representations, which both produce ideological, political, and sociocultural interpretations of places and people, and are also a product of meanings-making processes (Salazar, 2012). Critically engaging with the construction of ecotourism imaginaries on social media may provide insights on how virtual representations influence which ecological features are preferred (e.g., those fitting into an imaginary of a 'pristine' landscape, Wahler, Fanini, & Riechers, 2023), and how the production of meanings drive visitation and shape ecotourism impact on the ground (e.g., by accelerating transformation of places

to align local realities with virtual ideas, Parris-Piper *et al.*, 2023).

Eyster, Naidoo, & Chan (2022) importantly suggest that the negative association found in their study between tourists' visits and nearby human population may imply that revenues from ecotourism could favor the displacement of people and the conservation of landscape types which may not be envisioned or desired by locals. In protected areas, ecotourism imaginaries can drive environmental change by influencing normative value judgments on how landscapes *should* look like, which species are considered of value, and thus worth conserving, and for whom. Ecotourism practices reproduced around the idea of gazing an unpeopled nature, which is going to disappear (e.g., Anthropocene discourses as an extractive touristic model, Fletcher, 2019), may incentivize ecotourists to seek wild African landscapes as meaningful experiences in protected areas. Reproducing these expectations may not only risk generating injustices from specific management actions (e.g., displacements), but also drive a slower and more subtle process of erosion of local meanings of places, relational values, traditional knowledge, and social identities in the long term. Complementing results by Eyster, Naidoo, & Chan (2022) by engaging with these aspects may help understand how ecotourism impact develops in different contexts.

Overall, the study by Eyster, Naidoo, & Chan (2022) sets a fertile ground for future research to further assess the set of social-ecological conditions for ecotourism to contribute to biodiversity conservation. Although increasing evidence shows that ecotourists' preferences may be diverse, there is need to understand how virtual representations of nature-based experiences may shape meanings, perceptions, and preferences in protected areas. In addition, engaging with the normative power behind representation of places on social media (e.g., following platforms' commercial logic for maximizing attention, van Dijck & Poell, 2013) could provide further insights regarding the processes of social construction of virtual imaginaries and their implications in changing ecotourism realities. For example, ecotourists may tend to replicate dominant discourses and symbols (e.g., of a wild African landscape where charismatic species can be seen) as perceived to be more sharable (or 'instagrammable',

Arts *et al.*, 2021), eventually pushing toward a homogenization of preferences, a simplification of meanings of places, and a biased valuation of nature (e.g., Wahler, Fanini, & Riechers, 2023). A more comprehensive understanding of these dimensions can provide ground to deliberate around normative questions related to who, where, and how should ecotourism be implemented to advance toward just conservation goals.

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