


Profiling Ecotourists at a South African Wetland Park Based on Demographics and Participation in Ecologically-responsible Tourism Practices

Abstract

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Wetland Parks are some of the most treasured destinations conserving rich natural and cultural tourism resources. As such, wetland parks are emerging as conducive for ecotourists to create memorable tourism experiences. Despite emerging as suitable areas for the creation of memorable ecotourism experiences, some wetland parks are currently attracting low numbers of eco-tourists, which might be linked to their failure to meet customer needs. Considering the potential of iSimangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) and because empirical studies of this nature are scarce in developing countries, this study aimed to profile ecotourists at IWP. To reach this aim, a quantitative survey was conducted at IWP with 323 conveniently and purposively sampled respondents. Data were collected using closed-ended questionnaires and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results reveal that most ecotourists to IWP are domestic ecotourists aged between 31 and 40 years. The ecotourists are motivated by the need to relax and enjoy leisure. The ecotourists participate in different ecologically-responsible tourism practices with the most popular form being sustainable, nature and low-impact tourism practices. However, their participation in environmental tourism forms varies in terms of demographic factors. Understanding ecotourists' demographics and participation in ecologically responsible inclined tourism is imperative in setting management and marketing strategies.

Keywords Ecotourism, ecotourists, ecologically responsible tourism, iSimangaliso Wetland Park, Wetland parks

How to cite this article: Kuseni, M., Hermann, U. & Sifolo, P. (2024). Profiling Ecotourists at a South African Wetland Park Based on Demographics and Participation in Ecologically-responsible Tourism Practices. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 13(3):478-485. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.531>

Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, generating about US\$1.54 trillion in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). The rapid growth of the tourism industry may be attributed to diverse types of tourism offered to meet the needs and wants of different tourism markets such as nature, adventure, cultural, religious, sport, health and ecotourism. Of these different forms of tourism, ecotourism has emerged as one of the most popular forms with an annual growth rate of 5% (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012) and a market value predicted to reach US\$333.8 billion by 2027 (Allied Market Research, 2023). The growth of ecotourism might be linked to its culturally and environmentally friendly nature, hence its ability to support different stakeholders (Duruibe & Van der Merwe, 2022; Forje et al., 2021; Harilal & Tichaawa, 2020). Subsequently, ecotourism is integral to the development of the economies of nations as it triggers a cascade of positive social, ecological, cultural, and economic changes (Eshun & Tichaawa, 2019; Mudzengi et al., 2021). Ecotourism destinations act as a 'pragmatic middle ground' for achieving biodiversity conservation and community development. While ecotourism seems to be growing rapidly in the world tourism market based on its cultural and environmentally friendly nature (Forje et al., 2021), not all destinations have realised their ecotourism potential (Duruibe & Van der Merwe, 2022). Some ecotourism destinations still attract low visitor numbers, and wetland parks such as iSimangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) may not have circumvented this problem as yet. In the pre-WHS period, IWP (formerly known as St Lucia Wetland Park) was characterised by mass tourism created by the Fordist model of mass and standardised production (Govender, 2013). The mass tourists visiting the IWP were largely motivated by the need to experience 'sun, sea, sand, sex, sangria and fishing' (Govender, 2013) leading to the park being labelled a fishing destination (Nel, 2003). According to Allen & Brennan (2004), St Lucia town, at the southern entrance of the Park, was a popular destination for Afrikaans-speaking holidaymakers and caricatured as a stomping ground for 'beer-swilling cowboys'. In the post-WHS era, the IWP was rebranded as an ecotourist destination capable of promoting equitable access to tourism activities (Govender, 2013). The changed status of the park and its mandate has seen a shift in tourism in favour of more diversified ecologically responsible niche forms of tourism and tourism products (Govender, 2013). The profile of visitors changed from those who exploited nature unsustainably to those who were protective and conservative of nature. The park's transition from being a mass tourism destination to an ecotourism destination saw the number of tourists dwindling, which might be attributed to the generic mass marketing of ecotourism rather than a niche strategy. To increase the number of ecotourists, the IWP marketing managers should provide tailored products and programmes that will meet the desires and needs of the changing tourism consumers. This may be possible if ecotourists at IWP are profiled to understand their needs and wants. This view is substantiated by Constantin et al. (2022) who note that profiling ecotourists in protected areas is necessary so that marketers can acquire comprehensive data on the features of demand, classify target markets, craft expressive messages, and package products and resources in such a way that particular demands can be met. The authors further note that profiling provides the foundation of market breakdown, hence it enables managers to subdivide the tourists into segments, better understand their preferences, and professionally communicate more. In light of the above, there is a need for critical research into the characteristics of those visiting IWP.

Several studies to enhance a better understanding of ecotourism have been conducted (e.g., Babafemi et al., 2021; Constantin et al., 2021; Constantin et al., 2022; Duruibe & Van der Merwe, 2022; Eshun & Tichaawa, 2019; Forje et al., 2021;



Forge et al., 2020; Grobbelaar, et al., 2019; Gumede & Nzama, 2020; Ileri et al., 2020; Kruger et al., 2017; Mudzengi et al., 2021; Nheta et al., 2017; Nutsughodo & Mensah, 2020; Nyirenda et al., 2017). However, only a few studies have been conducted profiling ecotourists (e.g., Grobbelaar, et al., 2019; Kruger et al., 2017; Nheta et al., 2017). Despite enhancing an understanding of ecotourism and ecotourists' profiles, most of these studies were conducted in national parks and other sites in sub-Saharan African countries (Hadinejad et al., 2019). On the face of it, limited attention has been given or directed at understanding the profiles of ecotourists to South African destinations such as IWP. This oversight is a concern because tourists vary in their needs and preferences while destinations' situational factors such as tourism attributes differ from one place to another. Thus, the identification of ecotourists' characteristics and their participation in ecologically responsible tourism practice is imperative to implement marketing strategies. South Africa, the 5th signatory of the Ramsar Convention, hosts 22 wetlands covering approximately 29,000 square kilometres (Adeeyo et al., 2022). These wetlands include, amongst others, estuaries, floodplains, coastal lakes, highland wetlands, inland lakes, and others. IWP, as one of these wetlands, receives over 500,000 visitors and is regarded as the most successful wetland park in South Africa. Despite recording the highest numbers among the wetlands in South Africa, it is still reaching below its potential. This necessitates the profiling of ecotourists based on their demographic characteristics and participation in ecologically inclined tourism patterns to increase the number to pre-WHS levels.

Theoretical framework

Ecotourism

The environmental concerns brought about by the negative impact of tourism have changed the discourse of tourism development with some environmentally friendly forms of tourism being unveiled. Along the way, ecotourism or ecological tourism has gained traction and is becoming popular (Babafemi et al., 2021; Nakonechnykh et al., 2021). Ecotourism is a form of tourism that promotes the preservation of natural and cultural heritage by facilitating tourists to engage in low-impact activities and consumption of local resources (Chan et al., 2021; Duruibe & Van der Merwe, 2022; Ileri et al., 2020). In the same breath, Wondirad et al. (2020) and Lee (2019) describe ecotourism as tourism that encourages tourists to enjoy nature and interact and form relationships with different stakeholders in a destination. As such, ecotourism seeks to encourage tourists to take responsible trips to natural areas to help the local people's well-being, preserve the environment and learn about the natural environment (The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), 1995/2020). Ecotourism is primarily practised in appealing wildlife or natural settings with flora and fauna, geographical features and sites of historical importance (Grobbelaar et al., 2019). According to Duruibe & Van der Merwe (2022), ecotourism can enhance socio-economic development and sustainably protect the environment. Consequently, ecotourism has the potential to create socio-economic and ecological values for the host communities (Babafemi et al., 2021). Ecotourism is a form of tourism practised by ecotourists. While there are still varying explanations to elaborate ecotourists, a consensus among academics suggests that ecotourists must have positive environmental ethics and foster 'preferred' behaviours. Ecotourists promote environmental justice while trying to minimise tourism's social concerns. In this regard, ecotourists do not damage the resources, concentrate on intrinsic rather than extrinsic values, benefit the wildlife and environment and actively involve the local communities. In light of these characteristics, ecotourists are regarded as 'responsible tourists who travel to natural areas while conserving the environment and sustaining the well-being of the local people' (The International Ecotourism Society, 2021). Ecotourists travel not only because they want to communicate with nature but also to participate in sustainable development (Carvache-Franco et al., 2020a; Carvache-Franco et al., 2020b; Eshun & Tichaawa, 2020). Ecotourists prefer travelling to ecotourism destinations with abundant flora and fauna. Such destinations, however, are vulnerable to human pressure caused by the rapidly increasing population and insensitive economic activities (Babafemi et al., 2021). To protect ecotourism destinations while catering for the needs of ecotourists, ecotourists should participate in ecologically responsible tourism forms, some of which are discussed in the following section.

Ecologically responsible tourism practice in wetland parks

Tourism patterns have been changing and will continue to do so as long as the industry raises economic and environmental injustice and social concerns. In their initial stage of development, wetland parks may attract many visitors resulting in mass tourism. This may be attributed to visitors' need to experience new products and the aggressive marketing by destination managers. Apart from generating a high income, mass tourism promotes a plethora of negative impacts on the economy, society and environment such as the destruction of ecological systems and corrosion of cultural heritage. To minimise the negative effects of mass tourism, a paradigm shift transpired with some destinations promoting ecologically responsible tourism practices. Ecologically responsible tourism includes any form of tourism that promotes trips to the countryside to enjoy nature according to the objectives of sustainable development (Ahmadi & Khajeh, 2015). Ecologically responsible tourism forms are appropriate and effective in maintaining the integrity and authenticity of ecosystems in unspoiled areas (Chandel & Kanga, 2020). Chiu et al. (2014) and Liu et al. (2013) emphasise that ecologically responsible tourism encourages visitors to take responsibility for natural conservation and avoid damaging the natural environment. According to Spenceley (2012), ecologically responsible tourism encourages visitors to participate in non-invasive tourism forms, focusing on primarily learning about nature at first hand, while Speed (2008) notes that it encourages the visitors to use land in a manner that does not deplete or disrupt the rural and natural amenities of the local communities. This study focuses on eight (8) ecologically responsible tourism forms namely: nature-based tourism, low-impact tourism, environmentally friendly tourism, ecotourism, green tourism, sustainable, responsible tourism, ecotourism and appropriate tourism. These forms of tourism are designed to encourage visitors to use eco-products and the natural scenery as tourist products. In this regard, visitors may go sightseeing,



researching, and enjoying landscapes, species, and ecological systems. In the initial stages, ecologically responsible tourism forms were purely formulated to reduce tourism's negative impacts on the environment. These forms of tourism patterns were environmentally specific and meant to encourage visitors to use the relatively undisturbed natural area responsibly (Hansen, 2014). Later, ecologically responsible tourism forms were developed to address environmental issues by encouraging visitors to travel to learn about the natural world. Lastly, the proposed ecologically responsible tourism forms were meant to minimise both the environmental and socio-economic negative impacts of tourism. Nature-based and green tourism are some ecologically responsible tourism forms proposed to conserve the environment. These forms, while they appear to share some commonalities, are different in many aspects. Nature-based tourism encourages visitors to use natural resources in wild and underdeveloped areas (Kelso & Giddy, 2023). On the other hand, green tourism refers to the travel experience created when travellers enjoy ecological humanism in tourism with the fewest impacts on the environment under the spirit of energy saving and carbon reduction. It is tourism that encourages visitors to use service providers who adopt green practices. Low-impact tourism refers to tourism that benefits the local community and respects wildlife, the local people and their culture. It is tourism that is generous and allows any travel that does not deplete or disrupt the rural and natural amenities of the local community. Environmentally friendly tourism promotes responsible travel that conserves natural environments. It is tourism that is permissive concerning the areas visited and the number of visitors but encourages the proper use of tourism resources.

Responsible tourism is one of the most commonly practised forms of ecologically responsible tourism in South Africa. Responsible tourism minimises the socio-economic and environmental impacts while enhancing the economic well-being of the host communities. It refers to tourism holding individuals accountable for their choice and impact on society and the environment. It has a slightly wider focus and broader outcomes, which include assigning responsibility for action to various stakeholders. On the other side, ecotourism is a form of tourism that encourages visitors to travel to natural areas and focuses primarily on learning about nature. It is tourism characterised by small-scale and environmentally sensitive tourism activities. It aims to improve the welfare of the local people. Appropriate tourism, also referred to as 'progressive or soft tourism', is not a specific form of tourism, but any form that is appropriate to specific areas and responds to individual situations. It is tourism that may encourage visitors to leave lesser carbon footprints on the environment in the strive towards reducing global warming. The above-mentioned tourism forms are meant to address the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and also encourage visitors to participate in any tourism activity that benefits disadvantaged communities. These tourism frameworks encouraged tourism stakeholders to create tourism destinations that are better places for people to live in and better places to visit (Spenceley, 2012; Van Zyl, 2015). Formulated from sustainable development guidelines (Hattingh & Kock, 2013; Kapera, 2018), these forms of tourism encourage visitors to consider the current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts of their actions, as well as the needs of local industries, the environment, and the host community (Poudel & Nyaupane, 2012; Speed, 2008). Thus, promoting the practice of ecologically responsible forms of tourism is crucial for their sustainable development.

Wetland parks

Wetland parks are marshland areas with static or flowing water (Zhu et al., 2022). Zhu et al. (2022) observed that some wetland parks have marine water with a depth that at low tide does not exceed six metres. Egresi et al. (2021) note that wetland parks are habitats that are characterised by 'continuous, seasonal, or periodic standing water or saturated soils'. Wetland parks may be categorised under coastal or inland wetlands, artificial or natural, temporary, or permanent (United Nations Environmental Protection Agency [UNEP], 2023). Do et al. (2015) categorised wetland parks as habitats that are not exclusively terrestrial or aquatic or habitats that may be both simultaneously or seasonally aquatic or terrestrial. Wetland parks are important ecosystems offering economic, ecological and humanistic values (Zang, et al., 2021; Zhu & Wang, 2022). Economically, wetland parks provide residents with water resources, income generated from ecotourism, support for local development, and discourage the construction of unplanned tourism infrastructure. Ecologically, wetland parks protect the breeding grounds of different endangered flora and fauna species while also acting as areas capable of slowing down the river flow runoff (Zhu & Wang, 2022). Do et al. (2015) note that wetland parks provide the tourism industry with 'new' tourism destinations. From a humanistic point of view, wetland parks provide suitable areas for recreation, scientific education and research. Wetland parks create green spaces that are vital for the ecosystem. In light of the ecological values, wetland parks are seen as the 'kidneys' of the landscape and as 'biological supermarkets' because of the socio-economic benefits they provide to the local communities (Mitsch, & Gosselink, 2015). To fortify the ecological, humanistic, and economic value, many governments are investing heavily in the development and maintenance of wetland parks (Lui et al., 2020). Well managed wetland parks such as IWP are conserving the flora and fauna while supporting the local communities.

Methodology

Study area

IWP is the most popular wetland park in the South African province of KwaZulu Natal. The wetland park encompasses estuaries, floodplains and coastal lakes that protect key ecological processes, biodiversity, threatened species and superlative natural beauty (Adeeyo et al., 2022). While conservation is prioritised, IWP has emerged as a valuable ecotourist destination for ecotourists (Gumede, 2009; IUCN Consultation, 2020). The unique wetland of iSimangaliso was established in 1895. The Park combines sixteen parcels of previously fragmented pieces of land stretching 187 kilometres from Kosi Bay in the north to Maphelane in the south (IWPA, 2018). The Park extends inland with the furthest point of uMkhuze ranging to approximately 100 km. In the Park are the 'ten jewels' or ecotourism nodes, namely Cape Vidal, Lake St Lucia (the largest estuary in Africa),

Charter's Creek, False Bay, Sodwana Bay (voted as one of the top ten reefs for diving in the world), Lake Sibaya, Coastal Forest, Kosi Bay (hosting high numbers of nesting leatherback and loggerhead turtles), Maphelane and uMkhuze (IWPA, 2018). These ecotourism nodes act as visitor magnets in the Park (IWPA, 2018; 2019). Below is the catchment area map indicating the scope of the study.



Figure 1: ISimangaliso Wetland Park
Source: Hansen, 2014

Research design and sampling

A quantitative design approach was adopted with a survey comprising closed-ended questionnaires. The survey instrument was made up of two sections. The first section was made up of selected demographic variables while the second part was made up of eight (8) ecologically responsible tourism forms. The ecologically responsible forms of tourism were defined to clarify their meanings and guide visitors. A five-point Likert scale (ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') was designed to measure the rate at which the respondents perceived their participation in those ecologically responsible tourism forms. Ethical clearance was requested and obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee. After permission was granted by the park authorities, the research instruments were distributed by the researchers from November to December 2021, which is considered the peak visitation season for IWP. The respondents were conveniently and purposively sampled. A total of 380 questionnaires were distributed to respondents and 323 were returned with usable responses resulting in an 85% response rate. The participants were visitors who had travelled to IWP during the period the research was undertaken. To obtain a sample of individuals who were able to answer the questions, only those who were above the age of 18 years and had experienced activities in the IWP were asked to complete the paper-based questionnaire. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and analysis of variance in ecologically responsible tourism practices based on demographic patterns. In the analysis, the Mann-Whitney test for non-parametric data was used to assess the median difference in the outcome between two (2) groups. For more than two (2) groups, Kruskal Wallis was used. For normally distributed data, independent t-tests and ANOVA were adopted. The statistically significant differences were accessed through p-value at a 5% level where a p-value less or equal to 0.05 suggests enough evidence to conclude that there exists a significant difference between the demographic groups of study.

Results and discussions

Demographic profiles

The demographic profile of the respondents comprised gender, age, marital status, level of education, frequency of visits, whom the respondents were travelling with, whether they paid to enter the Park and the purpose of their visit to the Park. Results reveal that gender configuration was almost equal in distribution with males recording 50% and females recording 49%: the difference in proportion being marginal. With regards to age, IWP is a popular destination for people aged between 31 and 40 years (35%) followed by those who are aged between 41 and 50 years (31%). A total of 64% of the respondents were either married or living with their partners. Three common levels of education among the respondents were matric (39%), followed by those with three-year diplomas (22%) or degrees and four-year degrees (20%). Many of the respondents were vacationing with their family members (50%). This depicts that IWP is a decent and safe place for people travelling with their family members. Concerning visits to IWP, most respondents had been in the Park once (29%), twice (32%) or three times (24%). Regarding payment options, 93% of the respondents to IWP had paid to access the Park. The bulk of the respondents were domestic ecotourists.



Ecologically responsible tourism practice

The results in Table 1 show that respondents participated in different ecologically responsible tourism forms at IWP with mean scores ranging between 3.61 and 4.13. Despite respondents participating in different forms of ecologically responsible tourism as depicted by the mean scores, variations were revealed between these forms. The findings reveal that respondents mostly participated in sustainable tourism practices (4.16). Nature tourism practice (4.13), low-impact tourism practice (4.13) and environmentally friendly tourism practice (4.13) were the second highest-ranked ecologically responsible tourism practice that visitors considered to have participated in when they visited IWP. These were followed by ecotourism practice (4.11), green tourism practice (4.10) and responsible tourism practice (4.03). Appropriate tourism practice was the least-rated ecologically responsible tourism practice that visitors felt they participated in, with a mean score of 3.61. The respondents, therefore, can be said to concur with the literature which revealed that wetlands are important areas for visitors who prefer to participate in ecologically responsible practice (Do et al., 2015; Zang, et al., 2021; Zhu & Wang, 2022).

Table 1: Visitors' participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices

Ecologically responsible tourism practices	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach Alpha
Sustainable tourism practice	4.16	0.960	0.874
Nature-based tourism practice	4.13	0.980	0.873
Low-impact tourism practice	4.13	0.966	0.873
Environmentally friendly tourism practice	4.13	0.913	0.874
Ecotourism practice	4.11	0.952	0.872
Green tourism practice	4.10	0.948	0.869
Responsible tourism practice	4.03	0.890	0.870
Appropriate tourism practice	3.61	0.963	0.877

Comparisons of independent variables and ecologically inclined tourism patterns

ANOVA (analysis of variance) was used to determine how independent variables (demographic descriptors) were measured against the continuous variables (ecologically inclined tourism patterns) (Brace et al., 2013). Inferential tests were conducted using Kruskal-Wallis’s test, Dunn’s Pairwise comparison test, and Bartlett’s equal variance test to establish if there were any statistically significant differences between the findings. The Kruskal-Wallis’s test, Dunn’s Pairwise comparison test and Bartlett’s equal variance test pinpoint the specific means that are significant from the others (Cohen et al., 2008). The results from the ANOVA in Table 2 depict some differences in how visitors perceived their participation in the ecologically responsible tourism practice based on gender, age, marital status, travel motivation, frequency of visits and visitor type. Gender provided significant differences in respondents' participation in ecologically responsible tourism practice ($p = 0.0180$). A Dunn’s pairwise comparison test indicated significant differences between the rating of males and females regarding involvement in forms of ecologically responsible tourism practice. More males are rated to have participated in ecologically responsible tourism practices than their female counterparts. This is revealed by the males' higher rank sum (91.11728) than that of females (87.47134). There were statistically significant differences in the way visitors perceived their participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices between different age groups ($p = 0.0057$). According to Dunn’s pairwise comparison test, there were significant differences between the perceptions of those in the age group 31–40 years and those in the age group 18–30 years category ($p = 0.0228$) concerning their participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices. The age group 31–40 years was rated to have participated better in ecologically responsible tourism practises with a sum rank of 21 152 while the age group 18–30 years was rated lower with a sum rank of 10 650. There were also significant differences between the ratings of those aged 51–60 years and those aged 31–40 years ($p = 0.0215$). The age group 31–40 years rated higher regarding their participation in ecologically responsible tourism practice than the age group 51–60 years with rank sums of 21 152 and 4 099 respectively.

There were statistically significant differences in the level of visitor participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices based on marital status ($p = 0.0129$). A Dunn’s pairwise comparison test indicated that married and divorced visitors perceived their participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices differently ($p = 0.0414$). The respondents who identified themselves as married rated better (rank sum = 21 286.50) than those who identified themselves as divorced (rank sum = 2 065). Furthermore, statistically significant differences were revealed in respondents' participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices based on their visiting motivation ($p = 0.0001$). A Dunn’s pairwise comparison test indicated that the ratings regarding participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices of those who had been to the park for business differed from those whose motive to visit the park was for pleasure ($p = 0.0007$). Respondents motivated by the need for pleasure rated their participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices higher (rank sum = 22 470.50) than those in the park for business purposes (rank sum = 2 532.50). Another significant difference was found between the ratings of those whose motive was to relax and those who were in the park for business ($p = 0.0026$). The respondents in the park for relaxation rated to have participated in ecologically responsible tourism practices higher (rank sum = 14 367) than those who had been in the park for business (rank sum = 2 532.50).

There were also statistically significant differences in the level of respondents' participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices based on their frequency of visits to the park ($p = 0.0138$). A Dunn’s pairwise comparison test indicated a significant difference between the ratings of those who had visited the park twice and those who had visited the park four times ($p = 0.0244$). The respondents who had been in the park twice were rated to have participated in ecologically responsible tourism practices better (rank sum = 12 922.50) than those who had been in the park four times (rank sum = 2 287). Other significant differences were found between the ratings of those who had been in the park four times and those who had been in the park five times or more ($p = 0.0244$). Concerning visitor type, there were statistically significant differences in terms of the



level of visitor participation in practising ecologically responsible tourism ($p = 0.0180$). More domestic visitors are perceived to have participated in ecologically responsible tourism practices than international visitors. The rank sum of domestic visitors was higher (33 926) than the rank sum of international visitors (18 400).

Table 2: Variation of respondents' participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices based on demographics

Demographics	Participation in ecologically responsible tourism practice			
	N	Rank sum	t-value	P Asymp. sig (2-tailed)
Gender				
Male	162	28542.5	8.036	0.0180
Female	157	23326.5		
Other	2	457		
Age				
18-30 years	73	10850.0	14.45	0.0057
31-40 years	114	21152.0		
41-50 years	100	15900.5		
51-60 years	31	4099.5		
61 years and above	5	524		
Marital status				
Single	84	14117.5	14.462	0.0129
Living with partner	86	13410.5		
Married	121	21286.5		
Divorced	18	2065.5		
Widower/widow	12	1355.5		
Payment options				
Paying	300	48518.0	2.972	0.2335
Non-paying	19	2855.0		
Other	4	953.0		
Travel motivations				
Pleasure	124	22470.5	25.474	0.0001
Educational	28	3989.0		
Relaxation	81	14367.0		
Family gathering	51	7463.5		
Business	29	2532.5		
Frequency of visit				
Once	77	10177.5	12.528	0.0138
Twice	86	12922.5		
3 times	64	8122.5		
4 times	24	2287.0		
5 times or more	19	3075		
Travel accompany				
Alone	51	7600.5	3.657	0.4551
Family members	162	26431.5		
With spouse/partner	56	9942.0		
With friends	52	7930.0		
With strangers	2	422.0		
Educational level				
Below grade 12	33	4237	5.572	0.2335
Grade 12	125	20085.0		
3-year diploma	70	12102.0		
4-year degree	64	10725.0		
Post-graduate	31	5177.0		
Visitor category				
First-timer	270	42983	1.218	0.2231
Repeat visitor	53	9343		
Visitor type				
Domestic	199	33926	2.069	0.0386
International	124	18400		

Conclusion, implication and recommendations

Considering the results of this research study, the researchers believe that it makes a significant contribution to the body of knowledge in the field of tourism, especially regarding the marketing aspects of ecotourism destinations. A distinctive feature of this paper is the profiling of eco-tourists in IWP based on their demographics and their participation in ecologically responsible tourism practices. It allows us to point out that ecotourists to the IWP prefer to participate in sustainable, nature-based and low-impact tourism practices. From a practical perspective, the findings of this paper offer management insights into the needs and wants of ecotourists about the forms of tourism in which they are willing to participate. As such, the paper assists managers in avoiding a ‘sin of homogenisation’ regarding the production and promotion of tour packages. Thus, understanding the demographics and ecologically responsible tourism practice participation in the IWP enables the authorities to enhance the production of products that are in demand. Ecotourism in wetlands is an emerging niche form of tourism with high potential. As a ‘new’ niche tourism form, authorities need to understand the profile of those visiting IWP as it provides needed information for the formulation of products (Constantin et al., 2022). Profiling visitors based on demographic and ecologically responsible tourism practices, especially in IWP, enables proper formulation of tour packages and target marketing.

IWP aims to achieve a balance between wetland ecosystem conservation and increased visitations. To achieve this balance, the first thing is to match the ecotourism attributes in the park and those who come to create memorable tourism experiences. It is therefore important to profile visitors based on their common characteristics to achieve economic and resource



sustainability. This will facilitate the development of ecotourism products. Profiling ecotourists has an important impact on the management of IWP. This survey shows that ecotourists are different from other type of tourists. The ecotourists to IWP are aged between 31 and 50 years with most of them either married or living with their partners. Most of them travel with family members and are repeat visitors. Based on these characteristics, the authors suggest that IWP and other stakeholders should optimise packaging tours that meet the needs of the active population. More attention should be paid to formulating eco-friendly tour packages as most visitors prefer to participate in ecologically responsible tourism practices. In a world where ethical consumerism is gaining momentum, promoting different ecological tourism packages in IWP is apparent while knowing the profile of those who come to enjoy ecologically responsible tourism will provide valuable information about the service which is expected from the tour operators to improve ecotourists' experience. This study had a few limitations. Being quantitative, there is an opportunity to carry out new studies using both quantitative and qualitative methods and to conduct them in different contexts.

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