SOCIALISATION

How it augments ecotourists’ experiential satisfaction during ecotrips and after (in social media aided virtual settings)

Sudipta Kiran Sarkar

Introduction

Ecotourists, identified as the ones who travel to nature-based areas, both undisturbed and modified, and engage in experiences involving moderate to extreme levels of difficulty, constitute a major segment of green consumerism (Wearing, Cynn, Ponting & Mathew, 2002). Some of the principal motivations of ecotourists observed over the years have been nature-seeking, learning and education on environmental aspects, knowledge sharing, and last but not the least, socialisation (Hughes & Morrison-Saunders, 2005; Beaumont, 2011; Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2014). These largely distinctive motivations have separated ecotourists from mainstream tourists, and tourists related to consumption of other aspects of tourism. A wide range of previous literature focused on ecotourists’ behaviour have suggested nature-seeking and environmental learning and education (and knowledge sharing) as the most dominant motivations of ecotourists. Though socialisation among ecotourists has been recognised as a major experiential and motivational aspect of ecotourists, it did not seem to generate much zeal for a wider academic discussion in the body of knowledge in ecotourism so far.

Socialisation, in the context of ecotourists, refers to engaging in shared experiences with likeminded ecotourists via social interactions, sharing past experiences, views and knowledge during ecotrips. Quality socialisation opportunities have been found to enhance the value and satisfaction ecotourists derive from trips to nature-based settings (Chan & Baum, 2007; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Given the essentiality of socialisation for ecotourists, the possibilities for them to engage in it beyond real ecotourism contexts demands academic probing. Though largely absent in previous literature, a few studies have explored the possibilities of socialisation among ecotourists beyond real ecotourism settings particularly in the context of social media. These studies identified the causal influences of satisfying socialisation experiences for ecotourists upon knowledge sharing, a key behavioural trait, as well as the epistemological and ecological significance of socialisation for ecotourists, in social media contexts.

Online socialisation via social media can lead to the possibilities of collective awareness and actions or ‘online citizenship’ on ecological and responsible travel issues for ecotourists, supplementing beyond the sharing and exchange of nature-based travel knowledge. Such engagement via social media by ecotourists enhances the value in online communities, as well as
leads to collective knowledge building and to a new dimension of ecotourist behaviour as ‘green consumers’. However, socialisation activities by social media platforms in the form of sharing of pictorial and audiovisual content have in many recent instances proliferated, and hence, led towards overwhelming influxes of tourists to sparsely populated and ecologically sensitive locations. Social networking platforms in social media—namely Instagram and Snapchat—where brief forms of online social interactions (short-length texts, short videos, and photos) are only possible, have merely contributed towards widespread popularisation of locations, without providing the necessary space for engaging in well-informed dialogue about responsible visitations.

Given this premise, this chapter will endeavour to engage in a conceptual exploration of socialisation as a major facet of ecotourists’ behaviour, in both real and virtual (social media) settings, and its implications with relation to both theory and praxis.

Ecotourists’ motivation, as we understand it

Ecotourists being ‘green consumers’ are primarily driven by desires to engage with nature-based experiential activities, actuated by their needs to learn about the ecological aspects and ways to sustainably bond with the wilderness of the sites they visit. The learning needs are largely realised by their eagerness to acquire knowledge about the geographical, the biodiversity in particular, and the anthropological elements they encounter as a part of their visitation experiences in nature-based settings (Beaumont, 2011; Wearing & Neil, 2009). Hence, the pedagogical elements involved in the consumption process become a vital aspect of ecotourists’ gaze (Chan & Baum, 2007). Various studies have also indicated as learning through interpretation facilities at nature-based settings, as an imperative source of knowledge as well as a stimulus for ecotourists’ to visit nature-based destinations (Beaumont, 2011).

Acquiring knowledge via interpretation not only encompass having insightful understanding of different elements of ecology in the natural surroundings, but also issues of conservation of biodiversity, green practices at ecotourism sites, and the compatibility of the ecotourism operations in terms of sustainability (Hughes & Morrison-Saunders, 2005; Okech, 2009). Interpretation comes in a range of forms—texts as signages, information boards being the most traditional ones; however, the role of talks by nature-tour guide on ecology as a mode of interpretation is a more interpersonal process involving engaging social exchanges (Hughes & Morrison-Saunders, 2005; Hill, Woodland, & Gough, 2007; Powell & Ham, 2008). Ecotourists who seek insightful knowledge on ecology may not be experts themselves in areas of biodiversity and environment, and hence, the extent and reliability of the knowledge they receive at ecotourism sites are vital for them.

Therefore, the imperativeness of knowledge acquired is central to the experiences of interpretation ecotourists go through. It is something that affects the cognitive process of ecotourists who endeavour to reflect on nature-based experiences at a post-trip stage, or the ‘recollection’ stage in which the experience of the visitation is recalled (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966). Interpretation that effectively disseminates insightful knowledge in various engaging forms enhances the satisfaction levels of ecotourists as they are able to retain such knowledge and provides them a fulfilling experience (Dodds & Joppe, 2001; Okech, 2009; Hill et al., 2007).

While seeking learning and pedagogical benefits of ecotourism brought about by interpretation is an important motivating factor for ecotourists, their desire to seek nature precedes it. Nature seeking desires of ecotourists are driven by their ecocentricism; need to reach out to the inherent spiritual value emanating from close human-nature exchanges (Cini, Leone, &
Such spiritual value can be enhanced by the recreational and therapeutic value derived from nature, particularly forests—sometimes referred to as ‘forest bathing’, alluring ecotourists towards nature-based settings (Cunningham, 2016). Besides these aesthetic experiential factors, ecotourists seek nature for their commitment towards environmental protection, and sustainable behaviour by means of deeper understanding of flora and fauna species, and making their consumption of nature compatible with such commitment and insightful understanding of the wilderness (Beaumont, 2011; Higham & Luck, 2002; Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Lee & Moscardo, 2005; Zografos & Allcroft, 2007; Wearing & Neil, 2009). The degree of such commitment and understanding of ecological aspects in turn, demand a need for knowledge that creates further curiosity for ecotourists to learn about nature.

However, it is interesting to note, as pointed out by Lee et al. (2014) that knowledge attainment is brought about by ecotourists meeting and socialising with others who share similar interests about ecology, and certain aspects of ecotourism consumption. Ecotourists have been observed to associate with like-minded groups that are instrumental in building their personal identities as nature seekers via the means of the ecological knowledge and awareness they receive from such groups (Lee et al., 2014; Kim, Kim, Park, & Guo, 2008). The value derived from the process of association (and socialisation) taking place in these groups can lead towards ecotourists deciding to visit an ecotourism site or the nature of responsible ecotourism consumption they should engage in (Lee et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2008).

**Socialisation: A less heeded experiential trait of ecotourists**

Engaging in social interactions with peer ecotourists and loved ones during ecotrips has been an inextricable part of the experiential moments of ecotourists (Chan & Baum, 2007; Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002, Kim et al., 2008). Ecotourists have been observed to have considerable levels of socialising intent during their ecotourism experiences in various studies. Trekkers to Annapurna, Nepal, were found to exercise significant levels of socialisation among their groups that brought them enhanced experiential satisfaction and better bonding among themselves (Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002). Socialisation plays a catalytic role in bringing about a stronger peer influencing and social bonding among ecotourists in the process of their experiential interactions with their natural surroundings (Harlow & Pomfret, 2007). Such social bonding via socialisation can further become a driving factor towards ecotourist groups developing a shared commitment towards the surrounding natural living environment, resulting in a ‘sense of community’ (Harlow & Pomfret, 2007, p. 199). The social bondages among ecotourists also enriches their hedonic desires derived during their social exchanges of affective elements. While engaging with immersive wildlife experiences and nature-based adventure experiences, the thrill and excitement derived from it is often reflected in their social exchanges with each other (Chan & Baum, 2007). Ecotourist communities found in the forms like voluntary environmental organizations or birding communities accomplish their collective environmental and experiential goals by harnessing from the deep social bondages and shared hedonic contentment enabled by socialisation (Eubanks Jr., Stoll, & Ditton, 2004). Ecotourists belonging to communities engaging with specialized nature-based activities like birding have found socialising with fellow organisational members considerably instrumental in their intention to participate in such activities (MacFarlane, 1996). Socialisation in such communities entails acquiring existing and new knowledge about the specific nature-based recreational activity, and the establishment of distinct community identity via the sharing of “similar attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies”, “similar behaviour”, as
well as sharing of “a sense of group identification” (MacFarlane, 1996, p. 37). It also establishes a set of vital community norms to adhere to for members of these communities; for which interactions via socialisation is further necessary to keep the structures of such community norms intact (MacFarlane, 1996). Therefore, for communities of ecotourists, engaging with a range of specialised nature-based activities, socialisation has been instrumental in bringing cooperative actions, community norms, and shared values as well as sense of kinship in turn, leading towards enhancing the levels of gratifications derived from nature-based experiences (Lee, Graefà, & Li, 2007; Moore, Scott & Moore, 2008; Kuentzel & Heberlein, 2006; Eubanks Jr. et al., 2004).

Socialisation particularly plays a much stronger role in the experiences of softer ecotourists. Socialisation opportunities in the form of social interactions with peer ecotourists, as well as with ecotourism staff and local communities at destinations, tends to bring increased levels of gratification to them from their ecotourism experiences (Cini et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2008). In the context of ecolodge experiences of ecotourists, socialisation with peers with identical trip interests, as well as with friends, and family members have been found to play a significant role in their selection of ecolodges as well as a major source of satisfaction enhancing the quality of their ecolodge experiences (Chan & Baum, 2007; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Chan and Baum (2007) found socialising opportunities brought about by socio-psychological factors to ecotourists were highly instrumental in their visitation to the ecolodges in Sukau, East Malaysia. Similarly, ecotourists in their online social interactions about ecolodge experiences in Costa Rica were evidently indicative of socialisation as the principal gratifying factor that augmented the quality of their ecolodge experiences in that country (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012).

Satisfying experiences of socialisation with peer ecotourists during ecotrips, can also enable ecotourists towards the fulfilment of their personal development desires (Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Ryan, Hughes, & Chirgwin, 2000). The different facets of socialisation that an ecotourist goes through during an ecotourism experience; sharing and exchange of knowledge, ideas, emotions as well as the shared moments with peer ecotourists, friends, and family members, can be educational for them (Ryan et al., 2000). Personal development desires enabled by socialisation can lead towards gaining spiritual benefits from the natural environment, as well as shared sensitivity towards the environment, and collective attitudes towards conservation and sustainable behaviour (Harlow & Pomfret, 2007). It can, therefore, be elevating especially for certain sections of ecotourists who are driven by motives of having a scholarly desire for deeper understanding of nature during an ecotourism experience. Moreover, their intentions to engage more in similar ecotourism experiences are also brought by such personal development benefits (Galley & Clifton, 2004; Harlow & Pomfret, 2007).

Socialisation for ecotourists: The online context

Socialisation can be referred to as the collective exercise by like-minded individuals to associate with each other through social interactions for a shared purpose (Kesebir, Uttal, & Gardiner, 2010). In other words, it is “a dynamic and constructive process embedded in the practices of social interactions” (Kesebir et al., 2010, p. 97). According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p. 62), socialisation can be defined “as a process of sharing process experiences and thereby creating tacit knowledge such as shared mental models and technical skills”. Socialisation tends to be more effective depending on the aptness of the settings that aid in the intensity of the exchange process (Kesebir et al., 2010).
Socialisation among ecotourists also entails the important dimension of knowledge sharing. This emanates from their learning and pedagogical needs in terms of the ecological aspects of the natural settings they visit. Socialisation among them is therefore, not merely about kinship and togetherness or sharing of hedonic moments during an ecotour, but also sharing of expert knowledge of different ecological aspects during their encounters with nature. This dimension therefore aids in the development of environmental values of ecotourists, as it encompasses the levels of their deeper understanding and admiration for the ecology as well as the sustainability issues relating to the nature-based settings they visit. Knowledge shared by ecotourists through their socialising activities during an ecotour further enhances the quality and their contentment of their shared experiences of nature-based areas (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Sarkar, Au, & Law, 2017). Therefore, given the imperativeness of the socialisation process for ecotourists, its continuity during the post-trip stage is essential to understand ecotourists’ shared behaviour.

Social media platforms which can provide dyadic or many-to-many online social interactions can become a medium of socialisation experiences for ecotourists before and after they engage with ecotourism activities (Sarkar et al., 2014, 2017). Social media platforms that include social networking sites (SNS), carry the potential in initiating dyadic socialisation between ecotourists, knowledge sharing and trip research (Charters, 2009). Based on User-generated content (UGC), SNS sites have the ability to provide satisfying socialisation and knowledge-sharing experiences to ecotourists (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Though relatively sporadic, few empirical studies have inquired into the role of social media leading towards socialisation (and knowledge sharing) among ecotourists. Studies by Sarkar et al. (2014, 2017), examined the social exchange factors embedded in social media enabled social interactions among ecotourists in bringing rewarding socialisation experiences for them, while the study by Cheng, Wong, Wearing, and McDonald (2016) determined how social media enabled social interactions among ecotourists was instrumental in their trip motivations as well as in bringing about awareness towards sustainability and pro-environmental behaviour. The role of social exchange factors of cooperation, reputation, altruism, and trust reflected via the concept of Value in Online communities (VOC) were specifically examined Sarkar et al. (2017), as to how they had a significant causal effect on social media–enabled socialisation that in turn, led towards knowledge sharing intentions. Moreover, the studies by Sarkar et al. (2014, 2017) both confirmed that for ecotourists, both hard and soft, it is imperative for ecotourists to continue socialising and sharing knowledge online via social media and derive similar satisfaction as in the case of face-to-face socialisation during actual ecotrips.

While these studies ascertained the importance of online socialisation and knowledge sharing by ecotourists, Cheng et al. (2016) ascertained that building of collective knowledge about environmental awareness, and pro-sustainable behaviour and ecotourism consumption can be brought about by via social media–enabled socialisation among ecotourists. Such collective knowledge can enrich ecotourists’ online experiences and motivate them towards visiting ecotourism sites (Cheng et al., 2016). The study was also indicative that social media–enabled communication, dyadic and many-to-many, among ecotourists can lead towards effective ecotourism promotion in China (Cheng et al., 2016). In addition, Fennell (2017) explored the videos shared on video-sharing platform, Vimeo, by individuals engaging in the nature-based recreational activity of fishing. One of the key observation of this study was the tendency of fly anglers to share personal experiences online via Vimeo, and interact with a wider community of likeminded individuals having similar interests in fishing. Moreover, it was through this sharing and interactions, these individuals were able to establish mutually acceptable and unified view of how fly angling should be practised (Fennell, 2017).
A wider significance of socialisation via social media and ecotourists; ecological citizenship

The socialisation process that ecotourists engage with via social media involves a co-creative activity, which can lead towards collective consciousness and responsible behaviour towards environment. Such collective behaviour is not only mutually beneficial for them, but also results in collective online actions pertaining to the welfare of the ecological elements, and sustainable practices. One such collective online action is found in the form of ecological citizenship. Ecological citizenship (or sustainable citizenship) entails an intense dialogical process relating to pro-environmental issues carried out by ecologically conscious individuals via online social networking platforms, resulting in actual collective actions and practices necessary for the welfare of the environment (Rokka & Moisander, 2009). These ecologically conscious individuals (who can also be nature-based travelers) belong to online communities in social media that are responsible in engaging in collaborative and dialectical online conversation about environmental sustainability (Rokka & Moisander, 2009). Such conversations also encompass issues like responsible tourism consumption and environmentally compatible ecotourism practices, resulting in enhanced commitment towards sustainable wellbeing of local communities and ecosystems (Rokka & Moisander, 2009). Hence, such conversations via social media becomes central to the establishment of ecological citizenship. Social media–enabled ecological citizenship can have a major influence on ecotourists as green consumers and the ethical and responsible behaviour that comes with it (Budeanu, 2007). Furthermore, ecological citizenship also demands altruism among ecotourists to jointly articulate the importance of ecological responsiveness in social media platforms, in the forms of audiovisual, textual and pictorial content, (Rokka & Moisander, 2009).

Therefore, the environmental citizenship evident among eco-conscious travelers via online socialisation, is clearly indicative of its consistency with the ecotourists’ motivations of learning, nature seeking, and engaging in socialisation during actual ecotrips. The ecological awareness and advocacy–related initiatives of ecotourists evident in these motivations are clearly reflected in their online ecological citizenship. The pro-environmental behaviour and desire for responsible ecotourism consumption that underlie as factors in their socialisation process during actual ecotourism experiences is markedly reflected in their equally ecologically conscious online socialisation process. Therefore, this could be indicative of the fact that the gratifying outcome of online socialisation of ecotourists could be compatible with the outcomes of satisfying socialisation experienced face-to-face with peer groups, friends, and family in an actual ecotour.

Conclusion

Socialisation, both as a construct and a critical experiential component, in ecotourists’ consumption process now appears more protruded as demonstrated by this study. Given this distinctiveness it carries, the academic discourse on socialisation as a construct in ecotourism is conspicuously absent in the recent literature. In particular, and as evident in the discussion in this study, the pursuit of online socialisation by ecotourists’ enabled by social media, and the collective and environmentally constructive actions it can produce, has received very little attention. Therefore, it puts forward a scholarly duty on future pundits researching ecotourists to ascertain firstly, the underlying reasons for the presence of only few studies on online socialisation given its imperativeness in a face-to-face
context. Secondly, future studies need to probe into the wider evidence of socialisation in social media in newer platforms like Instagram, and the resulting collective actions; pro-environmental online behaviour and advocacy, as well as the shared recreational benefits they derive from it. Finally, future scholars may also examine whether online socialisation activities and the resulting collective actions translate into actions in the real world, with relation to responsible consumption of ecotourism and environmental advocacy. Furthermore, it would also be interesting to observe the consistencies and inconsistencies between online socialisation and face-to-face socialisation of ecotourists and the satisfaction derived from them.

Finally, scholars and practitioners, DMOs, and local communities, have to be mindful of online socialisation via popular social networking platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube leading towards undesirable outcomes. The boundless, expansive coverage of social media and the resulting unprecedented popularity of its usage by tourists are making destinations, particularly ecotourism sites, increasingly experience overcrowding, visual (or aesthetic) pollution, and irresponsible digital behaviour (i.e., selfie-taking at nature-based sites considered sacred by local communities, and sharing of such selfie photos on social media platforms resulting in disrespectful behaviour). Such situations would pose major challenges for stakeholders involved in responsible ecotourism, and therefore, online socialisation initiated by both, hard and soft ecotourists, needs to be driven by their core motivations of learning, knowledge sharing, and nature-seeking.

References

Socialisation


