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An exploratory study with western female tourists about perceived drivers and challenges towards environmental stewardship in a nature-based destination

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Abstract: Nature-based destinations heavily rely on their natural environment as the primary driver to attract tourists. The balance between preserving the unique characteristics of the destination and meeting the demands of the rapidly growing tourism industry has become a pressing challenge. Environmental stewardship emerged as a proactive approach to mitigating the negative impacts of tourism on the environment. An exploratory research design was adopted to investigate how tourists perceive the importance of environmental stewardship. The thematic analysis revealed two primary themes that could explain the attitude-action-gap in the context of environmental stewardship. The results indicated a strong awareness of the importance of environmental stewardship. Moreover, there was a notable indifference towards taking action when the perceived impact seemed minimal or nonexistent. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to bridge the gap between awareness and behaviours among tourists and extend the discourse on the importance of long-term sustainability in nature-based destinations.

Keywords: environmental stewardship; sustainable tourism development; nature tourism; ecotourism; responsible practices.

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1 Introduction

Sustainable tourism, particularly in nature-based destinations, has emerged as a critical area of research and practice in response to growing concerns about environmental degradation and climate change (Mandić, 2019; Chakraborty, 2021). The impacts of tourism on fragile ecosystems become increasingly evident (Ooi et al., 2020). The inflow of tourists often leads to habitat disruption, degradation of natural landscapes, and a decline in biodiversity (Steibl et al., 2021). Popular nature-based destinations, like Phuket Island, now bear the consequences of over-tourism's tangible effects on both the environment and local communities (Prideaux and Pabel, 2020). As tourists increasingly recognise their role in shaping the environmental impact of tourism, the importance of environmental stewardship becomes pivotal (Holden, 2019; Cheng and Chen, 2022). In the context of this study, environmental stewardship refers to the responsible use and protection of the natural environment through active participation in conservation efforts and sustainable practices. For instance, through diverse actions such as reducing harmful activities or pollution, restoring degraded areas, or purchasing more sustainable products" (Bennett et al., 2018, p.597). The balance between preserving the unique characteristics of the destination and meeting the demands of the rapidly growing tourism industry has become a pressing challenge (Streimikiene et al., 2021; Lee, 2024).

This prompts the need for comprehensive strategies to manage and mitigate the impacts of over-tourism in nature-based destinations (Iflazoglu and Can, 2021; Mandić and McCool, 2023). Phuket Island – located in the South Andaman Sea and therefore often referred to as 'The Pearl of the Andaman' – is known for its natural beauty and cultural richness (Phakdee-Auksorn et al., 2023). As a renowned world-class destination, Phuket heavily relies on its natural environment as the primary driver for tourists seeking a tropical nature-based destination (Khudathong and Kasim, 2020). However, this dependence on its ecological assets also renders Phuket particularly susceptible to the adverse impacts of environmental issues (Fuchs, 2022). The escalating threat of climate change, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events pose significant challenges to the island's fragile ecosystems (Leal Filho et al., 2021). Amidst the demands of a thriving tourism industry, environmental stewardship emerges as a potential driver to preserve the island's unique characteristics (Flood Chavez et al., 2024).

1.1 Research objective

The significance of environmental stewardship, characterised by the responsible and sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems, becomes increasingly evident in maintaining the delicate balance between tourism development and environmental preservation (Huang et al., 2023). Finding a balance between development and preservation through environmental stewardship involves integrating sustainable practices in planning and development (Huang et al., 2023). However, limited research exists on how 'environmental stewardship' manifests among tourists in nature-based destinations and its role in achieving sustainable tourism development (Han et al., 2023). This research aims to fill a gap by investigating the perceptions and practices of Western female tourists towards environmental stewardship during their travels in Phuket. The focus on Western female tourists is based on the recognition of their influential role in shaping travel behaviours and sustainable practices (Ursić et al., 2024). The study is guided by the following research question: "*How do Western female tourists perceive the*

importance of environmental stewardship and their role towards environmental stewardship during their travels in Phuket, Thailand?” The implications of the study will advance the discourse about sustainable tourism development in nature-based destinations.

1.2 The need for sustainable (tourism) development

Sustainable tourism development has emerged as a central topic of interest in recent years, reflecting a growing awareness of the environmental, social, and economic impacts of tourism on destinations worldwide (Budeanu et al., 2016; Sharpley, 2020). The primary motivation to advocate for sustainable tourism development is the recognition of the significant environmental impacts associated with conventional tourism (Zhang and Chan, 2020). Numerous studies highlight issues such as habitat destruction, pollution, and depletion of natural resources as direct consequences of unsustainable tourism practices (Steibl et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2021). While tourism can bring economic benefits to destinations, the focus is shifting towards ensuring that these benefits are sustainable and inclusive (Cardoso, 2020). Tourists can help mitigate environmental issues by opting for sustainable travel practices, such as staying at eco-friendly resorts, minimising plastic use, and participating in conservation activities. These actions support the local environment and reduce the impact of climate change, rising sea levels, and extreme weather (Prideaux and Pabel, 2020). Research emphasises the importance of community engagement, capacity building, and the development of tourism-related skills to enhance the long-term economic viability of tourism destinations (Rahman and Baddam, 2021). Effective governance and collaboration among stakeholders play an essential role in achieving sustainable tourism development (Fuchs, 2022). Integrated planning and strategies are advocated to address the complex challenges associated with tourism development (Mandić, 2019; Hall, 2021).

1.3 Related works on environmental stewardship

Environmental stewardship in tourism refers to the responsible and ethical management of natural resources, ecosystems, and cultural heritage to ensure their preservation for present and future generations (Holden, 2019). Further conceptualising this definition, environmental stewardship can also be described as a proactive approach to mitigating the negative impacts of tourism on the environment (Dinica, 2018). Although environmental stewardship (ES) is closely related to sustainable tourism (ST) or pro-environmental behaviour (PEB), ES tends to be broader and more systematic, often involving collective actions and long-term strategies (Dinica, 2018). Understanding tourist behaviour and raising awareness about environmental issues are crucial components of effective environmental stewardship (Han, 2021). Previous studies (Wang et al., 2019; Su et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Cajiao et al., 2022) explored the motivations and behaviours of tourists, highlighting factors influencing environmentally responsible choices, and emphasising the need for targeted education and communication strategies to enhance tourists' awareness and encourage sustainable practices during their travels. Roxas et al. (2020) highlight the significance of government regulations, industry standards, and collaborative efforts in shaping a conducive environment for sustainable tourism practices. Evidence suggests that gender dynamics play a role, with studies indicating that female tourists may exhibit different perceptions and heightened

sensitivity towards environmental stewardship in the context of tourism development (Casado-Díaz et al., 2023). Moreover, examining the role of policies and governance structures is essential in advancing environmental stewardship in tourism (Roxas et al., 2020).

1.4 Sustainability among female tourists

The literature suggests that gender dynamics play a significant role in sustainable tourism practices. As previously indicated, there is limited empirical evidence that female tourists often exhibit a heightened awareness of environmental and social issues, influencing their travel decisions and behaviours (Canosa et al., 2020; Ibnou-Laaroussi et al., 2020; Casado-Díaz et al., 2023). Female tourists may engage in more responsible behaviours, such as reducing waste, supporting local communities, and participating in eco-friendly activities (Ajibade and Boateng, 2021). Moreover, Boğan et al. (2021) suggest that female tourists are more likely to choose destinations and accommodations with strong environmental and social responsibility initiatives. Additionally, the role of personal values and ethical considerations may shape female tourists' sustainable choices during their travels. Education and awareness campaigns have been identified as influential factors in promoting sustainable behaviours among female tourists (Passafaro, 2020; Tölkes, 2020). A study by Aydın and Alvarez (2020) highlights the importance of targeted initiatives to enhance awareness, providing female tourists with the knowledge and tools needed to "make sustainable choices throughout their travel experiences" (pp.13–14). While female tourists show a tendency towards sustainability, the evidence in the literature is rather limited (Streimikiene et al., 2021).

2 Methodology

2.1 Research design

An exploratory research design was utilised to empirically investigate the problem. Exploratory research is a method of inquiry to generate a thesis where little prior knowledge exists (Jebb et al., 2017). This research approach is appropriate for research questions that have not previously been studied in-depth (Jain, 2021). The research was undertaken from the perspective of Western female tourists who shared their experiences about the perceived importance of environmental stewardship. Women from Western cultures often exhibit heightened environmental awareness and engagement in sustainable practices during travel (Canosa et al., 2020; Ibnou-Laaroussi et al., 2020; Casado-Díaz et al., 2023). It should be noted that the participants were not given a formal definition for 'environmental stewardship' because their interpretation of the term was considered another contribution for this exploratory study.

2.2 Data collection and sampling

The participants were purposively selected by the lead researcher and asked for their voluntary participation in the research. Selection criteria included: gender, ethnicity, and English language proficiency (to facilitate an in-depth discussion). Moreover, the semi-structured interviews were guided by a seven-item interview guide (Table 1) with

relevant probing questions for each item. Sampling took place at various popular beach locations on the Westcoast of Phuket, while the interview was arranged at a convenient location for the participants. The data was collected in 2024 and sampling was concluded based on the concept of data saturation, in which “the ability to obtain new information has been attained” and generating additional themes was no longer feasible (Fusch and Ness, 2015, p.1408). Data saturation was reached with the 24th interview.

Table 1 A copy of the interview guide that directed the discussions with the participants

<i>Interview guide</i>	
No. 1	In your own words, can you explain how you define the term environmental stewardship?
No. 2	How important do you believe environmental stewardship is during your travels?
No. 3	Can you share specific experiences about sustainable practices in Phuket that have influenced your view?
No. 4	Are there social influences from your peers or family that affect your decisions regarding environmentally friendly behaviour in Phuket?
No. 5	How do you perceive the attitudes and behaviours of other tourists around you with regard to environmental stewardship?
No. 6	What factors do you think facilitate your ability to engage in environmentally friendly practices while travelling in Phuket?
No. 7	Have you faced any challenges in implementing sustainable behaviours, and how did you navigate them?

3 Results and analysis

3.1 Data analysis and ethical considerations

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were shared electronically with the participants for their approval (as well as allowing them to supplement information if necessary). Next, the content was organised by question and manually colour-coded based on similar themed keywords. Drawing on good practice, the retrieved codes provided a foundation for further bundling and arranging the keywords into clusters on which basis the final themes emerged, and conclusions were drawn accordingly (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The research adhered to the standards appropriate for human subjects following the recommendations of the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee for Social Science Research (NREC, n.d.). Moreover, written consent was collected from every participant before commencing the interview.

3.2 Participants' demographic profile

Among the 24 female participants, the majority originated from various Western European countries, including Germany (3), Netherlands (3), UK (3), Belgium (2), Sweden (2), Italy (2), Austria (2), Switzerland (1), and Hungary (1), comprising 19 individuals. The remaining participants were from US (2), Australia (2), and New Zealand (1). Seven participants were travelling solo, twelve with a friend or spouse,

and the remaining participants with their family. The sample can be described as relatively well-educated with all participants holding at least a high school diploma, and the majority (20) possessing a university degree (or being in the process of completing one). Moreover, eight participants had previously travelled to Phuket, while it was the first time for the remaining 16 participants. No information about marital status or disposable household income was collected.

3.3 *Theme one – perceived awareness of environmental stewardship*

After establishing rapport and signing the consent forms, the opening question posed to every participant was to articulate how they would define environmental stewardship using their own words. While the opening question was aimed to familiarise the participants with the subsequent questions and start the interviews with ease, two noteworthy observations emerged. First, a considerable proportion of participants (16, 66.7%) demonstrated an insightful understanding of environmental stewardship. Examples of the reported definitions included:

“To me, environmental stewardship means taking care of the planet [...] it is about making choices to protect nature and the environment for future generations.” (Participant #5)

“I would say it is about being environmentally responsible in everything we do [...] to minimise harm to the environment and promote sustainability.” (Participant #11)

“It is all about balance. [...] finding ways to enjoy and benefit from nature without damaging [it]. It is also about being mindful of our actions.” (Participant #16)

Although these statements are just snippets from a longer discussion, they illustrate that the participants had generally a good understanding of the concept related to and surrounding environmental stewardship. Additionally, recurring keywords such as conservation, responsibility, and preservation emerged throughout the interviews, further highlighting the depth of participants’ understanding.

Second, another significant observation that emerged in the discussion was about the perceived importance of environmental stewardship. Particularly, in the context of tourism destinations, but with a specific focus on nature-based destinations like Phuket. The majority of participants (21, 87.5%) voiced a strong belief in the importance of environmental stewardship for maintaining the attractiveness and sustainability of tourist destinations. Interestingly, the participants highlighted the importance of sustainable practices not only for the benefit of future generations (i.e., long-term sustainability) but also for their enjoyment of the destination in the short term (i.e., short-term sustainability). The interviewees emphasised that preserving natural environments plays an important role in ensuring the long-term viability of destinations that heavily rely on their natural beauty to attract visitors.

“I think it is really important for tourist destinations like Phuket to prioritise the environment [...]. Yes, people come here to party, shop, and relax, but if the environment is gone, Phuket will lose its charm to do all of that.” (Participant #2)

“As much as I love exploring new places like Phuket – like many others, too – I want to experience its natural beauty, like the beaches or the ocean, but also for my children in the future.” (Participant #18)

However, while the majority of participants (21, 87.5%) strongly acknowledged the importance of environmental stewardship, a subset (7, 29.2%) encountered difficulties in providing concrete examples or articulating specific actions that could demonstrate this commitment in practice. For instance, when participants were asked to describe sustainable practices influencing their views or to name specific factors facilitating environmentally friendly behaviours, they faced challenges in providing relevant examples. Nevertheless, several participants were able to provide illustrative instances of how heightened awareness could translate into actionable practices:

“I think it starts with small things. I always carry my reusable water bottle when I travel. I believe reducing plastics is important for preserving the environment and I see so much plastic garbage on the shorelines.” (Participant #21)

“I try to support eco-friendly accommodations when possible. They often have initiatives in place to reduce waste and protect the local environment, so I feel like I am helping by choosing them.” (Participant #4)

“Every day, I buy a coconut on the beach and say ‘no’ to the straw. It creates no garbage and is good for the environment, but also supports local people.” (Participant #1)

Overall, it can be summarised that many participants (16, 66.7%) had a good understanding of what environmental stewardship means (to them) and provided insightful definitions during the interview. Moreover, most participants (21, 87.5%) attested to the importance of environmental protection and conservation, especially for nature-based destinations like Phuket. However, some participants (7, 29.2%) struggled to describe what environmental stewardship means in practice or how it can be translated into actions.

3.4 Theme two – inaction and lack of environmental engagement

When examining the perceptions and behaviours of female tourists regarding environmental stewardship, it became evident that while many participants (21, 87.5%) demonstrate a strong awareness of the importance of protecting natural environments, there exists a notable gap between this awareness and their actual engagement in sustainable practices. This gap manifested in several different ways. Throughout the interviews, numerous instances arose where participants exhibited a lack of engagement or inaction toward environmental stewardship. Despite expressing awareness of environmental issues, half of the participants (12, 50.0%) reported a hesitancy or reluctance to actively participate in sustainable behaviours.

Several factors contributed to the participants’ lack of environmental engagement. For some (6, 25.0%), the perceived inconvenience of adopting alternative practices discourages them from “taking action”. This can be illustrated by the following comment that is exemplary of the sentiment:

“I am all for reducing waste, but it is just more convenient to buy pre-packaged snacks at 7-Eleven instead of bringing my reusable containers to the beach.” (Participant #12)

Moreover, the lack of sustainable options available to participants emerged as another factor contributing to inaction. Throughout the interviews, a few participants (4, 16.7%) expressed frustration with the limited availability of eco-friendly alternatives in Phuket. This scarcity of sustainable options made it challenging for them to uphold environmentally friendly practices during their travels. The four participants reported encountering difficulties in finding alternatives to single-use plastics, such as straws and disposable containers, particularly in convenience stores and fast-food establishments. Additionally, the absence of public recycling facilities worsened their struggle to minimise their environmental footprint while away from home as illustrated by the following comments:

“I wanted to buy souvenirs made from sustainable materials, like bamboo or recycled plastics, but all the shops seemed to sell the same cheap, mass-produced stuff.” (Participant #15)

“I tried to order a vegetarian meal at a local restaurant, but they did not have any options [on the menu]. When I asked if they could make something without meat, they seemed confused and said it was not possible.” (Participant #22)

Finally, the issue of awareness was also evident among a small subset of participants (2, 8.3%). Both participants demonstrated a lack of understanding or knowledge about sustainable practices. During the interviews, it became apparent that these participants lacked exposure to information about environmental conservation and sustainable tourism practices. This knowledge gap hindered their ability to make informed decisions regarding their environmental impact while travelling.

“To be honest, I do not even know what environmental stewardship’ means until you mentioned it [in the interview]. It is not something that I ever learned about in school or heard about from friends or family.” (Participant #24)

Overall, it can be summarised that a significant portion of the participants (12, 50.0%) were hesitant to actively engage in sustainable behaviours. Three primary factors emerged from the discussion that contributed to this inaction: Firstly, inconvenience was identified as a major factor, followed by a lack of (sustainable) options, and finally, a lack of awareness.

4 Discussion and implications

This study aimed to explore the perceptions and attitudes of Western female tourists toward environmental stewardship during their visits to Phuket, Thailand. The thematic analysis revealed the interplay between perceptions, awareness, and actual engagement in environmental stewardship among Western female tourists. Several factors were identified as contributing to participants’ lack of engagement or inaction towards environmental stewardship. Foremost, one of the central themes emerging from the analysis is the dissonance between participants’ perceived awareness of environmental stewardship and their actual engagement in sustainable practices. The majority of participants demonstrated a commendable understanding of environmental stewardship, which validates similar studies in different contexts (Groulx et al., 2019; Engerman et al., 2020). Interestingly, the study found that while female Western tourists demonstrate high awareness and support for environmental stewardship, this does not necessarily translate into sustainable behaviour. This discrepancy between awareness and action raises the

need to further explore the factors that hinder or motivate tourists to actively engage in sustainable behaviours. It also highlights the hidden role that social desirability might have played in the findings reported by previous research into tourism actions vs. reported behaviours (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2016). In other words, although an individual exhibits a pro-environmental attitude, it does not predict more support for eco-friendly behaviour.

While many of the study participants articulated their understanding of environmental stewardship and its importance for sustainable tourism development, a substantial proportion of the tourists struggled to translate their level of awareness into concrete actions. Juvan and Dolnicar (2014) described this phenomenon as an attitude-action-gap, which has been vastly discussed in the literature from various perspectives in the context of tourism (Tölkes, 2020; Birch and Memery, 2020). However, this study addressed the attitude-action gap by examining the underlying factors contributing to tourists' inaction towards environmental stewardship. The identified barriers, such as convenience, limited availability of sustainable options, and a lack of awareness, provide insights into the complexities of tourists' decision-making processes and the challenges they face in adopting sustainable behaviours during their travels (Font and McCabe, 2017). As one participant aptly noted, "It starts with small things", highlighting the importance of individual actions in driving broader sustainable change.

Although environmental stewardship on its own is not an antecedent for sustainable behaviour among tourists, it can be leveraged as a vehicle for sustainable change (Dolnicar et al., 2019). For example, by integrating targeted environmental education campaigns, destinations can empower tourists to make informed and sustainable choices during their travels (Wu et al., 2021). Furthermore, policy interventions and government regulations play a crucial role in shaping the tourism landscape and incentivising sustainable practices (Mutana and Mukwada, 2020). Implementing policies such as carbon taxes, waste management regulations, and incentives for eco-friendly businesses can create a conducive environment for sustainable tourism development (Pan et al., 2018). Moreover, there is support that tourists are willing to pay a premium for sustainable services and conform better if policy is imposed upon them (Fuchs et al., 2024).

4.1 Implications

A variety of noteworthy theoretical as well as practical implications were derived from the study. First, the results of the study extend the discourse on environmental stewardship in the context of female Western travellers in a nature-based destination. The study suggests that Western female tourists may have a relatively high level of awareness regarding environmental stewardship. However, heightened awareness and perceived importance of environmental stewardship do not necessarily lead to increased support or actions. This finding highlights the need for targeted interventions to bridge the gap between awareness and behaviour. This highlights the necessity for targeted interventions to bridge the gap between awareness and behaviour. Second, the study emphasises the importance of educational initiatives and supportive policies in promoting sustainable tourism practices. Educational campaigns tailored to tourists can empower them to make informed and sustainable choices during their travels.

Moreover, policies such as carbon taxes and waste management regulations can incentivise businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices, creating a conducive environment

for sustainable tourism development (Maniu et al., 2021). Additionally, the study highlights the need for destination management organisations and policymakers to prioritise sustainability efforts and collaborate with stakeholders to implement effective strategies (Srisathan et al., 2023). Practically, the study suggests that businesses in tourist destinations should invest in sustainable practices and offer eco-friendly options to meet the growing demand from environmentally-conscious travellers. Moreover, tour operators and accommodation providers can play a significant role in promoting sustainability by offering educational tours and implementing green initiatives (Saeed et al., 2019). In essence, while environmental stewardship is recognised as pivotal for preserving the natural beauty and long-term viability of destinations like Phuket, concerted efforts are needed to translate awareness into meaningful action and ensure the sustainability of tourism for current and future generations.

5 Conclusion and future research

The purpose of the research was to examine the perceptions and practices of Western female tourists regarding environmental stewardship during their visits to Phuket, Thailand. Phuket Island is a renowned nature-based destination facing the challenges of over-tourism and environmental degradation. The empirical findings highlight the participants' commendable awareness of environmental stewardship and its significance for sustainable tourism development. However, a notable gap emerged between this awareness and their actual engagement in sustainable practices. While many participants articulated a strong understanding of environmental stewardship and its importance, a significant portion struggled to translate this awareness into concrete actions. Factors such as inconvenience, limited availability of sustainable options, and a lack of awareness hindered their engagement in sustainable behaviours. The research highlights the complexity of tourists' decision-making processes and the challenges they face in adopting sustainable practices during their travels. The reader is advised that the results of the study are not generalisable outside the context of the study. Moving forward, future research should explore strategies to bridge the gap between awareness and behaviour among tourists, particularly focusing on the efficacy of different interventions and the role of policy in promoting sustainable tourism practices. Additionally, investigating the perspectives of other tourist demographics and examining the impact of cultural factors on environmental stewardship behaviours would enrich our understanding of sustainable tourism development in nature-based destinations. Lastly, the study recommended a targeted approach in policy and interventions, therefore, future research could explore further in detail to determine which interventions work best with different demographics.

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest has been reported.

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