

Investigating the Ongoing Discussions on Ecotourists: A Two-Stage Sequential Review

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Considering the unending debates and varied interpretations regarding ecotourists, a structured analysis of the existing literature is essential. This study employs a two-stage sequential review process, integrating bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review using qualitative content analysis. Data were extracted from the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases, analysed quantitatively using RStudio's bibliometrix package, and further reviewed qualitatively using the Theory, Context, and Methodology (TCM) framework. Findings indicate that the term 'ecotourist' gained prominence in academic discourse in the early 1990s, underscoring a conceptual gap in the initial ecotourism literature, which tended to focus on principles, impacts, and implementation of tourism rather than on the tourists engaging in it. Over time, research on ecotourists evolved from basic demographic profiling to in-depth investigations into psychographic and behavioural aspects. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) emerged as the predominant theoretical framework among the most influential publications, with four major themes having dominated the most-cited academic works: (1) the nature of ecotourists and their existence within the ecotourism context, (2) the impacts of ecotourist activities, (3) ecotourist segmentation, and (4) the cognitive-normative profiles of ecotourists. This study contributes to the existing literature by tracing the evolution of ecotourist research, identifying key conceptual frameworks, and synthesising central themes. Additionally, it offers researchers and practitioners a structured overview of ecotourist-related literature, providing direction for future research avenues and practical insights for marketing, policy, and management strategies in ecotourism.

Keywords: ecotourists, ecotourism, bibliometrics, systematic literature review

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Introduction

Owing to market heterogeneity and differing perspectives on ecotourism, there is no ultimate consensus on the conceptualisation of 'ecotourist', reflecting the fact that ecotourists are not a homogeneous group or market segment (Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002;

Nowaczek & Smale, 2010; Sheena et al., 2015; Wight, 2001). While extensive scholarly attention has focused on defining ecotourism, examinations of ecotourists frequently emerge as secondary considerations or derivative constructs within broader ecotourism contexts (see Björk, 2000; Blamey, 1997; Donohoe

& Needham, 2006; Fennell, 2001; Juric et al., 2002). These persistent definitional debates underscore the imperative for researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to account for the inherent diversity among ecotourists and to recognise how varying conceptual boundaries may shape marketing approaches, conservation outcomes, and sustainable tourism development (Ashok et al., 2019; Beaumont, 2011; Massi & De Nisco, 2018). More rigorous delineation of ecotourist characteristics could optimise ecotourism programme efficacy while simultaneously advancing both ecological objectives and guest expectations (Dolnicar et al., 2013).

Scholars have traditionally identified ecotourists based on destinations, activities, or self-identification (Nowaczek & Smale, 2010), with studies using diverse methods such as demographic profiling, motivational analyses, and interactional-based criteria (Deng & Li, 2014; Lemelin et al., 2008). While some define ecotourists broadly – as those visiting natural areas with a concern for conservation and cultural understanding – others highlight the wide variation in motivations, from adventure to ideological commitment (Beaumont, 2011; Carrascosa-López et al., 2021; Dolnicar et al., 2013; Fennell, 2007; Sheena et al., 2015; Weaver & Lawton, 2007; Wight, 2001). This diversity complicates efforts to define a single, universal ecotourist profile, underscoring the complexity of this group (Hvenegaard, 2002).

In recent years, researchers have conducted numerous literature reviews on ecotourism and related topics, including debates on ecotourists, utilising bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review across various academic sources. A subset of these works plays a pivotal role in advancing the discipline by addressing pertinent fundamental issues, illustrating the historical evolution of the field, shaping current research directions, applying methodological rigour, and securing publication in leading journals that uphold a stringent peer-review process. For instance, Brandt and Buckley (2018) critically examined the role of ecotourism in forest conservation within biodiversity hotspots – regions where effective management is crucial due to high stakes for conservation. Their review revealed that

ecotourism can either detrimentally affect or positively contribute to forest conservation, contingent upon management practices. Similarly, Hasana et al. (2022) analysed over 1,182 articles indexed in the Scopus database from 2002 to 2020 using quantitative bibliometric analysis and revealed dominant research themes in ecotourism, including conservation, visitor management, and social issues like gender and climate change. The analysis revealed that a significant proportion of ecotourism research is concentrated in specific countries, with the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, Canada, and China leading in publication output. These studies highlight both the opportunities and challenges within ecotourism and the growing international interest in its impacts.

Focusing on the ecotourism experience, Sana et al. (2023) provided a qualitative structured review using 88 selected articles, identifying three key phases in the ecotourism experience – pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit – while emphasising the shift toward multi-stakeholder approaches. The findings highlight how ecotourism research has evolved toward more inclusive and comprehensive models, prompting further exploration of effective methods to engage travellers and promote sustainable practices within the industry. By acknowledging the complexity of the ecotourism experience, stakeholders can better support both the preservation of natural environments and the facilitation of meaningful travel experiences for ecotourists.

Despite a substantial and growing body of research, there remains a lack of integrative reviews that systematically synthesise knowledge about ecotourists using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This article addresses this gap via a two-stage sequential review: a bibliometric analysis followed by a systematic review of selected literature. The initial stage entails a quantitative assessment of existing ecotourist literature using bibliometric analysis, employing data extracted from the Scopus and WoS databases. Subsequently, the systematic literature review phase examines qualitative dimensions in greater depth. Together, these methods yield a holistic understanding of ecotour-

ists, elucidating key themes and delineating future research directions.

Materials and Methods

Mapping and analysing academic literature are essential for tracking research trends, understanding disciplinary evolution, and synthesising knowledge (Keathley-Herring et al., 2016; Linnenluecke et al., 2019). Systematic literature reviews and bibliometric

analyses are commonly used methods for achieving this, offering both quantitative and qualitative insights into specific research domains (Keathley-Herring et al., 2016; Linnenluecke et al., 2019). Bibliometric analysis applies mathematical and statistical tools to examine research output, collaboration networks, and impact (Donthu et al., 2021; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Salouw et al., 2023; Vishwakarma & Mukherjee, 2019; Zupic & Čater, 2015), while systematic literature re-

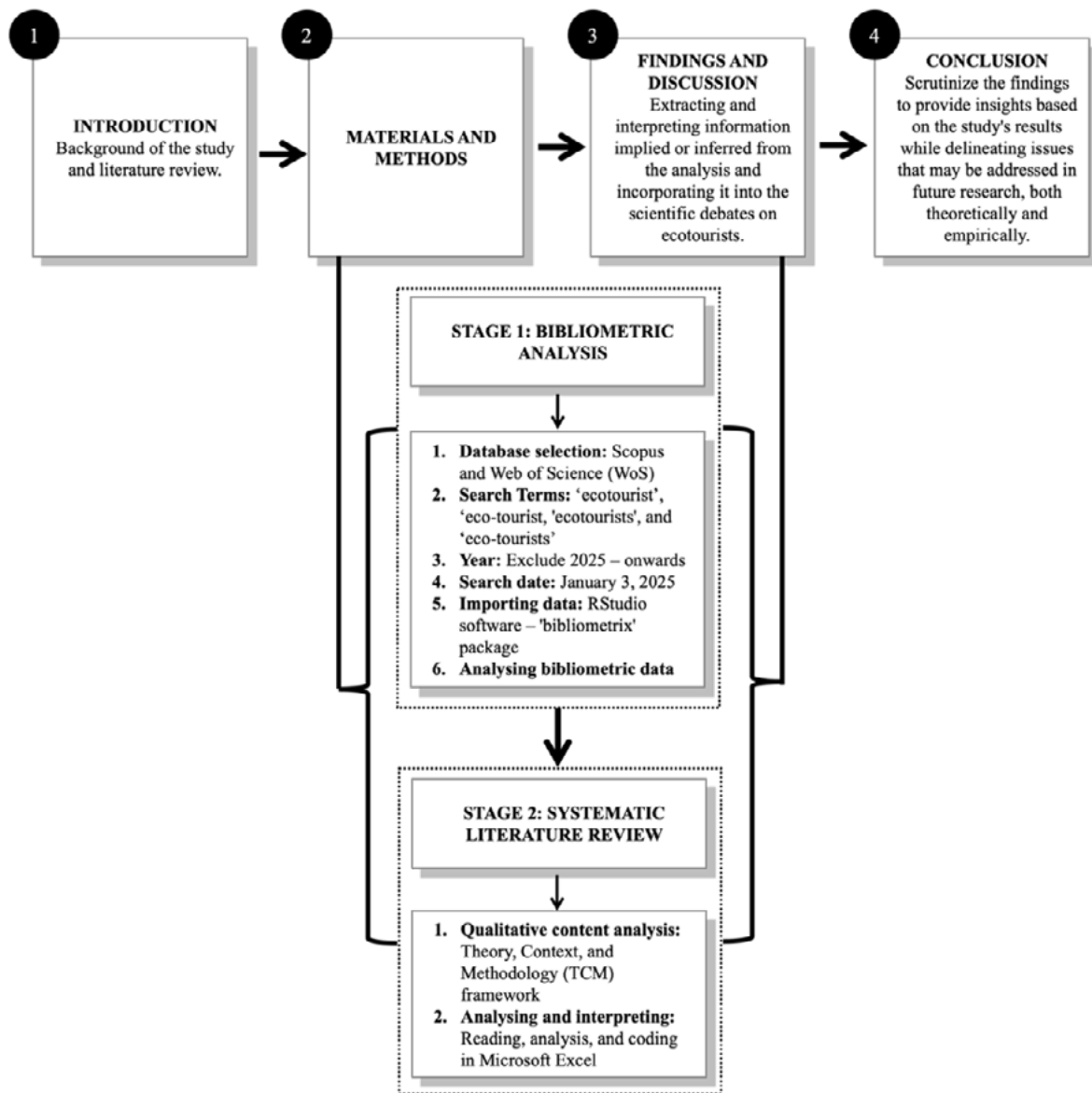


Figure 1 Research Design and Stages of Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Literature Review

views provide structured, comprehensive evaluations of existing studies with a strong emphasis on transparency and reproducibility (Fan et al., 2022; Polat et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021; White & Schmidt, 2005).

This study adopted a two-phase methodological framework, combining bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review employing qualitative content analysis. The bibliometric phase examined three main categories: quantity indicators (e.g. publication output), quality indicators (e.g. citations and impact), and structural indicators (e.g. collaboration networks) (Durieux & Gevenois, 2010; Hasana et al., 2022). The bibliometric analysis was conducted using Rstudio, which incorporates the 'bibliometrix' package, a comprehensive tool developed in the R programming language that offers a variety of bibliometric and scientometric methodologies (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), allowing for network visualization and identifying influential authors, institutions, keywords, and geographical distributions of document production and output (Brida et al., 2023).

Scopus and WoS were selected as the primary databases for this study because of quality, retrieval

efficiency, data cleanliness, and comprehensive disciplinary coverage (Baas et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021; Valderrama-Zurián et al., 2015; Zhu & Liu, 2020). The initial literature search was conducted on January 3, 2025, employing the following search protocol: the terms 'ecotourist', 'eco-tourist', 'ecotourists', and 'eco-tourists' were queried within the title, abstract, and keywords fields for each document on the official Scopus and WoS websites, filtered for documents published before 2025. The search returned 368 documents from Scopus and 245 from WoS, spanning journals, books, conference papers, and reviews. Subsequently, we exported metadata in BibTeX format and organised it using Mendeley Reference Manager to ensure standardization and maintain data integrity.

In the second phase, a systematic literature review was conducted using the Theory, Context, and Methodology (TCM) framework (Polat & Köseoglu, 2024). This framework categorises literature into key theoretical foundations, research settings, and methodological approaches (Polat et al., 2023). To perform the systematic literature review, we applied qualitative content analysis to the most influential scientific

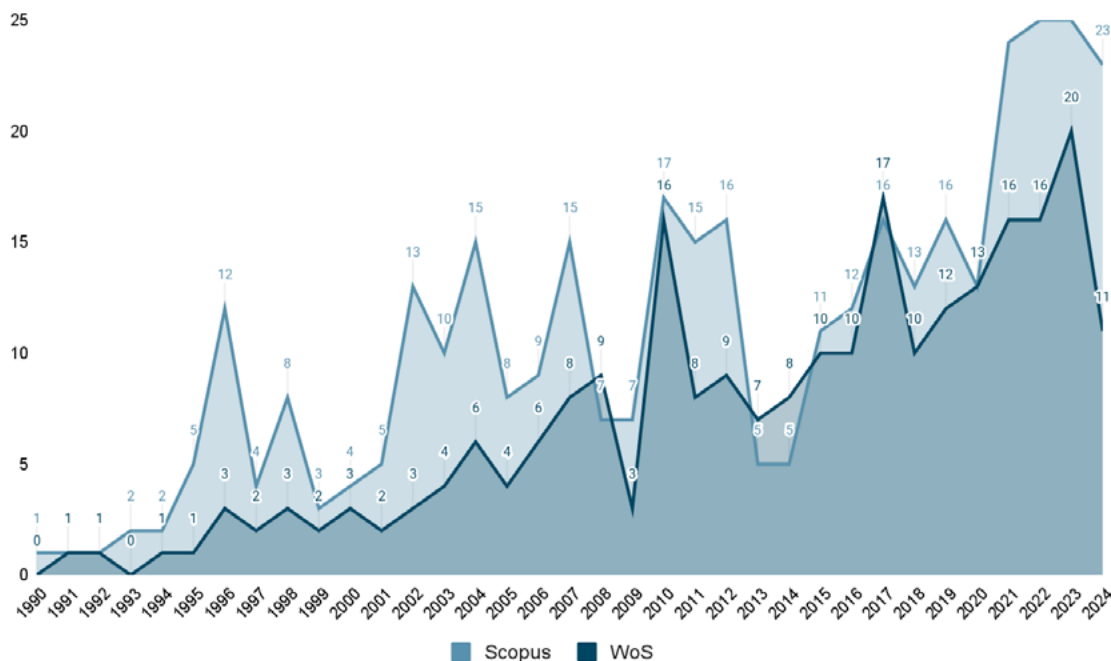


Figure 2 Publication Progress Related to 'Ecotourists' in the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) Databases

publications identified during the bibliometric phase. The analysis involved a rigorous process of reading, interpreting, and coding the selected articles using Microsoft Excel. This dual-method approach enabled a comprehensive synthesis of the literature, offering deeper insights into theoretical perspectives, research contexts, and methodological trends in ecotourist studies. The research design of this study delineates each phase of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Findings and Discussion

Stage 1: Bibliometric Analysis

Publication Progress, Outlets and Trends

An analysis of annual production data reveals a discrepancy in scientific publications between the Scopus and WoS databases. Researchers first recorded publications using the term 'ecotourist' in the Scopus database in 1990, followed by the WoS database in 1991. As of 2024, there are 368 documents in Scopus and 245 in WoS addressing the topic of ecotourists. Since the ear-

ly 1990s, the number of publications in both Scopus and WoS has exhibited annual fluctuations. The years 2022 and 2023 demonstrated the highest number of publications discussing ecotourists, with a total of 25 documents in the Scopus database. In the WoS database, the peak number of publications on ecotourists occurred in 2023, totalling 20 documents (Figure 2).

Furthermore, academic journals serve as the primary channels for disseminating scientific publications on ecotourists, particularly those specializing in the Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Management category. However, the Multidisciplinary journals category and those focusing on the Nature and Landscape Conservation category also play a significant role in publishing literature on this topic. Bibliometric analysis identifies several key journals as leading outlets for research on ecotourists, including the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Journal of Ecotourism*, *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *Tourism Recreation Research*, *Environmental Conservation*, *Tourism Management*, *Journal of Environmental Pro-*

Table 1 Top Ten Publication Outlets on Ecotourists in the Scopus and WoS Databases

R	Scopus			Web of Science (WoS)				
	Sources	Total Documents	H-Index	SJR Rank	Sources	Total Documents	H-Index	SJR Rank
R1	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	27	140	Q1	Sustainability (Switzerland)	14	169	Q1
R2	Journal of Ecotourism	25	48	Q2	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	9	140	Q1
R3	Sustainability (Switzerland)	14	169	Q1	Environmental Conservation	7	99	Q1
R4	Journal of Travel Research	10	172	Q1	Journal of Ecotourism	6	48	Q2
R5	Tourism Recreation Research	9	63	Q1	Journal of Environmental Protection and Ecology	6	27	Q3
R6	Environmental Conservation	7	99	Q1	Tourism Management	6	255	Q1
R7	Tourism Management	7	255	Q1	Annals of Tourism Research	5	216	Q1
R8	Journal of Environmental Protection and Ecology	6	27	Q3	Biological Conservation	5	235	Q1
R9	Annals of Tourism Research	5	216	Q1	Animal Conservation	4	97	Q1
R10	Biological Conservation	5	235	Q1	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	3	62	Q1

tection and Ecology, Annals of Tourism Research, Biological Conservation, and Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research. These journals are consistently featured in bibliometric databases such as Scopus and WoS, reflecting their centrality to the field (Table 1).

Since the first publications in the Scopus and WoS databases, early research on ecotourists (2002–2010) has primarily focused on identifying ecotourist demo-

graphic profiles and examining the impacts of human activity on nature, protected areas, and biodiversity, underscoring ecotourism's goal of balancing tourism development with environmental conservation. Over time, the scope expanded to include segmentation, motivation, satisfaction, perceived value, and loyalty (e.g. Carvache-Franco et al., 2021; Duong et al., 2022; Kim & Park, 2017; Kwan et al., 2008; Luo & Deng,

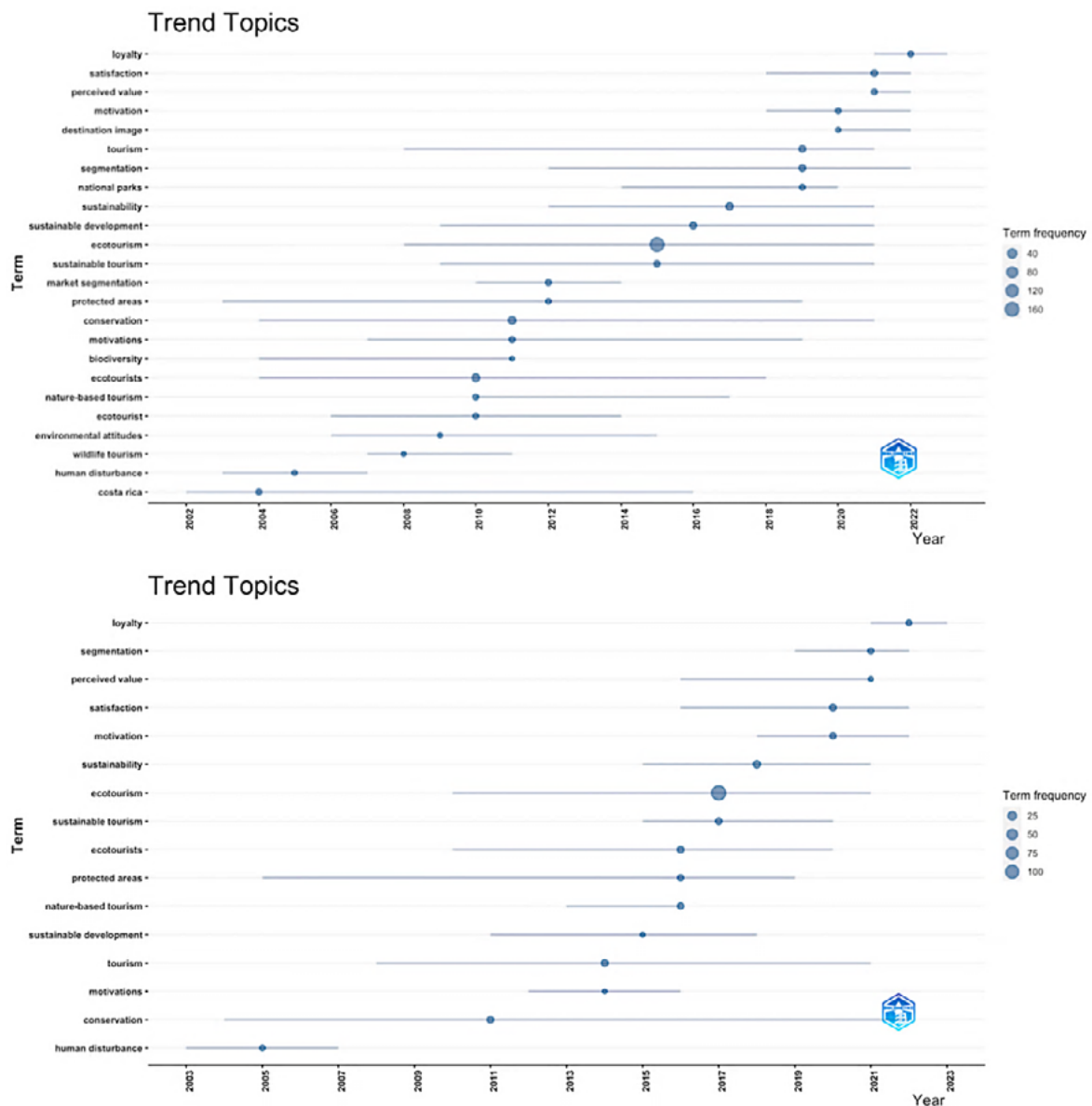


Figure 3. Trend Topics on Ecotourists in the Scopus (A) and Web of Science (B) Databases

2008; Oviedo-García et al., 2017; Perera et al., 2012), highlighting a shift toward understanding the human and experiential dimensions of ecotourism, such as understanding what drives individuals to participate, how they perceive their experiences, and their likelihood to engage in repeat visits or recommend destinations (e.g. Chan & Saikim, 2022; Hultman et al., 2015; Kirilenko & Stepchenkova, 2018; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2017; Ruhanen, 2019). The progression of topics highlights that while ecotourism remains strongly associated with nature-based tourism, sustainability, and conservation, the field has increasingly incorporated psychological and behavioural studies. These include examining the environmental attitudes of ecotourists and their emotional connections to destinations (e.g. Beaumont, 2011; Cheung & Fok, 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Thi Khanh & Phong, 2020). The incorporation of psychographic criteria marks an interdisciplinary shift, blending tourism, psychology, and environmental science to offer a more holistic view of ecotourism.

Co-occurrence of keywords

As de la Hoz-Correa et al. (2018) explain, keyword co-occurrence in bibliometric analysis helps define a research field by highlighting its most significant terms. Analysing 804 keywords from Scopus and WoS publications on ecotourists reveals diverse thematic

directions in the field. Core keywords like ‘conservation’, ‘protected areas’, and ‘sustainability’ reflect ecotourism’s environmental focus, while terms like ‘satisfaction’ and ‘motivation’ emphasise psychographic aspects (Table 2). These patterns mirror the field’s evolution from ecological concerns to include human experiences and behaviour.

Relevant authors

Relevant authors are researchers who exhibit a high volume of publications in a specific area or across interdisciplinary domains. The identification of highly productive authors within the domain of ecotourists is a crucial step in understanding the academic landscape and recognising key contributors shaping the field. As illustrated in Table 3, the most prolific authors of discussions pertaining to ecotourists remained relatively consistent. Mauricio Carvache-Franco ($n = 12$ Scopus; $n = 9$ WoS) emerged as a leading figure in this topic, demonstrating sustained contributions to ecotourist research, as evidenced by the Articles Fractionalized (AF) value derived from bibliometric analysis, which underscores the impact of an author’s contributions. His work underlines psychographic segmentation, specifically focusing on motivation, which explores the factors that drive ecotourists to engage in nature-based activities; perceived value, which exam-

Table 2 Top Ten Publication Outlets on Ecotourists in the Scopus and WoS Databases

R	Scopus	Web of Science (WoS)			
	Keywords	F	C (%)	Keywords	F C (%)
R1	Ecotourism	171	36.93	Ecotourism	124 36.36
R2	Ecotourists	21	4.54	Sustainability	12 3.52
R3	Conservation	18	3.89	Satisfaction	11 3.23
R4	Sustainability	15	3.24	Conservation	10 2.93
R5	Sustainable development	12	2.59	Ecotourists	10 2.93
R6	Tourism	12	2.59	Tourism	10 2.93
R7	Satisfaction	11	2.38	Sustainable tourism	9 2.64
R8	Segmentation	11	2.38	Motivation	8 2.35
R9	Sustainable tourism	9	1.94	Nature-based tourism	8 2.35
R10	Motivation	8	1.73	Protected areas	8 2.35

Note *R = Rank; F = Frequency (number of occurrences of keywords); C = Coverage (percentage coverage of keywords in database).

Table 3 Most Relevant Authors

R	Scopus			Web of Science (WoS)		
	Authors	F	AF	Authors	F	AF
R1	Carvache-Franco, M.	12	3.35	Carvache-Franco, M.	9	2.48
R2	Carvache-Franco, W.	8	2.02	Carvache-Franco, W.	7	1.82
R3	Carrascosa-López, C.	6	2.00	van der Merwe, P.	6	2.25
R4	van der Merwe, P.	6	2.25	Burger, J.	5	2.58
R5	Burger, J.	5	2.58	Carrascosa-López, C.	5	1.67
R6	Carvache-Franco, O.	5	1.02	Cheung, L.T.O.	5	2.37
R7	Eagles, P.F.J.	5	2.00	Saayman, M.	5	1.75
R8	Weaver, D.	5	2.33	Carvache-Franco, O.	4	0.82
R9	Fennell, D.A.	4	2.50	Alsisto, S.	3	0.41
R10	Hausmann, A.	4	1.92	Ambu, L.	3	0.41

Note *R = Rank; F = Frequency (number of articles); AF = Articles Fractionalized (representation of authors' contributions in terms of scientific impact and productivity).

ines how ecotourists assess the benefits of their experiences; and loyalty, which investigates the factors that influence repeat visits and long-term engagement.

The Geographical Distribution of Documents Production and Output

The United States leads in author correspondence on ecotourists, with most publications classified as Single-Country Publications (SCP), indicating limited international collaboration (Figure 4). This contrasts slightly with Singh et al. (2021), who noted broad U.S. collaboration in ecotourism research more generally. The dominance of SCPs reflects a broader trend in developed countries like the U.S., U.K., and Germany, where strong national research funding supports domestic output. Similarly, countries such as China, Canada, and Australia also show high SCP activity in ecotourist research, reinforcing this global pattern.

As shown in Figure 4, the bibliometric analysis of international collaboration networks reveals that the most prominent research partnership regarding ecotourists within the Scopus database is between Spain and Ecuador ($n = 7$). This is followed by collaborations between the United States and the United Kingdom ($n = 4$) and between the United Kingdom and South Africa ($n = 3$). A similar pattern emerges in the

WoS database, where Spain and Ecuador again lead in collaborative output ($n = 7$), followed by partnerships between South Africa and Finland ($n = 4$) and the United States with both the United Kingdom and Germany ($n = 4$). These findings highlight that international collaboration in ecotourist-related research occurred between developed and developing countries, represented by the most prominent research partnership between Spain and Ecuador, as recorded in both the Scopus and WoS databases.

Furthermore, this study also identified leading institutions in ecotourist research through a bibliometric analysis of Scopus and WoS databases. Universities in both developed and developing countries play key roles, with notable contributions from Ecuador's Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo and Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral. Southeast Asian universities like Universiti Putra Malaysia and Indonesia's Brawijaya University are also actively engaged in this field. In developed countries, major contributors include U.S. institutions such as Northwest University, Utah State University, the Rutgers University–New Brunswick, and the University of California; Canadian universities such as Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, and the University of Waterloo, along with Griffith University in Australia,

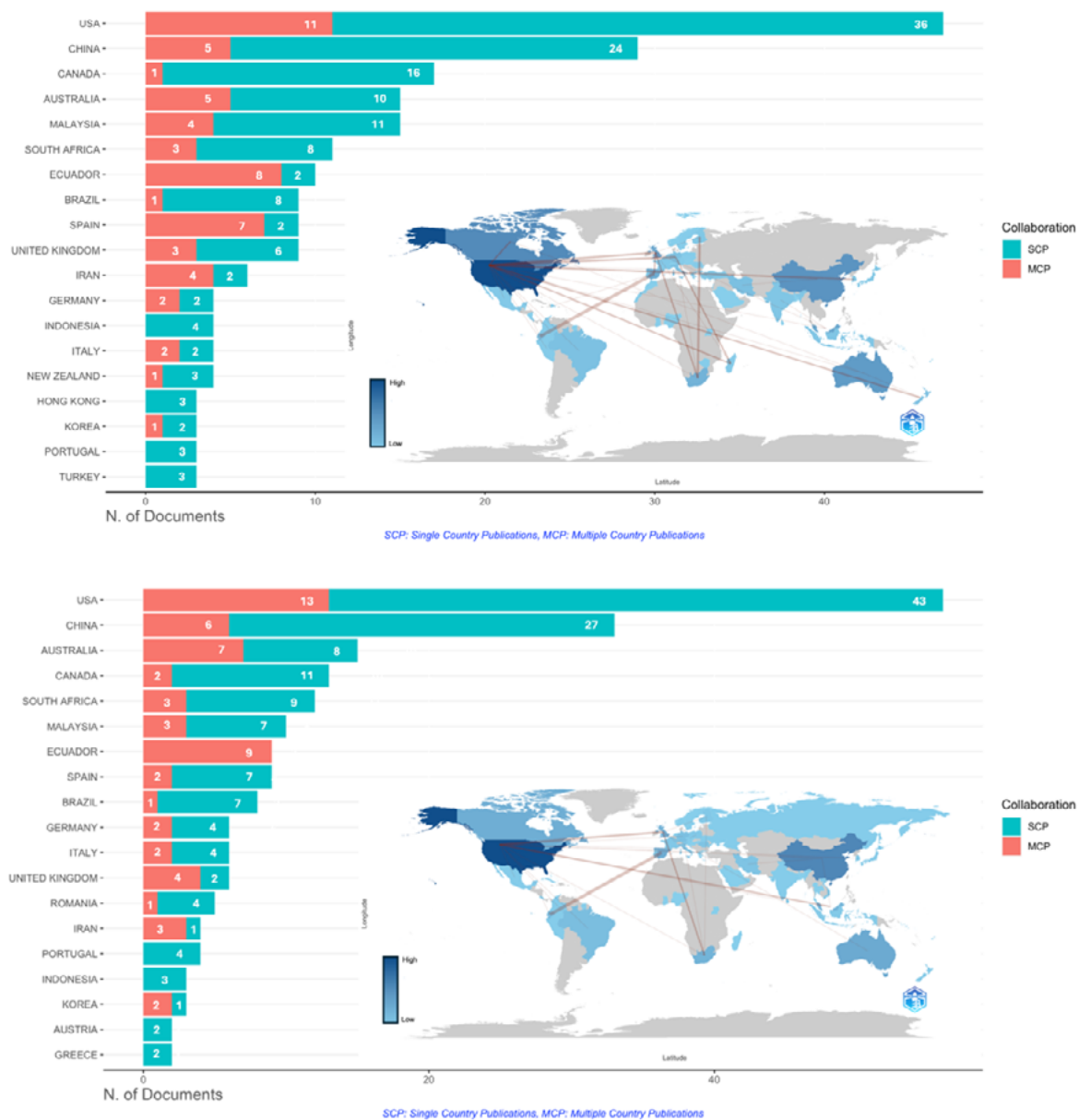


Figure 4 Corresponding Authors' Countries and Collaboration Network: Scopus Database (A) and Web of Science Database (B)

also contribute substantially to the literature on ecotourists.

Most influential publications

Identifying highly cited publications is key to assessing the most impactful contributions in a research

field, as citation counts reflect a work's influence over time (Aji et al., 2024; Polat & Köseoglu, 2024). By focusing on these publications, scholars can trace the development and foundational themes within a domain. In this study, bibliometric analysis of Scopus and WoS reveals considerable overlap in the top ten

Table 4 Institutions with the Most Publications on Ecotourists

<i>R</i>	Scopus	Web of Science		
	Institutions	<i>F</i>	Institutions	<i>F</i>
<i>R</i> ₁	Northwest University	14	Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo	8
<i>R</i> ₂	Universiti Putra Malaysia	13	Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral	7
<i>R</i> ₃	Simon Fraser University	9	Rutgers University–New Brunswick	7
<i>R</i> ₄	Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo	9	Northwest University	7
<i>R</i> ₅	University of British Columbia	9	Griffith University	6
<i>R</i> ₆	Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral	8	Universitat Politècnica de Valencia	6
<i>R</i> ₇	Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University	8	Utah State University	5
<i>R</i> ₈	Brawijaya University	8	Rutgers University	5
<i>R</i> ₉	University of Waterloo	8	University of British Columbia	5
<i>R</i> ₁₀	Griffith University	7	University of California	5

Note * *R* = Rank; *F* = Frequency (number of total documents).

most-cited works on ecotourists, while also highlighting some unique contributions in each database. Scopus exclusively includes Wilk (2006), Orams (1996), and Weaver and Lawton (2002), whereas WoS features Kerstetter et al. (2004), Brightsmith et al. (2008), and Ryan et al. (2000). These differences

reflect subtle variations in database scope and coverage, despite their general alignment in spotlighting influential research.

The majority of influential documents indexed in both the Scopus and WoS databases are journal articles. These publications predominantly appear in esteemed

Table 5 Top Cited Documents in the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) Database

Scopus					
Rank	Authors (year)	Document Type	Source (SJR Rank)	Total Citations	Total Citations per Year
<i>R</i> ₁	Scheyvens (1999)	Journal Article	Tourism Management (Q1)	820	30.37
<i>R</i> ₂	Miller et al. (2015)	Journal Article	Journal of Sustainable Tourism (Q1)	272	24.73
<i>R</i> ₃	Müllner et al. (2004)	Journal Article	Biological Conservation (Q1)	259	11.77
<i>R</i> ₄	Dolnicar et al. (2008)	Journal Article	Journal of Sustainable Tourism (Q1)	245	13.61
<i>R</i> ₅	Weaver & Lawton (2002)	Journal Article	Journal of Travel Research (Q1)	226	9.42
<i>R</i> ₆	Sekercioglu (2002)	Journal Article	Environmental Conservation (Q1)	220	9.17
<i>R</i> ₇	Wilk (2006)	Book	Berg Publishers	211	10.55
<i>R</i> ₈	Orams (1996)	Journal Article	Journal of Sustainable Tourism (Q1)	209	6.97
<i>R</i> ₉	Lu & Stepchenkova (2012)	Journal Article	Tourism Management (Q1)	204	14.57
<i>R</i> ₁₀	Khan (2003)	Journal Article	Annals of Tourism Research (Q1)	182	7.91

Table 5 Continued

Web of Science (WoS)					
Rank	Authors (year)	Document Type	Source (SJR Rank)	Total Citations	Total Citations per Year
R1	Scheyvens (1999)	Journal Article	<i>Tourism Management</i> (Q1)	626	23.19
R2	Miller et al. (2015)	Journal Article	<i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i> (Q1)	244	22.18
R3	Müllner et al. (2004)	Journal Article	<i>Biological Conservation</i> (Q1)	235	10.68
R4	Dolnicar et al. (2008)	Journal Article	<i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i> (Q1)	199	11.06
R5	Lu & Stepchenkova (2012)	Journal Article	<i>Tourism Management</i> (Q1)	181	12.93
R6	Sekercioglu (2002)	Journal Article	<i>Environmental Conservation</i> (Q1)	174	7.25
R7	Khan (2003)	Journal Article	<i>Annals of Tourism Research</i> (Q1)	148	6.43
R8	Kerstetter et al. (2004)	Journal Article	<i>Tourism Management</i> (Q1)	123	5.59
R9	Brightsmith et al. (2008)	Journal Article	<i>Biological Conservation</i> (Q1)	114	6.33
R10	Ryan et al. (2000)	Journal Article	<i>Annals of Tourism Research</i> (Q1)	112	4.31

journals, particularly those focused on the Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Management category, such as *Tourism Management*, the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, the *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Annals of Tourism Research*. Among the ten most highly cited documents, both Scopus and WoS databases exhibit similar rankings for the top three. These top three publications comprise articles by Scheyvens (1999), Miller et al. (2015), and Müllner et al. (2004). Their recognition in both the Scopus and WoS databases signals their significant impact, likely due to their contribution to key theoretical frameworks, methodologies, or insights within tourism studies, particularly in discussing ecotourists. These rankings reflect the broader academic and practical relevance of their work, guiding both researchers and practitioners.

Stage 2: Systematic Literature Review

Given the significant overlap in top-cited documents across Scopus and WoS, this study analysed the most influential publications based on citation count using the TCM framework. The findings indicate that the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) emerged as the predominant theoretical framework underpinning the most significant research on ecotourists. Along-

side Resource-Based Theory, TPB – along with Psychological Empowerment Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Cognitive Dissonance Theory – provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding ecotourist behaviour (Table 6). The prominence of TPB in the literature suggests that research on ecotourists primarily focuses on identification and psychographic profiling, examining their characteristics and motivations. This trend underscores the growing integration of psychological and behavioural theories in ecotourism studies. Overall, this evolving focus reflects the complexities of ecotourist behaviour and highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between psychological factors and decision-making processes in this specialised sector of alternative tourism.

In terms of *Methodology*, according to the TCM framework, the findings reveal a diverse landscape within the most-cited publications focused on ecotourists. While several of these documents are conceptual in nature, others employ empirical approaches to gather and analyse data. Notably, some of the empirical studies within these influential works specifically target protected areas in developing countries, which is consistent with the findings of Wardle et al. (2021),

who noted that the majority of ecotourism-related research tends to be situated in developing regions, despite the fact that the concept of ecotourism itself is largely rooted in Western ideologies (Cater, 2006). These insights suggest a critical gap in the literature, prompting a reconsideration of how ecotourism is understood and practiced outside its Western origins, while highlighting the significance of contextual factors in shaping ecotourist experiences and behaviours in diverse geographical settings. The diversity of methodologies in influential publications reflects the multifaceted nature of research within the topic. The methodologies used in the publications span from qualitative approaches to mixed methods and more rigorous quantitative analyses, including conceptual articles featuring qualitative literature reviews and historical narratives, mixed-methods approaches (both sequential and convergent parallel), experimental quantitative assessments, quantitative research utilising clustering method analysis, descriptive bibliographic studies, and quantitative assessments employing the user-generated content (UGC) method (Table 6).

The most influential publications addressing ecotourists employed diverse theories, contexts, and methodologies, indicating that the discourse surrounding ecotourists centres on several key themes. These key themes do not significantly deviate from a series of findings and analyses presented in previous sections, particularly regarding research topic trends and co-occurrence keywords. The first key theme frequently referenced pertains to publications that examine the nature of ecotourists and their existence within the ecotourism context. This is explicitly reflected in the publications by Scheyvens (1999), Dolnicar et al. (2008), and Ryan et al. (2000). These three articles address the dilemma that a recurring theme in the literature is the paradox of ecotourists' intentions versus their actual impact. The aspiration to engage in environmentally responsible tourism can often conflict with the realities of their presence in remote and fragile ecosystems. This dilemma highlights the necessity for critical reflection on the motivations and outcomes associated with ecotourism, emphasising that positive intentions do not inherently lead to pos-

itive environmental outcomes because the interaction of ecotourists with perceived natural environments is complex and depends on the way individuals observe and interpret their surroundings, as well as how the 'ecotourist gaze' is influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors (Fletcher, 2015). The transformation of nature into a spectacle underscores a significant critique of ecotourism practices. As articulated by Fletcher (2015), the commodification of natural resources can lead to the packaging of nature as a consumable product, challenging the original ethos of ecotourism. This commodification process raises important ethical questions about the sustainability of such practices and the genuine preservation of ecological integrity.

The subsequent key theme addressed pertains to publications that examine the impact of ecotourists' presence and activities. This is evidenced in the works of Müllner et al. (2004), Wilk (2006), and Brightsmith et al. (2008). Each study illustrates specific ways in which ecotourist activities influence local ecosystems and community dynamics, highlighting both beneficial and adverse outcomes. This aligns with the findings of a comprehensive review of empirical studies on ecotourism spanning the past three decades, conducted by Stronza et al. (2019), which posited that impact studies related to ecotourism tend to focus on either ecological or sociocultural impacts. For instance, Müllner et al. (2004) provide a focused case study on the effects of ecotourism on the sustainability of the Hoatzin bird (*Opisthocomus hoazin*). This research aligns with ongoing debates in ecology and conservation biology, as noted by Geffroy et al. (2015), which suggest that while ecotourism aims to promote conservation, its activities can sometimes lead to negative consequences for wildlife. Such studies emphasise the necessity for careful management of ecotourism to mitigate potential harm to sensitive species and habitats. Concurrently, the study by Wilk (2006), which emphasises the impact generated by ecotourists seeking "authentic" experiences, suggests that this pursuit may inadvertently drive demand for standardised, Westernised meals, potentially marginalising traditional Belizean cuisine and ingredients. This phenomenon reflects the complex interplay between

ecotourism, cultural preservation, and economic development in the social, cultural, and political domains, wherein ecotourism continues to demonstrate potential for enhancing local living conditions in ways that mitigate pressure on natural resources and biodiversity (Stronza et al., 2019). In summary, the

examination of ecotourist impacts reinforces the idea that ecotourism is a multidimensional phenomenon with both positive and negative implications.

The key theme of segmentation in the study of ecotourists constitutes a critical area of research that elucidates the diversity of ecotourist characteris-

Table 6 Overview of the Systematic Literature Review Using the TCM Framework on the Most Influential Documents Related to Ecotourists

Authors (Year)	TCM Framework		
	Theory	Context	Methodology
First theme: The nature of ecotourists and their existence within the ecotourism context			
Scheyvens (1999)	Main theoretical framework: Psychological Empowerment Theory	Geographical focus: Not specific	Conceptual article, Qualitative literature review
Dolnicar et al. (2008)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Not specific	Conceptual article, Descriptive bibliography study
Ryan et al. (2000)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Fogg Dam Conservation Area in the Northern Territory, Australia	Mixed methods – Convergent parallel mixed methods
Second theme: The impacts of ecotourist activities			
Müllner et al. (2004)	Main theoretical framework: Resources-based Theory	Geographical focus: The Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, Ecuador	Experimental quantitative assessment
Wilk (2006)	Main theoretical framework: Social Exchange Theory	Geographical focus: Belize	Historical narrative, Qualitative literature review
Brightsmith et al. (2008)	Main theoretical framework: Stakeholder Theory	Geographical focus: Tambopata National Reserve and Bahuaja–Sonene National Park, Peru	Qualitative research with longitudinal data
Third theme: Ecotourist segmentation			
Weaver & Lawton (2002)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Gold Coast, Australia	Quantitative research with the clustering method analysis
Kerstetter et al. (2004)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Taiwan	Quantitative research with the clustering method analysis
Fourth theme: The cognitive-normative profiles of ecotourists			
Miller et al. (2015)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Melbourne, Australia	Mixed methods – Exploratory sequential mixed methods
Sekercioglu (2002)	Main theoretical framework: Agency Theory	Geographical focus: Not specific	Conceptual article, Qualitative literature review
Orams (1996)	Main theoretical framework: Cognitive Dissonance Theory	Geographical focus: Not specific	Conceptual article, Qualitative literature review
Lu and Stepchenkova (2012)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Costa Rica	Quantitative assessment with the user-generated content (UGC) method
Khan (2003)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: United States of America	Quantitative research

tics among the most frequently cited documents, as demonstrated by studies from Weaver and Lawton (2002) and Kerstetter et al. (2004). The work of Weaver and Lawton (2002) is foundational in categorising ecotourists into distinct typologies: 'harder ecotourists', 'softer ecotourists', and 'structured ecotourists'. This classification illuminates the varying levels of engagement and commitment among ecotourists, indicating that individuals who identify as ecotourists exhibit heterogeneous motivations and behaviours. Furthermore, the study by Kerstetter et al. (2004) underscores the significance of understanding motivations and behaviours in tourism segmentation. Through an analysis of the Taiwanese ecotourism market, they identified various tourist typologies: experience tourists, learning tourists, and ecotourists. While segmentation provides valuable insights, it is imperative to acknowledge its limitations, such as those highlighted by Hvenegaard (2002). The tautological nature of segmentation and their often-localised characteristics can hinder the generalisability of findings across different contexts. This suggests that while typologies can be useful, they should be applied with caution and sensitivity to varying settings. Despite its fundamental limitations, segmentation remains a practical tool for planning, management, and marketing of ecotourism destinations or products. Dolnicar (2008) emphasises the role of effective market segmentation in enhancing tourist satisfaction and experiences. By catering to the diverse characteristics of ecotourists, ecotourism providers can create more personalised experiences that not only meet visitors' expectations but also promote responsible behaviours in natural environments.

Furthermore, the final key theme that has received considerable attention and is referenced based on the most influential academic works regarding ecotourists relates to the cognitive-normative profile (Hvenegaard, 2002), encompassing ecotourists' perceived value, attitudes, experiences, and behaviour. This is evidently demonstrated in several studies: Miller et al. (2015), which examines pro-environmental behaviours in urban ecotourism contexts, elucidating how urban environments can influence ecotourist actions; Sekercioglu (2002), which discusses the significance of birdwatchers in the ecotourism segment, emphasising

their commitment to conservation and the economic benefits they provide; Orams (1996), which proposes that interpretation programmes can significantly influence ecotourist behaviour, illustrating the importance of educational strategies in promoting sustainable practices; Lu and Stepchenkova (2012), which analyses online reviews to identify the attributes that enhance ecotourist satisfaction, revealing how perception shapes their experiences; and Khan (2003), which employs the ECOSERV scale to assess service quality expectations among ecotourists, emphasising the role of service experiences in shaping their behaviours and satisfaction levels (Table 6). The prominence of cognitive-normative profiling as one of the key themes in ecotourism literature indicates its critical role in understanding current and emerging trends. It serves as a framework through which researchers can examine the complexities of ecotourist behaviour, shifting the focus from mere economic or ecological impacts to a more nuanced understanding of human behaviour and decision-making. As discourse on ecotourists continues to evolve, understanding cognitive-normative profiles will be essential for effective governance and management of ecotourism.

Conclusion

Academia began focusing research on ecotourists within scientific publications only in the early 1990s, as recorded in Scopus and WoS databases. This delayed introduction suggests that prior research on ecotourism primarily concentrated on its foundational principles, ecological impacts, and implementation strategies, rather than on the individuals driving the phenomenon. Scientific publications on ecotourists are predominantly found in academic journals, particularly in the Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Management category. Over time, research expanded beyond initial concerns – such as demographic aspects related to human disturbance, protected areas, and biodiversity – to explore segmentation, motivation, satisfaction, perceived value, and loyalty. Co-occurrence keyword analysis highlights the strong interconnection between ecotourism and sustainability while emphasising the importance of psychographic dimensions in understanding ecotourists. This shift

reflects an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from tourism studies, psychology, and environmental science.

The most influential authors in research on ecotourists are predominantly university-affiliated scholars who adopt a multidisciplinary approach, integrating economics, management, marketing, and business administration; environmental sciences; conservation biology; forestry; and protected area management, reflecting the complex and interconnected nature of the field. Among them, Mauricio Carvache-Franco stands out for his sustained contributions. In terms of geographical research output and publication networks, the United States leads in author correspondence on ecotourists. However, much of its research is produced without international collaboration. Bibliometric analysis also reveals a diverse range of institutions contributing to research on this topic, highlighting its growing internationalisation. The participation of institutions from both developed and developing nations enriches the academic discourse on the subject. Additionally, the most influential documents on ecotourists indexed in Scopus and WoS are predominantly journal articles. These publications primarily appear in leading journals within the Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Management category, such as *Tourism Management*, the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, the *Journal of Travel Research*, and the *Annals of Tourism Research*.

A systematic literature review identifies the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as the predominant theoretical framework underpinning the most significant research on ecotourists. Alongside Resource-Based Theory, TPB, and several other theories – such as Psychological Empowerment Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Cognitive Dissonance Theory – form a comprehensive foundation for understanding ecotourist behaviour. Methodologically, findings based on the TCM framework reveal a diverse research landscape among the most-cited publications on ecotourists. While some studies are conceptual, others employ empirical approaches to data collection and analysis. Notably, several influential empirical studies focus on protected areas in developing countries. The methodologies used in the in-

fluent publications range from qualitative to mixed methods and rigorous quantitative analyses. These include conceptual articles featuring qualitative literature reviews and bibliographic studies, mixed-methods approaches, including both sequential and convergent parallel designs, experimental quantitative studies, quantitative clustering analyses, user-generated content (UGC) analysis, and historical narratives. The most frequently referenced scholarly studies on ecotourists address four key themes, including the conceptualisation and existence of ecotourists, the impact of ecotourist activities on destinations, ecotourist segmentation based on demographics and psychographics, and cognitive-normative profiles, examining ecotourists' perceived value, attitudes, experiences, and behaviours.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides comprehensive insights into research on ecotourists within the tourism literature, the authors acknowledge several limitations. First, the study relies solely on scientific publications from Scopus and WoS databases. As a result, relevant studies published in other journals or sources may have been overlooked. Future research could expand the range of databases to provide a more comprehensive review of the literature. Second, the bibliometric analysis was conducted exclusively using RStudio with the 'bibliometrix' package. This may lead to inconsistencies when comparing results with studies that utilise different bibliometric software. To enhance the robustness of bibliometric data processing, future research could integrate multiple software tools, such as VOSviewer, for a more holistic analysis. Third, this study did not pre-filter the dataset to ensure the removal of duplicate publications across Scopus and WoS. Consequently, some duplicate documents may have influenced the quantitative analysis. Future research following a similar approach should refine the literature search process by eliminating duplicate records to improve data accuracy.

Despite these limitations, a key strength of this study lies in its potential to serve as a foundational resource for future research. It demonstrates that recent studies on ecotourists primarily focus on psychographic

and behavioural dimensions – often referred to as cognitive-normative profiles – with variables such as motivation, satisfaction, perceived value, loyalty, and experiences dominating the discourse. However, this emphasis has yet to address pressing contemporary issues that are increasingly relevant, such as greenwashing and green grabbing, which are frequently linked to ecotourism (Ghaderi et al., 2025; Ojeda, 2012; Rozzi et al., 2010). This gap is particularly noteworthy given that Swarbrooke and Horner (2006) identified a subset of ecotourists with extreme preferences, including those who actively avoid distant ecotourism destinations to minimise their environmental footprint. Investigating ecotourists' psychographic and behavioural traits in the context of critical contemporary issues – such as greenwashing and green grabbing – is essential for a more nuanced understanding of their characteristics. Since this area remains largely unexplored, future research examining ecotourists' perceptions and responses to these challenges could provide valuable new insights that enhance the broader discourse on ecotourism and sustainable tourism practices. In addition, as highlighted by Jin and Gao (2025), future research related to ecotourists should delve deeper into the dynamics of motivation and its influence on ecotourism loyalty, as well as assess the shifts in tourist behaviour in the post-COVID-19 era. Understanding how motivations drive loyalty and how the pandemic has reshaped tourist preferences and behaviours will provide valuable insights for adapting ecotourism strategies to meet evolving demands while ensuring sustainability and resilience in the sector.

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