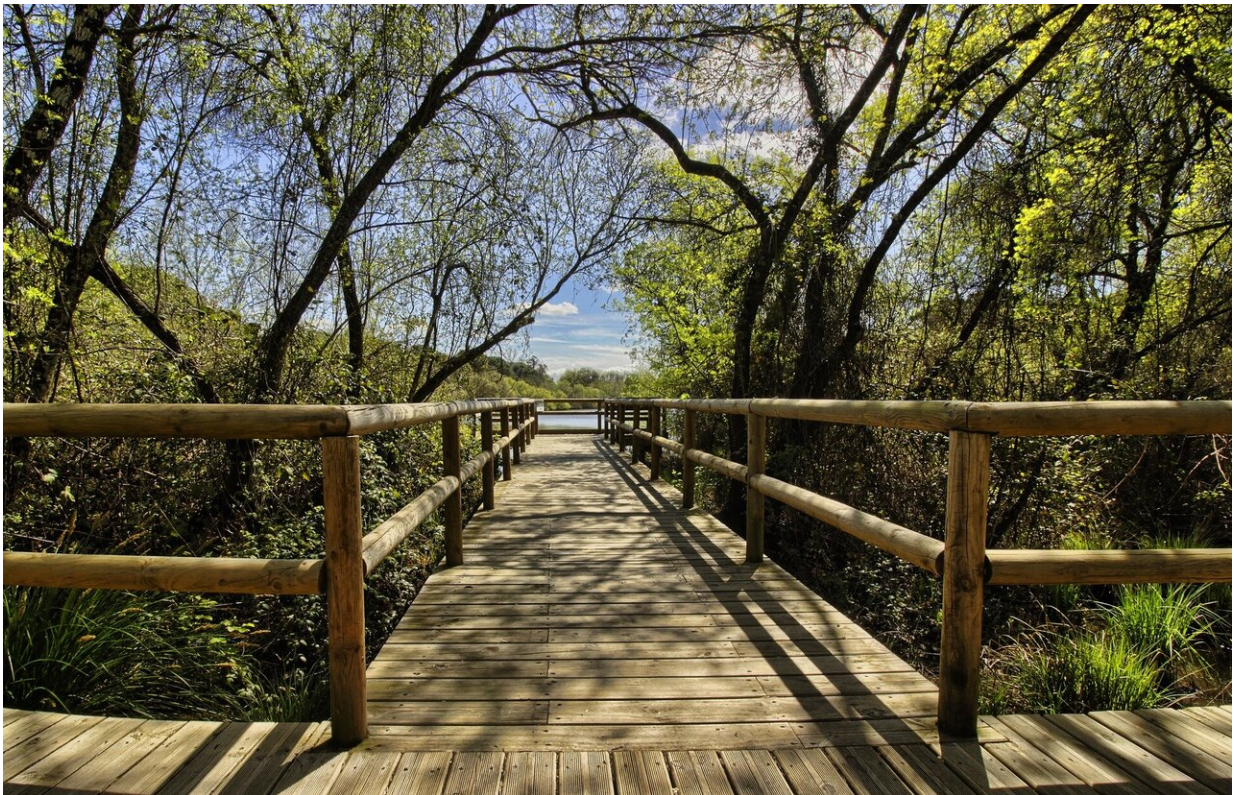


# **Sustainable tourism—or a selfie?**

## **Ecotourism's fans may be in it for the 'gram**

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Ecotourism offers a specific travel experience: It focuses on nature, education and sustainability. Often, these destinations highlight endangered or threatened species and engage visitors in making socially responsible choices.

But a new study by researchers at the University of Georgia suggests [ecotourism](#)'s altruistic attractions may be overshadowed by another benefit: photos for [social media](#). Recently published in the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, the research could help guide tourism operators as they weigh the costs and benefits of attracting visitors who care most for natural beauty only when it can be captured on their phone.

"It's been traditionally presumed that people are pursuing ecotourism because they are interested in making an environmentally or socially responsible choice—and this understanding is important for a host of reasons, including management and market segmentation," said Justin Beall, the study's lead author. "But our study throws a wrench in that a bit by showing that not only is it [environmental values](#) that are influencing people to participate in ecotourism, but people are also engaging in ecotourism so they can get good photographs to post online and present to their friends and loved ones."

Beall, a recent graduate of the UGA Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, wrote the paper as part of his master's thesis. Co-authors included Warnell faculty members Bynum Boley and Kyle Woosnam, as well as UGA alumnus Adam Landon, now with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

## **Social status over sustainability**

Say, for example, someone visits an ecotourism destination and shares photos and descriptions on social media. They are conveying an image of someone who cares about sustainability, the local community and education—all components of ecotourism. But, Beall said, travelers surveyed for the study revealed that how these photos look may be even more important than their own environmental values.

"People have a tendency to do something that elevates their status—I

think we all kind of do it. This idea is not new," added Boley. "It used to be a Porsche or a wristwatch or jewelry, but now it's a little more subtle, and channeled through travel experiences.

"So, our big debate is, do people choose ecotourism because they have strong environmental values, or is it a new way to show off to your peers that you're cool?"

Earlier research has suggested that ecotourists have motivations beyond environmental and social values. But with the rise of smartphones and social media, factors such as self-development, relaxation or escape are taking a back seat to the potential for likes and clicks. Boley has underscored this in more recent studies, showing how social media is changing how we view and experience travel.

Now, with this latest study, it appears the influence of social media has also reached ecotourism.

## **Overcrowding**

While the travel industry is reeling from COVID-19, visitors to remote, natural-focused destinations are up in the U.S. On the one hand, this research presents an opportunity for the ecotourism industry to market itself by highlighting scenic opportunities to potential travelers.

But then there are problems of overcrowding to consider. Too many tourists can also be a bad thing—especially when they're visiting sensitive natural areas. The problem is compounded for ecotourism destinations, where a small staff typically manages a larger and more fragile area. For example, visitors may stray off the established trail for their own set of photos, wandering into sensitive areas.

For years, ecotourists were categorized as a highly desirable segment of

the tourism market. They have money to spend, they're environmentally conscious and they are concerned about their effects on their destination. But perhaps that's no longer true.

"What if all of a sudden you realize most of the people who showed up to your site aren't ecotourists that care about your site, but just want to get the picture?" Beall asked. "With ecotourism done well, you can have this sort of low-volume, high-value tourism. But if you have all these other people that are getting in on it, and they're not concerned about their environmental impacts, where their money goes or what they do, then it could threaten the destination's sustainability."

**More information:** Justin M. Beall et al, What drives ecotourism: environmental values or symbolic conspicuous consumption?, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2020.1825458](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1825458)

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