Managing tourist expectations in nature-based tourism: Strategies for enhanced perception

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ABSTRACT

Nature-based tourism is gaining popularity as people seek meaningful experiences that combine adventure, leisure, and personal growth. This study explores how novelty, self-improvement, nature connection, knowledge, fitness, and escape influence tourists' perceptions in ecotourism. This study offers a thorough framework for comprehending tourist pleasure and engagement by combining several definitions of nature-based tourism and examining these motivating factors. SEM was used to analyze the relationship among the factors and the indicators. The results indicate that all four motivating elements have a major influence on travelers' overall opinions, highlighting their need for unusual experiences, closer linkages to the natural world, opportunities for personal growth, and a break from everyday life. These observations emphasize how crucial it is to provide tourist experiences that satisfy the psychological and emotional requirements of visitors. Offerings that are in line with the reasons behind travel can improve tourist experiences, encourage brand loyalty, and guarantee sustainable tourism growth, all of which are advantageous to industry stakeholders and long-term viability. This study has important ramifications for legislators, tourism planners, and destination marketers, recommending that ecotourism destinations modify their offerings to improve tourist pleasure and encourage environmentally friendly travel methods.

Contribution/Originality: This study adds to the current literature by providing a fresh viewpoint on how many motivating factors novelty and self-improvement, return to nature, education and fitness, and escape influence visitor views in nature-based tourism. In contrast to other research, this study uses SEM analysis to clearly show how these parameters relate to visitor satisfaction, offering practical advice for the growth of sustainable tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Natural resources are one of tourism's primary assets. In recent years, there has been a sharp rise in interest in natural resources, because the nature-based tourism movement is gaining popularity in the travel industry (Wolf, Croft, & Green, 2019) The ethical foundations of modern tourism, such as knowledge of the need to preserve the environment and take steps to avoid using up natural resources, have been seen to be growing. From this point on, nature-based tourism can be defined as a type of tourism that includes a variety of activities, such as swimming, diving, hiking, camping, picnicking, taking pictures, learning, making friends, or spending time with families, all of which are said to take place in supposedly distinct and purer natural areas (Tisdell & Wilson, 2012). This definition's important

aspects are the actions that will occur throughout the tourism movement and the choices made by tourists regarding their themes or required natural regions.

In the movement for nature-based tourism, success in two crucial areas becomes the highest priority for the movement's sustainability and revenue growth. Establishing natural spaces in terms of preservation and exploitation balance is the first of them (Winter, Selin, Cerveny, & Bricker, 2019). At this moment, the state, local government, the community, and each individual tourist have many obligations. The point of departure for the corresponding obligations will be taking preventative measures, planning accordingly, and giving special attention to cases like infrastructure and superstructure (Da Mota & Pickering, 2020). Determining the motivation and attractiveness in nature-based tourism the fundamental subjects of this study are the other crucial aspects. The most crucial circumstance for identifying a successful destination is the compatibility of the factors that make up the expectations of the travelers who engage in the tourism movement and the attractions that meet the expectations in the destinations of choice.

This research offers both an empirical and methodological contribution within the conceptual fields of tourist perception, digital storytelling, digital branding, and tourist experience. The study here attempts to resolve the following research questions.

RQ1: How do nature-based tourism motivation factors, such as novelty and self-development, returning to nature, knowledge and fitness, and escape, influence the overall perception of tourists toward ecotourism destinations?

RQ2: Which nature-based tourism motivation factor has the most significant impact on shaping the overall perception of tourists regarding ecotourism destinations?

The research questions will be addressed for understanding and analysis through the upcoming sections of the research.

Previous studies on nature-based tourism have mostly concentrated on conservation initiatives, economic effects, and environmental sustainability, frequently ignoring the psychological and motivational aspects that affect travelers' decisions and experiences. Numerous studies stress how crucial it is to protect natural areas and strike a balance between conservation and economic expansion (Da Mota & Pickering, 2020; Winter et al., 2019). However, people do not examine how travelers' internal incentives such as novelty, self-improvement, a return to nature, education, and escape influence how individuals perceive ecotourism locations. Furthermore, prior research has not adequately explored how well these attractions match passengers' expectations and motives, despite the fact that location attractiveness is a critical component of tourism success.

This study addresses these gaps by looking at how various motivational elements impact tourists' overall impressions of eco-tourism places. By examining the psychological factors that influence tourist engagement, it goes beyond the conventional emphasis on environmental and economic factors and offers a more comprehensive understanding of visitor experiences. This study highlights the key motivators that influence visitor views and pleasure by taking into account novelty, self-improvement, returning to nature, knowledge and fitness, and escapism. Further, this study advances the discipline by acknowledging the increasing significance of digital storytelling and branding in traveler decision-making and destination appeal. In contrast to earlier research, this study uses a systematic framework to empirically validate motivating components, guaranteeing a more data-driven approach to comprehending visitor experiences.

This study is divided into six sections, each of which provides a comprehensive examination of nature-based tourism motivation and its influence on visitor views. The introduction provides context for the study by explaining nature-based tourism and its importance in the tourist industry. It draws attention to the rising interest in ecotourism and points out areas where study is lacking, especially in terms of comprehending the psychological and motivational elements that affect visitors' perspectives. The research questions and objectives that direct the study are presented at the end of this section. The research concept, data collection procedure, and analytical technique are explained in the Methodology section, guaranteeing the study's rigor and transparency. Several motivating elements on the opinions of tourists are discussed. The study's results are presented in the Data Analysis and Interpretation section. The discussion examines the findings' implications for tourist management, destination branding, and policy-making while interpreting them in light of the body of previous research. Lastly, the Conclusion offers practical suggestions for tourism practitioners and a summary of the study's main findings.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The words "nature-based tourism" and "ecotourism" are approached differently in the literature. While some authors argue that ecotourism and nature-based tourism are synonymous or have the same meaning in terms of quality (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2012) others view nature-based tourism as a broad concept that encompasses activities like ecotourism, adventure tourism, and nature tourism, as well as resource consumption, environmental protection, and cultural preservation (Roxana, 2012). While there are significant distinctions between ecotourism and nature-based tourism in terms of quality, another perspective suggests that ecotourism is more responsible, yet it also has certain characteristics with nature-based tourism (Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015). It might be helpful to look at the definitions of nature-based tourism in light of such methods.

Eadington (2003) claims that as a result of the problems and contentment caused by mass tourism, these forms of travel emerged in harmony with ecological, social, and shared values, guaranteeing communication and a shared

experience between locals and visitors. The most acute of these forms of tourism is nature-based tourism. According to Laarman and Durst (1987), however, nature-based tourism is a form of travel that combines education, leisure, and most importantly, adventure. In addition to these definitions, some scholars define nature-based tourism in a formal way while taking into account the damage done to the environment. According to Lucas (2002), nature-based tourism offers significant social and economic advantages while having minimal environmental impact. In addition, Cater, Low, and Keirle (2020) emphasize the importance of nature-based tourism in relation to other forms of tourism and the features of their conceptions.

The elements that make up travelers' motivations are covered in the literature. Basically, the reason for the desire to escape can be said to be the desire of tourists to escape from the routine, seeking the senses that they can not reach in routine, in other words, the desire to realize the driving factors in their lives. However, tourists' desire to execute their expectations by seeking out fresh and relevant attractions might be the reason for their quest. Accordingly, the driving elements include fundamental sets like the socio-psychological travel drive of the individual and reliving past events (Moscardo, Dann, & McKercher, 2014) that activate the desire for a holiday. The natural qualities that draw tourists to a certain location, historic sites, or architectural elements are examples of alluring factors. In order to generate enthusiasm for driving factors, enticing elements should maintain certain characteristics (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). In other words, the main variables influencing travelers' choice of places are motivating and alluring characteristics. For example, a tourist who leads an unsocial sort of daily life due to their professional life may have expectations that include wanting to socialize with people and enjoying entertainment that differs from what they are used to. Such a person may spend the vacation in a hotel that is well-known in the area, according to his or her preferences, and that offers a lot of entertainment.

The definitions of "nature-based tourism" and "ecotourism" in the literature currently in publication are varied and disjointed. Although some scholars use these terms interchangeably, others contend that nature-based tourism is a more comprehensive idea that encompasses resource consumption, adventure tourism, environmental preservation, and cultural preservation. Additionally, although ecotourism and nature-based tourism have certain similarities, ecotourism is frequently viewed as more sustainable and responsible. These disparate viewpoints draw attention to the absence of a cohesive framework for comprehending nature-based tourism, particularly with regard to its definitions, drivers, and effects.

Furthermore, although the reasons why people choose nature-based travel, such as wanting to experience new things and getting away from routine, have been studied, little is known about how these reasons affect how visitors perceive their experiences in general. In terms of their combined impact on visitor happiness and perceptions, the significance of motivational and appealing elements such as the environmental, historical, and architectural features of destinations remains understudied.

Understanding the relationship between motivational factors such as novelty, self-development, return to nature, knowledge and fitness, and escape and tourists' overall perceptions of these experiences is lacking, despite some studies highlighting the minimal environmental impact and significant socio-economic benefits of nature-based tourism.

This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating how nature-based tourism motivating elements affect travelers' perceptions in general. This study adds to a more thorough understanding of the elements influencing visitor satisfaction and engagement in nature-based tourism experiences by combining the disparate definitions of nature-based tourism and examining the captivating and motivating aspects that influence visitor perceptions.

As a result, the following objective is established for the study: *To examine the influence of nature-based tourism motivation factors on the overall perception of tourists.*

In the next section, the detailed method followed to arrive at the results of the study is discussed.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methods and materials used for conducting a study are of utmost importance as they can exhibit the levels of error and bias that result. In this case, a descriptive nature of study is conducted where a quantitative approach has been undertaken. The methodological approach generated here is quite rigorous, and the process followed is provided below.

3.1. Sampling Population

The study's target demographic is a specific set of respondents, which includes both local and foreign tourists. More than half of domestic visitors are anticipated to be from large cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Kolkata, and they are likely to have a keen interest in ecotourism. Another important category consists of visitors from nearby states with easy access to Northeast India, such as West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. About 10% of the population is made up of international tourists, who include backpackers and adventure seekers who actively use digital storytelling to organize their trips, as well as visitors from ecotourism hotspots like Europe, Japan, the USA, and Australia.

3.2. Sampling Method

The process of selecting the final group of respondents includes considering a non-probabilistic method. Here, the judgement sampling method is followed to select the final group of respondents.

3.3. Sample Size

A total of respondents will be considered for the purpose of the study, comprising domestic and international tourists. The domestic tourist segment will include individuals from metro cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Kolkata, with an interest in ecotourism, making up more than 50% of the domestic responses. Additionally, travelers from neighboring states like West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha, with accessibility to Northeast India, will be included. The international tourist segment, accounting for approximately 10% of the total, will consist of travelers from countries with a high interest in ecotourism, such as Europe, Japan, the USA, and Australia, along with backpackers and adventure tourists who actively engage with digital storytelling for trip planning.

3.4. Research Instrument

The data required for the study would be collected using a structured questionnaire that has been prepared from existing literature. The questionnaire includes items mostly in the 5-point Likert-type scale and consists of scales used to measure the set objectives of the study.

3.5. Statistical Approach

The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of nature-based tourism motivation factors on the overall perception of tourists. To achieve this, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS to assess the relationships between various motivational factors, such as novelty, self-development, return to nature, knowledge and fitness, and escape, and their impact on tourists' perceptions.

The detailed statistical analysis conducted is explained in the next section.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

As mentioned above, there is a total of 300 responses collected for the purpose of the study. The process to be followed in analyzing these datasets is to divide them into sub-sections investigating each category of the respondents. But before that, a demographic understanding of the respondents is provided below.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the variable - type of tourist.

Type of tourist	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
People from metro cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata) with interest in ecotourism.	150	50.0	50.0
Travelers from neighboring states (West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha) with accessibility to North East India.	120	40.0	40.0
Travelers from countries with high ecotourism interest (Europe, Japan, USA, Australia).	20	6.7	6.7
Backpackers and adventure tourists who engage with digital storytelling for trip planning.	10	3.3	3.3
Total	300	100.0	100.0

As shown in Table 1, a substantial proportion of survey respondents (90%) are domestic tourists, with the majority hailing from urban cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Kolkata, or adjacent states like West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. These tourists are attracted to North East India's accessibility and have a special interest in ecotourism. With a significant desire for experiences centered on nature, ecotourism is one of the most important of these. A lower percentage of the sample is made up of adventure-seeking backpackers (3.3%) and international tourists (6.7%), who are mostly from nations with strong ecotourism interests, such as Europe, Japan, the USA, and Australia. This distribution emphasizes how local ecotourism customers predominate and how crucial it is to satisfy their desires for environmentally beneficial travel experiences. It also emphasizes the necessity for strategies that attract more specialized tourists, such as adventurers and foreign visitors, in order to increase the allure of North East India's nature-based travel destinations. This heterogeneous demographic landscape implies that accessibility, environmental sustainability, and engagement with a range of travel interests should be balanced in the design of both domestic and foreign tourism plans.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the variable – age.

Age	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
18–24 years	90	30.0	30.0
25–34 years	50	16.7	16.7
35–44 years	80	26.7	26.7
45–54 years	40	13.3	13.3
55+ years	40	13.3	13.3
Total	300	100.0	100.0

Respondents in the 18–24 age range are the largest age group in the sample (30%), followed by those in the 35–44 age range (26.7%). Together, these two groups make up over half (56.7%) of all respondents (Table 2). Respondents between the ages of 45 and 54 and those over 55 comprise 13.3% of the sample, while the 25–34 age group is a smaller but noteworthy contributor at 16.7%. Although there is a large range of ages represented in this distribution, most of the individuals are younger (18–44 years old). This suggests that younger generations have a significant interest in nature-based tourism and are more inclined to seek out adventure, eco-tourism, and environmentally sustainable travel experiences.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the variable – gender.

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Male	150	50.0	50.0	50.0
Female	150	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

Male and female responses make up precisely 50.0% of the sample, which is evenly distributed across the two genders (Table 3). A fair examination of gender-based viewpoints or behaviors inside the research is ensured by this equal representation.

To examine the influence of nature-based tourism motivation factors on the overall perception of tourists.
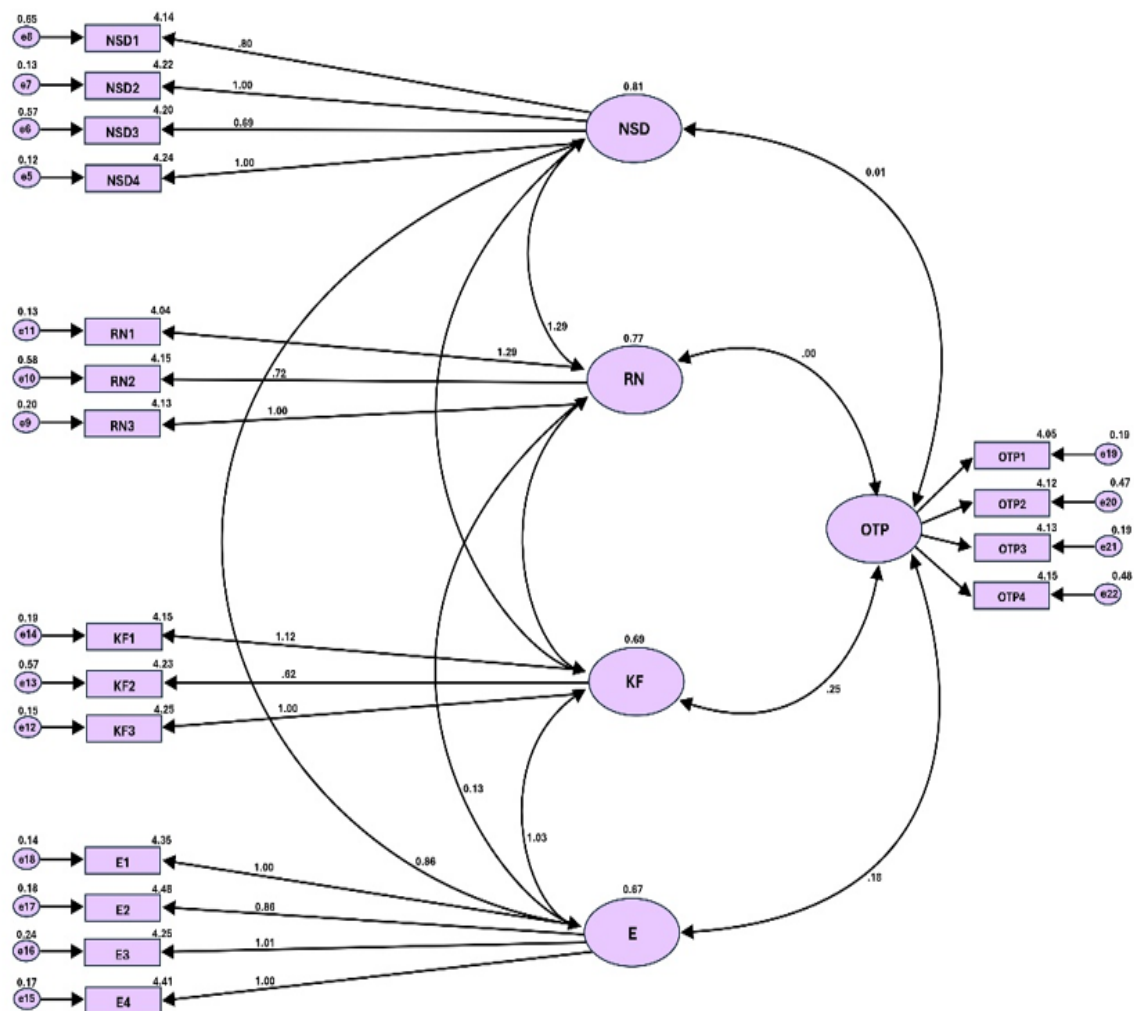

Figure 1. Path diagram of SEM.

The model quantitatively and graphically illustrates how many independent variables (motivational factors) combine to influence the dependent variable, which is the general perception of tourists (Figure 1). It emphasizes how crucial it is to target particular reasons in order to favorably impact travelers' experiences and perspectives, such as presenting opportunities for self-improvement, reestablishing a connection with nature, encouraging fitness, and providing an escape.

Table 4. Factor loadings.

Factor	Indicator	Estimate	SE	Z	p
Novelty and self-development (NSD)	NSD1	0.979	0.0393	24.9	< 0.001
	NSD2	0.591	0.0413	14.3	< 0.001
	NSD3	0.863	0.0351	24.6	< 0.001
	NSD4	0.600	0.0408	14.7	< 0.001
Return to nature (RN)	RN1	1.043	0.0415	25.1	< 0.001
	RN2	0.592	0.0406	14.6	< 0.001
	RN3	0.876	0.0344	25.5	< 0.001
Knowledge and fitness (KF)	KF1	0.970	0.0405	24.0	< 0.001
	KF2	0.666	0.0433	15.4	< 0.001
	KF3	0.869	0.0352	24.7	< 0.001
Escape (E)	E1	0.951	0.0398	23.9	< 0.001
	E2	0.803	0.0341	23.5	< 0.001
	E3	0.872	0.0375	23.3	< 0.001
	E4	0.842	0.0354	23.8	< 0.001
Overall tourist perception (OTP)	OTP1	1.051	0.0409	25.7	< 0.001
	OTP2	0.619	0.0414	15.0	< 0.001
	OTP3	0.961	0.0391	24.6	< 0.001
	OTP4	0.662	0.0414	16.0	< 0.001

Table 5. Estimates of coefficients.

Indicators	Relation	Factors	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
NSD4	<---	NSD	1.000	-	-	***
NSD3	<---	NSD	0.691	0.054	12.896	***
NSD2	<---	NSD	0.998	0.041	24.277	***
NSD1	<---	NSD	0.798	0.058	13.829	***
RN3	<---	RN	1.000	-	-	***
RN2	<---	RN	0.723	0.057	12.719	***
RN1	<---	RN	1.291	0.069	18.723	***
KF3	<---	KF	1.000	-	-	***
KF2	<---	KF	0.622	0.061	10.277	***
KF1	<---	KF	1.124	0.071	15.891	***
E4	<---	E	1.000	-	-	***
E3	<---	E	1.009	0.049	20.769	***
E2	<---	E	0.864	0.042	20.528	***
E1	<---	E	1.027	0.043	23.621	***
OTP1	<---	OTP	1.000	-	-	***
OTP2	<---	OTP	0.588	0.043	13.722	***
OTP3	<---	OTP	0.898	0.040	22.289	***
OTP4	<---	OTP	0.606	0.044	13.919	***

The purpose of the study was to investigate how nature-based tourism motivation factors affect tourist perceptions in general. The findings showed that the dependent factor, Overall Tourist Perception (OTP), and all the indicators under the four motivation factors—Novelty and Self-Development (NSD), Return to Nature (RN), Knowledge and Fitness (KF), and Escape (E)—showed significant loadings with high estimates and critical ratios (C.R.) that were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ (Table 4). The indicator NSD1 showed the greatest loading for Novelty and Self-Development (0.979, Z = 24.9), indicating that one of the main motivations is to experience new and different things. Similarly, Return to Nature showed its strongest loading on RN1 (1.043, Z = 25.1), reflecting the importance of reconnecting with natural environments. In Knowledge and Fitness, KF1 (0.970, Z = 24.0) emerged as the most significant, indicating that learning and maintaining physical fitness play key roles. For Escape, E1 (0.951, Z = 23.9) was the dominant factor, suggesting a strong desire to get away from crowds and noise (Table 5).

Table 6. Model fit indices.

Indices	Model
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.791
Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)	0.745
Bentler-Bonett normed fit index (NFI)	0.770
Bollen's relative fit index (RFI)	0.719
Bollen's incremental fit index (IFI)	0.793

In terms of the dependent variable Overall Visitor Perception, OTP1 showed the highest loading (1.051, Z = 25.7), indicating that visitor experiences were heavily impacted by whether their expectations were met or exceeded. With model fit indices (Table 6) like the Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.791), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.745), and Incremental Fit Index (IFI = 0.793), which are closer to the 0.7 threshold but still indicate a reasonably good match, the structural model showed adequate reliability and validity. These results demonstrate how important motivational elements are in determining how nature-based tourism is perceived overall, emphasizing the need to provide visitors with engaging, peaceful, and enlightening experiences in order to increase their satisfaction. The model fit indices can be regarded as a reasonably good match because they are closer to the acceptable value of 0.7.

5. DISCUSSION

This study investigated how overall tourist perception was impacted by nature-based tourism motivators, including novelty and self-improvement, return to nature, knowledge and fitness, and escape. The results provide insight into how crucial these elements are in influencing visitors' experiences in ecotourism environments.

The study discovered that visitors' perceptions are greatly influenced by the factors of novelty and self-development. This element was closely linked to indicators like trying new things, reflecting, and growing personally. This is consistent with earlier studies that highlight travelers' desire for distinctive and rewarding ecotourism experiences (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012). These results imply that tourism locations may draw and satisfy more visitors if they emphasize activities that encourage creativity and self-improvement.

Additionally, the Return to Nature element had a significant impact on visitors' opinions. Key drivers were indicators like taking in the landscape and feeling at ease. The importance of reestablishing a connection with nature in ecotourism is widely known. Similar findings from earlier research have demonstrated that natural environments improve psychological health and general contentment (Su & Chen, 2020). These results highlight how crucial it is to protect natural areas and encourage peaceful travel experiences in ecotourism locations.

The Knowledge and Fitness component was significant, suggesting that travelers appreciate opportunities to preserve their physical well-being and gain more knowledge about the environment. This conclusion is supported by indicators such as participation in physical activity and learning opportunities. In line with trends in experiential and health-conscious travel, tourists are increasingly looking for locations that provide educational and fitness-focused experiences (Buffa, 2015).

Another important element was escape, which emphasized travelers' want to get away from crowds, noise, and routine. Strong correlations were found between indicators like carefreeness and relaxation. This is in line with research by Crompton (1979), who found that one of the main reasons people travel is to escape. According to the study, ecotourism locations that prioritize remote, peaceful settings are likely to improve tourists' impressions in general.

The aforementioned elements influenced the dependent variable, overall tourist perception, with some indications making substantial contributions. Despite their shortcomings, the model fit indices were satisfactory, suggesting that the connections between the driving forces and visitor perception are adequately well represented. These results imply that the model's architecture may be improved and that other factors could be investigated (Dash & Paul, 2021).

These results emphasize how ecotourism managers must accommodate a range of reasons. It's crucial to provide fresh experiences, protect natural areas, offer opportunities for education and exercise, and facilitate an escape from everyday life. Enhancing overall visitor satisfaction and promoting sustainable tourism growth may be achieved by aligning marketing and operational strategies with these incentives.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how, in the context of ecotourism, the nature-based tourism incentive elements of novelty and self-improvement, return to nature, knowledge and fitness, and escape affected the overall perception of tourists. The results showed that visitors' impressions are greatly influenced by all four independent aspects, emphasizing their need for unusual experiences, a connection to nature, opportunities for personal development, and a break from daily life. These incentives are consistent with the body of research that emphasizes how crucial nature is in determining the experiences and satisfaction of tourists.

The study also highlights how ecotourism locations could intentionally address these goals by providing experiences that foster physical well-being, education, personal growth, and calm. Although the model employed in

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this study yielded insightful results, it also identifies areas that warrant further investigation, especially in terms of improving the model to incorporate more features or modifying it for better fit indices.

All things considered, this study advances our knowledge of how motivational variables affect travelers' opinions and provides useful information for destination marketers and tourism management. Ecotourism locations may increase visitor pleasure, encourage sustainability, and support long-term growth in the industry by matching their services with the fundamental motivations of travelers.

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