PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS SHAPING BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS FOR ECOTOURISM IN NATURE CONSERVATION AREAS

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DOIs: https://www.doi.org/10.46242/jstiuh.v80i2.5899

Abstract. Ecotourism in nature conservation areas has been growing in Vietnam. However, visitors' psychological determinants remain insufficiently understood. This study investigates the psychological determinants shaping intentions for ecotourism in nature conservation areas, with a case study of the Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve. A web-based survey was conducted in March 2025 with 305 respondents living or working in Ho Chi Minh City. Structural equation modeling was applied to examine the hypothesized psychological determinants. The results identify six psychological determinants: "green daily routine," "awareness of human impact on the environment and nature," "awareness of conservation," "attitude toward ecotourism," "awareness of the benefits of ecotourism," and "behavioral intentions to engage in ecotourism in nature conservation areas." Among them, "green daily routine," "awareness of human impact on environment and nature," and "awareness of conservation" positively influence both "attitude toward ecotourism" and "awareness of the benefits of ecotourism." "Attitude toward ecotourism" and "awareness of the benefits of ecotourism" positively contribute to "behavioral intentions to engage in ecotourism." These findings provide useful insights for further analyses of ecotourism-related policies aimed at enhancing visitor engagement and promoting ecotourism in nature conservation areas.
Keywords. Ecotourism, conservation area, psychological determinants, behavioral intention.

1 INTRODUCTION

Nature conservation areas are a type of protected area designated to conserve biodiversity, maintain ecosystem functions, and preserve cultural values. They encompass categories such as national parks, biosphere reserves, and nature reserves [1]. In many developing countries, ecotourism in nature conservation areas has been promoted as a means to support local economic development. A notable example is Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam. The area has been developed as a tourist destination, capitalizing on its mangrove forests and coastline. Covering 34,000 hectares of mangroves, it is designated as a nature conservation area with high biodiversity. This makes it highly suitable for ecotourism development and is expected to attract a growing number of visitors.

From another perspective, residents of major cities may view ecotourism in nature conservation areas as an opportunity to escape daily routines, relax, and relieve stress. Can Gio, therefore, represents a potential destination for people living in nearby areas, particularly HCMC. Gaining a better understanding of urban residents' preferences for ecotourism in such areas is essential for developing effective strategies to promote this form of tourism.

Psychological determinants are recognized as playing a crucial role in shaping preferences for sustainable tourism offerings [2], [3]. Previous studies have shown that tourists' understanding of sustainable tourism and ecosystem services varies across regions [4], and that environmental attitudes function as key psychological determinants [3]. However, research in the context of Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve remains limited. Existing studies have assessed visitor satisfaction based on factors such as environment, natural resources, infrastructure, cultural heritage, accommodation, services, and transportation [5]. Findings indicate high satisfaction with natural resources; moderate satisfaction with the environment, cultural heritage, and infrastructure; but low satisfaction with accommodation and services; and dissatisfaction with transportation. Another study examined factors influencing ecotourism development, including landscape, infrastructure, human resources, security, and service costs [6]. To our knowledge, no research has yet examined behavioral intentions toward ecotourism in this area.

This study examines psychological determinants influencing individual intentions to engage in ecotourism in the Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve, using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach.

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS: A BRIEF REVIEW

Psychological processes are involved when individuals face multiple choices and experience conflict. The input factors of these processes include psychological determinants, such as traits, perceptions, and attitudes as well as the choice situations. Final decisions are shaped by the interaction of these salient factors [7]. Understanding psychological determinants can provide deeper insights into choice behaviors. In particular, behavioral intention is regarded as the most immediate predictor of actual choice, as proposed in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [8] and extended to technology contexts through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) [9].

As described above, the term "psychological determinant" refers to traits, perceptions, or attitudes that are not directly observable. However, they can be modeled as latent variables measured by observable indicators and explained by other observed elements, following Jöreskog's approach [10]. This method, known as SEM, is widely applied in the social sciences. Through SEM, psychological determinants can be captured and subsequently treated as endogenous explanatory variables to improve the analysis of choice behaviors. An alternative approach, principal component analysis (PCA), reduces data dimensionality by extracting linear composites of indicators into components. Kim argued that PCA is less appropriate for examining data structure compared to SEM, particularly in relation to common factor analysis [11]. In addition, several studies have employed qualitative approaches to investigate psychological determinants [12], [13].

Regarding psychological determinants' role, they are valuable for explaining choice behaviors, as demonstrated in behavioral economics [2], [14], including applications in green tourism [2]. Choice behavior can be explained either directly [15] or indirectly through latent class analysis [16]. Some studies further suggest that raising "awareness of environmental impacts" can foster environmentally friendly behaviors [17], [18].

In tourism research, pro-environmental intentions have been explained through determinants such as "pro-environmental personal norm" and "expectancy", derived from integrating the value-belief-norm theory and expectancy theory [19]. In the context of ecotourism at nature-based destinations, behavioral intentions may be strengthened by influencing psychological determinants such as "perceived ecotourism usefulness," "biospheric value," "ecotourism self-identity," "environmental attitude," "subjective norms," and "perceived behavioral control" [9].

In Vietnam, "ecotourism attitude" has been found to be positively affected by "environmental belief" and "nature-based destination image" [20]. Specifically, "environmental belief" influences "ecotourism attitude" both directly and indirectly through "nature-based destination image," highlighting its importance in fostering tourist engagement with ecotourism. However, this study did not directly examine the impact of attitude on behavioral intention. In the case of South Cat tien National Park, "place attachment," "ecotourism motivation," and "nature-based destination image" were reported to have positive effects on "ecotourism intention" [21]. In the study, the "ecotourism motivation" was measured in terms of benefits such as intellectual enrichment and relaxation, while conservation aspects were partly reflected in "nature-based destination image." Another study explored "revisit intention" in Bach Ma National Park, showing that "tourist satisfaction" and "perceived COVID-19 risk" were the main factors influencing intention, while "natural attraction" directly impact "tourist satisfaction" [22]. Overall, previous studies in Vietnam have addressed behavioral intention in ecotourism within nature conservation areas mainly in terms of participation, visit, or revisit. Although conservation has been considered, its role in psychological determinants has received limited attention.

3 MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1 Questionnaire survey

To address the research question of how psychological determinants shape behavioral intentions toward ecotourism in nature conservation areas, we designed a questionnaire consisting of 17 items on respondents' views and lifestyles. These covered aspects such as daily routines, awareness of human–nature relationships, awareness of conservation, attitudes toward ecotourism, and perceived benefits of ecotourism in nature conservation areas. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from negative to positive, as shown in Table 2.

We hypothesized six psychological determinants, measured through the indicators described above. These determinants were structured from general to specific: lifestyle, awareness, attitude, general views on ecotourism, perceptions of its usefulness in nature conservation areas, and behavioral intentions. Two of the hypothesized determinants "green daily routine" and "attitude toward ecotourism" were adapted from [23], drawing respectively from the factors of "pro-environmental private behavior" and "ecotourism attitudes." While the authors measured "environmental beliefs" through views on human impact and conservation, we separated these into two distinct determinants in our study: "awareness of human impact on the environment and nature" and "awareness of conservation." This distinction was made to better reflect specific understandings of conservation in the study context.

The determinant "perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas" was developed based on TAM, which highlights the role of perceived usefulness in shaping behavior [9]. In this study, it was measured through perceived values that tourists may obtain from ecotourism in nature conservation areas, such as learning about local people's nature-based way of life, enjoying natural landscapes, observing wildlife in their habitats, and learning about native plant species. The determinant "behavioral intention to engage in ecotourism in nature conservation areas" was measured through respondents' willingness to participate in and recommend ecotourism. This follows TPB, in which behavioral intention is typically assessed using direct indicators of intended participation. In our study, intention was extended to a broader sense of engagement, captured through both direct and indirect indicators that reflect an individual's willingness to support and promote ecotourism. This is consistent with prior tourism research, where behavioral intention is defined to include not only the likelihood of revisiting but also the willingness to recommend a destination to others [24].

Regarding the relationships among the latent determinants, previous applications of TAM in ecotourism have shown that perceived usefulness may indirectly influence environmental attitudes [9]. In this study, however, we hypothesize that "perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas" has a direct effect on "behavioral intention to engage in ecotourism in nature conservation areas." In addition, "attitude toward ecotourism" is also expected to influence "behavioral intention toward ecotourism in nature conservation areas," consistent with TPB, which emphasizes the role of attitudes in shaping intentions [8]. Finally, the determinants "green daily routine," "awareness of human impact on environment and nature," and "awareness of conservation" are hypothesized to influence both "attitude toward ecotourism" and "perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas."

Additionally, socio-economic characteristics were collected using 11 questions, covering gender, age, education level, employment status, work-environmental relevance, family size, number of children, annual holiday frequency, hometown, monthly income, and monthly expenditure.

Based on the designed questionnaire, a web-based survey was conducted in March 2025 using the online platform SurveyEngine [25]. The survey link was distributed to individuals living or working in HCMC. As an exploratory study, data were collected through convenience sampling. Although this method does not ensure representativeness, it is considered appropriate in early-stage research, where the primary aim is to test the initial validity of latent constructs and structural relationships. In total, 305 valid responses were obtained, meaning that these respondents completed the entire questionnaire.

3.2 Data analysis

We applied SEM approach [10] and used a measurement component (Equation (1)) that defines latent variables η, representing psychological determinants, evaluated through observable indicators b from the questionnaire survey. Additionally, a structural component (Equation (2)) was used to describe the dependency relationships of the latent variables η_i on other latent variables η_j.

$$b = \Lambda\eta_i + \zeta \quad (1)$$

$$\eta_i = B\eta_{j;j\neq i} + \xi \quad (2)$$

where η and b denote the latent variables and observed indicators, respectively. The terms ξ and ζ represent error components, while B and Λ are parameters indicating the relationships among variables. The parameters were estimated using the lavaan package [26]. Model fit was evaluated using several criteria, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

(RMSEA), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). All data analyses were conducted in R version 4.4.3 [27].

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Most respondents are from HCMC (Figure 1), employed in private companies (Figure 2), and report that their work is partly related to environmental issues (Figure 4). The sample shows no significant gender imbalance, although a small proportion (1.6%) identified as other genders (Figure 3). In general, respondents are young and highly educated. On average, they report a monthly income of 9-12 million VND, a monthly expenditure of 7-9 million VND, and 2-3 holidays per year. The average family size is four members, including one child (Table 1).

Regarding the indicators, responses generally showed a positive tendency, with both mean and median values above 3 (the neutral point), except for several indicators of the determinant "green daily routine" (Table 2). The lowest scores were observed for "You often bike or use public transport" (2.58, 0.85) and "You join environmental activities regularly" (2.72, 0.81). These may reflect local lifestyle characteristics, particularly the limited development of public transport infrastructure in Vietnam.

Other indicators related to psychological determinants such as awareness, attitude, perception, and behavioral intention showed relatively high values. This may reflect the sample's characteristics, being skewed toward highly educated respondents whose work is related to environmental issues to some extends.

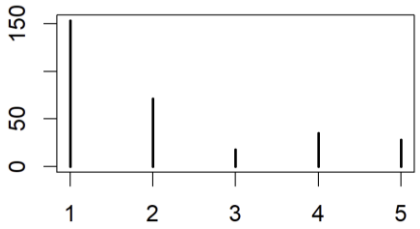


Figure 1: Hometown. 1 (HCMC), 2 (Urban areas near HCMC), 3 (Urban areas far from HCMC), 4 (Rural areas near HCMC), 5 (Rural areas far from HCMC)

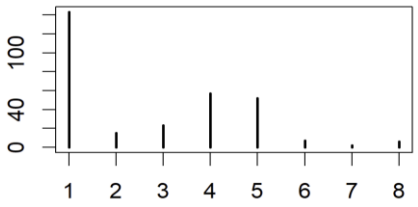


Figure 2: Employment status. 1 (Working in a private company), 2 (Working in a government agency), 3 (Part-time employment), 4 (Self-employed, business owner, or trader), 5 (Student), 6 (Retired), 7 (Housewife/househusband), 8 (Unemployed)

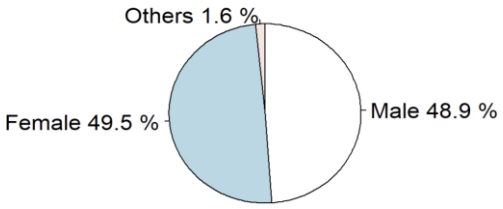


Figure 3: Gender

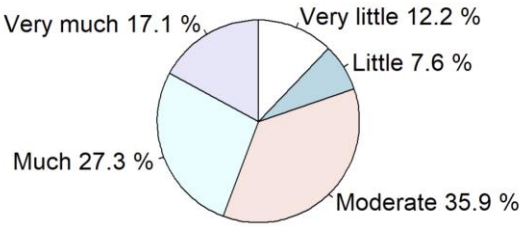


Figure 4: Work related to environmental issues

Table 1: Demographic statistics (N=305)

Socio-economic Characteristics	Categories (%)
Age group	Below 18 (2.62), 18-24 (25.57), 25-34 (32.79), 35-44 (21.97), 45-54 (12.79), 55-64 (3.93), 65 or above (0.33)
Education level	Elementary (1.31), secondary(3.93), high school (10.16), associate degree/equivalent (6.23), undergraduate (32.46), graduate (45.90)
Individual income (10^6 VND/month)	Below 5 (17.70), 5–7 (6.89), 7–9 (7.87), 9–12 (27.54), 12–15(24.59), 15–20 (12.46), 20–25(0.66), 25–35(1.31), 35–50 (0.33), 50 or above (0.66)
Individual expenditure (10^6 VND/month)	Below 5 (25.57), 5–7 (19.34), 7–9 (24.26), 9–12 (21.97), 12–15 (5.57), 15–20 (1.31), 20–25(0.66), 25–35 (0.33), 35 or above (0.98)
Family size (persons)	Below 4 (37.17), 4 (33.88), 5 (7.89), 6 (16.78), 7 or above (4.28)
Number of children in family (children)	0 (26.07), 1 (44.55), 2 (25.74), 3 or above (3.63)
Number of holidays to go somewhere	Below 2 (10.49), 2-3 (22.30), above 3 (16.07), do not know (51.15)

4.2 Psychological determinants

The SEM model included six latent variables, defined by significant indicators as shown in Table 3, and structured as shown in Figure 5. The model fit criteria included an RMSEA of 0.075 (90% CI: 0.064-0.086), a CFI of 0.953, and a SRMR of 0.080. These values satisfy the commonly accepted thresholds for acceptable model fit [28]. This modest fit may be attributable to the relatively small sample size compared with the complexity of the model, combined with the presence of ordinal indicators, may have contributed to some fit indices reaching only acceptable rather than good levels. Such modest fit is common in behavioral and social science research, particularly when sample size below 500, fit indices tend to underestimate the model fit compared to population values [29].

The measurement equations for latent variables are presented in Table 3. Six determinants were specified. First, “green daily routine” was identified by participation in environmental activities, following environmental news and publications, and daily use of a bicycle or public transport. Second “awareness of human impact on environment and nature” was defined by recognition of human interference with natural systems. Third, “awareness of conservation” was captured by the perceived value of conservation for future generations and the belief in the rights of plants and animals. Fourth, “attitude toward ecotourism” was measured by respondents’ views on its role and activities. Fifth, “perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas” was defined by the perceived benefits of ecotourism, including learning about local people’s nature-based way of life, enjoying natural landscapes, observing animals and plants in their habitats, and learning about native plant species. Sixth, “behavioral intention to engage in ecotourism in nature conservation areas” was represented by willingness to participate and to recommend it to others, highlighting both the direct (participation) and indirect (recommendation) dimensions of intention in the context of ecotourism in nature conservation.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of indicators for psychological determinants (N=305)

Hypothesized Psychological Determinant	Indicator	Adapted from	Median	Mean	SD.
Green daily routine	You often read environmental news	[23] (originally Pro-environmental private behavior)	3	2.97	0.86
	You own energy-saving appliances		4	3.84	0.93
	You join environmental activities regularly		3	2.72	0.81
	You often bike or use public transport		2	2.58	085
Awareness of human impact on the environment and nature	Humans are abusing the environment	[23] (originally Environmental beliefs)	5	4.50	0.81
	Interference by humans in natural systems frequently leads to negative outcomes		4	3.94	0.85
Awareness of conservation	Nature possesses inherent value and its protection is crucial for both present and future generations	[23] (originally Environmental beliefs)	5	4.75	0.55
	All plants and animals have an equal right to exist alongside humans		5	4.68	0.61
Attitude toward ecotourism	Ecotourism revenue should support conservation	[23] (originally Eco-tourism attitudes)	4	4.32	0.68
	Ecotourism should avoid disturbing wildlife habitats		4	4.27	0.65
	Sustainable tourist areas provide more than economic benefits		4	4.20	0.87
Perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas	Learn about the local people's nature-based way of life	_	5	4.57	0.67
	Allow everyone to enjoy natural landscapes		5	4.65	0.63
	Observe animals and plants in their natural habitats		5	4.66	0.59
	Learn about native plant species		5	4.66	0.59
Behavioral intention to engage in ecotourism in nature conservation areas	You will participate in ecotourism	[24] (originally Behavioral intention for destination)	5	4.41	0.71
	You will recommend ecotourism to people around you		5	4.52	0.67

The 5-point Likert scale from negative to positive was used.

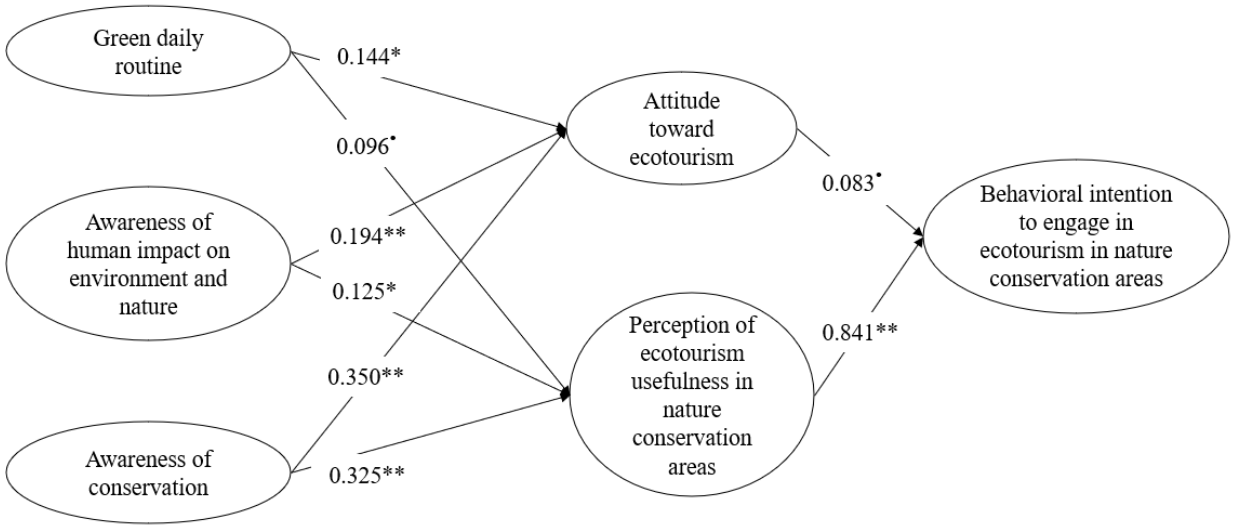
Table 3: Relationship between psychological determinants and indicators

Psychological Determinant	Indicator	Factor loading
Green daily routine	You join environmental activities regularly	1
	You often read environmental news	0.972**
	You often bike or use public transport	0.683**
Awareness of human impact on the environment and nature	Humans are abusing the environment	1
	Interference by humans in natural systems frequently leads to negative outcomes	0.638**
Awareness of conservation	Nature possesses inherent value and its protection is crucial for both present and future generations	1
	All plants and animals have an equal right to exist alongside humans	0.955**
Attitude toward ecotourism	Sustainable tourist areas provide more than economic benefits	1
	Ecotourism revenue should support conservation	0.936**
	Ecotourism should avoid disturbing wildlife habitats	0.762**
Perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas	Learn about the local people's nature-based way of life	1
	Allow everyone to enjoy natural landscapes	0.989**
	Observe animals and plants in their natural habitats	0.931**
	Learn about native plant species	0.948**
Behavioral intention to engage in ecotourism in nature conservation areas	You will participate in ecotourism	1
	You will recommend ecotourism to people around you	0.932**

*** Significant at 1% level.*

Figure 5 illustrates the relationships among the determinants. “Green daily routine,” “awareness of human impact on environment and nature,” and “awareness of conservation” all positively affect both “attitude toward ecotourism” and “perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas.” The positive effects of awareness on attitude are consistent with earlier findings showing the significant impact of “environmental belief” on “ecotourism attitude” in the context of nature-based ecotourism in Vietnam [20]. Interestingly, “green daily routine” influences both “attitude towards ecotourism” and “perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas,” suggesting that individuals with environmentally friendly habits not only hold more favorable attitudes toward ecotourism but also see it as more beneficial for conservation areas. This result aligns with a previous study [30] linking personal lifestyle choices to pro-environmental intentions. Awareness of human impact and conservation awareness also emerged as significant predictors, underscoring that ecological knowledge and value-based concerns are critical in shaping ecotourism attitudes, consistent with earlier research [31]. These findings highlight the role of environmental education in cultivating favorable attitudes toward sustainable travel.

Moreover, “behavioral intention to engage in ecotourism in nature conservation areas” is positively influenced by both “attitude toward ecotourism” and “perception of ecotourism usefulness in nature conservation areas.” This finding confirms the importance of internal attitudes and perceived usefulness in decision-making processes. It is consistent with behavioral models such as TPB, which highlights attitude as a key determinant of intention, and TAM, which emphasizes the role of perceived usefulness. The positive impact of perceived usefulness on behavioral intention is also consistent with findings from a study in South Cat Tien National Park, Vietnam [21] , which identified “ecotourism motivation” and “nature-based destination image” as important predictors.



*** Significant at 1% level; * Significant at 5% level ; • Significant at 10% level.*

Figure 5: Relationship among psychological determinants

These findings have practical implications for developing ecotourism in the Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve, particularly in attracting tourists and encouraging word-of-mouth recommendations. First, two critical factors to emphasize are the attitude toward ecotourism and the perception of its usefulness in nature conservation areas. Second, effective strategies include raising awareness of human impacts on the environment and conservation in order to enhance both attitudes and perceptions of ecotourism usefulness. Third, individuals with environmentally friendly daily routines represent potential customers, and marketing efforts should target this group.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms the psychological determinants hypothesized to shape behavioral intentions toward ecotourism in nature conservation areas, using the Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve as a case study. From an empirical standpoint, the findings contribute to a better understanding of specific psychological determinants, namely "green daily routine," "awareness of human impact on environment and nature," "awareness of conservation," "attitude toward ecotourism," "awareness of the benefits of ecotourism," and "behavioral intention to engage in ecotourism in nature conservation areas" and their interrelationships in explaining behavioral intentions. These results provide insights for policies aimed at enhancing visitor engagement and promoting ecotourism in the Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve. Policy implications include: prioritizing the development of positive attitudes toward ecotourism and perceptions of its usefulness for nature conservation; implementing strategies to raise awareness of human environmental impacts and conservation, thereby strengthening both attitudes and perceptions; and targeting individuals with environmentally friendly daily routines as a potential customer segment in marketing campaigns.

It should be noted that the results are based on data skewed toward younger, highly educated individuals with work related to the environment. Such a composition may accentuate certain psychological determinants while underrepresenting how these factors operate in more diverse populations. Moreover, the model fit is relatively modest, which is not uncommon in behavioral and social science research, where moderate sample sizes, complex model structures, and self-reported measures can reduce overall fit indices. These limitations suggest that the implications of this study should be interpreted with caution and validated with larger samples and more refined measurement instruments. Future analyses could also account for exogenous influences on these determinants to enhance explanatory power. Additionally, integrating psychological determinants into latent class analyses of ecotourism choice behavior could provide valuable insights for policy-making aimed at fostering this type of tourism.

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CÁC YẾU TỐ TÂM LÝ ĐỊNH HÌNH Ý ĐỊNH HÀNH VI ĐỐI VỚI DU LỊCH SINH THÁI TRONG KHU BẢO TỒN TỰ NHIÊN

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Tóm tắt. Du lịch sinh thái tại các khu bảo tồn tự nhiên đã được phát triển ở Việt Nam. Tuy nhiên, các yếu tố tâm lý của du khách vẫn chưa được hiểu đầy đủ. Nghiên cứu này nhằm khám phá các yếu tố tâm lý định hình ý định hành vi đối với du lịch sinh thái trong khu bảo tồn tự nhiên, với ví dụ trường hợp Khu Dự Trữ Sinh Quyển Rừng Ngập Mặn Cần Giờ. Một khảo sát trực tuyến đã được thực hiện vào tháng 3 năm 2025 với 305 người đang sinh sống hoặc làm việc tại thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Mô hình phương trình cấu trúc được sử dụng để kiểm định các giả thuyết về yếu tố tâm lý. Kết quả xác nhận sự tồn tại của sáu yếu tố tâm lý, gồm: "thói quen xanh trong sinh hoạt hằng ngày," "nhận thức về tác động của con người đối với môi trường và thiên nhiên," "nhận thức về bảo tồn," "thái độ đối với du lịch sinh thái," "nhận thức về lợi ích của du lịch sinh thái," và "ý định hành vi đối với du lịch sinh thái tại các khu vực bảo tồn tự nhiên." Ba yếu tố "thói quen xanh trong sinh hoạt hằng ngày," "nhận thức về tác động của con người đối với môi trường và thiên nhiên," và "nhận thức về bảo tồn" có ảnh hưởng tích cực đến "thái độ đối với du lịch sinh thái" và "nhận thức về lợi ích của du lịch sinh thái." Trong khi đó, "ý định hành vi đối với du lịch sinh thái ở các khu bảo tồn tự nhiên" được thúc đẩy bởi hai yếu tố là "thái độ đối với du lịch sinh thái" và "nhận thức về lợi ích của du lịch sinh thái." Những phát hiện này có thể làm cơ sở cho các phân tích sâu hơn về chính sách thúc đẩy du lịch sinh thái tại các khu bảo tồn tự nhiên theo hướng thu hút khách du lịch tham gia và giới thiệu về loại hình này.

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Từ khóa. Du lịch sinh thái, khu bảo tồn tự nhiên, các yêu tố tâm lý, ý định hành vi.

Received on May 19 – 2025

Accepted on Sep 11 – 2025