Seeking a deeper level of responsibility for inclusive (eco)tourism

Duty and the pinnacle of practice

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ABSTRACT

As a form of tourism that aims to be sustainable and, in broader terms, responsible and ethical, ecotourism occupies a peak position in terms of people's understanding of sustainable tourism. The purpose of this paper is to articulate how responsibility can be actuated through a deeper consideration of duty (good as intrinsic) and strategic (good for business) perspectives. In pursuit of this overall aim, the paper investigates a sample of Ecotourism Australia (EA) certified company websites to examine inclusivity barriers based on the social model of disability: physical, attitudinal, and informational. The choice of Australia is based on the observation that ecotourism providers in this region are often cited as highly advanced in terms of policies and practices. Results suggest that there is only limited statistical support for the hypothesis that the 'leading' ecotourism operators (with advanced EA certification) in Australia pay more attention to disability issues than those in the 'following' group (with lower categories of EA certification). The paper concludes by suggesting that the responsibility agenda is most likely to move forward by providers adopting ways of "thinking" and "doing" that emphasise duty and justice instead of following accepted business practice.

Keywords: Accessibility, disability, ecotourism, responsible tourism, Ecotourism Australia

1. INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities (PwDs) face many challenges when taking tourism trips. Several recent media accounts have drawn these challenges into the public eye. For example, Cerchiai and Lieberman (2021) explore the difficulties PwDs experience in undertaking air travel and argue that the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 has done little to reduce discrimination against PwDs in this respect. Lu (2019) writes that travel for PwDs can cost upwards of four times the amount paid by those without disabilities but insists that travel should be a right for all rather than a luxury for the few. And Abdullahi (2019) urges change on the part of the travel industry but insists that PwDs would do well not dwell on things they cannot do.

Cerchiai and Lieberman (2021) suggest that people with disabilities have consistently faced discrimination when travelling for leisure purposes. Recent studies have also observed that tourism and accessibility studies and practices need to take place within the context of sustainability, responsibility and ethical perspectives (Benjamin, Bottone, & Lee, 2021). Indeed, if tourism fulfils its obligation to take the needs of marginalised populations seriously, transitioning towards more responsible forms of production, consumption and benefits is hardly optional: it is a fundamental moral imperative (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

This is especially the case with ecotourism, which is, at least in theory, the most ethically informed type of tourism. It embraces core aspects including a responsibility to facilitate learning and education, sustainability, and ethics, in natural settings (Fennell, 2020). Ecotourism providers have generally sought to accommodate the needs of PwDs by complying with new legislation (Chikuta, du Plessis, & Saayman, 2019). Challenges in serving the recreational needs of PwDs span the provision of activities of both soft and hard path ecotourism, which involve different considerations concerning modifications to nature (Authors, in press).

Given the dearth of scholarship in the intersection of responsibility, accessibility and tourism, the purpose of this paper is to examine a sample of websites of Ecotourism Australia (EA) certified companies to investigate how, and also how far, they are addressing the barriers that flow from the social model of disability: physical, attitudinal, and informational. Australia is selected because of its advanced certification system, which includes 400 operators and 1600 certified products (Tourism 2030 Services, 2021), and because of the tight connection between ecotourism operators, scholars, and government involvement. As such, we argue that EA certified providers should be at the forefront of accessibility practices. A further aim of this paper is to articulate how responsibility, in this case for accessibility for PwDs, can be actuated through a deeper discussion and framework on duty and justice. The intent is to accelerate responsibility in ecotourism by further investigating the responsibility platform from both duty (good as intrinsic) and strategic (good for business) perspectives. The present study is informed by the critical/transformative research paradigm. This approach is characterised by concern over power relationships within social structures, an understanding of the consequences of privileging versus reality, social positioning, a focus on morality and ethics, the promotion of human rights and social justice, and a high reliance on praxis and action (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Much of the literature on accessibility in tourism has focused on disentangling terms that have been used synonymously. Accessible tourism refers to the ease with which persons with disabilities can access facilities and equipment, for example by removing barriers to tourism (Buhalis, Darcy, & Ambrose, 2012). Inclusive tourism, in contrast, is defined as "[t]ransformative tourism in which marginalised groups are engaged in ethical production or consumption of tourism and the sharing of its benefits" (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018, p. 592). PwDs constitute one such marginalised group, which implies that accessible tourism is a subset of inclusive tourism. The focus of this paper is at the level of the former set, but its conclusions have ramifications for the latter.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review is in four parts. The first considers disabilities and barriers in tourism, including identifying gaps in the literature and practice. The second includes a discussion on sustainability and responsibility and why the absence of a focus on ethics has made these two concepts more aspirational than operational. The third provides a discussion on how Kierkegaard's ethic of responsibility based on duty can contribute to building individual and community capacity for positive change. The fourth involves the blending of these three parts results in the development of a *pinnacle of practice* framework based on best practices from intra-field, intra-sector and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Scholarly research on accessible tourism has advanced on several fronts. Much of the earliest research was conceptual (Darcy, McKercher, & Schweinsberg, 2020), focusing on making a case for the needs of PwDs first to be recognised and subsequently to be addressed by the tourism industry (Ambrose, 2012). Recent studies indicate that there are upwards of one billion people on the planet who live with some type of disability (World Health Organization, 2021), and thus the market for such travel holds tremendous potential (Porto, Rucci, Darcy, & Garbero 2019). Economic impact studies and studies of patterns of travel behaviour for PwDs have been shown by Darcy, McKercher, and Schweinsberg (2020) to be carried out mainly in European countries such as Germany, the UK, and Spain, but some have also been based carried out in Australia.

A growing number of empirical studies have considered the travel experiences of those with physical disabilities (Bi, Card, & Cole, 2007; Ray & Ryder, 2003), sensory disabilities (Richards, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010; Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012), intellectual disabilities (Sedgley, Pritchard, Morgan, & Hanna, 2017) and, occasionally, a combination of these (Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2010; Yau, McKercher, & Packer, 2004). Such studies have been in the context of air travel (Darcy, 2012; Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2010), tourist accommodation (Darcy, 2010; Randle & Dolnicar, 2019; Williams, Rattray, & Grimes, 2006) and, albeit only in a handful of cases, nature tourism and ecotourism (Chikuta, du Plessis, & Saayman, 2017, 2019; Lovelock, 2010). Previous studies have also focused on the provision of information in the destination marketing context (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011); family travel and children with disabilities (Kim & Lehto, 2013); and accessible tourism and destination competitiveness (Porto et al., 2019).

A framework that has proven helpful in many studies is the social model of disability which focuses on three sets of barriers that prevent PwDs from participating in tourism (Randle & Dolnicar, 2019). First are physical barriers, which relate to aspects of buildings, streetscapes or natural areas that make everyday activities difficult for PwDs, including entering and leaving buildings, moving around, sitting, sleeping, washing, bathing, and using the toilet. Second are attitudinal barriers, which relate not to the PwD’s attitude to travel but to those they encounter in their travels, particularly those who work in tourism occupations. Such attitudes include, variously, paying too little attention to PwDs, treating them in insulting or discriminatory ways, or even being 'overly helpful'. Third are informational barriers, which relate to the difficulties PwDs may encounter in obtaining information about the trip and how their needs and wants might be met while they are taking it. Increasingly, PwDs are using websites and social media as a means of information-gathering, but these sites are not always well designed for them.

The importance of accessibility in tourism is recognised by the UNWTO, which has as a central theme the creation of better policies, facilities, products, and services designed to meet the needs of persons with disabilities (UNWTO, 2021a). This theme is part of a broader initiative by the UNWTO (2021b) on ethics, culture, and social responsibility, making it clear that disability and accessibility are intricately tied to a moral agenda. Research by Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) also makes an explicit connection between disability and accessibility, and responsible (more substantively) and ethical (far less substantively) tourism. Like the UNWTO (2021a), there is recognition that an ethical future for persons with disabilities will include participation in the production and consumption of the tourism industry, with benefits going to those who have otherwise been marginalised in these processes. A similar call “for an *inclusive tourism* framework that includes involving PWDs in the ethical production and consumption of tourism” has been made by Benjamin et al. (2021, p. 309).

The preceding discussion on tourism and disabilities demonstrates the need for greater emphasis on responsibility and sustainability both in theory and practice. However, the relationship between these concepts is not always clear. Sustainability is seen as a theory and concept, whilst responsibility is viewed as practice demanding action (Mihalic, 2016), with the former subsuming or underpinning the latter (Goodwin, Spenceley, & Maynard, 2002). Indeed, while sustainable tourism is viewed as a long-term goal, responsible tourism is “a process where companies, authorities, tourists and other stakeholders take concrete actions for working towards more sustainable tourism futures” (García-Rosell, 2021, n.p.). Recognising the important positionality of both sustainability and responsibility in tourism, some scholars have recognised the value in combining the two terms as “responsustable” tourism in achieving better balance between (1) awareness (e.g., of environmental harm), (2) agenda (e.g., environmental policy linking to sustainable tourism), and (3) action (e.g., implementation of policy as responsible tourism behaviour) (Mihalic, 2016).

Responsible tourism is said to be a way of doing tourism in securing good outcomes for people and the planet (Husbands & Harrison, 1996). More broadly, responsible tourism is designed to increase the economic wellbeing of individuals and communities, is inclusive, contributes to the conservation of heritage, enables meaningful contact between hosts and guests, minimises impacts, and is culturally sensitive (McLaren, 2006). Furthermore, motivations for being responsible can be based on intrinsic goals (doing good for its own sake) or extrinsic (doing good because it is good for business).

The problem in realising these often-aspirational approaches to tourism – meaning responsible tourism and sustainable tourism – is that they are too often constructed in the absence of a solid ethical framework, despite early calls for such an approach (Hughes, 1995; May, 1991). Becker (2012), for example, argued that sustainability must be grounded in ethics. If not, it will fail to properly situate our many relationships: people of the present day, people in future generations, and our relationship with nature. More recently, Salamat (2016) has articulated several of the points raised above:

> In the final analysis, sustainable development actions by governments or the private sector should be undertaken as a result of an innate *duty* and not simply out of *self-interest*. In other words, such actions should not be taken because they will reduce costs, increase revenues, create jobs or increase GDPs. Instead, they should also be taken to achieve the SDGs because, as rational human beings, preserving Earth's environment and protecting the welfare of society as a whole is morally the *right* and the *good* thing to do (Salamat, 2016, p. 5; see also mshank, 2016).

Ethics, then, provides a rich tapestry of perspectives that allows for application in any context in expanding the circle of morality (Singer, 1981) in improving and expanding our moral codes. Consequently, the standards used to judge moral action need to be stronger as time progresses (Wright, 2000). Many recent studies in tourism have adopted ethical theories for greater clarity around practical issues (Macbeth, 2005). Examples include Lee and Jamal (2008) on environmental justice; Holden (2009) on environmental ethics; Przeclawski (1996) on deontology in tourism; Heintzman (1995) on the Golden Rule; and Lovelock (2008) and Mihalič and Fennell (2014) on human rights and tourism.

In responding to the call for a more inclusive tourism framework that includes the ethical production and consumption of tourism from Benjamin et al. (2021), this paper introduces an ethical approach to responsibility based on duty. The focus on duty can be both normative and existential. As a normative focus, duty has been discussed from a deontological perspective through work by Kant (1781) and Rawls (1971). Kant argued that general or universal laws provide guidance for society, and goodwill compels individuals to act for the benefit of society. If done not in the service of self-interest or personal gain but rather from altruistic and benevolence, these acts have a higher moral significance (Kant, 1781). Rawls (1971) observed that rational beings have both a conception of the good and the willingness to act upon principles of justice in being fair to all members of society in an objective way.

When justice is discussed in a normative manner only, however, there is the chance that the responsibility and accountability that individuals have in creating a just world may be overlooked. Sometimes, humans' decisions as individuals hide within the safe confines of the organisations they operate. Pieper (1955) broached this topic in arguing that justice must be performed at the scale of the individual, not by organisations and institutions because it is the former (individuals) who act on behalf of the latter. The danger of transgressive acts, Pieper argued, is not the act itself but rather the threat to the harmony and balance of community life. Although humans are relational and dependent on others in the world, they also act as individual agents and practice individual morality in determining what is good for us as individuals and the collective. The sustainable citizen, Becker (2012) argues, emerges through the balance of both.

The focus on individual or subjectivist morality has been a topic of considerable debate in the existentialism domain. Kierkegaard argued that we must work in the interests of others as an ethic of response or as a form of love-as-responsibility (see Fennell, 2008). In his *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard (1847/2000) reasoned that the deontological duty of "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" pertains not just to immediate neighbours but rather as a multiplicity of people (Lillegard, 2002) in building a community of ethically oriented selves as the basis of responsible citizenship (Dooley, 2001; Fennell, 2008). Where Kierkegaard departed from the Golden Rule is in the belief that there are too many obscurities in loving one's neighbour as oneself. Sometimes people do not love themselves, so often do not have love for others. Furthermore, self-love is also not a manner by which to love others.

In its place, Kierkegaard commanded "You Shall Love", which is a duty not based on reason in the Kantian sense, as noted above, but instead as a duty to the heart. As such, we care for our own hearts by exploring our inner selves, i.e., who we are and perhaps whom we wish to be, and how this applies to other people – our neighbours – in the form of an ethic of care. Additionally, Kierkegaard argued that we need to remain in love's debt. This state of constant indebtedness and asymmetry means that we can never do enough for people, e.g., we cannot choose to be good 20% of the time and call that enough. Being in the service of the needs of others, therefore, is a duty that is never fulfilled. It is only in taking care of the hearts of others that we take care of our own heart, which in the end gives us freedom. Therefore, the essence of true responsibility is not about maximising benefits and minimising costs because this opens the door to self-interest and the suspension of morality. We can only be truly free if we put the needs of others ahead of our own (see Fennell, 2008 for an extended discussion of this philosophy).

In summary, this paper echoes the thoughts of McLaren (2006) that responsible tourism should be about, among other things, meaningful contact between hosts and guests. Kierkegaard's focus on duty provides an ideal moral framework from which to build responsible citizenship not just by "doing" responsible tourism but first by "thinking" critically about it (Fennell, 2008) in creating innovation in accessibility practices (Benjamin et al., 2021), especially in ecotourism. Such an approach also provides people with the ability to critically question the relationship between responsible and sustainable in being ethical operators and the nature and meaning of best practice. The convergence of these perspectives allows for the development of an approach referred to here as the *pinnacle of practice,* which is based on thinking and doing from a more holistic and comprehensive approach. Reaching the pinnacle of practice, using ecotourism and accessibility as an example, demands three levels of influence (Figure 1), as follows.

1. Accessibility best practice within the *ecotourism* sector based on theory and practice (intra-sectoral focus)
2. Accessibility best practice within the *tourism* sector in general based on theory and practice (intra-field focus)
3. Accessibility best practice from *other fields and disciplines* based on theory and practice (interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary focus)

The intersection of knowledge in these three spheres, and the application of core values and principles, will contribute to a type of operation that provides far greater depth to ecotourism and accessibility in practice, but also in policy and theory.

This paper sets out to investigate these issues through a content analysis of the websites of certified ecotourism businesses in Australia. As well as highlighting its members' sustainability credentials, Ecotourism Australia includes a list of members on its website, with click-through to further information and members' website home pages. This analysis attempts to assess how accessible these operations are for PwDs.

Figure 1 about here

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Selection of websites

The sample of websites used in his study was drawn from those included on the Ecotourism Australia (2020a) list of certified ecotourism providers. At the time of the data collection for this study (March

2020), the list contained nearly 500 businesses holding EA certification, located across all eight states and territories of Australia. EA certification can be held at one of three levels, the base level being ‘nature tourism’, the next ‘ecotourism’ (or ‘eco-certified) and the highest ‘advanced ecotourism’. Further details of the EA certification scheme, including eligibility and assessment criteria, are available on their website (Ecotourism Australia, 2020b).

The filters provided on the EA website were used to search for ecotourism businesses within each of the three categories of certification. It was also possible to search within these categories for providers that were listed as 'wheelchair accessible’, this being the only filter relating to accessibility available. It is important to note that it was not clear how wheelchair accessibility had been assessed to build these filters: whether by self-reporting on the part of the provider or some form of professional assessment. EA certification does not presently include any assessment of accessibility for people with disabilities. It is also important to recognise that 'wheelchair accessible' can only be taken as a proxy for the provider's commitment to addressing the motivations and needs of people with disabilities in general, which is the subject of this paper. There are people with disabilities of many types and levels of severity who do not need or wish to use a wheelchair, either in their daily lives or when engaging in ecotourism. Each listing provided some basic information about the provider and a link to their customer-facing website homepage. In every case, this homepage was used as the starting point for the content analysis.

The website of every provider with 'wheelchair accessibility in each certification category was chosen for further analysis. This amounted to 25 websites for the advanced ecotourism category, 17 for the eco-certified category and nine for the nature tourism category: a total of 51 providers. Coincidentally, this profile was almost representative of the totality of providers listed on the website (i.e., all certified providers, removing the ‘wheelchair accessible’ filter), which would have resulted in 25 advanced, 18 eco-certified and eight nature-tourism-certified providers.

For providers not listed as ‘wheelchair accessible’, a randomised selection strategy was employed (candidates being selected using polyhedral dice to ensure an equal chance of being included in the sample). A quota sample was used to reflect the number of providers in each certification category to match the 'wheelchair accessible' sample in total size. This resulted in the random selection of 25 advanced, 18 eco-certified and eight nature tourism providers. Hence, the total size of the dataset was 102 (51 that were identified as wheelchair accessible on the EA website and 51 that were not).

Coding of the dataset

Coding was undertaken between March and June 2020. A 'double-blind' coding process was applied to the whole dataset. One coder was an author of this paper, and the other was a research assistant who had been trained in the technique. A coding guide was developed to assist in this process. Appendix 1 summarises the coding scheme and provides detail of the rationale for the choice of variables.

The coding scheme can be thought of as a series of proxy measures of the accessibility of each of the companies' ecotourism facilities and/or activities to PwDs, based on the information that could be gleaned from the websites. As summative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2016) was to be used, and codes were chosen to allow for as an objective assessment as possible. Thus, the coding analysis focused on subjects that could be determined to be present or absent.

The coding process sought to identify both barriers to PwDs accessing the facilities and activities of the company concerned and the measures that the companies had put in place to address these (Kastenholz et al., 2015; Randle & Dolnicar, 2019). Informational barriers were assessed using proxies relating to best-practice design for PwDs. These included an assessment of the accessibility features of the homepage, for example, whether photographs on the page had Alt-tag descriptions for people with visual disabilities or subtitling on videos for those with hearing disabilities, as well as whether the website as a whole had features such as a dedicated information page for PwDs and a website access pack. Such techniques have been used previously to assess accessibility (e.g., Williams et al., 2006; Mills, Han, & Clay, 2008), and the good practices used in these studies were followed.

Physical barriers, meanwhile, were assessed in terms of what facilities and activities were available to non-disabled people that were not for PwDs. Thus, some websites stated that people who used wheelchairs would be unable to access some parts of the site, while others stated that people with certain medical conditions could not participate in certain activities. Further evidence was gathered in whether the website mentioned different types of disability catered for (relating to physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities). Those not mentioned were presumably not considered by the company, and hence any barriers to access that may exist had not been addressed.

The presence of attitudinal barriers was assessed in several ways, including whether there were additional charges for carers or assistance animals and whether PwDs were required to contact the company ahead of arrival to explain their needs. The terminology used to describe PwDs and their access needs were also assessed because this could serve as a proxy of the owner and staff members' attitudes. If outdated terminology was used, for example, it may indicate the owner and staff members are not up to date with disability issues or that they were unconcerned about the effect this might have on the rights and dignities of PwDs (Eichhorn, Miller, & Tribe, 2013; Gillovic, McIntosh, Darcy, & Cockburn-Wootten, 2018). The usage of such terms may be regarded as cases of microaggression (Olkin, Hayward, Abbene, & VanHeel, 2019).

This coding scheme required a total of 50 individual items to be coded for each website: this implied a total of 5100 coded items in the dataset as a whole. After the initial coding, an 89.2% inter-coder reliability statistic was recorded using the widely accepted percentage-agreement method (Lombard, 2002). It is essential to note in the course of the analysis, the Australian government's regulation to restrict the spread of COVID-19 led to the effective shutdown of the Australian tourism industry. During this time, many providers edited their websites to include information for potential visitors; others used the downtime to update their websites. Such could explain the relatively poor inter-coder reliability statistic recorded, as the first reviewer undertook their analysis in March and the other reviewer undertook theirs through April to June.

Perhaps due to the economic effects of the COVID-19 lockdown in Australia, two websites ceased operation during the timeframe for analysis, and were, therefore, excluded from the dataset. The total number of websites included in the analysis was hence 100. A breakdown is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic dataset characteristics

	Identified as 'wheelchair accessible'	Not identified as such	**Total**
Advanced	25	23	**48**
Eco-certified	17	18	**35**
Nature tourism	9	8	**17**
Total	**51**	**49**	**100**

As is conventional with summative content analysis, the reviewers discussed those instances where their codes differed and agreed on revisions to the coding guide. Following a second attempt at coding the entire dataset, and inter-coder reliability statistic of 99.2% was recorded. Such is above the widely accepted 90% threshold of acceptability (Park & Park, 2015) and demonstrates that, despite the effects of COVID-19, a high level of confidence can be put on the data.

This dataset was then used for further analysis to determine the findings of this part of the study. Chi-square analysis was used to assess the relationships between the data according to six hypotheses, based around the theory developed in the literature review.

As noted above, it has been established that companies may adopt sustainable and/or responsible practices either because of extrinsic or intrinsic motivations. Extrinsic motivations tend to focus on doing good because it is good for business, while intrinsic motivations tend to focus on doing good for its own sake. In this case, doing good comprises one or both of two things: adopting ecotourism practices and ensuring accessibility for PwDs. It might therefore be hypothesised that those providers that have gained greater levels of EA certification in order to achieve extrinsic outcomes might be more likely to use the term 'ecotourism' prominently on the website in order to secure additional customer interest, while those that are seeking intrinsic outcomes might feel less inclined to do so. The first hypothesis was thus that:

> H1: Providers with higher levels of EA certification make more use the term 'ecotourism' on their homepage

The second and third hypotheses also relate to the motivations of providers. It can be hypothesised that particular types of providers have more flexibility to introduce changes to their business practices that reflect responsibility towards ecotourism and accessibility respectively. It might be argued, for example, that providers working with human-built resources (such as accommodation) have greater opportunities to develop 'win-win' practices that will be more sustainable and/or responsible and at the same time contribute to their business performance. Other providers (such as, for example, wilderness tours) rely more on natural resources, which are more difficult to manage and less likely, in so doing, to contribute the company's bottom line. H2 and H3 are thus that:

> H2: Providers with higher levels of EA certification are concentrated in particular categories of business

> H3: Providers listed as 'wheelchair accessible are more concentrated in particular categories of business

The final three hypotheses were concerned with identifying whether there is indeed a group of providers that represent exemplary or 'pinnacle' practice in terms of taking responsibility for both sustainability and accessibility. As such, H4 hypothesised that:

> H4: Providers with higher levels of EA certification are concentrated in certain states/territories

The purpose of H6 was then to examine whether the motivation was extrinsic or intrinsic, based on whether they chose to be listed as 'wheelchair accessible' (extrinsic) or could demonstrate a concern for people with different disabilities in the content of their web pages (intrinsic). H5 thus hypothesised that:

> H5: Providers in this 'leading group' are disproportionally listed in the 'wheelchair accessible' group

While H6 was that:

> H6: Providers in this 'leading group' make more use of the terms relating to disability on their websites

Chi-square analysis was conducted to investigate the presence of associations between significant variables in the dataset. The Yates correction was applied in the case of matrices with only one degree of freedom.

4. RESULTS

Sample characteristics

Table 2 shows that most of the providers were located in Queensland (39%), followed by New South Wales and Western Australia (15% each). Australia-wide was included as a category because 3% of providers indicated a national affiliation. There was more of an even distribution regarding the type of business. Most took the form of tours (39%), followed by on-site activities (26%), accommodation (17%) and other/multi-type experiences (16%). In terms of their ecotourism credentials, 70% of websites indicated explicitly that the company was an ecotourism provider, 4% mentioned sustainability instead of ecotourism, but 26% failed to mention ecotourism at all. Concerning their accessibility credentials meanwhile, only one of the 100 providers had a disability logo on their homepage; only 12 mentioned disability on the homepage, and only 13 had a separate accessibility information page on their website.

Table 2: Sample characteristics (n=100)

Coding item	**Frequency**
Location:	
Australia-wide	3
Northern Territory	6
Queensland	39
New South Wales	15
South Australia	9
Western Australia	15
Tasmania	4
Victoria	8
Australian Capital Territory	1
Type of business:	
Accommodation	17
Tour	39
On-site	26
Other/Multi	16
Mention of ecotourism on homepage:	
Yes ecotourism	70
No, but sustainable	4
Neither	26
Disability logo on homepage:	

Yes	1
No	99
Mention of disability on homepage:	
Yes	12
No	88
Separate accessibility information page on the website:	
Yes	13
No	87

Note: As n=100, the frequencies also represent the percentage shares for each coded item.

Table 3 illustrates the findings relating to the disability-friendliness of the homepage and a specific accessibility page (if any) according to eight different variables. Alt-tags, defined as descriptions of visual elements that screen readers can read, were found on only one of the homepages and none of the accessibility pages. Subtitles and transcripts were only very rarely included for videos on the homepage and no cases whatsoever on the provider's accessibility page. Several disability style guides recommend in favour of the use of full stops in acronyms. Only one homepage used full stops in their communication of acronyms, while 67 did not (in 32 cases, no acronyms were used). In reference to acronyms on the accessibility page, one provider used full stops, while three did not (nine cases were not applicable). Of those that did use hyperlinks on their homepage (n=36), 30 operators provided description and identification of these, while six did not; four of the five on the accessibility page did this. Underlined hyperlinks provide a greater degree of user-friendliness for persons with disabilities. Ten of the 35 providers with hyperlinks underlined them on their homepage, while only one of five on their accessibility page did so. All providers included large clickable areas on their homepage, with nine of the 13 accessibility pages (four cases were not applicable) doing the same. Finally, none of the providers included an accessibility guide on the homepage or accessibility page to benefit prospective tourists.

Table 3: Disability-friendly features of homepage and accessibility page (if any)

Coding item	**Homepage (n=100)**			**Accessibility page (n=13)**		
	Yes	**No**	**n/a**	**Yes**	**No**	**n/a**
Alt-tags for photos	1	98	1	0	3	10
Subtitles for videos	2	8	90	0	0	13
Transcripts for videos	2	8	90	0	0	13
Use of full stops in acronyms	1	67	32	1	3	9
Described hyperlinks	30	6	64	4	1	8
Underlined hyperlinks	10	25	65	1	4	8
Use of large clickable areas	100	0	0	9	0	4

Accessibility guide for website	0	100	0	0	13	0

Concerning access information packs, only two websites included access information packs on their websites: the Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary in Queensland and The Phillip Island Nature Park in Victoria. Of these, the latter of the two is more sophisticated, including video content and a limited number of measurements (such as the gradients of boardwalks). In addition, there are links to "Access Key" documents developed in 2017 by a specialist company called "AccessAbilityAustralia". While these guides are intended for all potential customers (AccessAbilityAustralia, 2020), they include information about what to expect at the venue, including layout, parking, services, procedural information and sensory elements, that is intended mainly to assist those with sensory disabilities, those with intellectual disabilities and mental illnesses, parents with pushchairs and prams, and senior visitors. The documents are richly illustrated with photographs, although there are also text-only versions available. The Phillip Island Nature Park has an Access Key document for two of its four venues.

Table 4 displays the results relating to the types of disability referred to anywhere on the website and terminology on the part of the website designer. The most frequently cited disability groups included “wheelchair” (40%), followed by “pushchair and pram” (19%) and "condition" (19%). Reference to "carer" only occurred in (13%) of websites, while assistance animals were found in 11% of websites, and "senior" in 10%. Fewer of the websites included sensory-specific information like "hearing" (8%), "visual" (6%), and only 6% include mention of "intellectual" as a disability group.

Table 4: Reference to disability groups and terminology used (n=100)

Coding item	**Frequency**	**Coding item**	**Frequency**
Those mentioning disability group:		**Terminology used:**	
Wheelchair	40	Access etc.	43
Mobility scooter	5	Disabled etc.	28
Walker, stick, frame	5	Special needs etc.	9
Pushchair, pram	19	Limited mobility etc	24
Carer	13	Inclusive etc	5
Assistance animal	11	Other	5
Visual	6	None of these terms	47
Hearing	8		
Intellectual	6		
Condition	19		
Senior	10		

Note: As n=100, the frequencies also represent the percentage shares for each coded item.

The terminology used on the Ecotourism Australia websites was varied. The most frequently used term was "access" (43%), followed by "disabled" (28%), and "limited mobility" (24%). Far fewer used terminology such as "special needs" and "inclusive". "Other" terms that emerged from the dataset included "disability," “diverse,” “impaired,” and “physical injury.”

Table 5 illustrates the findings relating to the questions relating to equality of access. The results suggest that the websites were rarely clear about whether people with disability can expect to be treated equally to their non-disabled counterparts in these respects. Only five websites claimed that they made 'inclusive' provision. Even so, it is clear that even those websites failed to provide clear information on whether there is, for example, an additional charge for assistance animals (even to assure customers that there is not). A quarter advised customers with disabilities to email or telephone ahead while not making this same suggestion or requirement to their non-disabled customers. Often this was phrased in terms of providing a service to the customer with disabilities to ensure that they do not make a trip to the site or book with the company only to be refused service at the point of delivery. Concerning whether carers must stay in the same room as those they care for, this only applied to 42 websites (those offering accommodation) but none of the websites was clear on this point.

Table 5: Equality of access (n=100)

Coding item	Yes	No	Unclear
Customers with disabilities advised to telephone or email ahead	25	0	55
Segregation, e.g., people with a disability only permitted on some tours	11	4	85
An additional charge is made for people with disabilities	0	0	100
An additional charge is made for assistance animals	0	1	99
Carers must pay their way for some or all of the visit	2	5	95

Note: As n=100, the frequencies also represent the percentage shares for each coded item.

Statistical analysis

No statistically significant relationship was found between the level of certification achieved by the ecotourism provider and whether or not they used the term 'ecotourism' on their website homepage: no evidence could be found to suggest that those providers with advanced certification were any more likely to advertise the fact on their websites by using the term, even once. H1 was thus not supported.

Meanwhile, no significant relationship between the level of certification achieved by the ecotourism provider and the type of tourism business (whether it provides accommodation, tours, on-site activities or a mixture of these). H2 was thus not supported. In contrast, a statistically significant association was found between the type of tourism business and whether the provider was listed on the EA website as ‘wheelchair accessible’ (χ^2=30.046, df=3, p=0.000). H3 was thus supported. Accommodation and on-site activity providers were found to be significantly more likely to be listed as ‘wheelchair accessible’ than not, while tour operators were significantly less likely to be listed as such.

Concerning the geographical distribution of EA certification, it is apparent that there was a group of providers based around Queensland and New South Wales that were leading the way in terms of obtaining advanced certification. Chi-square analysis (χ^2=6.19, 2d.f., p=0.045) supported that certified providers in these two states are significantly more likely to have achieved advanced accreditation than certified companies in other Australian states and territories. H4 was thus supported. They were also less likely to have achieved eco-certification (the middle level) and no more likely to have achieved only the level of nature tourism. In comparison, no significant relationship was found between geographical location and whether the providers were listed as ‘wheelchair accessible’ on the EA website. H5 was thus supported. This is an instructive result, as it suggests that while providers in Queensland and New South Wales are more ’invested’ in the concept of ecotourism, this had not fed through into a broader responsibility towards ensuring accessibility.

When a test was made for whether the website mentioned any terms relating to disability, anywhere within the website, a significant relationship did, however, emerge (χ^2=5.53, 1d.f., p=0.019). This suggests that those in the proposed 'leading group' (Queensland and New South Wales) were more likely to mention people with disabilities somewhere on their website than those based in other states and territories. H6 was thus supported

5. DISCUSSION

This section summarises the paper’s main results and then situates these findings to discuss themes introduced in the literature review. These include reference to (i) sustainability and responsibility, and what these mean for accessibility; (ii) the role of duty; (iii) intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in service provision; and (iv) what represents best practice for the industry. All four sets of results are geared toward the creation of new accessibility goals for the sector. While it should be acknowledged that ecotourism operators in Australia that provide services for PwDs have already shown a willingness to support a population that has historically been marginalised in tourism, the findings nevertheless suggest that there is much more that needs to be accomplished.

What sustainability and responsibility mean for accessibility

The results found that the disability groups cited most frequently included “wheelchair” and “pushchair and pram”, which suggests that operators are placing priority on mobility, which is perhaps the least challenging segment to address. The question it raises is whether this resulted from seeking commercial advantage or the result of a moral imperative. Furthermore, the websites were generally not clear on whether PwDs would be treated equally to their non-disabled counterparts. This questions whether access means “slightly better than conventional practice” or, rather, full and equal access that indicates what it should mean to be responsible. It was also found that the higher the level of certification (i.e., the leaders of ecotourism in Australia by level of certification), the more that ecotourism operators focused on wheelchairs. Moreover, this leadership group (based mainly in Queensland and New South Wales) were more likely to mention PwDs on their websites.

It is important to note that the results suggested that operators did not generally make their ecotourism credentials clear, let alone their accessibility provisions. It was observed that EA is, meanwhile, keen for them to market their credentials. Whether such a disconnect between operators and EA represents greenwashing (a marketing promise without substance, based on extrinsic reasoning) requires further research. Future studies on this topic should include site visits to understand better the sustainability and disability dimensions of operations first-hand and to enable the relationship between marketing and visitation dynamics between non-disabled clients and PwDs to be unpacked. Ultimately, minimal statistical support was found for the hypothesis that the ‘leading’ ecotourism operators (in terms of EA certification) pay more attention to the disability agenda than the operators from lower certification levels.

The role of duty

Previously in the paper, it was argued that both sustainability and responsibility suffered from an absence of a sufficient foundation upon which to build a reasonable approach to the provision of ecotourism services. Kalisch (2000) observed that there are two critical preconditions in efforts to be responsible. The first is actuating one’s conscious, and the second is the development of a moral framework. Operators cannot hope to “do” responsible tourism without this moral framework first being in place, and this has not been embraced in scholarly work to the degree that it should (Fennell, 2018).

The analysis of the study's results indicates that showing responsibility towards PwDs is not something that EA members proclaim loudly and clearly, i.e., there is no overt and intentional element communicated that is inclusive of PwDs. From this standpoint, it can be argued that operators may have been able to satisfy the core dimensions of sustainability in the standards to which they would have been expected to address and often exceed. If responsible tourism is a process where companies take concrete actions in working towards sustainable tourism futures, as argued by García-Rosell (2021), an important question is how we should make accessibility more responsible for a future sustainable ecotourism industry.

A good way forward is to focus on the actions of individuals in the form of duty (Kierkegaard) and justice (Pieper) in building a conception of the good in Australian ecotour operations. Such an approach responds to the call for greater emphasis on responsibility and ethics in recent studies on accessibility in tourism (Benjamin et al., 2021; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018) and efforts to be sustainable in general (McLaren, 2006; Salamat, 2016).

Kierkegaard (1847/2000) reasoned that if individuals maintain a duty to others in the form of gifts, gratitude – perhaps better stated as an ethic of care – they place others' interests above their own. The duty "You Shall Love" requires people to explore their inner selves in a state of asymmetry or constant indebtedness, i.e., to be in a state of perpetual indebtedness to others. What this means for the certified operators of the Australian ecotourism industry, especially those who are certified as advanced ecotourism, is that by adopting this duty, they set the stage for the development of a new norm that filters throughout the sector through the assemblage of a community of ethically oriented selves (Dooley, 2001). Responsibility, then, becomes an outcome of this ethic of care which, according to Kierkegaard, is the only manner in which to be truly free. There is also value in the wisdom of Pieper (1955), who argued against hiding behind institutions and organisations. Virtue starts with the individual. When individuals act in immoral ways, the result is that there are compromises to the balance and harmony of the community.

Extrinsic or intrinsic motivations

In the present context, therefore, if operators focus too much on maximising benefits and minimising costs from a financial standpoint, they compromise the ability of PwDs to maximise their own experiences in reaching a state of fulfilment that they often pay more for (than non-PwDs) to obtain. It can be argued that commercial considerations are at least partly – if not primarily – involved in the provision of accessibility services. Thus, there are essential intrinsic-extrinsic motivational questions embedded within the discourse that the present research was unable to discern. Further research is required to assess whether this is because of duty or because of commercial gain (because it is cheapest to deal with or the best way to satisfy the demands of regulators). Whether this support is extrinsic or intrinsic is vital in demonstrating the moral outlook of these enterprises. Acts for the benefit of society based on altruism and benevolence have greater moral significance than acts that come packaged in personal gain and self-interest (Kant, 1781).

Duty can also be discerned in the context of language. This study found that the terminology used by operators varied somewhat. The most frequently used term was "access", followed by "disabled" and "limited mobility". "Other" terms used included "disability," "diverse," "impaired," and "physical injury." It can be argued that terminology can be used as a proxy for attitude, in that getting the language right is a quick way of showing support for marginalised people without having to do very much. This has everything to do with the calculation of gain and little to do with duty and justice as an ethic of care.

The pinnacle of practice

The present research indicates that even though there are best-practice examples in Australia, operators still do not do enough about accessibility. In saying this, it is important to remember that it cannot definitively be said that operators are not adhering to best practices in accessibility but rather that no evidence could be found of it. Meanwhile, the absence of evidence implies that more needs to be included on websites to more clearly articulate their accessibility and disability principles and practices.

Two best practices example from the sample are The Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary in Queensland and the Phillip Island Nature Park. The latter is more developed because it has an Access Key document for two of its four venues. Such access guides are considered best practice and are being developed in other parts of the world (e.g., in England and Scotland, see Accessibility Guides, 2020).

However, this paper argues that best practice for the future of ecotourism in Australia, and indeed the world, can be hampered by the restrictions of the practice itself. By this, it is meant that there is a critical tension that exists between what is moral and what is achievable along practical and financial lines. There are two ways to look at this dilemma. The first is that implementing measures to make operations fully accessible may mean much more of an investment in resources with bottom-line implications for the operator. However, the absence of these conditions will not lead to fully inclusive operations. The second is that even before questions of commerce, there are questions of value that can only be thoroughly scrutinised through a more thorough investigation of current knowledge. This adheres to the notion of responsible tourism as both “thinking” and “doing” discussed above.

An approach based on the pinnacle of practice framework (Figure 1) suggests that it is not tenable to be led by ecotourism theory and practice alone (the intra-sector focus). Such an approach is often limiting, being based on restrictive normative thinking that shapes the boundaries of practice and is marked by small, incremental strides. By casting the net more widely (at Level 2 and, especially, Level 3), new tools, methods, theories, and practices can provide a deeper foundation for operationalising the true meaning of “sustainable” and "responsible" in the accessible ecotourism domain through the duty (an ethic of response) that operators have towards PwDs. Such an approach corresponds to Mihalic’s (2016) claim for greater synthesis between the theoretical and conceptual aspect of sustainability and the practical and action-based approach inherent in responsible tourism.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In responding to recent calls for a more robust moral agenda in tourism and accessibility studies (Benjamin et al., 2021; UNWTO, 2021b), our study had two principal aims. The first was to investigate physical, attitudinal and informational barriers in a sample of EA certified company websites. The second was to show how a deeper vision of responsibility based on duty and justice could accelerate a more intrinsic set of priorities around acting on and for the interests of persons with disabilities instead of doing what is strategic and good for business.

The findings provide evidence that not one single operator in one of the best ecotourism certification schemes in the world can be said to be doing enough when it comes to accessibility for PwDs. For example, while accommodation and on-site activity providers were more likely to be listed as 'wheelchair accessible' than tour operators, the reasons for this are likely to be tied to a regulatory effect, i.e., they have more rules to abide by regarding physical access. If this is the case, it is hard to see why tours should not be subjected to similar regulations.

In responding to this dilemma, this paper argues that there needs to be a willingness across the board to respond to the disability and accessibility agenda at a deeper level. The true essence of responsibility may emerge from a type of “thinking” and “doing” that emphasise duty and justice in the straightforward manner described above. We also feel that working towards this end will include a more comprehensive approach that pushes the limits of best practice into the pinnacle of practice idea introduced above. A practical guide based on the results of this study, and a companion study, will be made available to ecotourism operators in Australia and globally in an effort to advance practice. Furthermore, future research should seek to better define the parameters of the pinnacle of practice and how it applies to any number of different tourism scenarios and dilemmas. Qualitative research that focuses on a more in-depth analysis of these companies could provide added value.

Finally, while the information found on websites can be used to assess barriers that are presented to PwDs when accessing the facilities and activities provided, along with attempts by the company to address these, this study does not claim that the process is comprehensive. Indeed, there are likely to be relevant issues and features that cannot be picked up through a content analysis of companys' websites. A full audit of each company, along with each of its facilities and activities, would be necessary to achieve that. However, it is contended that the content analysis undertaken in this study provides a broad indication of the current state of affairs and that this is sufficient to draw broad conclusions. Chief among these conclusions is that inclusion and accessibility need to be “thought” and “done” much more seriously in sustainable tourism, and ecotourism should be at the vanguard of such efforts. That it does not surely must be a matter of concern for academics, policymakers, and practitioners.

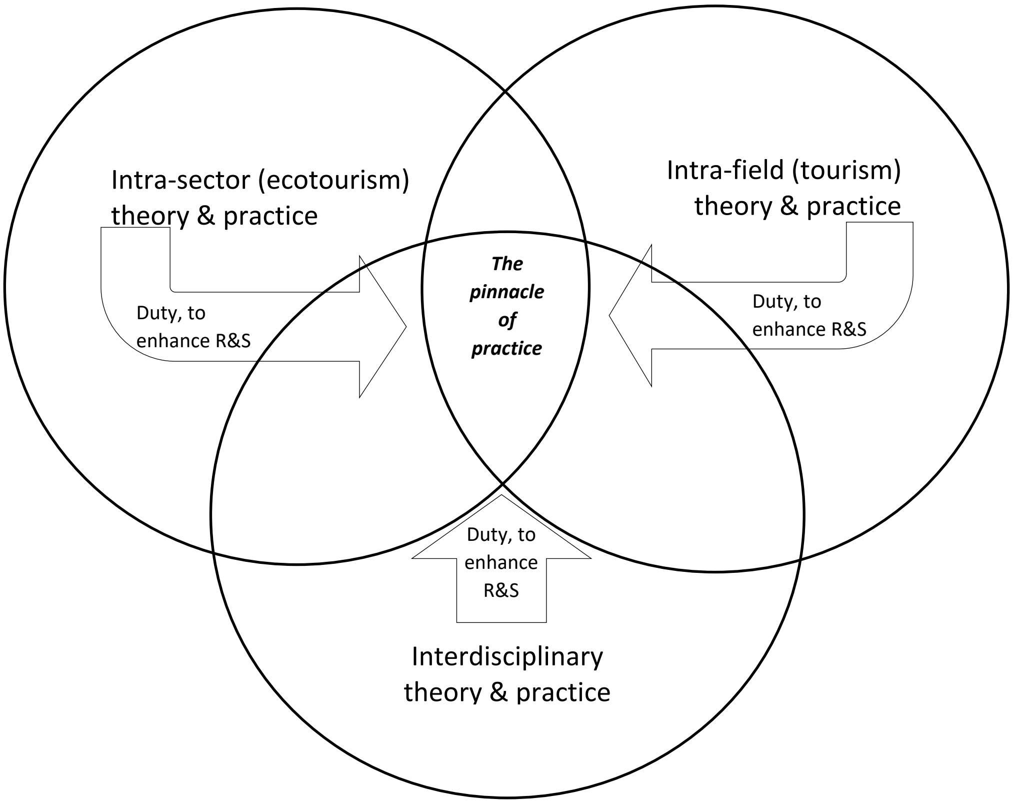
Intra-sector (ecotourism) theory & practice
Intra-field (tourism) theory & practice
The pinnacle of practice
Duty, to enhance R&S
Duty, to enhance R&S
Duty, to enhance R&S
Interdisciplinary theory & practice

Figure 1: The pinnacle of practice triad

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Appendix 1: Design and rationale of the coding guide

Theme	**Coding subject**	**Available codes**	**Notes**	**Rationale**
Basic information	1. Name of company	As per website		The first set of codes collected basic information on the provider: company name, location, website URL and business type. The following codes then turned to consider how far the website homepage (landing page) reflected the provider's certification status and welcome for visitors with disabilities. The former would involve the website, including the appropriate Ecotourism Australia logo according to the company's level of certification. The latter would take the form of a logo or symbol to make users with disability aware that the design of the website has considered their needs and that various features are available to assist them. Such is a form of assurance to people with disability that the website will be easily usable. Where logos or symbols are not used, mentioning ecotourism and/or accessibility in the text may serve as a second-best option (as it can be far less visible), and the presence or otherwise of such was duly coded up.
	2. Location	State of territory	Some companies operated nationwide. An extra code was added for these	
	3. Website	URL		
	4. Type of provider	Accommodation; tour; on-site; multiple/other		
	5. Ecotourism claim on homepage	Ecotourism used; sustainability used; neither	Evidence could be pictorial or textual. The website had to use the term, rather than imply it (e.g., by using terms such as conservation or natural)	
	6. Accessibility logo used on the homepage	Yes or no	Of any kind that relates to disability	
	7. Accessibility claim on homepage	Yes or no	Or synonyms. Text mention is visible without clicking or hovering	
Informational	8. Disability-friendly features of the home page	Yes, no or not applicable	Alt-tags on photos, subtitles on videos, transcripts provided for videos, use of full stops in acronyms, described hyperlinks, underlined hyperlinks, use of	These codes relating to the content of website pages were selected from Destra (2014), which provides a nine-point guide to making website pages more ‘disability-friendly. As such, these codes relate primarily to the informational barriers someone with a disability may face in dealing with

			large clickable areas, accessibility guide for the website.	the ecotourism company in question. Many of the design features coded up in this section are designed for those who use screen readers (such as the use of alt-tags to describe photographs), but others are intended to assist those with other types of disability (such as large clickable areas to assist those with unsteady hands). This assessment was undertaken both for the homepage (landing page) and for the separate page for accessibility information if the website had one. One of the codes in this set related to whether there was an accessibility guide for the website. Such guides include information about the website's features that users with a disability might find helpful, such as the ability to change fonts and font sizes, change background colours, magnify the screen, make the keyboard or mouse easier to use, and so on. The absence of such a guide will typically imply that the website does not include such features. The next set of codes related to whether the website includes an access pack (or link to such) relating to the features of the product or site that would be of interest to people with disabilities. Such packs are different to accessibility guides (which relate to the usability of websites) and may include features such as photographs, videos or measurements. These are typically intended to help those customers with physical disabilities know whether the company can meet their needs: the width of doors, the height of the sink in the bathroom, or how much room for manoeuvre there is in the bedroom. Such packs may also be of great assistance to those with intellectual disabilities, such as people on the autistic spectrum disorder, who are particularly sensitive to unexpected situations.
	9. Separate page for accessibility information	Yes or no	If the answer was no, the codes in the following section were recorded as 'not applicable.'	
	10. Disability-friendly features of accessibility page	Yes, no or not applicable	Alt-tags on photos, subtitles on videos, transcripts for videos, use of full stops in acronyms, described hyperlinks, underlined hyperlinks, use of large clickable areas, accessibility guide for the website.	
	11. Separate access pack for those with disabilities	Yes or no	If the answer was no, the codes in the following section were recorded as 'not applicable.'	
	12. Feature of the access pack (if provided)	Yes or no	Alt-tags on photos, subtitles on videos, transcripts for videos, use of full stops in acronyms, described hyperlinks, underlined hyperlinks, use of large clickable areas, accessibility guide for the website.	

Types of disability and physical barriers	13. Types of disability noted on the website	Yes or no	Those who use a wheelchair; those who use a mobility scooter; those who use a walker, frame or stick; those who use a pushchair or pram; those who travel with a carer; those who travel with an assistance animal; those with a visual disability; those with a hearing disability; hose with intellectual disability, e.g., autism; those with a medical condition, e.g., epilepsy, asthma, pregnancy; senior/elderly. The website had to use these terms rather than imply them, e.g., ramps are available.	This set of codes focused on what kinds of disabilities were mentioned anywhere on the website. Items included those who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices, those with visual disabilities, those with hearing disabilities, those with intellectual disabilities, seniors/elderly. Mention of a disability type does not, of course, imply that the company provides for this: indeed, some may mention this disability group because they currently do not cater for such people. Nevertheless, this set of codes can be used as a proxy for the extent of physical barriers someone with a disability is likely to encounter when using that ecotourism provider.
Attitudinal barriers	14. Are those with disabilities required to telephone or email in advance?	Say yes, say no, unclear (does not say)		A set of six code items was used to measure how far people with disabilities were treated differently from other customers. These include the requirement to email or telephone ahead to warn the provider that they intended to visit; whether people with disabilities had full access to all parts of the site and/or activities provided; whether there is an additional charge; whether assistance animals (such as guide dogs) are welcome on-site; whether carers were required to pay their way; and whether carers were expected to stay in the same bedroom as those they care for (this last code applied only to accommodation providers and some tours). Such coding can reveal much
	15. Are people with disabilities ever segregated, e.g. may only use a particular vehicle, only allowed on specific tours, only at certain times?	Say yes, say no, unclear (does not say)		

	16. Are people with disabilities charged any more than non-disabled people for any service, stay or activity?	Say yes, say no, unclear (does not say)		about the attitude of the ecotourism provider company and its staff members towards meeting the aspirations and needs of people with disabilities. The final set of codes then focused on using terminology in the website to describe people with disabilities. The intention of this was to examine how far the business had ensured the use of modern terminology that is appropriate and will not offend, which in turn is likely to reveal much about their attitudes to disability and the attitudinal barriers their customers are likely to encounter. Such terms could appear anywhere on the website, and multiple instances were recorded (e.g. a website that use both the terms 'accessibility' and 'disability).
	17. Is there is an additional charge for assistance animals?	Say yes, say no, unclear (does not say)		
	18. Do carers have to pay their way for any service or activity?	Say yes, say no, unclear (does not say)		
	19. Does the website state that carers have to stay in the same room?	Say yes, say no, unclear (does not say), not applicable	Not applicable for companies that do not provide accommodation.	
	20. Terminology used to describe people with disabilities	Yes or no	Access, accessible, accessibility, etc.; disabled, disability, etc.; special needs, special requirements, etc.; limited mobility, etc.; Inclusive, all-inclusive, etc.; others, e.g., handicapped, etc.	