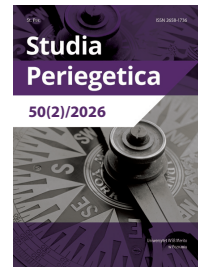


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The Ethical Behaviour Paradox in Protected Areas: A Study of Visitor Conduct at Isimangaliso Wetland Park, South Africa

Abstract. Protected areas (PAs) are vital spaces for conservation, evolving from isolated nature reserves into dynamic environments that offer visitors transformative recreational opportunities. As a result, visitors are encouraged to adopt ethical behaviours (EBs) to support PAs' sustainability. Although visitors express strong pro-environmental values, it remains unclear how effectively these intentions are translated into ethical practice. This study investigates this EB paradox to determine whether a gap exists between perceived EB importance and practice. Data from a convenience and purposive sample of 323 respondents, who answered a questionnaire with 23 EB indicators, were compared using paired-sample t-tests. Results confirm the existence of a statistically significant ethical paradox: while visitors at iSimangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) identify strongly with conservation ethics, their on-site behaviour falls short of reflecting those values. Management must adopt nudging strategies and enhance environmental interpretation to bridge the gap between declarations and actual behaviour.

Keywords: ethical behaviour, ethical behaviour paradox, ethical tourism, protected areas, iSimangaliso Wetland Park

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1. Introduction

Protected areas (PAs) have undergone a significant conceptual evolution since their beginning, and the iSimangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) is no exception. Originally designed to preserve biodiversity, ecosystem services, and cultural heritage (Blanco-Cerradelo et al., 2022), contemporary PAs operate under an expanded socio-ecological mandate to promote human well-being and recreational engagement (Smith et al., 2021). However, this paradigm shift has given rise to a critical ethical behaviour (EB) paradox: visitors often self-identify as nature enthusiasts, fair traders, and social activists, expressing deep-seated ethical values yet rarely putting these attitudes into on-site pro-environmental practice (Kuseni et al., 2025; MacInnes et al., 2022). This EB gap poses operational and systemic challenges for PA managers, as cumulative visitor transgressions continue to jeopardise the ecological, social, and economic systems that tourists claim to value (Dias et al., 2021; Mondal & Samaddar, 2021). Consequently, there is an urgent need to investigate the extent of this EB paradox within high-traffic PA regions, specifically the IWP in South Africa.

The EB paradox highlights a profound cognitive and behavioural disconnect that challenges traditional rational choice paradigms. It functions as an active psychological coping mechanism, whereby visitors treat environmental values as currency for personal identity and social validation, yet systematically abandon these principles when confronted with the immediate costs of self-restraint and on-site convenience (Lampreia et al., 2024). While traditional psychological models, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, posit that action is a direct, linear consequence of rational intent, contemporary empirical evidence indicates that, in the highly emotional, hedonic, and high-stakes context of travel, intention is a poor predictor of actual behaviour (Seyfi et al., 2024). This systematic failure of intent is sometimes referred to as “the 30:3 syndrome”: while approximately 30% of consumers declare an explicit interest in ethical practices, only a small fraction (3%) acts on these preferences at the point of consumption or encounter (Sadiq et al., 2022).

Rather than viewing this gap as a simplistic deficit in visitor willpower, modern tourism scholarship conceptualises the EB paradox as a complex negotiation among competing structural, situational, and psychological forces. Scholars such as Kuseni and Hermann (2025) and Greene et al. (2024) link this gap to macroeconomic and structural constraints, including rising living costs, pervasive information asymmetry regarding greenwashing, and the perceived inconvenience of choosing sustainable alternatives. Conversely, Ko and Cho (2022) and Kuseni et al. (2024b) note that egoistic micromotives, such as a strong desire for personal benefit, prestige, and exceptional thrills, often drive visitors to violate regulations such as driving off-road to secure close-range wildlife encounters. Fundamentally, the EB paradox

manifests as a context-dependent conflict in which localised, immediate desires for escapism and price sensitivity consistently eclipse broader, collective environmental or social responsibilities.

Despite significant progress in probing behavioural disconnects (e.g., Chatterjee & Barbhuiya, 2021; Dedeoğlu et al., 2022), current academic discourse remains largely focused on identifying the gap's antecedents rather than exploring its multidimensional mechanisms. Furthermore, existing literature on the EB paradox exhibits an overwhelming ecological bias, focusing almost exclusively on ecological stewardship while systematically ignoring the social and economic dimensions of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework (Ko & Cho, 2022). Seyfi et al. (2025) support this view, noting that while friction between biosphere values and egoistic self-interest is well documented, a stark empirical deficit remains regarding how this paradox operates within the socio-cultural and economic domains of tourism destinations. Therefore, it remains theoretically unclear whether the EB paradox functions as a universal human cognitive bias or a context-specific phenomenon shaped by local economic realities and destination infrastructure issues.

This study addresses these theoretical gaps by evaluating the EB paradox through a holistic TBL lens at a high-traffic, socio-ecologically vulnerable protected area — the IWP in South Africa. It uses empirical data to investigate and quantify the EB paradox among park visitors. To achieve this main objective, two specific research objectives were formulated:

1. Review and quantify the statistical variance between visitors' perceived TBL values (importance) and their on-site execution (practice) across 23 distinct, multi-domain indicators.
2. Evaluate how socio-demographic variables influence the magnitude of this EB paradox.

To address these objectives, the study tests the following operational hypotheses:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference between visitors' perceived importance of ethical behaviours and their actual on-site practice across the ecological, social, and economic TBL domains at IWP.

H2: The magnitude of the EB gap varies significantly across visitor socio-demographic profiles and trip characteristics.

By reviewing and quantifying the statistical variance between visitors' perceived TBL values and their on-site execution across these 23 distinct, multi-domain indi-

cators, this study addresses specific gaps in the current academic landscape. First, it provides quantitative empirical data on the EB gap in IWP, offering a statistical baseline that could enable park managers to move beyond awareness campaigns to targeted behavioural interventions. Second, while many studies discuss sustainable or responsible behaviours in tourism broadly and treat them as monolithic concepts, this research breaks EB down into 23 distinct indicators, offering a broader understanding of the concept.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Redefining Ethical Behaviours in Tourism

Grounded in ethical tourism, EBs are defined as voluntary or intentional actions shaped by stringent ethical standards and societal norms (Carrington et al., 2016) and explicitly designed to mitigate a visitor's negative footprint (Sangkhaudang et al., 2023; Singh & Mir, 2020; Meng et al., 2024; Kuseni et al., 2024a). While conventional tourism discourse often lumps EBs together with sustainable or responsible behaviour, treating them as interchangeable is a fundamental analytical error. EBs are not merely the result of passive adherence to green guidelines; they represent a distinct, proactive paradigm driven by a profound shift in visitor mindset that compels critical reflection on environmental, economic, and sociocultural impacts (Ko & Cho, 2022). The critical distinction between responsible behaviour and EBs, and the reason the latter hold distinct transformative power, lies in their foundational motivation. Responsible frameworks are inherently reactive, serving as damage-control responses to tourism's negative externalities. Conversely, EBs are proactive rather than reactive, anchored in immutable human principles of justice, fairness, and equality. Rather than merely tallying ecological consequences, EBs demand internal accountability. They challenge visitors to actively define their fundamental moral duties towards indigenous populations, their service providers, and themselves. Ultimately, prioritising EB offers a far more humanistic approach to travel; it recognises that true accountability cannot be engineered by policy alone but must instead come from ethics intrinsic to the human experience itself (Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013). In protected areas like IWP, where delicate ecosystems intersect with historical socio-economic sensitivities, relying solely on reactive management rules is often insufficient. Understanding visitor conduct requires evaluating these intrinsic ethical drivers that shape real-world behaviour on the ground.

2.2. Conceptualising the EB Paradox in Tourism

While the disconnect between human values and actions remains a fundamental question in social psychology, the field struggles with inconsistent terminology. Sustainability literature has historically labelled this phenomenon as the “belief-action gap,” “value-action gap,” or “attitude-behaviour inconsistency.” In this study, however, we adopt the term “EB paradox” to emphasise an inherent psychological contradiction rather than merely a passive gap between a visitor’s cognitive understanding and their physical conduct. Grounded in Behavioural-Reasoning Theory (BRT) and the Ethical Tourism Model (ETM), this paradox highlights a psychological discrepancy in which competing motivations and actions override attitudes (Diddi et al., 2019). In this study, the EB paradox describes a scenario in which visitors to PAS profess strong biospheric values, yet egoistic motives drive their actual conduct. This pattern is particularly prevalent in PAS such as IWP, where visitors express a deep affinity for nature yet engage in damaging actions, such as off-road driving for close-range wildlife sightings (Kuseni et al., 2024b). Similarly, Agag et al. (2020) observed that while tourists often oppose environmental degradation in principle, they rarely forgo the hedonic enjoyment of unsustainable choices when faced with the immediate costs or inconveniences of green alternatives.

Tourism literature remains divided on whether the EB paradox is universal or context-specific. Studies employing conventional rational-choice models, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), argue that actions directly reflect underlying attitudes (e.g., Burhanudin & Unnithan, 2022; Chatterjee & Barbhuiya, 2021; Dedeoğlu et al., 2022; Patwary et al., 2022). For instance, Chatterjee and Barbhuiya (2021) demonstrated that pro-environmental attitudes directly influenced tourists’ willingness to pay for bottled water alternatives, while Dedeoğlu et al. (2022) found that positive attitudes significantly and positively impacted local food consumption. Conversely, a growing body of literature reports instances where attitudes fail to translate into actual behaviour (e.g., Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2016; Ko & Cho, 2022; Sadiq et al., 2022). Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Wooliscroft (2016), for example, found that favourable environmental attitudes do not consistently lead to responsible practices. Furthermore, demographic variables such as age, education level, and gender have been shown to significantly moderate both tourists’ valuation of and practice of EB (Wu et al., 2016).

Researchers have increasingly investigated why PAS serve as distinct breeding grounds for the EB paradox. Parkinson et al. (2025) and Sadiq et al. (2022) argued that tourism spaces like PAS operate under psychological and structural dynamics that diverge sharply from everyday life. Consequently, visitors often experience a sense of behavioural license that social rules would normally cur-

tail at home, a state referred to as tourism liminality. While visitors may uphold strong pro-environmental values in their day-to-day routines, PA-specific factors can trigger an ethical reversal during travel. Font and McCabe (2017) highlighted hedonic motivation and a “luxury mindset” as primary drivers of this paradox, noting that tourists seeking pleasure, relaxation, and escape feel entitled to their break and resist personal inconvenience. As a result, hedonic well-being overrides ethical intentions (Chen & Cheung, 2025). Holiday environments in PAs foster liminal conditions where social norms are suspended, encouraging psychological detachment from personal accountability and granting tourists a tacit “license to sin” (Seyfi et al., 2024). Beyond psychological drivers, structural and situational constraints further exacerbate the paradox. Diddi et al. (2019) noted that inadequate park infrastructure often compels unsustainable behaviours, while Seyfi et al. (2024) identified price premiums and inconvenience as major financial and practical barriers to ethical decision-making. Ultimately, contemporary tourism enables visitors to rationalise unethical choices by prioritising personal aesthetic and experiential satisfaction over tangible resource protection (Chen & Cheung, 2025).

2.3. The Strategic Importance of Adopting EBS

While often seen as a voluntary contribution to destination resilience, adopting EBS is increasingly recognised as essential to balancing the triple bottom line of modern tourism. Beyond simple preservation, recent scholarship argues that ethical visitors add destination value through pro-environmental actions that directly enhance the adaptive capacity of both the natural environment and the local economy (Wang & Cao, 2026). By prioritising behavioural sobriety and shifting toward reduced consumption, visitors lessen ecological pressure on sensitive biodiversity hotspots, moving from passive consumers to active stewards of the outdoors.

Furthermore, EBS serve as a strategic tool for managing the overtourism crisis. By consciously rejecting high-density enclave tourism models in favour of ethical travel, ethical visitors help decentralise tourism impacts (Straits Research, 2025). This movement mitigates concentrated carbon footprints while counteracting the cultural commodification that frequently plagues high-traffic zones. Economically, EBS empower marginalised communities by directing capital directly towards Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Recent findings emphasise that such empowerment creates a mutually reinforcing relationship in which local leadership and MSME innovation drive the long-term sustainability of tourism villages (Purnomo & Purwandari, 2025). However, despite the acknowledged strategic importance of EBS, it remains unclear to what extent visitors themselves perceive

and internalise these values, which constitutes a critical gap in current destination management literature.

2.4. Antecedents of the EB Paradox in PA

The EB paradox exhibited by visitors of PAS arises from a complex interplay of psychological, situational, and structural antecedents that disconnect pro-environmental intentions from actual conduct. Although visitors frequently express strong conservation values, these moral inclinations are routinely overridden by a desire for personal convenience, price sensitivity, and hedonic leisure priorities (Seyfi et al., 2025). This EB paradox is heavily compounded by the psychological state of vacation liminality, a temporary suspension of everyday social accountability that allows immediate self-interest to supersede environmental ethics (Seyfi et al., 2025).

Beyond individual psychology, situational constraints within PAS actively exacerbate non-compliant conduct. Spatial crowding, for instance, triggers diffusion of responsibility and normalises depreciative actions, such as littering or off-trail camping, when visitors see peers violate regulations without consequence (van der Merwe, 2023). Ultimately, because ethical decision-making in PAS often entails perceived financial sacrifices, additional transactional effort, or reduced personal convenience, these immediate structural barriers easily override abstract moral principles, locking well-intentioned tourists into a collective cycle of ecological degradation (Song et al., 2024; Lemy et al., 2026).

2.5. Theoretical Underpinnings: The Behavioural Reasoning Theory and the Ethical Tourism Model

This study's theoretical foundation is a synthesis of BRT and ETM. Westaby (2005) formulated BRT to challenge traditional decision-making models, such as the TPB, which assume a direct, linear progression from attitude to intention to behaviour. Instead, BRT posits that dual-pathway processing shapes consumer actions, where context-specific "reasons for" and "reasons against" an action mediate or moderate the link between values and behaviour. In protected natural areas like IWP, a tourist may hold strong biocentric values; however, immediate situational barriers, such as absent recycling infrastructure, high costs for community-led tours, or conflicting hedonic desires for social media content, generate compelling "reasons against" compliance. These contextual friction points break the traditional attitude-behaviour link, allowing self-interested motives to override conservation intentions.

To evaluate the scope of these behavioural failures, this study pairs BRT with Speed's ETM. While BRT explains the psychological mechanism behind the EB paradox, ETM establishes the multidimensional benchmark for sustainable travel across three core pillars: environmental integrity, social justice, and economic equity. By merging BRT with ETM, this study moves beyond simple eco-centric habit tracking to encompass broader ethical obligations, including local economic empowerment and animal welfare. As Nica et al. (2025) note, embedding ethical accountability directly within the TBL framework exposes how practical trade-offs operate on the ground. Synthesising these perspectives ensures the EB paradox is evaluated not as a static ethical failure, but as a dynamic, context-driven process where environmental, social, and economic duties continuously collide with personal travel goals.

3. Methods

3.1. Context of the Study: iSimangaliso Wetland Park

IWP is South Africa's largest wetland park and hosts several significant heritage tourism sites. Promoted as a flagship of South Africa's post-apartheid protected area (PA) conservation policy (Hansen, 2014), the park is regarded as a vital asset for driving regional economic growth (IWPA, 2018, 2019). Encompassing five interlinked ecosystems, IWP has undergone a major conceptual shift since its inception. Originally established primarily for biodiversity preservation, the park has evolved into a key hub for nature-based recreation. However, expanding recreational activity within IWP has highlighted a critical EB paradox: visitors frequently report strong environmental values but fail to demonstrate them in practice. In response, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority (IWPA) and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the provincial conservation agency responsible for daily management and enforcement (IWPA, 2017), launched a 'development for conservation' initiative (IWPA, 2018). This strategy aims to safeguard ecological processes, biodiversity, threatened species, and natural landscapes while simultaneously fostering inclusive economic growth.

While conventional management at IWP relies mainly on reactive enforcement and spatial restrictions to curb visitor-induced degradation, theoretical discourse shows that long-term footprint mitigation requires proactive EB rooted in intrinsic moral responsibility (Carrington et al., 2016; Ko & Cho, 2022). Despite high self-reported environmental values among eco-tourists, a persistent gap remains between stated convictions and actual conduct within protected area boundaries.

At the iSimangaliso World Heritage Site, this EB paradox manifests as unauthorised off-roading, wildlife harassment, and non-compliance with local community guidelines.

3.2. Design and Data Collection

This study employed a balanced, two-phase sampling design within the geographic boundaries of IWP, collecting primary data during the peak visitation period from 1 November to 31 December 2021. Purposive and convenience sampling captured a representative cross-section of visitors while maintaining logistical feasibility across an expansive landscape. First, three high-traffic access corridors were selected: the Dukuduku, Nhlozi, and Bhangazi gates. These gates serve distinct flows of domestic and international tourists, ensuring broad coverage across visitor profiles. Second, convenience sampling was conducted at these entry points to recruit visitors. To minimise convenience sampling bias and avoid time-of-day or day-of-week clustering, we stratified across systematic time intervals (morning, afternoon, and weekends).

Based on institutional visitor records indicating an annual volume of approximately 522,954 visits (IWPA, 2019), we calculated a minimum target sample size of 384 using Raosoft (2004) parameters (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error). Of the 384 questionnaires distributed, 323 were retrieved fully completed, yielding an effective response rate of 84.1%. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire developed from validated scales available in the literature (e.g., Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2016; Ko & Cho, 2022; Sadiq et al., 2022; Speed, 2007). The questionnaire had three sections: Section 1 captured respondent demographic characteristics, and Section 2 assessed the perceived importance of EBs across 23 indicators, measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (extremely unimportant) to 5 (extremely important). Questions in Section 3 were designed to elicit respondents' reports of their actual EB practices using the same 23 indicators, measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The primary researcher and a trained research assistant administered the questionnaires in person. Standard ethical protocols were maintained throughout: participation was strictly voluntary, anonymous, and restricted to individuals aged 18 and older. Respondents were informed of the study's academic purpose and assured that participation posed no physical or psychological risk. The Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval (Ref: FCRE2021/FR/07/001-MS (2)), and the IWP granted formal institutional research permission before field deployment.

3.3. Instrument Validity and Reliability

Because the measurement instrument was adapted from external literature, four academic subject-matter experts and a statistician assessed its content validity, construct validity, and internal consistency reliability before data collection by analysing the questionnaire to refine phrasing, improve clarity, reduce item complexity, and estimate completion time. Post-data-collection reliability was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha. All subscales exceeded the standard 0.70 threshold (0.60 minimum exploratory baseline), indicating strong internal consistency.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Mean scores and standard deviations for the 23 paired importance and practice items were computed. To test for significant differences across demographic groups, we conducted comparative analyses. Although Likert items yield ordinal data, composite scale scores can be treated as continuous interval-level data, justifying parametric testing (Carifio & Perla, 2008; Norman, 2010). However, to guard against potential violations of normality and equal variance, we applied non-parametric equivalents as robustness checks. Bartlett’s test was conducted to test for homogeneity of variance, followed by Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Kruskal-Wallis tests with post hoc Dunn’s pairwise comparisons where variances differed significantly. We set statistical significance at $p \leq 0.05$.

3.5. Characteristics of the Research Sample

Table 1 outlines the demographic and travel characteristics of the surveyed visitors (N = 323).

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents

Characteristic	Frequency (N = 323)	Percentage (%)	Characteristic	Frequency (N=323)	Percentage (%)
Visitor type	N	%	Sex	N	%
Domestic	199	61.61	Male	162	50.15%
International	124	38.39	Female	157	48.61%
			Other	4	1.24%
Age	N	%	Marital Status	N	%
18–30 years	72	22.60	Married	121	37.46

Characteristic	Frequency (N = 323)	Percentage (%)	Characteristic	Frequency (N =323)	Percentage (%)
31–40 years	114	35.29	Living with partner	86	26.63
41–50 years	100	30.96	Single	84	26.01
51–60 years	31	9.60	Divorced	18	5.57
60 years and above	5	1.55	Widowed	12	3.72
			Other	2	0.62%
Education	N	%	Visiting frequency	N	%
Below Grade 10	33	10.22	Once	77	28.52
Grade 12	125	38.70	Twice	86	31.41
3-year Diploma	70	21.67	3time	64	23.70
4 Year degree	64	19.81	4times	24	8.66
Postgraduate	31	9.60	5 times or above	19	7.22
Accompany	N	%	Purpose of travel	N	%
Alone	162	50.15	Pleasure	124	38.39
Family	56	17.34	Education	28	8.67
Spouse/partner	52	16.10	Relaxation	81	25.08
Friends	51	15.79	Family gathering	51	15.79
Stranger	2	0.62	Business	25	7.74
			Transit	14	4.33
Paying category	N	%	Repeat visitor	N	%
Paying	300	92.88	Yes	270	83.59
Non-paying	23	7.22	No	53	16.41

Source: Authors' own work

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

4.1.1. Comparison of Perceived EB Importance vs Practice

To evaluate the presence of an EB paradox and test H1, paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare mean scores for perceived EB importance against actual EB practice implementation. Table 2 presents these comparisons categorised across the three TBL domains: ecological, socio-cultural, and economic.

Table 2. Paired-Samples Comparison of perceived EB importance vs Practice (N = 323).

EB Indicators (TBL Domains)	Perceived Importance Mean (SD)	Actual Practice Mean (SD)	Mean Diff. (Imp – Prac)	t-value	p-value
Ecological (Overall Aggregated)	3.99 (0.72)	3.94 (0.74)	+0.05	2.84	.005*
Following signs in the park	4.12 (0.94)	3.95 (1.03)	+0.17	3.12	.002*
Honouring environmental rules and regulations	4.10 (0.94)	3.96 (0.98)	+0.14	2.65	.008*
Acting with care and diligence in the park	4.10 (0.94)	3.99 (0.89)	+0.11	2.15	.032*
Reducing, reusing, and recycling waste	4.08 (0.97)	3.96 (1.01)	+0.12	2.21	.028*
Respecting and protecting unique features	4.08 (0.94)	4.02 (1.00)	+0.06	1.10	.272
Using designated garbage-collection bins	4.06 (0.92)	4.03 (0.95)	+0.03	0.58	.562
Proper use of tourism facilities (avoiding graffiti)	4.05 (0.91)	3.87 (0.96)	+0.18	3.24	.001*
Not feeding animal species in the park	4.01 (0.97)	3.99 (1.07)	+0.02	0.35	.727
Not removing natural resources (stones, plants)	4.02 (0.94)	4.05 (0.81)	-0.03	-0.61	.542
Choosing low-impact routes	3.85 (0.97)	3.81 (1.00)	+0.04	0.74	.460
Seeking efficient transport options	3.82 (1.02)	3.80 (1.00)	+0.02	0.38	.704
Socio-cultural (Overall Aggregated)	3.83 (0.78)	3.86 (0.79)	-0.03	-0.74	.460
Valuing local traditions and customs	4.08 (0.99)	3.87 (0.96)	+0.21	3.51	.001*
Treating others with respect in the park	4.08 (0.95)	4.01 (0.91)	+0.07	1.32	.188
Treating local vendors respectfully	4.01 (0.96)	3.91 (0.94)	+0.10	1.84	.067
Avoiding promotion of human exploitation	3.89 (1.06)	3.88 (1.01)	+0.01	0.18	.857
Establishing contact with local community	3.53 (1.00)	3.68 (1.03)	-0.15	-2.48	.014*
Learning words of the local community languages	3.48 (1.00)	3.70 (1.07)	-0.22	-3.21	.001*
Economic (Overall Aggregated)	3.89 (0.75)	3.76 (0.80)	+0.13	3.42	.001*
Contributing to infrastructure maintenance	3.93 (1.02)	3.67 (1.00)	+0.26	4.12	<.001*
Buying local products, e.g., crafts	3.87 (0.99)	3.59 (1.10)	+0.28	4.35	<.001*
Avoiding products from endangered species	3.88 (1.00)	3.95 (0.95)	-0.07	-1.18	.239
Refraining from buying counterfeit products	3.86 (1.04)	3.86 (0.94)	0.00	0.00	1.000
Preferring local visitor services	3.85 (1.00)	3.79 (0.96)	+0.06	1.02	.309
Choosing resource-efficient outings	3.80 (0.88)	3.81 (1.00)	-0.01	-0.19	.850

*p-value is less than 0.05

Source: Authors' own work

As can be seen in Table 3, mean scores for perceived importance ranged from 3.48 to 4.12, whereas those for actual practice implementation ranged from 3.59 to 4.05. The data provide partial support for H1, revealing a statistically significant EB paradox for two of the three TBL domains. Overall, the data show a highly nuanced, non-linear manifestation of the EB paradox across the TBL spectrum, directly challenging the theoretical assumption that the value-action gap is uniform (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2016).

Within the ecological domain, respondents assigned a high cognitive value to environmental ethics (3.99) relative to actual practice (3.94), yielding an over-

all statistically significant EB paradox ($t = 2.84$, $p = 0.005$). These high baseline importance ratings align with Value-Belief-Norm (vBN) theory, as tourists with strong biospheric values feel an intrinsic moral obligation to protect protected areas like IWP (Agag et al., 2020). According to Norm Activation Theory (NAT) (Schwartz, 1977), individuals activate personal norms when they perceive a clear threat to the environment and feel directly responsible for averting it; the high mean for “following signs and indications” (4.12) indicates that park management has effectively communicated the consequences of habitat degradation. At the item level, significant gaps between professed values and practice were concentrated in formal compliance indicators, such as “following signs” ($t = 3.12$; $p = 0.002$) and “proper use of tourism facilities” ($t = 3.24$; $p = 0.001$). Conversely, low-friction habits such as “using designated garbage bins” (importance = 4.06; practice = 4.03; $p = 0.562$) and “respecting unique park features” ($p = 0.272$) exhibited minimal, non-significant differences, confirming that environmental norms are deeply institutionalised within the consumer mindset. Under BRT, this minimal friction suggests that established park infrastructure acts as a critical structural facilitator (Song et al., 2024). When clear, localised rules and accessible facilities reinforce desired actions, the required cognitive and physical effort is minimised, enabling a smooth translation of environmental values into compliance when supported by a low-barrier operational framework (Lemy et al., 2026).

Conversely, the economic domain demonstrated the most pronounced positive EB paradox across the dataset (difference = +0.13, $t = 3.42$, $p = 0.001$), revealing severe structural breakdowns in tourist economic ethics. While respondents acknowledged abstract ethical obligations, their actual on-site choices lagged significantly when faced with direct financial transactions, specifically “buying local products and crafts” (importance = 3.87; practice = 3.59; difference = +0.28, $t = 4.35$, $p < 0.001$) and “contributing to the maintenance of park infrastructure” (importance = 3.93; practice = 3.67; difference = +0.26, $t = 4.12$, $p < 0.001$). BRT explains this friction through the specific activation of situational constraints and economic sacrifices as explicit “reasons against” carrying out an action (Song et al., 2024). When an ethical choice demands a direct financial trade-off, perceived loss of convenience, or added transactional effort, immediate structural barriers easily override abstract moral principles (Lemy et al., 2026). This shows that tourists’ willingness to support destination prosperity is highly elastic, stretching in theory but snapping when confronted with immediate individual costs.

Finally, the socio-cultural domain exhibited a complex, relational mechanism characterised by contrasting item-level trends, despite displaying no overall statistically significant gap (importance = 3.83; practice = 3.86; $t = -0.74$, $p = 0.460$). In passive ethical dimensions, tourists exhibited a conventional positive gap, such as

“valuing local traditions and customs” (importance = 4.08; practice = 3.87; difference = +0.21, $t = 3.51$, $p = .001$), where reported practice lagged behind perceived importance. However, active, face-to-face engagements yielded statistically significant negative gaps, where actual on-site practice significantly exceeded prior perceived intent, specifically for “establishing contact with the local community” (importance = 3.53, practice = 3.68; difference = -0.15 , $t = -2.48$, $p = .014$) and “learning words of the local community language” (importance = 3.48, practice = 3.70; difference = -0.22 , $t = -3.21$, $p = .001$). These findings demonstrate that socio-cultural ethics are heavily context-dependent and relational rather than strictly premeditated. Modern consumer behaviour models emphasise that although premeditated behavioural intentions are frequently constrained by perceived task difficulty or perceived ineffectiveness of individual action, real-time contextual triggers and immediate face-to-face social dynamics can bypass prior cognitive frameworks, driving spontaneous pro-social engagement (Lemy et al., 2026). Synthesising these multi-dimensional dynamics, H1 is partially supported: visitors’ perceived importance and actual practice differ significantly within the ecological ($p = .005$) and economic ($p = .001$) domains. In contrast, mechanisms underlying the overall socio-cultural domain ($p = .460$) are non-linear and situationally driven.

4.2. Inferential Analysis

4.2.1. Variations in the EB paradox based on socio-demographic characteristics

To formally test H2, which posits that the magnitude of this EB gap varies significantly across visitor socio-demographic profiles and trip characteristics, we conducted non-parametric rank sum tests (Mann-Whitney/Kruskal-Wallis) to evaluate differences in EB importance versus practice across key visitor variables. Statistical significance was evaluated at the standard threshold of alpha = 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). Table 3 presents the results of these tests across IWP.

Table 3. Comparisons of the influence of demographic variables on EB importance and practices.

Demographics	The importance of EB				EB practice			
	N	Rank Mean	<i>p</i> -value	P Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	N	Rank Mean	<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Visitor type								
Domestic	199	166.6	1.124	0.2616	199	170.5	2.069	0.0386
International	124	154.6			124	148.4		
Sex								
Male	162	174.4	5.908	0.0526	162	176.5	8.036	0.0180
Female	157	150.0			157	148.6		

Demographics	The importance of EB				EB practice			
	N	Rank Mean	<i>p</i> -value	P Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	N	Rank Mean	<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Other	2	262.5	5.908	0.0526	2	228.5	8.036	0.0180
Visitor category								
First time	270	122.8	0.092	0.092		159.2	1.218	0.2231
Repeat visit	53	163.1				176.3		
Marital status								
Single	84	163.0	14.96	0.0105	84	168.1	14.462	0.0129
Living with a partner	86	148.8			86	155.9		
Married	121	181.7			121	175.9		
Divorced	18	137.5			18	114.8		
Widower/widow	12	103.3			12	113.0		
Travel companion								
Alone	51	144.7	3.311	0.5052	51	149.0	3.657	0.4551
Family members	162	167.0			162	163.2		
With spouse/partner	56	170.8			56	177.5		
With friends	52	153.0			52	152.5		
With strangers	2	182.3			2	211.0		
Purpose of travel								
Pleasure	124	182.6	23.32	0.0001	124	181.2	25.474	0.0001
Educational	28	152.4			28	142.5		
Relaxation	81	178.2			81	177.4		
Family gathering	51	121.7			51	146.3		
Business	29	107.9			29	87.3		
Transit	14	117.8			14	107.4		
Paying Options								
Paying	300	162.2	5.835	0.0691	300	161.7	2.972	0.2335
Non-paying	19	138.1			19	150.3		
Other	4	261.8			4	238.3		
Age group								
18–30 years	73	146.8	5.314	0.2565	73	148.6	14.45	0.0057
31–40 years	114	175.7			114	185.5		
41–50 years	100	161.9			100	159.0		
51–60 years	31	153.3			31	132.2		
61 years and above	5	127.9			5	104.8		
Educational level								
Below Grade 12	33	143.6	5.243	0.2633	33	128.4	5.572	0.2335
Grade 12	125	156.4			125	160.7		
3-year diploma	70	178.3			70	172.9		

Demographics	The importance of EB				EB practice			
	N	Rank Mean	<i>p</i> -value	P Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	N	Rank Mean	<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
4-year degree	64	171.5	5.243	0.2633	64	167.6	5.572	0.2335
Postgraduate	31	147.8			31	167.0		
Frequency of visits								
Once	77	140.9	9.196	0.0564	77	132.2	12.528	0.0138
Twice	86	136.4			86	150.3		
3 times	64	134.4			64	126.9		
4 times	24	95.5			24	95.3		
5 times or more	19	163.9			19	161.8		

A *p*-value of less than or equal to ($\leq$) 0.05 in ANOVA means that there is a significant difference based on the mean score on the dependent variable for the groups' measure

Source: Authors' own work

To analyse the impact of demographic variables on EB importance and practice, we categorised the variables into three distinct roles: those that drive the entire paradox cycle, those that widen the EB paradox, and those with no statistical effect. Based on the dataset in Table 3, the core drivers influencing both importance and practice are 'purpose of travel' with EB importance ($p = 0.0001$), while EB practice ($p = 0.0001$) and 'marital status' with EB importance ($p = 0.0105$) and practice ($p = 0.0129$). For these variables, the groups differ significantly across the board, meaning they heavily influence the entire cycle of the paradox. Specifically, 'pleasure and relaxation' travellers have much higher rank means, suggesting they are more engaged with or sensitive to environmental conditions than 'business or transit' travellers. Similarly, married individuals and those living with partners have the highest rank means, suggesting that family dynamics or shared households foster stronger structural habits around environmental awareness and sustainable practices.

Conversely, a second set of critical demographics serves as gap-widening variables, showing a significant difference in one category but not the other, highlighting where the EB paradox shifts. This trend is prominent in visitor type (domestic vs international), where EB importance ($p = 0.2616$) is not statistically significant, but EB Practice ($p = 0.0386$) is. Here, domestic and international visitors value sustainability similarly. However, domestic visitors show a higher relative rank mean for EB practices, implying that international visitors face structural, cultural, or logistical barriers while abroad. A similar pattern appears in the case of sex, where EB importance is marginally non-significant ($p = 0.0526$) while EB practice is significant ($p = 0.0180$), demonstrating that while men and women view environmental importance somewhat similarly, there is a clear split in which

sex is more likely to carry out the actions. Age group also reflects this divergence, with an insignificant result for EB importance ($p = 0.2565$) but a highly significant result for EB practice ($p = 0.0057$). This shows that all age groups are conceptually on a level playing field. However, older and middle-aged cohorts account for the bulk of the rank means, suggesting that green practices may be limited by factors such as financial stability, habit, or life experience, leaving younger demographics (18–30) lagging in action despite similar intentions. Frequency of visits follows suit, with a marginally non-significant EB importance ($p = 0.0564$) and a significant EB practice ($p = 0.0138$), showing that as visitors return multiple times, familiarity alters their behaviour and makes their execution more disciplined or localised, even if their baseline appreciation remains stable.

Finally, several demographic variables have no significant effect on either dimension and thus do not statistically moderate the EB paradox, meaning any internal variation is likely due to chance. Overall, broad visitor categories (first-timers vs repeaters) show no significant difference for EB importance ($p = 0.0920$) or EB practice ($p = 0.2231$). Travel companion yields uniform results across both EB importance ($p = 0.5052$) and EB practice ($p = 0.4551$), meaning whether someone travels alone, with family, or with friends has no impact. Financial entry arrangements, categorised as paying for options, also do not affect outcomes for EB importance ($p = 0.0690$) and EB practice ($p = 0.2335$), while education level similarly does not yield a statistically significant difference in environmental execution within this dataset ($p = 0.2633$; $p = 0.2335$). Ultimately, the core drivers of the paradox are items like Age, Visitor Type, Sex, and Visit Frequency. At the same time, visitors generally agree on what is important; their real-world practices diverge sharply based on who they are. Based on the above analysis, H2 is strongly supported.

5. Discussion

This study sought to empirically investigate and quantify the EB paradox among IWP visitors by deconstructing the statistical variance between visitors' perceived TBL values and their actual on-site choices. Overall, the empirical evidence partially supports H1, showing that the EB paradox does not operate uniformly across all sustainability dimensions. There was evidence of a statistically significant gap ($t = 2.84$, $p = 0.005$) in ecological domain, with baseline environmental values outpacing EB practice. Through the lens of VBN theory and NAT, visitors generally hold strong biospheric values and feel a moral obligation to protect sensitive

wetlands. However, while low-friction habits like using designated garbage bins showed no significant gap, compliance with formal guidelines, such as following posted signage ($t = 3.12, p = 0.002$) and avoiding facility misuse ($t = 3.24, p = 0.001$), trailed behind stated intentions. In line with BRT, this suggests that clear physical infrastructure facilitates compliance by minimising friction issues.

In contrast, operational confusion or perceived restrictions create barriers to executing compliance-based behaviours. The largest positive EB paradox was found in the economic domain ($t = 3.42, p = 0.001$), pointing to a profound financial friction barrier in tourist economic ethics. Although respondents recognised their abstract responsibilities to support the regional economy, their actual execution dropped significantly when choices required direct financial transactions or personal inconvenience, such as purchasing local products and crafts ($t = 4.35, p < 0.001$) or contributing directly to infrastructure maintenance ($t = 4.12, p < 0.001$). In the light of RBT, these findings suggest that situational constraints and immediate financial trade-offs act as explicit “reasons against” ethical purchasing. Consequently, while tourist commitment to local destination prosperity remains high in theory, it proves highly elastic and cost-sensitive in practice.

In contrast to the ecological and economic dimensions, the data regarding the socio-cultural domain revealed a unique dynamic with no statistically significant aggregate gap ($t = -0.74, p = 0.460$), though item-level analysis identified two distinct operational mechanisms. Passive ethical dimensions, such as respecting local traditions, followed the traditional pattern, with practice lagging behind stated importance ($t = 3.51, p = 0.001$). Conversely, active relational engagements produced statistically significant negative gaps, with reported practices actually exceeding prior perceived importance for actions like establishing direct contact with the local community ($t = -2.48, p = 0.014$) and learning words of local languages ($t = -3.21, p = 0.001$). This indicates that socio-cultural ethics are deeply relational and context-dependent rather than strictly premeditated. Modern consumer behaviour models confirm that while planned intentions can be constrained by perceived difficulty, real-time social interactions and face-to-face engagements frequently trigger spontaneous pro-social actions that surpass initial expectations. The non-parametric rank-sum tests strongly supported H2, confirming that socio-demographic background and trip context significantly moderate how effectively ethical values translate into on-site practice. The analysis highlighted two core paradox drivers, the purpose of travel and marital status, which significantly influenced both EB Importance ($p < 0.05$) and EB Practice ($p < 0.05$). Pleasure and relaxation seekers, as well as married couples, demonstrated the highest baseline ethical habits and receptivity to park norms. Meanwhile, several key variables widened the gap: baseline ethical importance remained constant across groups

($p > 0.05$), but actual practice diverged significantly ($p < 0.05$). Domestic visitors achieved higher practice scores than international guests ($p = 0.0386$), older and middle-aged cohorts outperformed younger visitors aged 18–30 ($p = 0.0057$), and repeat visitors executed ethical behaviours at higher rates than first-time guests ($p = 0.0138$). These patterns demonstrate that site familiarity, life-stage factors, and the absence of logistical travel barriers play crucial roles in bridging the EB paradox across diverse tourist segments.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study provides clear empirical confirmation of the EB paradox among visitors to IWP, demonstrating a statistically significant gap between tourists' stated conservation values and their on-site practices across 23 multi-domain indicators ($p < .05$). Grounded in BRT and the ETM, the findings address the study's core research objectives by illustrating how this EB paradox operates across the TBL framework. In evaluating the TBL domains (Research Objective 1), the results confirm Hypothesis 1 by revealing a strong ecological bias among visitors. While tourists assign high baseline importance to biosphere protection, such as following park signage (Mean = 4.12) and honouring environmental rules (Mean = 4.10), their actual conduct systematically lags (Means = 3.95 and 3.96, respectively). Conversely, socio-cultural indicators, such as establishing local contact (Mean = 3.53) and learning local languages (Mean = 3.48), scored the lowest, demonstrating that visitors prioritise ecological integrity while largely ignoring host community socio-economic needs. Furthermore, after examining visitor profiles (Research Objective 2), the analysis confirms Hypothesis 2 by showing that the magnitude of this disconnect varies significantly across socio-demographic and trip characteristics. Psychological and structural mechanisms drive this paradox: upon entering the park, vacation liminality and hedonic travel motives grant tourists a temporary 'licence-to-sin,' in which immediate desires for leisure and convenience override abstract moral obligations, while structural friction, such as inadequate recycling infrastructure or spatial crowding, provides compelling 'reasons against' ethical compliance.

To translate these findings into practice, the study offers clear strategic contributions for the IWP and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife to move beyond generic awareness campaigns towards targeted behavioural interventions. Management must reduce structural barriers by investing in visible recycling points, clearly demarcated trails, and strict boundary markers to prevent off-road driving. Applying

choice architecture, such as default opt-in conservation levies or carbon offsetting at access gates, can subtly steer hedonic travellers towards sustainable choices without compromising their holiday experience. Additionally, to address the socio-cultural deficit in visitor conduct, promotional narratives must actively highlight host communities, support direct economic engagement with local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and promote community-led tours. Finally, by leveraging demographic and spatial variances, park authorities can optimise enforcement by deploying educational resources and ranger patrols to high-traffic access corridors (such as the Dukuduku, Nhlozi, and Bhangazi gates) during peak visitation periods.

7. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the EB paradox at IWP, several structural limitations remain. Methodologically, relying on self-reported surveys to evaluate personal practices exposes the data to social desirability bias and the holiday halo effect. Visitors often overreport their ethical actions to match personal ideals, potentially understating the EB paradox's true magnitude. Furthermore, retrospective data collection introduces memory bias and fails to capture real-time behavioural shifts during the trip. Temporally and spatially, the data collection was restricted to a peak holiday window (November to December 2021) at three specific access gates. This seasonal snapshot heavily favours a recreational, high-traffic demographic, which may differ substantially from off-peak, eco-centric travellers. Furthermore, because the study was conducted during the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period characterised by severely suppressed international travel, the findings predominantly reflect local perspectives. Finally, the study faces conceptual boundaries by treating domestic and international visitor profiles as relatively uniform groups. It does not map deeper psychological variables, such as varying baseline levels of conservation education or distinct cultural belief systems, which fundamentally dictate how intensely a tourist experiences vacation liminality. Although the survey showed that visitors are not fully committed, it did not investigate why respondents do not fully commit to practising EB. This study might also be affected by the Hawthorne Effect. People often change their behaviour simply because they know they are being observed. This makes it difficult to determine whether the result was caused by the variable being tested or by the researcher's presence.

8. Future Research

To address these future research directions effectively, prospective studies must adopt more robust methodological frameworks that overcome the limitations of self-reported survey data. Because cross-sectional surveys remain inherently vulnerable to social desirability bias and memory recall errors, future inquiries should integrate longitudinal designs alongside direct observational methods, digital trace data, or smart tracking technologies, such as GPS tracking along park trails, transaction logs at local vendor stalls, and post-trip follow-up evaluations, to assess whether ethical habits formed at natural heritage sites persist over time. Geographically, expanding this research beyond coastal and estuarine wetlands like iSimangaliso to include comparative analyses across diverse park topologies (e.g., alpine reserves, arid ecosystems, urban nature parks, and privately owned game reserves) will clarify how differing management structures and visitor profiles impact the TBL EB paradox. From a psychological standpoint, deeper investigation into micro-level mechanisms, such as moral licensing, place attachment, environmental self-identity, and real-time emotional states like awe or fatigue, can uncover why specific segments, particularly younger travellers, experience a sharper drop-off between ethical intent and action. Finally, scholars should move beyond diagnosing the paradox to testing empirical behavioural interventions on-site; field experiments evaluating the real-world efficacy of choice architecture, social proof messaging, and default conservation levies will give park managers concrete, evidence-based tools to bridge the gap between tourist values and practice.

AI Use Declaration

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilised Grammarly to improve the linguistic quality and flow of the text. Following this process, the authors critically reviewed, revised, and validated all generated content. The authors remain fully accountable for the accuracy, academic integrity, and final version of the work.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

MK: conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing — original draft preparation; **UPH:** writing — review and editing, supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Institutional Review Board Statement

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Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Paradoks zachowań etycznych na obszarach chronionych: badanie zachowań osób odwiedzających Park Mokradłowy iSimangalisu w RPA

Streszczenie. Obszary chronione, początkowo tworzone jako odizolowane rezerваты przyrody, coraz częściej nabierają charakteru dynamicznych środowisk oferujących zwiedzającym transformacyjne możliwości rekreacyjne. Co za tym idzie, turystów zachęca się do zachowań etycznych, które mają na celu wspieranie zrównoważonego rozwoju obszarów chronionych. Chociaż turyści często deklarują silne przywiązanie do wartości proekologicznych, nie ma pewności co do tego, w jakim stopniu ich deklaracje przekładają się na faktyczne zachowania etyczne. Niniejsze badanie analizuje ten paradoks, aby określić, czy istnieje luka między deklarowanym znaczeniem zachowań etycznych a praktyką. W tym celu przeprowadzono badanie ankietowe z udziałem 323 respondentów stanowiących próbę dogodną i celową wybraną spośród osób odwiedzających Park Mokradłowy iSimangalisu (IWP). Zebrane dane dotyczące 23 wskaźników zachowań etycznych porównano za pomocą testu t dla prób parzystych. Wyniki potwierdzają istnienie statystycznie istotnego paradoksu zachowań etycznych: chociaż osoby odwiedzające park silnie identyfikują się z etyką ochrony przyrody, ich zachowanie na miejscu nie odzwierciedla tych wartości. Wskazuje to na konieczność przyjęcia przez kierownictwo strategii stymulujących oraz poprawy sposobu, w jaki odwiedzający postrzegają środowisko naturalne, aby zniwelować rozdźwięk między deklaracjami a rzeczywistym zachowaniem.

Słowa kluczowe: zachowania etyczne, paradoks zachowań etycznych, turystyka etyczna, obszary chronione, Park Mokradel iSimangalisu



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