

# Ecotourism in New Zealand: A Catalyst for Sustainable Development

A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION AND EXECUTION OF  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES WITHIN ECOTOURISM  
OPERATORS IN NEW ZEALAND

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## Abstract

Since the 1980s, when ecotourism had emerged, a paradigm shift has occurred from mass tourism towards ecotourism. This shift indicates an increase in travellers' decision making based on environmental awareness and an inclination to travel to destinations which are rich in nature. New Zealand prides itself upon its nature-rich and sustainable environment and, in the tourism context, the brand image portrayed in international marketing is founded on being clean, green, and pure. Nonetheless, the concept of sustainable development can be more coherent amongst ecotourism operators.

To understand how operators implement sustainable development practices in the ecotourism sector, this research analyses and critiques the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand primarily from the tourist perspective. This is based on a website analysis and social media reviews of six ecotourism operators in New Zealand. These operators are based in the regions of Auckland, Rotorua, and the Bay of Islands. This study is pursued through an in-depth review of the literature, a thematic analysis applied to the qualitative data used, in conjunction with relevant academic literature, to explore the underlying themes of the relationship. The concept of greenwashing is also discussed. The key findings highlight the positives and negatives of the respective ecotourism operators in New Zealand. From the visitors' experiences, it is evident that the ecotourism sector can become a catalyst for sustainable development in New Zealand.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, 100% Pure New Zealand, Web Analysis, New Zealand, Catalyst, Conservation, Environment

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## List of Abbreviations

DOC	Department of Conservation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TIES	The International Ecotourism Society
TOSSI	Tāwharanui Open Sanctuary Society
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization

## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the coherence between sustainable development and the ecotourism sector in New Zealand. The research question is: “What is the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand?” A key objective of the research is to identify whether greenwashing is prominent within ecotourism operators in New Zealand, and if the ecotourism operators commit to the assurance of sustainable development practices.

The research undertaken is a web analysis of ecotourism operators in three different regions in New Zealand. The three regions are Auckland, Rotorua, and the Bay of Islands. The six selected operators are all located in these three key tourist locations and the majority of them are accredited award winners. In Auckland the ecotourism operators are Habitat Tours and Relaxing Journeys. In Rotorua the ecotourism operators are Tour Zealand and Redwoods Treewalk. The Bay of Islands ecotourism operators are Ecocruz and Fullers GreatSights Dolphin Cruise. The majority of this research is based upon the qualitative research method of netnography. The method of netnography utilizes online channels of communication in order to understand ideologies from the consumers perspective (Schober, 2018).

TripAdvisor reviews regarding the respective operators were researched and gathered in order to gain insights into the ecotourism operators and the current sustainable development processes they have in place, through visitor perspectives. In conjunction with that aspect of the research, the awards that the operator holds (Qualmark, Tourism New Zealand Awards) also have a vital role in dictating how the operator conducts their business and if they comply with the concept of sustainable development. The relevant information in this area was found on the ecotourism operators’ websites.

The term “ecotourism” first emerged in the 1980s as a byproduct of global and sustainable ecological practices which had achieved global recognition (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). The development had arisen from a paradigm shift in mass tourism towards ecotourism. This had incorporated the concepts of an increase in global environmental awareness and the inclination to start travelling to more nature-rich locations (Fiorello & Bo, 2012). In a beneficial manner, ecotourism has aided in the minimisation of the continual issues of poverty and the preservation of natural resources on a global scale (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013). Conversely, however, it is important

to acknowledge that ecotourism has also created negative issues such as cultural and environmental degradation, and an economic imbalance throughout society (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013).

From a global perspective, it has been highlighted that, whilst visiting New Zealand and Australia, travellers seek natural scenery, flora and fauna as part of their journey. When visiting Africa, 80% of travelers had indicated seeing wildlife as a motivational factor (Diamantis, 2010). Travellers in the European and North American regions had considered the activity of bird watching to be the motivational factor of their travels whereas, in South America, between 50-79% of travellers indicated that visiting protected areas represented a factor of importance whilst travelling. This also highlights that the ecotourism industry accounts for a significant portion of travel globally. However, this is also a concern for the ecotourism industry.

Ecotourism is a large sector of the tourism industry with many participants, and a great assortment of activities. Diamantis (2010) asserted that ecotourism should be treated as a concept with a variety of products offered rather than attempting to define ecotourism as a specific product itself. The main focus should be on the conservation and preservation of the environment for the future. Nevertheless, limitations also arise from the ecotourism sector and its operators. There is a variety of terms used to describe the concept of ecotourism itself, such as nature-orientated tourism, nature travel, sustainable tourism, special interest tourism, and alternative tourism (Diamantis, 2010; Laarman & Durst, 1987).

The concept of ecotourism includes both supply and demand factors. The supply factors include the different sources of accommodation provided, the nature and the resilience of the resources provided, and the preferences of the culture and local community. The demand factors include the level of interest in nature, the level of physical effort needed to immerse oneself in off-the-beaten-path journeys, and the variety of experiences and activities offered. In spite of the high level of recognition that has developed for this sector, ecotourism has still not received a proper definition per se.

Regardless, it is one of the most significant tourism buzzwords used in nature-based destinations (Diamantis, 2010). While definitions of ecotourism are variable, Steward and Sekartjajrarini (1994) argued that it is based upon two approaches. The first approach notes the activity-based perspective that ecotourism exhibits, and the second

approach requires a contextualised approach to ecotourism within the industry (Steward & Sekartjakrarini, 1994).

In New Zealand, the ecotourism industry has foreseen rapid growth across the country. The environment that the country possesses is an ideal location for the consumption of nature. However, there are issues faced within the sector regarding the implementation and the management of eco-friendly and sustainable development processes. There are opportunities within New Zealand for its various ecotourism operators to develop and manage ecotourism processes in order to be successful in environmental, economic, and socio-cultural terms (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013). In order for these processes to be implemented, there needs to be cohesion between the understanding of the concept of ecotourism, what is needed for the evolution of ecotourism, and what is needed to ensure that high levels of ecotourism and sustainability are maintained. The requirements of environmental planning and development include a vast level of knowledge about nature and the impacts of tourism. This is due to its rapid growth and constantly changing environment (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013).

The term ecotourism connotes cultural as well as environmental tourism (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013; Scheyvens, 1999). Community-based ecotourism recognises the need to promote the quality of life of the locals, in conjunction with the conservation of resources (Scheyvens, 1999). Ecotourism businesses denote themselves using sustainable practices; however, there is little understanding of the relationship between the host community and the ecotourism operators (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). In relation to ecotourism, sustainable development is perceived as the ability to meet the necessary needs of the present day without compromising the needs of the future. When adhering to this concept, communities are able to thrive in ecotourism development (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013).

The title of this dissertation forms the research question: “What is the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand?” This study aims to understand how the ecotourism industry in New Zealand can act as a catalyst for sustainable development. This will be examined through tourist perspectives on six ecotourism operators in New Zealand. A key objective is to identify whether greenwashing is present within the ecotourism operations and if the operators are committed to sustainable development practices.

In this dissertation, Chapter Two covers the greater part of the literature and includes an exploration of three themes. These are ecotourism, sustainable development, and brand image. The sub-section on ecotourism covers how ecotourism has emerged over the years and how an ecotourist in the present day is differentiated from the typical tourist. The sub-section on sustainable development highlights the importance of sustainable development practices in the present day in order to adhere to the greener approach that is taking place globally and, if they are not implementing these practices already, organisations will find them beneficial in the future through the introduction of a sustainable development policy. The final sub-section on brand image covers how New Zealand has portrayed itself through the 100% Pure New Zealand campaign.

Chapter Three discusses the methodology used to complete this dissertation and draws attention to the research method of netnography and the qualitative method. Netnography uses the understanding of social interactions through online channels of communication. The qualitative method is predominantly used to determine the perspective and ideologies of the participants and, moreover, forms a wider part of research (Schober, 2018). The case study approach was used, in particular with the instrumental study approach. The case study approach highlights a significant issue at a particular point in time in order to gain an understanding as to why it has occurred (Mason, 2014). Thematic analysis was used through a six-step process which highlights the qualitative concept of categorising the relevant data in significant themes for compelling examples in regard to the research.

Chapter Four embodies data sought through the social media channels of the six ecotourism operators. This included the sustainable development policies in place within the ecotourism operators; how the policies are implemented; and whether the operators are committed to the assurance of sustainable development. A web analysis was conducted in conjunction with social media reviews. This included the perspectives and implications sought through the opinions of the public on these online channels. The awards held by the ecotourism operators have been analysed as this displays the commercially recognised status of sustainable development and environmentally friendly practices. Moreover, after the key points of the research, a discussion is presented with regard to the influence of social media reviews, whether they are positive or negative.

Chapter Five discusses the findings of the dissertation. This begins with the starting point of each respective ecotourism operator and the organisations' relationships with sustainable development practices. This is inclusive of the sustainable development policies in place at the organisation. This highlights the key themes in the ecotourism industry that were obtained from the findings. It is evident that the themes of communication, knowledge about conservation, and value for money play a vital role through visitor perspectives. This also contributes towards an understanding of the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand.

Chapter Six draws conclusions from the findings presented in this dissertation and the key points that have been discovered, as well as reiterating the value of the relationship between ecotourism and sustainable development in New Zealand. There are also suggestions for further research which can be conducted in relation to greenwashing, sustainable development, and the 100% Pure New Zealand campaign over time.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter highlights the main body of literature which explores the three themes in relation to this study. First is an introduction to sustainable development and its importance; this is followed by an overview of ecotourism. Lastly, the exploration of brand image illustrates the portrayal of New Zealand through the 100% Pure New Zealand campaign as well as highlighting the concept of greenwashing.

### 2.1 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development requires the creation and implementation of various measures in order to ensure a greener and environmentally cautious future. The term has been highly debated, and it is paramount to understand and explore how sustainable development can be attained for the future (Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015). For example, this means advancing beyond the creation of sustainability goals and moving forward with policies and processes in order to start the sustainable development movement. This is to refrain using the term sustainable development as just a buzzword (Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015).

Sustainable development has a variety of definitions and usage; however, the commonality between what is perceived is that sustainable development is a necessity in order to ensure a prosperous future for the environment we live in. As a result, counteracting environmental deterioration has become an important issue for decision makers on a global scale (Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015; Truffer & Coenen, 2012).

#### 2.1.1 The Concept of Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development describes the pursuit of a balance between ecological conservation, socio-cultural preservation, and economic development (Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015). Research suggests that it is arguable whether the transition towards sustainable development leaves room for economic growth. Significantly, regarding ecological and social development, Martinez Alier (2009) argued that environmental sustainability is not compatible with economic development and growth. There is also a clear correlation between the possibilities available for innovative eco-friendly practices and capital resources.

Businesses which have been operating for longer periods of time seem to be more interested in innovation through eco-friendly practices, in comparison to newer businesses (Chapple, Kroll, Lester, & Montero, 2011). This is due to older businesses

having a stronger economic base. There are significant variations in how these practices are implemented in different regions of the world. Many companies are taking on board a technological approach for innovative ecological practices. An example of this is Millbrook which is a high-end resort in Queenstown in New Zealand. However, there are negative impacts from any proposed industrialisation which does not take sustainable development into account. This creates consequential challenges upon a global scale (Chapple et al., 2011; Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015).

The growth of the tourism industry as a whole also presents challenges for urban destinations alike. Timur and Getz (2009) argued that the concepts of the environment, conservation, and preservation of socio-cultural values need to be adhered to in order to maintain the quality of life for the host communities in the respective areas. Although the concept and adaptation of sustainable development has been administered to reduce the friction created between travellers, the environment, and host communities, the poor management and implementation of these processes can harm the resource base itself (Timur & Getz, 2009). The partners within the tourism industry, host communities, and governments need to diversify and understand the values and respective goals that need to be implemented during the planning and development process of sustainable development (Timur & Getz, 2009).

The division between sustainable development and conservation has tended to generate many debates since the introduction of ecotourism during the late 1980s. Over time, many ideas and processes have been developed in order to try and address this issue, which arises globally. Ecotourism as such is described as a form of tourism that takes place in areas rich in nature which aims to sustain local communities as well as involving an engaging learning experience (Mondino & Beery, 2019; Takele, 2019). Ideally, ecotourism policies may look as though they address the issue between sustainable development and conservation; however, the industry still faces various challenges. It is highlighted that there is a lack of appropriate environmental education. This is constituted as one of the main challenges that ecotourism faces.

According to Mondino and Beery (2019), adjusting the methods and language used in the education system in conjunction with higher governmental level recognition can support the ecotourism industry as a catalyst and a learning tool for sustainable development. The benefits of the ecotourism industry have the ability to enhance rural livelihoods, in particular for communities living in remote areas. However, in certain

circumstances, ecotourism is considered a burden forced upon these local communities. The locals have little to no motivation to partake in its development (Gurung & Seeland, 2011). For example, the host communities who reside in these remote areas do not have access to the resources that the urban communities have, therefore they do not feel the need to participate in such ventures. Ecotourism initiatives in rural areas need to address the motivations and needs of the local communities (Gurung & Seeland, 2011).

According to the definition of ecotourism, sustainable development has the tendency to involve socio-cultural and environmental tourism (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013; Scheyvens, 1999). The demand has indicated that this specific market has the inclination to start travelling to more natural, exotic, and remote areas. This has a direct impact upon the ecotourism industry within developing countries (Richardson, 2018; Scheyvens, 1999).

With respect to community-based ecotourism, this sector focuses upon promoting the quality of the conservation resources in conjunction with working with the locals. The local communities both within the tourism industry as a whole and in the ecotourism industry specifically, still face constraints regardless of the legitimization that comes from the relevant governments (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). Coria and Calfucura (2012) argued that previous studies have indicated that indigenous involvement within the ecotourism industry and with sustainable development processes is still variable. The majority of the involvement is through the Southern and Eastern African, Asian, and Latin America regions.

With regard to the local communities, in a few destinations the expression of culture and identity in the ecotourism sector has replaced harmful activities for the locals, such as crop farming, livestock rearing, and hunting (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Das & Chatterjee, 2015). These activities have been replaced with traditional creations of music and arts which contribute to the cultural sustainability of language. An issue which has been extensively debated within the ecotourism industry with regard to culture and indigenous communities is that developing countries are more prone to the disruption and degradation of the environment (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013). It is disputable whether romanticising ecotourism has the potential to promote the conservation and preservation of nature, or whether, on the other hand, the term should be considered as an aspect of the consumption of nature (Richardson, 2018; Scheyvens, 1999).

### 2.1.2 UNWTO Sustainable Development Goals

In order to contribute towards a collective consciousness regarding sustainability, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has developed seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The tourism industry is a key sector for driving the adoption of the commitment towards sustainable development. The objective is to achieve these goals by the year 2030 (UNWTO, 2019). The ambitious SDGs are an inspiration towards transformation on a global scale. The tourism industry has the ability to contribute towards the goals in a direct and indirect manner. For example, Goals 12, 13, and 15 are particularly related to the ecotourism sector. These SDGs are as follows:

- Responsible Consumption and Production (Goal 12)
  - The ecotourism sector has the potential to adopt sustainable consumption and production processes. In order to implement this, initiatives for the efficient use of resources can be developed. As a result, this leads to benefits through economic, environmental, and social impacts (UNWTO, 2019).
- Climate Action (Goal 13)
  - Climate change will affect destinations, their competitiveness, and the aim for sustainable development. Climate change will directly change environmental resources which play a significant role in a destination, and, indirectly, the loss of biodiversity and the shortage of resources such as water. In order to alter this trend, the act of innovation towards the preservation of resources will guide the industry to achieving this goal (UNWTO, 2019).
- Life on Land (Goal 15)
  - The ecotourism sector is one of parties the most significantly interested in the preservation of water, forestry, air, and areas of biodiversity. In order to implement conservation and preservation practices, efforts should be made towards the reduction and consumption of waste, activities to raise awareness, and conservation policies to protect natural flora and fauna (UNWTO, 2019).

Hence, the concept of sustainable tourism is positioned to be in place and implemented in the 2030 UNWTO agenda (UNWTO, 2019).

The New Zealand tourism industry aims to conserve, restore, and protect the natural resources of the country. The 100% Pure New Zealand campaign as well as other tourism organisations in New Zealand are focused on creating a balance between tourism and environmental sustainability. This is through waste management, ecological restoration, and the reduction of carbon production (Tourism New Zealand, 2017). For example, a tool created to help sustainable practices globally and to help organisations achieve the UNWTO SDGs is the Green Globe Programme. In this programme, tourism organisations in New Zealand are required to present certification to confirm that their business operates in a sustainable manner (Green Globe, 2019). The Green Globe Programme supports organisations globally to join the programme and to practice sustainability in order to support the environment for the future. Currently, the Green Globe Programme has members throughout 90 countries, including New Zealand (Green Globe, 2019).

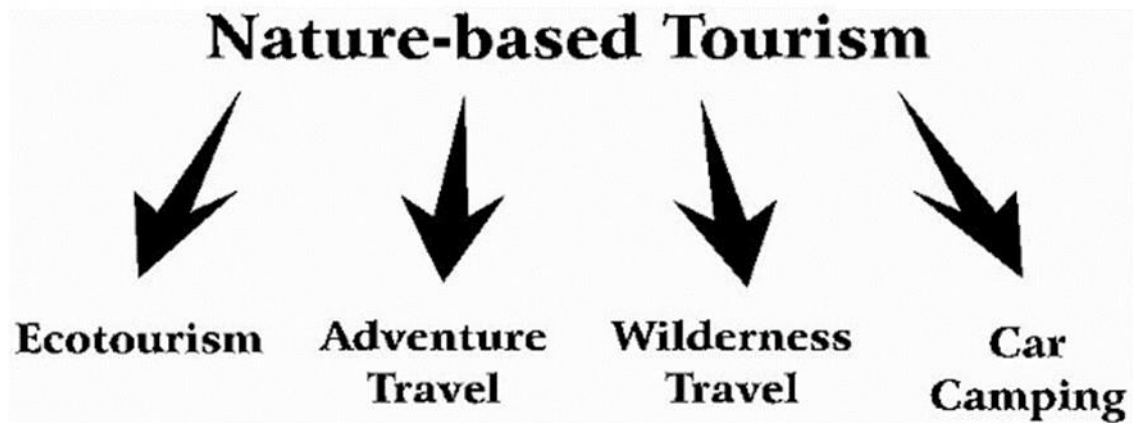
## 2.2 ECOTOURISM

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) has defined ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local community, and includes the involvement of education and interpretation (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; TIES, 2015). The ecotourism industry aims to understand the unity of sustainable travel, conservation, and communities. In order for this aim to be achieved, those who participate in and those who market ecotourism activities may consider adhering to the following ecotourism principles:

- To minimise behavioural, psychological, physical, and social impacts.
- To build respect and environmental and cultural awareness.
- To provide positive and engaging experiences for both the hosts and the visitors.
- To gain direct financial benefits for the purpose of conservation.
- To gain financial benefits for both private industries as well as the local community.
- To deliver interpretive and memorable experiences to visitors that aid in raising sensitivity towards the host countries, and their social, political, and environmental climates.
- To design, construct, and operate low-impact facilities.

- To recognise the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people amongst the community, and the formation of partnerships with them in order to create empowerment (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; TIES, 2015).

The concept of ecotourism is one of four sub-sectors of tourism which are nature-based. These sub-sectors are differentiated between travel motives (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Eagles, 1995; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017) and are: ecotourism, adventure travel, wilderness travel, and car camping (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Eagles (1995) Four sub-sectors of nature-based tourism**

For example, the concepts of travel and ecotourism involve the discovery of and education about nature and the environment (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Eagles, 1995; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017). The foundation of ecotourism is through the desire of travellers wanting to experience nature within the leisure time that they have. Increased participation has led to the recognition of natural sites and innovative eco-friendly ways to travel. The usage as well as the visitation of national parks and park land areas have developed from hundreds of visitors whom have a special interest in nature to, now, millions of educated travellers (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Eagles, 1995; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017). The increase in numbers is highlighted through people having more wealth over the past 30 years, a greater interest in the environment and cheaper travel options over time. However, a high level of environmental consciousness is a key attribute regarding the influx of demand into the ecotourism industry. The contribution of media outlets globally aids environmental awareness and reaches a wide audience. These factors are used to help the growth of ecotourism and the tourism industry as a whole. The developing market of the Asian economy has been identified as a key market for the ecotourism industry (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Eagles & Wind, 1994; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017).

There has been an increase in demand from wealthier tourists with a desire to travel to more remote and natural areas. This has directly had an impact on the ecotourism industry over time, specifically within developing countries (Scheyvens, 1999).

Regarding community-based tourism, it primarily focuses on the advancement of the quality of the conservation resources, as well as developing a relationship with the locals (Scheyvens, 1999).

### **2.2.1 The Ecotourist**

The “ecotourist” is known as a new form of tourist and identified as someone who is more environmentally cautious whilst travelling (Fiorello & Bo, 2012). However, the underlying motivations of the ecotourist compared to those noted for the ‘normal’ tourist tend to overlap. Therefore, the exact definition of the ecotourist is interchangeable with the ‘normal’ tourist (Fiorello & Bo, 2012; Wight, 1996).

The tourists who engage in ecotourism and the activities which are part of ecotourism are devoted to travelling responsibly. These individuals have the desire to generate a positive impact on the host community at the destination which they visit, as well as a positive impact on the environment. However, while ecotourists are devoted to travelling responsibly, there is a paradox in respect of New Zealand. This is due to the location of the country which means the ecotourists may have to travel long haul. This will offset the concept of responsible travel as it is uncontrollable by the traveller who wishes to travel to New Zealand.

The ecotourist is understood to be less demanding in comparison to the typical tourist. Ecotourists are more likely to learn about local culture, the food provided, and the conditions in which the environment is in (Eagles, 1992; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017; McCabe & Branco Illodo, 2019). The ecotourist appreciates being surrounded by others from whom they gain knowledge, in combination with the outlook of respecting the environment (Eagles, 1992; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017). The typical ecotourist has been noted to have a higher level of education, and tends to travel from developed countries (Cater, 1993; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017). Ecotourists are known to be middle-aged or younger than the average tourist. In terms of gender separation, ecotourists are equally divided between females and males, although the main differentiation is illustrated through the activities they partake in.

Ecotourists tend to have a higher expenditure (Wight, 1996; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017; McCabe & Branco Illodo, 2019). They have been noted to travel by themselves and in

groups. In comparison, whilst understanding the direct impacts of ecotourism, previous research has suggested that the tourists rarely thoroughly understand the long-term impacts of the activities they participate in. Hence, this goes against the initial principles of ecotourism (Cater, 1993; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017; McCabe & Branco Illodo, 2019).

Currently, the typical ecotourist is highly educated, earns a high income, and is identified as a middle-aged traveller who has a preference for a long stay at a destination (Kruger, Viljoen, & Saayman, 2016). According to Kruger et al. (2016), there is a clear relationship between education, income, and participation in ecotourism. Ecotourists can be classified according to travel benefits, travel motives, social values, and their concerns for sustainability. For example, ecotourists travel in accordance with the importance of protected areas while making their travel destination decisions (Kruger et., 2016). Therefore, since the 1980s, when ecotourism emerged, the travel motives of the ecotourist have not changed. The ecotourist remains the same in terms of their demographics; however in the present day there is a larger following and understanding due to education.

### **2.2.2 Impacts of Ecotourism**

Barkauskienė and Snieška (2013) argued that the ecotourism industry consists of three direct impacts: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts. These impacts contribute to the advantages and disadvantages within the ecotourism industry (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013).

#### *Economic Impacts*

The economic impacts of ecotourism highlight an increase in the capitalisation of resources overtime. This is in order to compensate for the pressure produced from the exploitation of resources in specific relation to more remote areas. The benefit of tourism to national economies is that it is a notable means of acquiring foreign earnings for the destination. With respect to the ecotourism sector, it aids the balance of economic development with natural resources and host communities with regard to income distribution, it creates new employment opportunities for locals and communities, and it promotes the local economy as well as aiding the destinations by creating sustainable infrastructure (Barkauskienė, & Snieška, 2013).

In comparison, leakage of income through corporate activities such as global trade deals, government strategies and corporate negotiations leads to negative impacts. This

is in conjunction with an influx of unhealthy competition and an economic gap between the tourists and the host community (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013). For example, the tourists on cruise ships which stop at destinations are more likely to keep the income generated and spent on board the cruise in comparison to the destination which they are visiting. This also highlights a paradox between the expenditure of the cruise tourism industry in contrast with the leakage of income of the destination which they are visiting. The host destination is receiving little to no income from the international visitors.

### *Environmental Impacts*

The benefits of ecotourism for the environment include the incentives based on tourist demand for the conservation of natural areas, the advocacy for preservation and conservation development, and the creation of educational programmes about environmental ethics. On the other hand, the disadvantages are inclusive of the direct and indirect damage caused to vegetation through ecotourist activity, and the constant decay of the natural habitats and the wildlife in the specific locations. The commercialisation of natural resources, and the pollution caused by the tourism industry, through noise, the generation of waste, and air pollution need to be mitigated and a focus on sustainability is key, not only for the environment but for the sustainability of the industry itself. Without sustainable practices there will be no ecotourism destinations to develop (Barkauskienė & Snieška, 2013).

### *Socio-cultural Impacts*

The socio-cultural impacts upon ecotourism are illustrated through the upkeep and maintenance of local occupations and traditional professions at each destination. This is determined through the increasing number of jobs. For example, capitalising on culture, arts, and the local way of life expressed at the destination. The benefits of ecotourism for socio-cultural sustainability can relate to sustainable culture, such as the promotion and preservation of local arts, music, and culture. Religious and historical sites are recognised and protected and promote knowledge and advocacy. The cultural exchange between locals and the visitors is encouraged as cultural narratives promote environmental sustainability as practiced by locals in their respective contexts. The educational benefits are seen in the significance of culture and the diversification of cultural activities at destinations. These benefits can aid in the reduction of homelessness and disenfranchisement in the local areas.

However, the impact of ecotourism can also exacerbate social issues, such as the unappealing commercialisation of the religious and cultural assets of the destination, and the unappealing behaviour that may come with the carrying capacity of crowds. Hence, it is highly debatable whether the advantages outweigh the impacts placed on the destination through the ecotourism industry (Apps, Dimmock, & Huveneers, 2018). Moreover, the carrying capacity of crowds as well as the capacity of the destination can be argued to be a cause of overtourism.

Tourism is a tool to help communities with economic and social development, and supports the conservation of nature (Stem, Lassoie, Lee, Deshler, & Schelhas, 2010). With regards to the impact upon nature, research has suggested that the tourism industry aids society by creating a better understanding of the environment we live in, and the importance of the preservation of nature, and its beauty, for the future (Hillery, Nancarrow, Griffin, & Syme, 2001).

In relation to consumer behaviour, ecotourism includes the involvement of the concept of decision making, understanding and accepting new ideologies and experiences, and activities that include the satisfaction of the needs and wants of the consumer (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2013).

## 2.3 BRAND IMAGE

Ecotourism has emerged as one of the fastest growing markets with a market segment of visitors who have the willingness to pay for a clean and green experience. The term 'green marketing' has emerged as a vital form of differentiation as it understands and embraces the idea of sustainability when it situates a brand's image.

### 2.3.1 Brand Image on a Global Scale

The natural assets possessed by a country can, if managed accordingly, act as a symbol and a source of emotional connectivity for the audience (Insch, 2011; Sharma, 2018). Moreover, destinations which promote the philosophies, practices, and values of sustainability gain a positive reputational advantage, in comparison to showcasing the destination without any thought for conservation and the future (Insch, 2011; Sharma, 2018). Essentially, the main goal of a destination and its branding needs to be to the creation of a unique yet ecologically sustainable policy to be perceived and understood by the consumer. Ultimately, it is the incorporation of the country's assets and the values offered to the target market which should align, although it is sometimes difficult

to represent the complexity of a destination through a single campaign and to appeal to different target markets (Insch, 2011).

As a result, destinations alike may have a tendency to try to cater to all markets, without the communication of what is unique to the destination itself. Not all consumers travel to destinations with the same purpose. Organisations within the tourism industry in the present day may invest in creating a greener brand image if they see it will enhance loyalty and profitability. However, the concept of being green and environmentally conscious must be authentic in its form (Henne, 2018; Insch, 2011).

Branding associated with sustainable practices and environmental conservation is classifiable as green. The criticism of consumers has also resulted in a resistance to supporting green branding. Ecotourists may be representative of a large component of a destinations market; however, they may not necessarily perceive the destination to be green. According to Insch (2011), New Zealand has been rated highly as a green destination but none of the cities in New Zealand are perceived as having a green brand image. In comparison, Sweden is also rated highly as a green destination, and it also has a green city as well. In conjunction, Australia is not recognised as having a high green rating, yet they are committed to conserving the Great Barrier Reef as a world heritage site (Honey, 2003). Furthermore, a number of measurement indicators have been introduced to measure the environmental performance and credentials of destinations. These are known as the Greendex, the Environmental Performance Index, and the Environmental Sustainability Index (Insch, 2011).

### **2.3.2 Brand Image in New Zealand**

New Zealand's "pure" brand image had been founded upon the underpinning terms of connection, being at one with nature, and a variety of experiences (Hayes & Lovelock, 2017). This is portrayed as the country having something different to offer in comparison to other international destinations. New Zealand is a country created on the foundations of greenery, picturesque landscapes, and sold upon the premise of being 100% pure: purity in the sense of clean air, clean rivers and a chance to build a connection with nature (Hayes & Lovelock, 2017). Arguably, there are various reasons to suggest that New Zealand is not as clean and green as it has claimed to be. New Zealand's greenhouse gas emissions are rising, and there is a dichotomy between the increased international mobility through travel around, to, and from New Zealand, and

environmental protectionism (Hayes & Lovelock, 2017). Local issues also include the degradation of ecosystems and the decline of natural species.

Aspects of ecological and environmental sustainability are progressively being highlighted by organisations as an important factor in order to gain a competitive advantage, and in particular for the feature of differentiation (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015). The ability to achieve differentiation is of high importance, as is the factor of authenticity. This is due to the criticism and presence of the term “green” (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015).

### 2.3.3 Greenwashing

Greenwashing is the practice and action of making a misleading or unsubstantiated claim regarding the environmental benefits of a product, service, company policy, or technology. As a result, green strategies are often perceived as superficial, more so in the present day (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015). In the past, New Zealand’s tourism industry has utilised nature and the environment as an integral part of its brand image. Green marketing in the present day is used as a form of marketing to indicate and embrace sustainability.

Consumers in the present day are increasingly becoming more aware of the environmental impacts of their purchases (Schmuck, Matthes, & Naderer, 2018). Products in the market are becoming more frequently labelled as ‘organic’ and ‘eco-friendly.’ Regarding the growing demand for environmentally friendly products, the claims based on green advertising are regarded as being of considerable importance. Schmuck et al. (2018) argued that environmental claims are often used for the products which are not environmentally friendly per se. This includes plastic bottles, airline flights, and non-hybrid cars. Simultaneously, many advertisements are portraying ‘truths’ about the environmental attributes of the product which are not correct. This has been described using the term ‘greenwashing.’

From a consumer’s perspective, it is concerning that the environmentally friendly aspects of the products cannot be verified (Schmuck et al., 2018). Accordingly, the claimed dishonesty of organisations about the environmental attributes of their products leads to an undermining of the confidence that the consumers used to have. The term ‘greenwashing’ first appeared in the 1980s. As a result, making a change in the public perception of an organisation’s attitude to the environment is costly and inconvenient to implement. Therefore, this can lead organisations to take an easier pathway towards

exploitation instead of sustainability (Junior, Martinez, Correa, Moura-Leite, & Silva, 2019).

The objective of green marketing is to appeal to consumers who are motivated to purchase environmentally friendly products (Rahman, Park, & Chi, 2015). These consumers are consistently demonstrating ecologically friendly behaviour through their actions. The term 'ecologically friendly behaviour' refers to actions that contribute towards the conservation and preservation of the environment. Rahman et al. (2015) stated that, generally, consumers who are environmentally conscious are willing to pay a higher price for eco-friendly products and services from eco-friendly organisations. Hence, these consumers feel as though they are obligated to conserve the environment (Rahman et al., 2015).

### *Tiaki Promise*

The Tiaki Promise is New Zealand's way of showcasing that the country is committed towards respecting and caring for the environment. This promise also aims to stand against the concept of greenwashing. Tiaki stands for caring for the people, the place, and the protection of both. The Tiaki Promise highlights the commitment towards caring for New Zealand and the environment the country is located in especially whilst travelling (Tiaki New Zealand, 2019). The purpose of the Tiaki Promise is for the preservation of the culture and environmental landscapes. This promise helps to inspire both locals and international visitors to become more responsible travellers. When following the Tiaki Promise the travellers should follow the concept of driving carefully when travelling around New Zealand. The visitors should be prepared for the weather conditions that the country brings. Showing respect to each other which includes the culture and the environment. The protection of nature whilst travelling and keeping New Zealand clean whilst travelling which highlights throwing away rubbish in the rubbish bins as well as recycling where possible. The Tiaki Promise holds the concept of not only caring for the environment currently, but to care for it for the future generations (Tiaki New Zealand, 2019).

### **2.3.4 100% Pure New Zealand**

The 100% Pure New Zealand brand was launched in 1999, in order to gain foreign exchange receipts for the New Zealand tourism industry (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015). The campaign has featured two main focal points. The first had focused upon the environment and the perception of New Zealand as a clean and green landscape. The

second focal point had been the Māori heritage and culture linked with the country. The 100% Pure New Zealand brand had been created to attract tourists seeking ecotourism activities, who travel often, and are both culturally and environmentally aware, and have a hunger to be a part of new and authentic experiences (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015). As part of this campaign, Qualmark's quality assurance scheme had been extended towards an environmental audit scheme. This had highlighted a guaranteed minimum standard for environmental performance through five key areas:

- Energy efficiency
- Waste management
- Water conservation
- Conservation initiatives
- Community activities (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015).

Over time, after the creation and release of the 100% Pure New Zealand campaign in 1999, New Zealand has changed the direction of its campaign. The new campaign has made a shift away from landscapes, and now emphasises the New Zealand culture and the people of the country (Bradley, 2018). Initially, the change in direction for the campaign had been understood as a response to those who have asserted the dishonesty of New Zealand's environmental record, which is not 100% pure. However, this has been claimed not to be the case, and it is highlighted that the visitors who travel to New Zealand are attracted by the people as well as the environment (Bradley, 2018).

It is suggested that landscapes are assets that everyone has; however, the people and the culture are what makes New Zealand truly unique. The current 100% Pure New Zealand campaign has transitioned into being 100% Pure Welcome. The 100% Pure Welcome showcases our people, culture, and landscapes. This adaptation is through social media. Every morning from June 17, 2019, a short video has been posted on Instagram of a New Zealander welcoming the world from their favorite location in the country. All of New Zealand is invited to participate in the campaign by creating their own "good morning world" video and sharing it on Instagram with the hashtag #goodmorningworldnz (Tourism New Zealand, 2019).

The use of social media allows the campaign to be seen on a global scale as well as the having the ability for interactivity. Users are able to share, like, and comment on the videos and have a more personal approach. This campaign allows creators to take advantage of the fact that New Zealand is the first country in the world to see the sun.

This campaign allows visitors to be welcomed into the country not only as visitors, but as family. This also ties in with the underpinning concept of the Māori term manaakitanga. Manaakitanga represents the connections created between people, the care, the respect, and the ever-extending hospitality that the country has to offer to the world. Therefore, visitors feel welcomed and leave as family (Green, 2019).

### 2.3.5 Qualmark Quality Assurance Scheme

This scheme is a New Zealand quality assurance scheme used to show New Zealand's environmental awareness. The Qualmark quality assurance scheme has been implemented to guarantee the minimum standards required for positive environmental performance (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015). The Qualmark performance scheme consists of five areas. These are noted as, water conservation, waste management, energy efficiency, conservation initiatives, and community activities (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015). The scheme has award categories of Enviro Gold, Silver, and Bronze awards. This concept links with the Tourism New Zealand strategy and aligns it with the commitment of sustainability (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015; Tourism New Zealand, 2017). Ecotourism is the primary example in national and international settings of how the social and ecological goals of sustainable development can be achieved (Gillespie, 2011). Ecotourism is known to be at the forefront of New Zealand's brand image. This image tends to have a positive outcome upon the economic status of New Zealand (Gillespie, 2011).

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter introduces the methods used to carry out the research. This research has been done through a website analysis and social media reviews, based upon qualitative data gathered and using the research approaches of netnography, case studies and thematic analysis.

### 3.1 QUALITATIVE METHODS

The qualitative methods approach aims to develop theory through observation and the explanation of the reality of experience (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015; Newman, Benz, & Ridenour, 1998). Qualitative research is predominantly defined through the understanding of social life and social concepts through the use of words in comparison to the use of numeric data (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Qualitative research is based upon the study of perspectives, opinions, and the experiences of participants. This allows the research to engage through a more personal approach (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). For example, if the research objective is an analysis of how an individual or a group understands a particular issue, the most appropriate way to conduct the research is through qualitative methods. These methods allow the researcher to explore an ideology within the relevant environment, as well as allowing the acquisition of various sources of data (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015).

### 3.2 CASE STUDY APPROACH

The research undertaken for this dissertation has used a case study approach. The case study approach, similar to questionnaires, is quite commonly used in the tourism area of research (Mason, 2014). In particular, the case study approach is used in qualitative research. According to Mason (2014), case studies are used to obtain an understanding of a particular circumstance, at a particular point in time, and to understand why the scenario has occurred. As stated by Mason (2014), the case study approach is “the study of the complexity and particularity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. 86). The use of the case study approach and the focus it creates upon the significant time and circumstances is highlighted as a form of a snapshot. However, it is noted that in order for the case study approach to be useful, it needs to be more than a snapshot in time; the findings need to be compared with other literature and studies in the tourism field (Mason, 2014). On the other hand, the case study approach also holds its own values, such as using references to real life concepts (Mason, 2014). A critique of this approach is that the real-life context can also be seen

as a disadvantage for the research as the results may be relevant only in that particular circumstance. Nonetheless, the results gained from the case study approach are in-depth and detailed.

A common concern raised in regard to the case study approach is whether the particular case study used will highlight any unusual examples or exploratory data, as well as whether there is anything to compare the results with. In order to address the issue, this particular study has focused on six different case studies. This highlights the commonalities and the differences amongst each case study of an ecotourism operator whilst adhering to the examination of the themes of ecotourism, sustainable development, and brand image.

The case study approach can be understood as having three different types. These are the intrinsic study type, the instrumental study type, and the collective study type. This research is focused on the instrumental study type. When using the instrumental study approach, the primary goal is to learn wider lessons and gain understanding through the study of one example (Mason, 2014). The instrumental study type provides lessons of value from the themes and context of the particular issue or issues identified in the research.

### 3.3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The qualitative data collected through the online channels were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is noted as an interpretive approach to qualitative research (Lehmann, Murakami, & Klempe, 2019). Thematic analysis allows the data retrieved to be categorised into specific themes. These themes are organised and descriptive in order to find both the commonalities and the differences between the data retrieved from the online channels (Lin, 2019). The use of the thematic analysis approach allows the combination of creativity and research to be bound together (Lin, 2019). Moreover, this helps in identifying the themes (Lin, 2019). The use of thematic analysis in conjunction with qualitative data aims to show the understanding of both theory and practice through meaning making (Lehmann et al., 2019). One of the main advantages of using thematic analysis is that it allows the researcher to have a flexible framework to work within (Lehmann et al., 2019).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a process which consists of six steps:

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. The generation of coding categories
3. The generation of themes
4. Reviewing the themes
5. The definition and naming of the themes
6. Locating the examples.

The first step entails either transcribing or re-reading the data to ensure it is valid for the research. The second step requires the generation of codes in a systematic manner to highlight the significant features. The third step requires the researcher to accumulate the codes and relevant data into separate themes. The fourth step involves reviewing whether the themes and the data set match. The fifth step determines the main concept of each theme and how it is to be conveyed. The final step requires the researcher to gather compelling and evident examples which relate directly to the research question or questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Scharp & Sanders, 2019).

The interpretive approach to this dissertation had been applied through thematic analysis inclusive of the six steps. The familiarization of the data had been a process of continual re-reading of the TripAdvisor reviews. This step creates the validity of the reviews and how meanings are created from the data. The generation of coding categories had been highlighted through filtering through the significant reviews and finding the reviews which were most influential regarding this research. The generation of relevant themes is interlinked directly with the process of coding categories. These categories aid in identifying the potential set of themes. This is where the relationship between ecotourism and sustainable development in New Zealand had come into account as well as the themes identified in the literature review. The process of reviewing themes had determined the data which had a significant impact on the study, in comparison to the data which had lesser relevance. The process of defining and naming the themes had been through finding the significant underlying messages portrayed within each TripAdvisor review. The final step of locating the examples had been through collating each review into a respective theme in order to convey the meaning and relevance towards this research.

### 3.4 NETNOGRAPHY

The research method of netnography is an adaptation of ethnographic methods and the technique is used to study consumer activities through online channels (Whalen, 2018).

The use of online data offers the advantage of readily accessible data which restricts the time-consuming nature of ethnographic research methods, and also aids in reducing costs whilst undertaking fieldwork research (Whalen, 2018). Online channels currently are undergoing continual growth. For example, the rise of the internet has revolutionised the engagement channels between the visitor and tourism operators, and these channels have increasingly become more interactive (Buhalis, 2003; Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Moreover, the netnographic methods used in order to gain insights into consumer interactions are also growing and are beneficial for the observation of the services which are provided by the tourism industry.

The organisations involved in the tourism industry need a form of separation in order to understand what creates the value for the consumer and their experience. Netnography helps accomplish this separation and understanding. The tourism and hospitality sectors recognise netnography has high potential as it offers an in-depth look into consumer behaviour and perspectives (Whalen, 2018). According to Whalen (2018), the netnography research method has grown in popularity. With regard to the tourism and hospitality industries, both offer a variety of products with decision making as a point of priority. Accordingly, consumers spend a copious amount of time studying consumer reviews online prior to making a final decision (Whalen, 2018).

The foundations of netnography as a research method are marketing oriented and this is noted as its point of difference amongst other research methods (Kozinets, Scaraboto, & Parmentier, 2018). The data gathered from this web-based research method is consumer-based, and the realm of social media in the present day has a direct link with netnographic research methods. This is because the basis of social media and the various posts shared online have the main objective of telling a story. These stories highlight the consumer narratives of human experience (Kozinets et al., 2018).

In some ways, netnography is described as a valuable way of social listening and a contribution towards a holistic form of understanding the consumer (Kozinets et al., 2018). The use of netnographic methods creates a purer form of understanding of the data gathered by the researcher from the consumer. For example, netnography has the distinguishing factor of keeping the personal touch of storytelling. In comparison if we were to use software such as SPSS or NVivo to understand data, the first constraint faced is the loss of the personal touch and complexity which had been intended by the consumer when the post had been shared. The post can be in the form of a photo, video,

or a written review with the personal expression of the consumer. Software does not have the same perception of such forms as a human being (Kozinets et al., 2018).

The method of netnography acts as a catalyst for scientific research and as an agent to understand consumer behaviour. A limitation faced through using netnographic methods is that concepts are volatile. For example, one website can be considered of high significance at one stage, and little to no significance the next. Based upon this notion, the method of netnography cannot be seen as a quick method of research; however, it is still valued for its flexibility in its way of engaging a deep understanding of consumer behaviour (Kozinets et al., 2018).

In 2018, Kozinets et al. found the following:

Basic nature: the brand or product becomes a fetish object, invested by the method with suprahuman significance and granted in material form an abjectly needful power to change the material circumstances of consumers, such as those who quantify the self. (p. 237)

In this circumstance, this study has gathered data from post-visit perspectives of ecotourist visitors with regard to their experiences at each ecotourism site. The archival data had been sought through TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor is considered the most favourable online travel channel, as well as an established domain for netnographic research (Paraskevaidis & Weidenfeld, 2019). The reviews chosen were selected based on the criteria of the relevant themes highlighted in the literature review, namely ecotourism, sustainable development and brand image, and these are the key themes reviewed which are related directly to the research questions. These themes elaborate upon the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand, in conjunction with the commitment to the assurance of sustainable development.

The rationale for choosing the research method of netnography consists of a variety of reasons. Netnographic data is described as being natural and rich and encompasses the ability to entail the realities of the consumer (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). In comparison to other research methods, netnography allows the research to be conducted in an unobtrusive manner (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). For example, the use of readily available online data reduces the constraints of time and location which would exist if an interview were to be conducted instead. Heinonen and Medberg (2018) asserted that netnography is compatible with other research methods such as surveys, interviews, and

ethnography (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Netnography also faces limitations. The quality and authenticity of the data retrieved is a specific concern (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). For example, it is difficult to establish any form of consumer demographics. Therefore, the netnographic research method may be unsuitable for research with a high importance in regard to gender, age, or race. Furthermore, the findings from the netnographic research method generalise the data for consumers outside the online channels. According to Heinonen and Medberg (2018), the ethical codes of conduct for netnographic research are extensively debated; however, no consensus has been reached as yet.

### 3.5 ETHICS APPROVAL

The research pursued does not require ethics approval. The data gathered for the purpose of this research were obtained through secondary sources and user channels which are publicly available and are not copyright protected. This research did not involve human participation and no interviews or surveys have been conducted.

## Chapter 4: Data

This chapter presents the findings of the research. The data was obtained from secondary sources such as ecotourism operator websites and social media reviews. The data collected is directly related to the relationship between ecotourism and sustainable development in New Zealand and the commitment towards the assurance of sustainable development are mentioned in the findings.

The organisation of the chapter is based on the six ecotourism operators that have been studied. The Auckland ecotourism operators are Habitat Tours and Relaxing Journeys. The Rotorua ecotourism operators are Tour Zealand and Redwoods Treewalk. The Bay of Islands ecotourism operators are Ecocruz and the GreatSights Dolphin Cruise. These six operators had been chosen due to the organisations being self-identified ecotourism operators in New Zealand. The tourism products offered by the operators are environmental-centric.

The TripAdvisor website has a function with the ability to filter through the reviews using keywords in the search bar. For example, the reviews chosen were based on the search tags of 'environment,' 'sustainable,' and 'conservation.' This aided in filtering down the mass of reviews in order to identify the reviews which are significant for the research. Examples of the reviews that reflected the key themes are provided within the sections of each operator.

The following table profiles the six self-identified ecotourism operators examined in this research. The first column notes the ecotourism operators. The second column highlights if the ecotourism operator is Qualmark endorsed. This endorsement showcases the assurance of sustainable development practices and environmental performance within the organisation. The number of TripAdvisor reviews mentions the overall number of reviews featured on the TripAdvisor website. It is notable to mention that Redwoods Treewalk and the GreatSights Dolphin Cruise have a higher number of reviews. This may be due to the experiences being activity based and suitable for all visitors, whereas the other ecotourism operators have experiences which are catered towards a niche ecotourist market. The final column addresses the explicit sustainable development practices featured within the organization and if it is present on their website.

Ecotourism Operators	Qualmark Endorsed	Number of TripAdvisor Reviews	Sustainable Development Practices Featured
Habitat Tours	Yes	159	Yes
Relaxing Journeys	Yes	34	No
Tour Zealand	No	56	No
Redwoods Treewalk	Yes	1,369	Yes
Ecocruz	No	0	Yes
GreatSights Dolphin Cruise	Yes	1,731	Yes

**Table 1. Matrix of Ecotourism Operator Data**

## CASE STUDY: AUCKLAND

### 4.1 HABITAT TOURS

The data collected was sourced from the Habitat Tours website and TripAdvisor. The Habitat Tours website describes the ecotourism operator as a small group eco tour company. The company prides itself upon the bird sightings they offer and the low impact the operation of the company has on the environment (Habitat Tours, n.d.-a). Habitat Tours is located in central Auckland. The products offered by the ecotourism operator are various half- and full-day tours which include a walk through some of Auckland's conservation areas. These areas are Tāwharanui Regional Park and Matakana. During this tour, visitors have the opportunity to explore the nature of the scenic reserves and have an up-close experience with the native birds of New Zealand such as the kiwi. The second tour is through the Waitākere Ranges, where visitors will encounter black sand beaches, waterfalls, and a gannet colony (Habitat Tours, n.d.-a). The owner and operator of Habitat Tours has followed their passion for the environment and conservation, which led to the establishment of the organisation in 2013 (Habitat Tours, n.d.-a).

#### 4.1.1 Sustainable Development and Ecotourism

According to the Habitat Tours website, nature and conservation is noted as the company's passion (Habitat Tours, n.d.-b). It is highlighted that the practices and values of the ecotourism operator are to support the environment in a sustainable manner in order to safeguard it for future generations. As stated by Habitat Tours (n.d.-b), the company supports conservation projects inclusive of the volunteering programme called TOSSI.

- “Volunteering with TOSSI (Tawharanui Open Sanctuary Society) – Tree planting, weeding, wildlife monitoring, pest trapping.
- For each guest taken to Tawharanui we make a trip donation to TOSSI” (para. 6).

The Habitat Tours website notes that the following precautions are taken and abided by in order to stay compliant their sustainable development goals and conservation practices:

- The maintenance of having a low impact on the environment, in order to do this the ecotourism operator:
  - Has a small group of visitors at a time, this being seven maximum.
  - A high awareness profile whilst being around wildlife, understanding the sensitivity towards the wildlife’s environment and space.
  - Taking away only what had been brought in, this is specifically in relation to rubbish.
- Picking up any rubbish found whilst the tour is in operation.
- The purchase of local goods, specifically, organic and seasonal produce if available.
- The use of biodegradable cleaning products.
- The elimination of plastic wrap and the replacement of bee’s wax food coverings.
- The use of reusable water bottles.
- Recycling when and where possible, as well as composting food (Habitat Tours, n.d.-b).



**Figure 2. Tāwharanui Regional Park Ecology Trail**

**Photo Source: Niharika Chand (author)**

#### **4.1.2 Awards**

Currently, Habitat Tours in Auckland holds the following awards:

- 2018 Certificate of Excellence from TripAdvisor, with five-star reviews
- Qualmark Silver Sustainable Tourism Business award (Habitat Tours, n.d.-a).

According to Qualmark (2017), the silver award entails the evidence of a tourism business which continually exceeds their visitors' expectations. The leadership and management help in engaging high performance throughout the business. The business has a focus on continually improving its social, environmental and economic performance in order to be assured of delivering a tourism product which is not only sustainable, but genuine too.

#### **4.1.3 Reviews**

Out of 159 reviews featured on TripAdvisor, the following are representative of two reviews related to good communication between the visitor and the ecotourism operator as well as the passion shared for conservation.

In 2018, a visitor from Portugal shared their experience of Habitat Tours on TripAdvisor, writing the following:

Throughout the tour it was clear that he really cares about the environment and preserving this little corner of the earth. All of the cutlery/plates used for the picnic were reusable, the reusable water bottles (whose brand I'll have to remember to buy some!) had no plastic in it, and all the food was home made. Plus the teas were special New Zealand ones made with plants he had spent the morning telling us about! Communication was great, I booked the wrong day initially and it was no trouble re-arranging it for the day I actually wanted. ... the commentary very informative. (TripAdvisor, 2018a)

In 2013, another visitor based in New Zealand shared their perspective on Habitat Tours on TripAdvisor, and mentioned the following:

With a background that included growing up in New Zealand, spending time in Costa Rica and time working at one of Australia's most highly respected conservation and wildlife parks, Tristan's (our guide's) passion for nature and wildlife is infectious. (TripAdvisor, 2013b)

#### 4.2 RELAXING JOURNEYS

The data collected was sourced from the Relaxing Journeys website and TripAdvisor. The Relaxing Journeys website highlights the ecotourism operator as a tour company which caters for a varied market of travellers, irrespective of whether they are on a budget, a discerning traveller, or visitors who have been in New Zealand for a while. The team at the ecotourism operator are all locals who have firsthand experience living in New Zealand and know its landscapes (Relaxing Journeys, 2019). Relaxing Journeys aids in providing travellers with tours that are readily available; however, the travellers also have the option to create their own itinerary to suit their needs (Relaxing Journeys, 2019). Relaxing Journeys is in East Tamaki, which is the east of Auckland. The products offered by the ecotourism operator are an array of tours across New Zealand. These tours are inclusive of self-drive tours, coach tours, cruises, sightseeing guided tours, or a mixture of all of these, as the opportunities are there for travellers to create their own itinerary. The operators offer a broad range of tours to suit the majority of travellers as the tours can range from a short one-day trip to at least an eighteen-day tour within different regions of New Zealand (Relaxing Journeys, 2019). The organisation has been in operation since 2014 (Relaxing Journeys, 2019).

#### 4.2.1 Sustainable Development and Ecotourism

According to the Relaxing Journeys website, there are no sections in particular which explicitly relate to sustainable development, conservation, or the environment.

However, it is stated that they offer two experiences at two of New Zealand's conservation projects (Relaxing Journeys, 2019). The tours offered are as follows:

- Tiritiri Matangi Island Tour
- Whale & Dolphin Conservation Experience (Relaxing Journeys, 2019).

The Tiritiri Matangi Island Tour was voted the “best day out” in 2008 and entails a cruise from Auckland to Tiritiri Matangi Island. The tour presents the opportunity to see some of New Zealand's endangered birds and wildlife (Relaxing Journeys, 2019). The island is managed by the Department of Conservation (DOC), in conjunction with the supporters of the island (Relaxing Journeys, 2019). The Whale & Dolphin Conservation Experience is a tour which allows the visitors to have an educational experience about the marine ecosystem which is seen in Auckland. A typical tour will allow visitors to encounter whales, dolphins, and an array of seabirds. There are also chances to see other marine animals such as the blue whale, New Zealand fur seals, and the orca (Relaxing Journeys, 2019).

#### 4.2.2 Awards

Currently, Relaxing Journeys in Auckland holds the following awards:

- 100% Pure New Zealand Specialist Gold 2017
- Qualmark Silver Endorsed Visitor Service
- Qualmark Silver Visitor Activity
- Qualmark Silver Visitor Transport
- Tourism Export Council – Inbound Tour Operator
- Relaxing Journeys is also a member of the Tourism Industry Aotearoa (Relaxing Journeys, 2019).

The 100% Pure New Zealand Specialist award entails preferential listing on the tourism New Zealand consumer website which gives access and awareness to consumers globally. This in return reaches global recognition for the ecotourism operator (Tourism New Zealand, 2019). The Qualmark awards criteria has changed its direction towards sustainable business awards (Qualmark, 2017). The tourism export council is noted as a trade association which represents inbound tourism. The council advocates and adheres

the opportunities and issues amongst the operators in the New Zealand tourism industry for the past 45 years (Tourism Export Council, 2019).

#### 4.2.3 Reviews

Out of 34 reviews featured on TripAdvisor, the reviews below are representative of international perspectives. It is notable that no reviews had featured the keywords 'environment,' 'sustainable,' or 'conservation.' However the flexibility of tours was commented on, in particular relation to inclement weather and good communication.

In 2018, a visitor from California shared their experience of Relaxing Journeys on TripAdvisor, and highlighted the following:

This company is just a middleman for selling tours in NZ. I had booked Arthur's Pass Transalpine train journey through Relaxing Journeys which was then outsourced to Canterbury Trails tours. Unlike a lot of other tour operators neither Relaxing Journeys nor their operators offer alternatives for a crappy weather day – the only option was to bail out (and pay full fees) or go in rainy weather with no views, no hikes & feeling cold and wet the entire day of the tour. . . I do NOT recommend either Relaxing Journeys or Canterbury Trails. They dont want to cancel the tour so they dont lose money but dont care if you have a crappy day instead. (TripAdvisor, 2018c)

In 2014, another from Virginia shared their opinion of Relaxing Journeys on TripAdvisor, as follows:

My husband and I just returned from a 3 week self drive tour of New Zealand booked through Relaxing Journeys and the trip was wonderful. Leanne at RJ handled our trip and did a great job. Leanne was very helpful and replied promptly to all our questions. I would definitely recommend Relaxing Journeys if you are traveling to New Zealand. (TripAdvisor, 2014)

### CASE STUDY: ROTORUA

#### 4.3 TOUR ZEALAND

The data collected was sourced through the Tour Zealand website and TripAdvisor. The Tour Zealand website has stated the ecotourism operator is a tour company that can

provide the perfect New Zealand vacation for visitors and locals (Tour Zealand, n.d.-a). The founder of Tour Zealand is passionate about what she does, specifically if it is off the beaten track. Tour Zealand provides experiences suited for all visitors, whether it be a luxurious trip, an adventurous exploration, or an eye for scenery. Tour Zealand ensures a memorable trip and aids in arranging a variety of options of transport, accommodation, and other special occasions such as anniversaries and honeymoons (Tour Zealand, n.d.-a). Tour Zealand is located in Rotorua, which is in the central part of the North Island of New Zealand. The founder of Tour Zealand is an avid outdoors person, who has a passion for fly fishing too (Tour Zealand, n.d.-a). The ecotourism operator offers products to suit all that could be offered in Rotorua for the visitors. This includes day trips or multi-day tours. The tours include a day of visiting Rotorua's most active volcano and bathing in natural hot pools, a private tour of New Zealand's native glow worms or visiting a sheep and beef station, trout fishing, a relaxing day spent in the landscapes with award winning wineries and restaurants, or a customised private tour to feature all of the above (Tour Zealand, n.d.-a). The ecotourism operator was established in 2011 (Tour Zealand, n.d.-a).

#### 4.3.1 Sustainable Development and Ecotourism

According to the Tour Zealand website, there are no sections which explicitly focus on sustainable development, conservation, or the environment. However, the ecotourism operator does offer experiences within Rotorua's nature. As noted by Tour Zealand (n.d.-b), the experiences offered include:

- Forest walks
- Hiking
- Trout fishing
- Kiwi encounters
- Waimangu volcanic valley (Tour Zealand, n.d.-b).

The forest walk entails an opportunity to explore the Whakarewarewa forest, which can be done by anyone, with a variety of fitness levels. The experience allows the visitor to complete their journey during the day or night and for as long as they require (Tour Zealand, n.d.-b). The Tour Zealand website notes that the Rotorua region is a paradise for hikers as it is filled with waterfalls, forestry, and lakes. There is an array for every hiker. The hiking experience is also available during the day or overnight (Tour Zealand, n.d.-b). The trout fishing experience is accompanied by an expert; therefore,

every visitor can enjoy the experience whether they have been fishing before or not. The trout fishing experience can cater for fly fishing, spinning, trolling, or any preference the visitor has (Tour Zealand, n.d.-b). The kiwi encounters allow visitors to have a memorable experience with one of New Zealand's native birds. They also offer a behind the scenes experience to see how the kiwi are helped at a hatchery (Tour Zealand, n.d.-b). The Waimangu Volcanic Valley involves a walk amongst volcanic craters and other geothermal activity. The visitors have a chance to experience the volcanic valley by boat or helicopter, or on foot for a personal approach (Tour Zealand, n.d.-b).

#### 4.3.2 Awards

Currently, Tour Zealand in Rotorua holds the following awards:

- Official Member of Tourism New Zealand
- Gold Member of Tourism New Zealand
- New Zealand Tourism Guide (Tour Zealand, n.d.-a).

Tour Zealand do not have any association or awards held by Qualmark according to their website. Nonetheless, Tour Zealand is a well-recognised operator through the New Zealand tourism guide. The New Zealand tourism guide is an online directory for travelling around the country. Tour Zealand is featured on the online directory as a New Zealand tour company (New Zealand Tourism Guide, 2019).

#### 4.3.3 Reviews

Out of 56 reviews featured on TripAdvisor, the reviews chosen are representative of international perspectives. These reviews were chosen based on the perspectives of the experience provided by the ecotourism operator, specifically how international visitors had perceived Rotorua through their personalised tours. While the 56 reviews did not highlight 'sustainability,' 'conservation,' and the 'environment' the key points raised were the ability to customize tours and the addition of educational factors.

In 2018, a visitor from Virginia shared their experience of Tour Zealand on TripAdvisor, and mentioned the following:

We are so happy we found Tour Zealand! Jane was able to put together a custom tour for us. We wanted a one-way trip from Auckland to Rotorua with sites in between and the trip she created was just perfect for us. Jane made excellent accommodation and restaurant recommendations and helped us plan our time in

Rotorua. It was fantastic to have a New Zealander guiding us through such a beautiful area. We highly recommend Tour Zealand if you want a custom tour. They will not disappoint! (TripAdvisor, 2018d)

In 2017, another visitor from Utah shared their opinion of Tour Zealand on TripAdvisor, and highlighted the following:

Thanks to Lilia for taking us to Hobbiton and Rotorua. Being in a small tour we were able to make small adjustments to our trip according to our personal preferences. I feel like we learned a lot about NZ and she was great about answering questions or pointing out interesting sights. Thanks again!!  
(TripAdvisor, 2017b)

#### 4.4 REDWOODS TREEWALK

The data collected was sourced through the Redwoods Treewalk website and TripAdvisor. The Redwoods Treewalk website notes the operator as an ecotourism walking experience which consists of suspension bridges over Redwood trees. The elevated view entails the forest below and the treetops above (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019). The trees are also decorated with lanterns which light up during the night walk. The ecotourism operator has a vision to be a sustainable business with a focus that is inclusive of economic, environmental, and social aspects (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019). The core values of Redwoods Treewalk are manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga. Manaakitanga is the Māori value which encompasses integrity, hospitality, trust, and sincerity (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019). Kaitiakitanga is the Māori value which entails the responsibility of guardianship between the world (sky, sea, and land) and the people (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019). Redwoods Treewalk is located in Whakarewarewa, in Rotorua. The organisation has been in operation since 2016 (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019).

##### 4.4.1 Sustainable Development and Ecotourism

According to the Redwoods Treewalk website, leaving an environmental legacy is a strong focal point of the operator. Redwoods Treewalk aims to capture the spirit of the experience offered whilst taking care of the environment they work in. The suspension bridges have been constructed with the aim of a minimal impact on the existing environment (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019).

The ecotourism operator has a connection with the local tribes of Rotorua, as the land that the forest is located is privately owned. The company noted that they work hard to safeguard the connection with the tribes. This is reflected in the actions of the operator, who gives the visitors an opportunity to engage with the history of the people, the land, and the forest (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019). In conjunction with this, Redwoods Treewalk values the concept of social responsibility. The ecotourism operator actively participates in supporting the community (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019). As stated by Redwoods Treewalk (2019), the operator supports social-oriented organisations such as:

- Big Brothers Big Sisters Rotorua
- Revolve Rotorua
- Running for Hope
- Sulphur City Steam Rollers
- Special Olympics Rotorua (para. 19).

#### 4.4.2 Awards

Currently, Redwoods Treewalk in Rotorua holds the following awards:

- Qualmark Gold Sustainable Tourism Business award
- Qualmark 100% Pure New Zealand Experience award
- Rotorua Sustainable Charter
- Tiaki Promise holder (Redwoods Treewalk, 2019).

According to Qualmark (2017), the gold award encompasses the evidence of the best sustainable tourism business in New Zealand. The delivery of an exceptional visitor experience is essential to what they do. Being awarded the gold sustainable tourism award recognises the businesses which are leading the way in presenting New Zealand tourism in a world class manner for sustainable development (Qualmark, 2017). Redwoods Treewalk is also recognized for ascertaining the concept of the Tiaki Promise.

**This content has been removed by the author due to copyright issues.**

**Figure 3. Redwoods Treewalk Suspension Bridge**

**Photo Source: Beth Wilson/Flickr: mirsasha (2018)**

#### 4.4.3 Reviews

Out of 1,369 reviews featured on TripAdvisor, the reviews below are representative of international perspectives that included the keywords ‘environment,’ ‘sustainable,’ and ‘conservation.’ Many reviews highlighted that the tour is expensive; however, the visitors feel as though it is value for money as they have helped conservation practices.

In 2018, a visitor from the Cook Islands shared their experience of Redwoods Treewalk on TripAdvisor, as follows:

This is a must do for all age groups and such great value at only \$25 per person. I can only imagine the high level of conservation and maintenance. Caring for the trees as they grow, ensuring the safety of the public and checking equipment. Just amazing! I loved every minute and will definitely be back. Thank you so much for an unforgettable experience ♡. (TripAdvisor, 2018b)

In 2018, another visitor from London shared their experience of Redwoods Treewalk on TripAdvisor, and noted the following:

I do think it's overpriced, however we looked at it as paying towards upkeep of facilities and conservation of the forest. There's a lot of information about forestry [sic] on each section which was interesting to read. (TripAdvisor, 2018b)

### CASE STUDY: BAY OF ISLANDS

#### 4.5 ECOCRUZ

The data collected was sourced from the Ecocruz website and Google Reviews. Currently, Ecocruz is not featured on TripAdvisor as they stated they do not meet the criteria (Ecocruz, 2019b). Ecocruz is based at The Wharf, in Paihia, in the Bay of Islands. The Bay of Islands is in the northern region of the North Island of New Zealand. The Ecocruz website notes the ecotourism operator as a multi-day sailing cruise which allows the travellers to enjoy the bay in the same manner as the locals

(Ecocruz, 2019b). The cruise is three days and two nights of exploration. This nature cruise takes the travellers on board off the beaten track for experiences within the marine environment and the coastal landscapes of New Zealand. Ecocruz offers travellers the opportunity to kayak, snorkel, walk upon the beaches, or simply relax on the boat (Ecocruz, 2019b). Ecocruz gives visitors an opportunity to go to uninhabited islands and remote beaches. There is no itinerary set as the product is weather dependent (Ecocruz, 2019b). A few of the notable locations featured during the cruise are Cape Brett with the hole in the rock, the Twin Lagoons, and Urupukapuka Island. There is a ten-passenger limit to ensure a personal atmosphere which is enjoyable (Ecocruz, 2019b). Ecocruz has been in operation since 2000 (Ecocruz, 2019b).

#### 4.5.1 Sustainable Development and Ecotourism

According to the Ecocruz website, the operator is an avid supporter of ecotourism and sustainable development practices (Ecocruz, 2019a). Ecocruz (2019a) highlights that ecotourism is thought of as an opportunity to engage an in-depth understanding of nature, without damaging it throughout the process. In particular, the participant actively contributes towards conservation practices through this. The ecotourism operator aims to encourage ecotourism practices through inspiration and raising awareness, and to minimise the negative impacts generated by tourism (Ecocruz, 2019a). Ecocruz aims to sail as much as possible in order to avoid using fuel. The company uses non-invasive marine interaction and follows the guidelines provided by DOC (Ecocruz, 2019a). As stated by Ecocruz (2019a), the company supports environmental groups such as;

- Fish Forever
- Whale Rescue
- Project Island Song
- Bay Bush Action (para. 9).

#### 4.5.2 Awards

Currently, neither the Ecocruz website nor the Google search engine have shown that the ecotourism operator has any awards as such to connote towards public measure (Ecocruz, 2019b).

### 4.5.3 Reviews

Currently, Ecocruz is not on TripAdvisor as they do not meet the criteria to be featured. However, they do have a presence on Google Reviews where visitors can rate the ecotourism operator (Ecocruz, 2019b). Out of the 31 reviews featured on Google Reviews, the reviews chosen are representative of the experience of the visitors. It is notable that Google Reviews does not have the feature to search for key words, nor are users able to see whether a review is from a local or international participant. The key focus from the 31 reviews reflected environmental factors.

In 2019, a visitor shared their experience of Ecocruz on Google Reviews, and mentioned the following:

John's passion for the environment and knowledge of the Bay is very evident. The delicious food, including fresh fish, was an unexpected bonus. We would not hesitate to recommend this amazing trip to anyone! (Google Reviews, 2019)

In 2017, another visitor shared their experience of Ecocruz on Google Reviews, and wrote the following:

John has a very good knowledge of wildlife, birds, dolphins etc. in addition to his specialist interest in False Killerwhales. We saw dolphins up close and playful on all three days which was magical. Marcus was a great 'tour guide' on our walks and kayak trips and was a very attentive crew member! Both John and Marcus made the trip so special with their friendliness and attention to our wellbeing and enjoyment. They were very responsive to our specific interests. The trip itself is excellent value for money. Thank you very much and we wish Ecocruz every success in the future. (Google Reviews, 2017)

### 4.6 GREATSIGHTS DOLPHIN CRUISE

The data collected has been sourced through the GreatSights Dolphin Cruise website and TripAdvisor. The GreatSights Dolphin Cruise website describes the ecotourism operator as offering a three-hour journey through the Bay of Islands in search of dolphins and other marine life. All passengers board the cruise at its location in Paihia or Russell in the Bay of Islands. The cruise shows visitors the scenic landscapes of the Rakaumangamanga Peninsula moving towards Cape Brett. A historic lighthouse is also highlighted at Piercy Island (GreatSights, 2018b). The views are provided by the operator's catamaran called the Dolphin Seeker (GreatSights, 2018b). The purpose-built

catamaran is licensed by DOC specifically for viewing dolphins, and the on-board crew have had experience with locating dolphins amongst these waters (GreatSights, 2018b). The GreatSights Dolphin Cruise has been in operation since 2011 (GreatSights, 2018b).

#### 4.6.1 Sustainable Development and Ecotourism

According to the GreatSights website, the ecotourism operator has sustainability initiatives which they follow (GreatSights, 2018a). It is emphasised that the company has an understanding of the tension between the experiences they offer and the impact that causes on the environment (GreatSights, 2018a). Currently, GreatSights is a founding signatory to the Northland Sustainable Tourism Charter (GreatSights, 2018a). GreatSights (2018a) has taken on board initiatives to minimise the environmental impacts created, including:

- Providing support for local biodiversity protection initiatives
- The contribution of research data where a portion of the fare from visitors goes towards DOC
- Recycling of waste on all the vessels taken out to sea and at the offices
- If and where possible, liquid waste from the vessel is pumped off at land-based areas instead of at sea
- Initiatives for water conservation
- The installation of speed restrictors to cut fuel consumption (para. 20).

#### 4.6.2 Awards

Currently, GreatSights in the Bay of Islands holds the following awards:

- Qualmark Gold Sustainable Tourism Business award
- New Zealand Tourism's Official Quality Assurance
- Grand Pacific Tours: Supplier of the Year 2009, 2010, 2011
- Inbound Tour Operator Council: Operator of the Year 2010
- 2013-2018 Certificate of Excellence from TripAdvisor (GreatSights, 2018a).



**Figure 4. Dolphins spotted on the GreatSights Dolphin Cruise**

**Photo Source: Niharika Chand (author)**

GreatSights (2018a) holds the gold sustainable tourism business award from Qualmark which evidences that they are known as one of the best sustainable tourism businesses in New Zealand. This is in conjunction with the delivery of an exceptional visitor experience. The ecotourism operator has also consecutively been recognised by TripAdvisor as an operation of excellence from 2013 to 2018 and the supplier of the year for three years from Grand Pacific Tours. In 2010 the Inbound Operator Council had also recognized GreatSights as the inbound operator of the year (GreatSights, 2018a).

#### **4.6.3 Reviews**

Out of 1,731 reviews featured on TripAdvisor, the reviews chosen are representative of international perspectives. Both reviews were selected on the basis of the keywords ‘environment,’ ‘sustainable,’ and ‘conservation.’ One review is a positive review, whereas the second review highlights a poor experience.

In 2013, a visitor from the United Kingdom shared their experience of the GreatSights Dolphin Cruise on TripAdvisor, as follows:

It is undemanding, yet the crew still make it a very pleasurable experience. If you want a more intimate experience, swimming with dolphins on the Eco trip is

a much better bet, but it is also a lot more demanding. Fullers is a very professional organization and once it was clear that we had booked on the wrong trip they were excellent about sorting it out. My advice is to talk to the friendly and knowledgeable staff to find out which trip suits your personal tastes. They do after all provide different trips to cater for most needs. (TripAdvisor, 2013a)

In 2017, another visitor from Washington shared their experience of the GreatSights Dolphin Cruise on TripAdvisor, and stated the following:

The tour was OK. Occasionally the skipper did point out different islands, but I expected more commentary about what we were seeing around us. The BIG disappointment was when we visited Otehei Bay on Urupukapuka Island. We had been to this bay on a previous day on a ferry operated by a different company. We were told the island had no pests or predators to hurt any of the birds & wildlife there & there were conservation efforts on the islands. We were urged to check the soles of our shoes (& there was a tub of water on the dock for rinsing). . . it was shameful Great Sights didn't talk about the conservation efforts in Otehei Bay. It would be better if Great Sights didn't bother going to Otehei Bay & tourists supported the ferry company instead. (TripAdvisor, 2017a)

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter analyses the findings based on the relationship between ecotourism and sustainable development in New Zealand and the commitment towards the assurance of sustainable development in New Zealand. This analysis is carried out in combination with the relevant literature on the key themes of ecotourism, sustainable development, and brand image.

The reviews from social media and the overall website analysis for six ecotourism organisations presented in Chapter Four are discussed and critiqued. This expands on the literature cited in Chapter Two in combination with the themes retrieved from the data. The findings from TripAdvisor and the ecotourism operator websites have highlighted the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand, as well as the commitment to the assurance of sustainable development. As a result, it is apparent from a visitor's perspective that ecotourism and sustainable development in New Zealand is more than the brand image the operators portray. Ecotourism as an industry has become a catalyst for sustainable development and the ecotourism operators alike. The following themes have been highlighted through the findings as the key areas that a visitor regards as contributing towards sustainable development practices in the ecotourism industry in New Zealand. These themes are communication, conservation, and value.

### 5.1 COMMUNICATION

Communication was a central theme highlighted in the reviews. For example, in 2018, a TripAdvisor review on Habitat Tours in Auckland had stated “communication was great, I booked the wrong day initially and it was no trouble rearranging it for the day” (TripAdvisor, 2018a). This highlights a positive review of using technology as a form of communication channel between the visitor and the ecotourism operator. This contributes towards the experience of the visitor and how they perceive the ecotourism operator in New Zealand. The ability to use social media, texting, calling, and emailing creates a better experience for the consumer as, if unforeseen circumstances arise, they have the ability to change their booking dates and activities if need be. In comparison, another TripAdvisor review in 2018 on Relaxing Journeys in Auckland had mentioned “miscommunication... So unprofessional!!” (TripAdvisor, 2018c). This highlights the negative connotation of the experience held by the visitor. Miscommunication and the inability to make alterations to the product booked by consumers lead towards an

unpleasant experience as consumers appreciate the use of modern-day technology to make these changes according to their circumstances. In 2014, a TripAdvisor review on Relaxing Journeys had noted “replied promptly to all our questions” (TripAdvisor, 2014). This review for the same company highlights a positive perspective. Once again, the consumers of the ecotourism operator appreciate the use of online communication channels in order to address any misinterpretation prior to the journey commencing.

The tourism industry is one of the biggest economic sectors which involves the global commodities of money, semiotic resources, and people (Sharma, 2018). Over the last 30 years, the ecotourism industry has been closely connected with the larger global process of sustainable development (Regmi & Walter, 2017). According to Gomez-Oliva, Alvarado-Urbe, Parra-Meroño, and Jara (2019), one of the main pillars of the tourism industry is sustainability. It is within the sustainability sector that the role of communication channels stands out. This is because they are utilised to improve current strategies by taking advantage of the benefits provided by modern day technology (Gomez-Oliva et al., 2019). For example, the use of technology and communication channels between the visitor and the ecotourism operators streamlines and personalises the experiences offered. Currently, tourist demand is undergoing a transformation which highlights experience as one of the essential parts of the journey (Henche, 2018). The visitors are feeling a greater need to experience destinations in order to optimise their journeys. In order to implement this insight, tourism markets are promoted as destinations which offer leisurely experiences (Henche, 2018).

Marketing and communication channels are combined in the immersion of tourists directly in the product. This is through the sense of emotional triggers, thoughts, and feelings which arise in the consumers from their experience of the tourism products offered (Henche, 2018). The initial goal of the operator is to transform the consumers into fans of their product. Essentially, the purpose is not only to focus on the product offered, but also to derive an interest in what the experience means for the consumer. The advancement of communication channels is not only found in the ecotourism industry, but the tourism industry as a whole enables both the international and local visitors to be producers of the resources needed by the ecotourism operators (Henche, 2018). For example, in the past, when the visitors had recommended a destination in their travel guides, their reviews would not be seen by readers until later. However, the present-day consumers have the ability to publish their reviews based on their experiences at any time (Henche, 2018).

It is notable that ecotourism consumers prefer to control their own itineraries. This includes experiences which are convenient and comfortable for them. The consumers know what they need and are becoming more experienced with communicating their needs to the ecotourism operators. This transformation has changed consumers into people creating journeys which are suitable for them instead of consuming wholesale journeys. This relates to the positive comments from the custom tours (Henche, 2018).

## 5.2 KNOWLEDGE OF CONSERVATION

The reviews within the case studies referred to the importance of conservation and the environment. For example, in 2018 a TripAdvisor review on Habitat Tours in Auckland stated that “Throughout the tour it was clear that he really cares about the environment and preserving the little corner of the earth” and “the cutlery/plates used for the picnic were reusable, the reusable water bottles had no plastic in it, and all the food was home made” (TripAdvisor, 2018a). This review highlights a positive approach towards conservation. The consumers of the experience appreciate the efforts made by the ecotourism operator which contributes towards saving the environment, as well as educating the consumers on simple ways in which they can contribute towards conservation practices. In conjunction with this, a Google Reviews review in 2019 on Ecocruz in the Bay of Islands mentioned that “passion for the environment and knowledge of the Bay is very evident” (Google Reviews, 2019). This highlights another positive connotation of the experience of the visitor. The passion and knowledge of the environment creates a sense of understanding and comfort for the consumers.

The interrelation between having the knowledge of conservation and sustainable development has drawn attention to the lack of appropriate environmental education within the ecotourism industry. Ecotourists acknowledge and value being surrounded by other tourists or hosts who provide a learning experience in terms of conservation and the environment (Eagles, 1992; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017). For example, TIES has stated that one of the main principles in order to attain sustainable development and conservation goals in the ecotourism industry is through providing a positive and engaging learning experience for the visitors and the hosts (TIES, 2015). Moreover, according to Mondino and Beery (2019) one way to face this challenge within the industry is through the adaptation of using different methods in the education system, as well as having governmental recognition to introduce sustainable development into the education system.

Ecotourism is known to be responsible travel to natural areas which improves the welfare of the locals and conserves the environment (Takele, 2019). Moreover, ecotourism should promote biodiversity conservation. Over the past 30 years, several paradigm shifts have occurred in relation to conservation, environmental management, and the development of nature (Brennan, 2018). There are many factors which influence the conservation of natural resources. Whilst it is implied that one should conserve nature due to its economic and environmental benefits, these attributes do not always emotionally engage consumers with the purpose of saving nature (Richardson, 2018). Traditionally, the assumption is that consumers themselves should be self-interested in understanding and responding to the environmental issues portrayed. According to Richardson (2018), there is a positive correlation between the environment and landscapes and human well-being and social harmony. The aesthetics and knowledge of the environment and conservation practices contribute towards the emotional engagement with nature and consumers. This transforms the relationship between consumers and nature from just viewing nature as a commodity for human needs. It is arguable, however, whether the conservation practices are used for the preservation of nature or the preservation of the experience (Richardson, 2018).

The concern for environmental conservation has been motivated through a range of economic, aesthetic, and ethical factors. The movement from conserving nature for its own sake to now conserving nature for the purpose of human living has fundamentally changed the perception of ecotourists globally (Doak, Bakker, Goldstein, & Hale, 2014). According to Doak et al. (2014), the current and past conservation practices have been poorly done, motivated the wrong way, and is seemingly scientifically unstoppable. The first principle of conservation has been noted as development. For example, the utilisation of natural resources is for the benefit of the people who live here. The efforts to engage an understanding of environmental protection has been a long-term goal on a global scale. Advocates have argued that the past efforts for conservation support the shift towards more people-centered approaches to conservation (Doak et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it is stated that the fates of nature and humans are deeply intertwined, in that the same activities which harm ecology are the same activities which have the potential to harm our own well-being. Globally, we should be realistic about what can be accomplished and what is inevitable for the environment (Doak et al., 2014).

### 5.3 VALUE

Value for money was a central theme highlighted in the reviews. For example, in 2018, two TripAdvisor reviews on Redwoods Treewalk in Rotorua had stated “This is a must do for all age groups and such great value at only \$25 per person ... the high level of conservation and maintenance” and “I do think it’s overpriced, however we looked at it as paying towards upkeep of facilities and conservation of the forest” (TripAdvisor, 2018b). These reviews highlight a positive approach towards both conservation practices and value for money. The ecotourists are aware of the high level of maintenance required to not only conserve the experience but to also keep it open for visitors to enjoy. One of the reviews mention it is great value for money in order to help towards conservation practices, whereas the second review notes that the experience is overpriced in their opinion, but due to the cost of the upkeep of the facility and the influence of conservation, the visitors do not mind paying the fee for the experience. In comparison, in 2018 a TripAdvisor review on Relaxing Journeys in Auckland mentioned the following:

The only option was to bail out (and pay full fees) or go in rainy weather. . . I had two other operators. . . who, due to bad weather, provided me alternative tours & also an option to take a refund. I do NOT recommend. . . Relaxing Journeys. (TripAdvisor, 2018c)

This highlights a negative perspective of the experience held by the visitor. The inability to find alternatives or get a partial or full refund due to poor service and bad weather had led to an unpleasant experience. The consumer had not felt as though their experience was value for money and they had stated that they would no longer recommend the ecotourism operator due to the lack of service. It had made the consumer feel as though the ecotourism operator had wanted the money but did not value the consumer.

The connection between value for money and sustainable development and its policies is quite ambiguous in terms of the sustainable development movement (Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015). This is due to the concept of sustainable development requiring a balance between the sustainable practices as well as financial gain. According to Hoppstadius and Dahlstrom (2015) the progression towards more sustainable development practices and economic growth is debatable. For example, TIES has also stated that in order for the ecotourism industry and sustainable development goals to be

achieved, ecotourism businesses may consider adhering to the specific principle of gaining financial benefit for conservation purposes. In addition, ecotourists also tend to have a higher expenditure in comparison to the normal tourist. However, it is indefinable to identify whether the tourists who visit the ecotourism organisations are ecotourists or normal tourists (Wight, 1996; TIES, 2015; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017; McCabe & Branco Illodo, 2019).

The tourism industry is a dynamic and competitive industry as part of the service sector (McCabe & Branco Illodo, 2019). There is a variety of choices displayed for consumers to purchase, and consumers are aware of the determinants of quality and value for money. These determinants play an essential role in decision making for the consumer. Modern-day technology has initiated a high degree of transparency regarding the tourism products available. The same determinants are used to generate perceptions about how the tourism industry has evolved (McCabe & Branco Illodo, 2019). The price of the product plays an elemental role when perceiving quality, and price is notable as one of the significant factors which affects decision making for the consumer. For example, it is common for consumers to link a lower price with lower quality; however, this is not always true. Consumers in the tourism industry tend to be concerned due to quality constraints. The influence of value for money connotes a direct relation towards consumer responses (McCabe & Branco Illodo, 2019). The value and recognition received from a satisfactory tourism product creates a positive influence on tourist experiences.

The relationship between consumer satisfaction and value for money holds true for the ecotourism industry (Kansal, Walia, & Goel, 2015). According to Kansal et al., (2015), in the service industry the delivery of value is an important factor for the consumer. The concept of experience has been noted to be the consumer's response to the consumption of the product or service (Kansal et al., 2015). The quality of the experience is derived from the satisfaction of the consumer. The experience of visitors in the ecotourism sector refers to the engagement of the visitor at the destination. If the visitor has had a pleasant experience at the destination, it will positively affect their perception of the experience and their value-for-money satisfaction (Kansal et al., 2015).

In addition, the perception of value of the consumer has been found to be an important aspect of consumer satisfaction (Williams, Soutar, Ashill, & Naumann, 2017). Whilst the service aspect is noted as a key factor in explaining and understanding customer

satisfaction, the value aspect is recognised as having more influence over satisfaction. Research has highlighted that satisfaction is positively influenced by value (Williams et al., 2017).

#### 5.4 SUMMARY

In summary, the findings presented in this dissertation highlight that there is more to the relationship of sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand than previous studies have shown. The literature review focused on the broader topics of ecotourism, sustainable development, and brand image. However, the findings show the relevance of the themes derived from the data. The themes of communication, knowledge of conservation, and value for money contribute towards the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism. The majority of the criticism in the findings is based on the level of communication between the visitor and the ecotourism operator, as well as the concept of value for money. There is no prominent greenwashing highlighted within the examination of these ecotourism operators. However, it must be noted that the research pursued is specifically focused on the regions of Auckland, Rotorua, and the Bay of Islands. These are only three of the many different ecotourism regions in New Zealand, and the study covers only six of the ecotourism operators in New Zealand. Hence, the research has taken just a small sample in comparison to ecotourism as a whole within New Zealand.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This dissertation has presented an in-depth analysis of academic literature with regard to the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand and the prominence of greenwashing by ecotourism operators. Specifically, the key concepts of sustainable development, ecotourism, and brand image were the main focal points of the literature. Having gained a deeper understanding of these concepts, a website and social media analysis was undertaken, and it was concluded that the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand is a key aspect when researching visitor experiences. These experiences are derived from the key themes of communication, knowledge of conservation, and value for money. The organisations featured are all self-identified as ecotourism operators; however, it is evident that not all ecotourism operators have sustainable development policies in place. The use of social media reviews provided the insights needed to challenge the sustainable development practices put in place by the self-identified ecotourism operators. On a positive note, however, greenwashing had no prominence.

On a global scale, the concept of sustainable development is a journey to balance economic development, ecological conservation, and socio-cultural preservation. However, it is controversial whether the shift towards sustainable development has left room for economic growth whilst considering ecological and social development. The ecotourism industry can be identified as an industry that can aid the shift towards sustainable development through the principles that the industry is based upon. The ecotourism industry can work with the concept of sustainable development in order to implement the changes needed to ensure the transition to a sustainable future. However, for this to occur, ecotourism operators in New Zealand need to implement sustainable processes into their organisations.

When considering the objective of the dissertation, several themes were explored after analysing six ecotourism operators' websites and their social media reviews. It was evident that though these ecotourism operators may be self-identified as such, not all of them have sustainable development practices within their businesses. Two of the ecotourism operators are not Qualmark endorsed, and one ecotourism operator is not on TripAdvisor. This is a key aspect as TripAdvisor is internationally recognized and used for visitor reviews and it may disadvantage the organisations who are not on the social media channel. The information shared on the websites of the respective ecotourism

operators are conveniently accessible and highlight the urgency of the transition to a sustainable future. Nonetheless, from the social media reviews, it is notable that conservation and preservation practices are taken into account by these organisations, and in exchange this has created a positive experience for the visitor. The major themes that were noted in the visitor reviews were communication, knowledge of conservation, and value for money.

The theme of communication highlights that the efficiency and accuracy of the communication channels between the visitor and the ecotourism operator creates the first impression, whether it is positive or negative. An example of this is highlighted through the TripAdvisor reviews. If the visitor needs to make alterations to their booking, they prefer having the ability to communicate with the ecotourism operator in order to make the relevant changes and have an enjoyable experience, in particular if the visitor is travelling from overseas. According to Bradley (2008), it has been noted that visitors who travel to New Zealand visit the destination for the people, not just the country. Thus, a personal relationship is more important in planning, decision making, and delivery. In addition, the ability of the ecotourists to have good communication channels is the communication of tour guides in the delivery.

The theme of knowledge of conservation highlights that having a tour guide who has educated themselves about the country and conservation practices constitutes a positive experience. In accordance with TIES (2015), it is beneficial for the ecotourism operators to have guides who provide a positive and engaging experience for the visitor and the host. In addition, this is also supported by the definition of ecotourism by TIES which mentions that the ideology of ecotourism includes the involvement of education and interpretation (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; TIES, 2015). Moreover, it is notable that a lack of environmental education is one of the main challenges that the ecotourism industry faces.

The theme of value for money highlights that visitor satisfaction is constituted through the value gained in accordance with the money paid for the experience. For example, the ecotourists who visit New Zealand have a willingness to pay for a clean and green experience (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015). From a visitor perspective, ecotourists do not seem to be cost sensitive if they see it contributing towards eco-factors such as conservation and environmental protection. In accordance with the importance to the visitor of value for money and having a pleasant experience, the concept of value for

money also contributes to gaining a competitive advantage (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015). Furthermore, from the perspective of the ecotourism operator, the financial gain can be put towards the purpose of conservation, and the revenue should be beneficial for the private business as well as the local communities (TIES, 2015). Hence, this ties in with the conservation and community support groups that the ecotourism operators help.

Fundamentally, the main goal of a destination is to portray itself as a unique yet environmentally and ecologically friendly place. The creation of a sustainable development policy is an ideal way to create a positive image of a destination and of an ecotourism operator. This will contribute to a positive first impression for the ecotourist. This highlights that the romanticism of the ecotourism industry has the potential to promote and practice the conservation and preservation of nature. Lastly, the combination of visitor education, ecotourism operator understanding, and sustainable development practices can assure a steady growth towards achieving the balance between consuming nature and its preservation for the future. This can help the implementation of what is described in the title of this dissertation, “Ecotourism in New Zealand: A Catalyst for Sustainable Development,” along with sustainable development practices in the future.

## 6.1 LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of the research is that no interviews were conducted and no actual communication was made between the researcher and the ecotourism operators. The research was limited to tourist reviews which were not specifically targeted at sustainable development. Whilst the literature review had mentioned the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts, only the economic and environmental impacts had been highlighted within the findings. The reviews from the consumers had been based purely on regular tourist perspectives as there had been no way to differentiate whether the tourists had been regular tourists or ecotourists. The key limitation uncovered while preparing the data chapter of the research is the fact that not all the ecotourism operator reviews had featured the key words ‘environment,’ ‘sustainable,’ or ‘conservation.’ In addition, Google Reviews does not have the feature to search through the reviews using keywords. Thus, Habitat Tours, Redwoods Treewalk, and the GreatSights Dolphin cruise reviews had these keywords featured; however, Relaxing Journeys, Tour Zealand, and Ecocruz reviews did not feature the keywords. Therefore, the ecotourism operators which had not featured the keywords ‘environment,’ ‘sustainable,’ or ‘environment’ had been found through visitor reviews

which had the closest relevance to the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand.

## 6.2 FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research could supplement this secondary resource study by including a quantitative research approach using a larger sample which includes more ecotourism operators in different regions of New Zealand, in order to explore the relationship between sustainable development and ecotourism in New Zealand. A larger sample may highlight the prominence of any greenwashing by ecotourism operators. Equally, primary research may allow the researcher to gain insight into historical data for the ecotourism operators. This may highlight the various processes of sustainable development, for example, to reveal whether the intention of sustainable development had been implemented from the establishment of the operator or if it had been put in place at a later date. Limited research has been done regarding ecotourism in New Zealand in the past.

For the future, ecotourism operators who do not have sustainable development processes in place may benefit from introducing them as this will contribute towards achieving the UNWTO SDGs by the year 2030. Regarding the 100% Pure Welcome marketing campaign, as of the time of writing this dissertation, none of the six ecotourism operators have featured in the campaign. The strength of the campaign allows global recognition of the ecotourism operators, as other tourism organisations in New Zealand who have featured on the campaign have gained a competitive advantage as well as having the opportunity to promote these organisations for who they are and what they do. This can aid the ecotourism operators in growing their target markets as well as the promotion of conservation and sustainable development practices.

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