

Millennials as consumers of wildlife tourism experiences

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Abstract

Wildlife tourism benefits regional economies and biodiversity conservation, yet visitor numbers remain below capacity in many wildlife destinations. With an aging population and increasing pressure on the natural environment, the need to attract a younger generation (Millennials) to nature and conservation is becoming more important than ever. To see increasing visitation from Millennials it is necessary to understand their perceptions of and expectations about wildlife tourism experiences and how that may require improved management effectiveness. To this end, six focus groups were conducted with South African Millennials in different family life cycle stages. The findings show that focus group participants' expectation of a wildlife tourism experience is to have an encounter with wildlife. They expect the experience to be authentic and responsible. They want opportunities to engage in various activities, and show a keen interest in visiting national parks. The paper contributes to the limited research on Millennials and their preferences for nature and wildlife-based experiences. Insights gained from this cohort have implications for wildlife tourism organisations in terms of product development and species conservation.

Keywords: Expectations, Millennials, perceptions, product development, travel behaviour, wildlife tourism experiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

Wildlife tourism is a category of nature-based tourism that relies on encounters with wild animals (Ballantyne, Packer & Falk, 2011). It should be managed efficiently to ensure that the negative impacts (Haskell, McGowan, Westling, Méndez-Jiménez, Rohner, Collins & Pierce, 2015) do not outweigh the positives (Trave, Brunnschweiler, Sheaves, Diedrich & Barnett, 2017). Wildlife tourism benefits regional economies and biodiversity conservation, yet visitor numbers remain below capacity in many wildlife destinations – specifically those in Africa and Latin America (Balmford, Green, Anderson, Beresford, Huang, Naidoo, Walpole & Manica, 2015). Some of the factors that have an impact on visitor numbers to protected areas are natural attractiveness, (Balmford et al., 2015), distance (Ramsay, Dodds, Furtado, Mykhayletska, Kirichenko & Majedian, 2017), natural disasters (Mathivha, Tshipala & Nkuna, 2017) and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic (Spenceley et al., 2021).

In their research, Smith and Kirby (2015) found that younger generations, such as Millennials, are becoming gradually more disengaged from nature and more attached to technology. This increasing disengagement adds to the global environmental crisis (Zylstra, Knight, Esler & Le Grange, 2014), resulting in reduced levels of interest in and appreciation of nature (Kesebir & Kesebir, 2017). There is thus a need to encourage a growing interest in wildlife tourism and its advantages in order to increase environmental conservation and protection (Schwoerer, Knowler & Garcia-Martinez, 2016).

Understanding what will attract younger generations, such as Millennials, to nature and conservation is more critical than ever (Ramsay et al., 2017). Aside from the importance of connecting younger generations to nature, various authors have noted that the buying power of Millennials is significantly greater than that of the generations before them (i.e., Generation X and Baby Boomers) (Bucic, Harris & Arli, 2012). This

generation is also becoming a vital source of visitors to some tourism destinations, and expectations are that they will become the most important cohort in terms of tourism consumption (Nusair, Parsa & Cobanoglu, 2011). Kim and Park (2020) note that limited research has been done on Millennials' values, attitudes, and behaviours. There is thus inadequate empirical support for managerial implications and suggestions. Canavan (2018) also notes that further research is needed to investigate this cohort and its on-going relationship with the tourism sector. Given this context, wildlife tourism organisations must gain a deeper understanding of the demands and profile of Millennials as a way to bridge the gap between expectations and offers (Veiga, Santos, Águas & Santos, 2017). Without understanding what will satisfy Millennials' wildlife tourism needs, unsuitable services or products may be offered, possibly leading to reduced visitor satisfaction and to negative effects on the natural environment. Managers of wildlife tourism are thus faced with the dual mandate not only of satisfying the needs of Millennials (not only Millennials but all visitor types), but also of conserving the natural resource base (Semeniuk, Haider, Beardmore & Rothley, 2009).

The limited research that has studied Millennials and their preferences for nature and wildlife-based experiences has primarily focused on existing visitors, leaving the expectations and perceptions of potential visitors largely undiscovered (Moyle, Scherrer, Weiler, Wilson, Caldicott & Nielsen, 2017). To date, these studies have mainly centred on people from Western cultures, with little understanding of visits by Millennials of other ethnic backgrounds. This is a problem, given the inequalities in participation rates and imbalances in access that have been uncovered in recent studies (Donaldson, Ferreira, Didier, Rodary & Swanepoel, 2016; Flores, Falco, Roberts & Valenzuela, 2018). The aim of this qualitative study is thus to discover the expectations and perceptions of prospective and existing Millennial visitors, of different family life cycle stages and ethnic groupings, regarding wildlife tourism experiences. Through focus groups, the likelihood that Millennials' will participate in such experiences is also examined.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Tourists' expectations and perceptions of wildlife tourism experiences

Wildlife tourism is a form of nature-based tourism that includes non-consumptive experiences with wildlife in their natural habitats (Newsome & Rodger, 2013). Not only does wildlife tourism create public interest in biodiversity, it also contributes to the economic viability and social importance of protected areas (Perera, Senevirathna & Vlosky, 2015). During wildlife tourism experiences, tourists are given a chance to see and interact with animals that may be rare, threatened, or endangered (Cousins, 2007). All wildlife tourism attractions (WTAs) have to make trades-off between the values of conservation, visitor satisfaction, animal welfare, and profitability (Fernandez, Tamborski, Pickens & Timberlake, 2009). In order to manage these trades-off, it is important to understand visitors' expectations and perceptions of wildlife tourism so that they can be balanced against the values of conservation, animal welfare, and profitability.

In their research, Mutanga, Vengesayi, Chikuta, Muboko and Gandiwa (2017, p.7) established that the most important motivators of wildlife tourism experiences are

'feeling close to nature', followed by 'appreciating wildlife', and 'recreation and knowledge seeking'. According to Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001), six factors embody the quality and richness of the wildlife tourism experience. *Authenticity* refers to the honesty of the attraction and the environment in which it is situated, and the extent to which fauna exhibit natural behaviour. *Intensity* points to the excitement produced by an experience. A wildlife tourism experience is *unique* if it is special and unusual and leaves the visitor feeling fortunate. *Duration* refers to how long the visitor is exposed to the stimuli. The experience is heightened only for a specific time, after which the visitor becomes saturated by that experience. *Species popularity* is determined by a series of factors, including the species' size and physical attractiveness, and the publicity received in the media. *Species status* alludes to the rarity of the animal. It appears that tourists are especially attracted to species regarded as endangered and rare (Semeniuk, Haider, Cooper & Rothley, 2010).

In addition to the six factors, Braithwaite, Reynolds and Pongracz (1996) found that the skill of the guide and the design and comfort of the facilities also influence visitors' views of quality. Conversely, Okello and Yerian (2009) recognised that tourist satisfaction with wildlife tourism experiences is independent of the accommodation facilities, tour services, and tourist attractions. Instead, tourists' expectations are influenced by wildlife-based images. Another aspect of the wildlife experience that is of increasing concern to visitors is their safety; and they expect park management to communicate proactively and to mitigate safety risks (Gstaettner, Lee & Weiler, 2020).

The wildlife experience is improved through activities such as interaction with wild animals in their natural habitats, and wildlife interpretation (Oh & Hammit, 2010). The encounter between the visitor and wild animals is the most vital part of a wildlife experience (Newsome, Rodger, Pearce & Chan, 2019). In Africa, visitor satisfaction is dependent on viewing charismatic animals such as predators and large ungulates (Di Minin, Fraser, Slotow & MacMillan, 2013).

Moscardo, Woods and Saltzer (2004, p.231) define 'interpretation' as "educational activities used in places like zoos, museums, heritage sites and national parks, to tell visitors about the significance or meaning of what they are experiencing". Roberts, Mearns and Edwards (2014) provide four goals of interpretation: (1) ensuring visitor satisfaction, (2) increasing visitors' knowledge, (3) achieving a change in attitudes and, as a result, (4) attaining behavioural change. Kularatne, Wilson, Lee, and Hoang (2021) also emphasise the importance of information/interpretative facilities in establishing the satisfaction of users. Tourists enjoy the discovery and learning part of wildlife tourism, seeing it as a vital part of the experience – thus suggesting that learning about conservation is expected to improve rather than diminish tourists' experiences (Ballantyne, Packer, Hughes & Dierking, 2007).

Disregarding the requirements, wishes and expectations of visitors could degrade the wildlife tourism experience or the wildlife itself (Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001). For example, a lack of visitor supporting services such as interpretation could lead to a reduction in the quality of tourism experiences (Perera et al., 2015) which could also hold implications for wildlife itself, since visitors will be less informed on how to behave when encountering animals. Thus, if tourism is to be used as a vehicle for conservation, it is important to understand tourists' preferences and behaviour (Buckley, 2013). Managing the visitor's experience is therefore the most difficult part

of managing wildlife tourism, because visitors have different requirements, expectations, values, and beliefs. What makes this even more difficult is that expectations, values, and beliefs also differ across generations.

2.2 Generational theory

Strauss and Howe (1997, p.61) define a 'generation' as an "aggregate of all people born over roughly the span of a phase of life who share a common location in history and, hence, a common collective persona". A generation is typically 20-25 years in length, and is defined by its years of birth (Schewe & Meredith, 2004). In sharing the same life span, each generation has experienced the same external influences and social events in their developmental years, thus producing similar life experiences. These external events shape the generation's core values, and provide cues for behaviour (Schewe & Noble, 2000). Generational theory aims to group people by their membership of distinct cohorts (Canavan, 2018), and claims that each cohort has its own characteristics, consumption, and behavioural patterns that differentiate it from others (Chen & Shoemaker, 2014; Schewe & Noble, 2000).

The tourism literature has seen an increasing interest in generational analysis (Chang & Sung Hee, 2010; Gardiner, Grace & King, 2015), as it can offer valuable insights into the travel behaviours, attitudes, consumption patterns, and preferences of different generations. Tourism destinations also benefit from the insights obtained through a generational theory lens because it raises important practical implications (Pendergast, 2010). Nevertheless, Pennington-Gray and Blair (2010) call for more theory-based studies to document the travel behaviour and attitudes of different generations. The focus of this paper is on one generation only – Millennials. The tourism industry is becoming more aware of the Millennial market: it may represent the industry's future (Rita, Brochado & Dimova, 2019) because of its large size and growing purchasing power (Giovannini, Xu & Thomas 2015). However, there is a limited focus on Millennials in tourism and leisure studies (Joseph & Wearing, 2014; Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010), and so they are poorly understood (Bucic et al., 2012). Both practice and theory suffer from this shortage of research (Leask, Fyall & Barron, 2013).

2.3 Millennials as tourists

Millennials, widely accepted as those born between 1981 and 1996 (Pew Research Centre, 2016), have distinct wants and needs (Leask et al., 2013). They have high demands and expectations of themselves and others (Debevec, Schewe, Madden & Diamond, 2013) that could be transferred to their tourism and leisure consumption (Jennings, Cater, Lee, Ollenburg, Ayling & Lunny, 2010).

Travel allows Millennials to escape the ordinary (Rita et al., 2018) and they are more likely than other generations to look for entertainment while on holiday (Li, Li & Hudson, 2013). Millennials also look for destinations that involve them both physically and emotionally in unique, innovative and memorable experiences (Leask, Fyall & Barron, 2014). Various studies emphasise that this cohort appreciates opportunities to immerse themselves in the local culture and have direct and close contact with the locals (Jennings et al., 2010; Pendergast, 2010) and experience their daily lives (Veiga et al., 2017). It is evident that Millennials value opportunities for self-discovery,

deepening connections with others and nature, learning, and reflexivity when they travel (Canavan, 2018). On the other hand, they also see travel as hedonistically self-indulgent; in fact, Howe and Strauss (2009) claim that hedonism and fun-seeking are associated with Millennials. They are also sensitive to exposure to risk and security issues (Pendergast, 2010), and view safety and security as the most important aspect when evaluating destinations (Li et al., 2013).

A number of untested and often contradictory claims have been made about the environmental attitudes of Millennials. Some authors, such as Kotler and Keller (2012), claim that Millennials have an intense concern for environmental protection. This could be from their exposure to natural disasters and ecological devastation, which have become a vital part of their environmental consciousness (McKay, 2010) and turned them toward more ethical consumption (Bucic et al., 2012). This environmental consciousness is likely to activate pro-environmental behaviours – for instance, participating in environmental volunteering (Woosnam, Strzelecka, Gwendelyn, Nisbett & Keith, 2019). Social media improve Millennials' knowledge of, and desire for, ecotourism (Kaihatu, Spence, Kasim, Satria & Budidharmanto, 2020) and directly influence their pro-environmental behavioural intentions (Han, McCabe, Wang & Chong, 2017). According to Kline, Benjamin, Wagner and Dineen (2020) using the motivations and skills of Millennials could lead to positive change for the planet's biodiversity. While Bucic et al. (2012) opined that Millennials seem to be more environmentally conscious than their predecessors, Li et al. (2013) revealed that the attribute of environmental quality seems to be of the highest importance to Baby Boomers and of the least importance to Millennials. Wismayer (2014) emphasises Millennials' propensity to be self-absorbed. It is important for them to travel so that they can brag that they have been somewhere, and to outperform their peers. Millennials are also likely to travel for lengthy periods, visit isolated locations, and travel irrespective of their economic means (Machado, 2014).

Only limited theoretical and empirical research has studied Millennials' interaction with national parks and protected areas (Weiler, Martin, Canosa & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2018). Studies on Millennials' expectations and perceptions of wildlife tourism experiences are even scarcer. In their research on tourist satisfaction and travel motivation with wildlife tourism experiences in the Gonarezhou and Matusadona National Parks in Zimbabwe, Mutanga et al. (2017) discovered differences between the factors that motivated different ages to visit the parks. The younger age groups were more motivated by the need to seek knowledge and recreation. Younger visitors were also attracted to the parks because of their knowledge of the park, the availability of diverse plant species in the park, good opportunities to gain more knowledge about nature, the convenience of the location, harmonious relationships between park and local community, and an assortment of recreational activities in the park.

Because of this limited research, there seems to be a lack of clarity concerning the views and behaviour of Millennials when visiting national parks and protected areas, and why they may (or may not) have or wish for fewer (or diverse) experiences than older generations (Malone, 2016). There is thus a need to study the expectations and perceptions of Millennials regarding wildlife tourism experiences. Insights gained from this cohort could have implications for wildlife tourism organisations in terms of product development and species conservation.

3. METHODOLOGY

While much of the wildlife tourism literature is leaning towards the quantification of impacts, satisfaction and motivations, the need for more in-depth investigation into the individual tourist experience to enrich the quantitative results have been highlighted (Cong, Wu, Morrison, Shy & Wang, 2014). Although a few qualitative studies have discovered the meaning of wildlife travel to various tourist groups (e.g., Curtin, 2010), it is still uncertain what expectations and perceptions Millennials have about wildlife tourism experiences, and how likely they are to engage in such experiences. The target population for this study therefore comprised of South African Millennials of diverse ages and ethnic groups.

Most studies on Millennials assume that they are a homogeneous market (Santos, Veiga & Águas, 2016). There is thus a need to segment this generation further. Millennials are not a homogeneous cohort; there are sub-groups, each with its own unique opinions and characteristics (Torres, 2015). Researchers have used several factors to identify Millennial sub-groups, including variables that incorporate the family life cycle (Brida, Disegna & Scuderi, 2013). In our study, the family life cycle, also called the household life cycle (Mothersbaugh, Hawkins & Kleiser, 2020), was chosen to segment the market and to investigate Millennials' different sub-groups. Research has shown that products, services and decision-making in general changes as family units move through the different phases (Mothersbaugh et al., 2020; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019) and that the presence (or absence) of children in the different phases have a direct influence on consumption decisions (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019).

Separate focus groups were held for each of the following family life cycle groups:

- Group 1: single Millennial adults who are not permanently employed;
- Group 2: single Millennial adults who are permanently employed;
- Group 3: Millennials who are living together or newly married with no children;
- Group 4: Millennials who have pre-school families (children 0-6 years);
- Group 5: Millennials who have primary school families (children 7-13 years);

To date, studies have mainly centred on people from Western cultures, with little understanding of visits to protected areas by Millennials from other ethnic backgrounds (Donaldson et al., 2016; Flores et al., 2018). In South Africa, according to Butler and Richardson (2015), the demands and motives of affluent, mainly White, domestic tourists continue to get more attention than those of the majority Black African population. For this reason, in addition to the five sub-groups identified above, a sixth focus group consisting of only Black African participants was included to gain deeper insights into this largely unexplored market segment.

The researchers' personal networks were used to source the initial participants for each focus group, followed by snowball sampling to increase the number of participants. Despite this approach, every effort was made to ensure that an adequate number of participants were included in each of the family life cycle groups. Millennials of all genders, ages, South African ethnic groups, and life cycle stages took part in the focus groups (as per the six groups identified above). All participants had to indicate in which year they were born (to ensure only Millennials participated in the study).

The first objective with the focus groups was to assess the expectations of Millennials about wildlife tourism experiences. National parks are synonymous with wildlife, and offer a vital part of the wildlife tourism experience. For this reason, the focus groups gathered Millennials' perceptions of South African National Parks (SANParks) as the custodian of wildlife tourism experiences. The likelihood of Millennials visiting a national park was also determined. To achieve these objectives, a focus-group schedule was developed from the literature. The schedule included questions prompting participants concerning their expectations and perceptions regarding wildlife tourism experiences, as well as how likely they are to visit a national park. Following a pre-test on 10 individuals from the study population, small linguistic changes were made to the interview schedule to ensure greater comprehension of terminology used. Focus groups permit participants to interact and discuss ideas and thoughts, possibly producing a greater variety of responses due to the diversity of participants. Two moderators facilitated each of the focus groups, conducted in January 2019. The first moderator asked the majority of the questions and also facilitated the discussion. The second moderator made sure that no one dominated the discussion and that all participants were given an equal chance to contribute. Both moderators asked probing questions. To avoid the risk of 'group think', or participants not wanting to share their opinions, homogeneous groups (as set out above) were created in which participants could feel safe sharing their opinions, even if they were different from the rest of the group. At the start of the focus groups, participants were assured that there were no right or wrong answers, and they were encouraged to share their opinions on the topic. During the focus groups, the moderators challenged participants, especially to draw out differences and to tease out a diverse range of meanings on the topic (Stalmeijer, McNaughton & Van Mook, 2014). Between seven and twelve individuals participated in each focus group. Table 1 provides details on the participants. Participants' age groupings were distributed across the Millennial age group (i.e. born between 1981 and 1996) as follows: 37% were born between 1981 and 1985; 24.1% were born between 1986 and 1990; and 38.9% were born between 1991 and 1997. Considering the distribution of participants' ages and gender, most male (52.9%) and female (59.5%) participants were born between 1981 and 1989. Existing and potential visitors were included as participants. The focus groups were held in Gauteng, a main source tourism market for SANParks. The importance of this province (the smallest in terms of land area in South Africa), is evident when considering that it is responsible for 35% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), or stated differently: despite being only one of the country's nine provinces, Gauteng is the seventh largest economy on the African continent (BusinessTech, 2018). The focus group sessions were conducted in English. The duration of the sessions varied between 60 and 90 minutes. Once the focus groups concluded, each participant received a small incentive in the form of a gift voucher to thank them for their participation. The discussions were audio-recorded. The recordings were transcribed verbatim directly after each focus group. Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2015) propose the notion of 'saturation' to describe achieving a suitable sample size in qualitative studies. With six focus groups, the researchers concluded that data saturation had been reached. Prior to any focus groups being conducted the researchers obtained approval from their university's research ethics committee.

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

Family life cycle groups and participant codes	n	Gender		Population group				Visits	
		Male	Female	Black African	Coloured	Indian	White	Never overnighed in a park	Never visited a park
Single Millennial adults who are not permanently employed (SA-NE 1-9)	9	6	3	1	0	1	7	4	1
Single Millennial adults who are permanently employed (SA-PE 1-12)	12	3	9	7	0	0	5	7	4
Millennials who are living together or newly married – no children (NC 1-7)	7	2	5	3	1	0	3	2	0
Millennials who have pre-school families (children 0-6 years) (PRE 1-9)	9	2	7	2	1	0	6	2	1
Millennials who have primary school families (children 7-13 years) (PRI 1-7)	7	0	7	6	0	1	0	2	2
Black African Millennials (BAM 1-10)	10	4	6	10	0	0	0	10	3
TOTAL	54	17	37	29	2	2	21	27	11

Content analysis was used to analyse the data from the focus groups. Content analysis is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). The data analysis followed the protocol of Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). The first step was to get a general understanding by reading and re-reading the transcriptions. Second, text was divided into smaller parts, i.e. units of meaning. Next, researchers recognised differences in the underlying meaning of these units. For example, a certain unit could have a negative connotation for some participants and a positive connotation for others. Thereafter units of meaning were labelled by formulating codes and then grouping these codes into categories. Then, the differences between subgroups were noted. In step 6 quotes were identified that described the category under discussion the best. Lastly, similar categories were clustered together to determine themes.

Reliability in content analysis means that the coders involved in the analysis process use the same approaches to generate the same coding results (Krippendorff, 2010). To improve the reliability of the coding process, it is recommended that at least two coders are involved, therefore in this study, the data were analysed by a team of two coders, who were also the facilitators of the focus groups. In this study each coder encoded the same questions twice with a specific time interval, and then monitored the consistency between the two times of coding to ensure reliability (Lian & Yu, 2017). Thereafter, the two coders discussed the coding to obtain consensus (Boo & Kim, 2019).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes emerged from the data about Millennials’ expectations of wildlife experiences. The themes, with their related categories, are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Expectations of wildlife tourism experiences

Question	Theme	Categories
What are Millennials' expectations of a wildlife tourism experience, including what they would like to do, see and experience?	Wildlife	- Animals - Big five - Safety from animals - Interpretation
	Activities and facilities	- Activities - Cultural activities - Entertainment - Facilities - Maintenance and upkeep
	Responsible tourism	- Authentic and natural - Natural vs captive habitats
	Nature	- Remoteness - Scenery

4.1 Expectations of wildlife experiences: Wildlife

One of the most frequently mentioned themes was wildlife. Animals were mentioned 25 times. Participants wanted to see the animals close by, confirming the findings of previous researchers who identified proximity to wildlife as a key aspect of the wildlife tourist's zoological gaze (Curtin, 2010) and as a factor that adds to tourists' satisfaction and affects their future behavioural intentions (Lee, 2009).

Some participants (eight mentions), expected to see not only the 'usual' animals, but also the big five (lion, rhinoceros, elephant, leopard, and buffalo), which is in line with the findings of a number of authors (Arbieu, Grünewald, Martín-López, Schleuning & Böhning-Gaese, 2017; Di Minin & Moilanen, 2014) who noticed that some animals are more memorable and more attractive than others, and that seeing these animals is vital for visitor satisfaction (Di Minin et al., 2013). On the other hand, Di Minin et al. (2013) noted that experienced wildlife tourists have a much wider interest in and knowledge about all animals, and not only specific species such as the big five. Thus wanting to see the big five might be an indication of the participant's level of experience. One participant (BAM 5) said: *"I would love to go there and see animals, and I want to be guaranteed to see the big five"*. This is clearly an unrealistic expectation, as it is known that sightings of certain species cannot be guaranteed in most wildlife tourism experiences (Curtin, 2010). Interestingly, seeing the big five specifically was mostly mentioned by the Black African participants (seven times).

However, others were less keen on being close to wildlife: *"I am not an animal person, but if I am safe I would like to see them from far"* (PRI 5). Black African participants commented more frequently (twenty times) on the safety aspects of the experience than other participants (only three times), corroborating the findings of Di Minin et al. (2013), who established that individuals from diverse cultures and value systems view animals in different ways. This is consistent with Kellert (1980), who identified basic wildlife values, ranging from naturalistic to negativistic, that influence people's attitudes toward wildlife. Park management must address these misperceptions about the interactions between humans and wildlife. Most national parks in South Africa offer tourist accommodation in well-developed fenced camps that protect guests from the dangers of wildlife and species from the impacts of visitors and tourism development.

Emphasis was placed on the interpretation of the wildlife experience (twenty-five mentions), confirming that Millennials value opportunities for deepening connections with nature, learning, and reflexivity when they travel (Canavan, 2018). Participants expressed their desire to learn about the history, vegetation, and birds and animals of a specific area. They did not indicate a preferred format for the interpretation services, but mentioned talks by experts, posters, videos, and smartphone applications. It was also important for participants to expose their children to the interpretation services. In their research, Kruger, Viljoen and Saayman (2017) found that interpretation was the least important part of Gen X and Baby Boomers' wildlife tourism experience, whereas our study found it to be an important part for Millennials.

4.2 Expectations of wildlife experiences: Facilities and activities

Participants expressed their expectations of the facilities and activities provided. The expected activities were: guided tours, hiking, game drives (self-drive and facilitated), mountain biking, horse riding, rock climbing, tennis, and fishing, confirming that Millennials look for active tourist experiences (Santos et al., 2016; Leask et al., 2014), and wants a variety of activities at a destination (Caber, Albayrak & Crawford, 2020).

Unlike the generations before them (Scholtz, Kruger & Saayman, 2013; Van der Merwe & Saayman, 2008), Millennials are interested not only in game viewing activities when participating in wildlife tourism, but are also keen to engage in cultural activities (ten mentions). Some want to be spectators, whereas others would prefer to be immersed in the culture of the destination, confirming the research of Jennings et al. (2010) and Pendergast (2010). A number of participants in our focus groups stated their interest in cultural dancing as part of the entertainment offered, while others wanted to engage in other cultural activities, as expressed by this participant (BAM 3): *"We go around outside the park to see the cultural villages as well and interact with the locals"*. Black African participants mentioned cultural activities more (nine times) than others did. Wildlife tourism organisations should include opportunities for interactions between tourists and locals in their product offering to appeal to a wider market – for instance, hiring staff from the area, or those informed about local realities (Santos et al., 2016). This is important since current conservation and sustainable tourism practices support the inclusion of communities and take into account that protected areas are also defined by their cultural values (Tichaawa & Lekgau, 2020).

Opinions were mixed about the need for entertainment during a wildlife tourism experience. Some were convinced that they do not need entertainment, as this participant (NC 2) said: *"I don't expect much entertainment there, it is just for relaxation"*. Others (mentioned by nine participants) required a central meeting place where they could socialise and find entertainment. Interestingly, the central meeting place was only mentioned by males who did not have children. Perhaps the importance of a central meeting place emerged because participants understood the wildlife tourism organisation's rules about noise and respecting other visitors.

Various requirements for tourism facilities were mentioned, including the availability of 'braais' (barbecue facilities), options to self-cater or eat out, a spa, a convenience shop, double rather than single beds, equipped kitchens, and swimming pools. Regardless of the type of facility, there was agreement that it should be clean, working, and well-maintained. Participants with children commented more on the activities and

facilities that they require, whereas participants without children were mainly interested in seeing animals and being in nature. Fu, Kirillova and Lehto (2022) found that having children influences travel experiences and patterns, not only in terms of frequency of travel, but also in the nature of travel experiences. They noticed that their respondents were willing to give up egocentrism for larger purposes in family life, for example exposing children to education and history, encouraging family communication and bonding and making family memories.

4.3 Expectations of wildlife experiences: Responsible tourism

The findings show that participants are environmentally conscious, and that it is important to them that the wildlife tourism experience complies with the principles of responsible tourism. This is consistent with Kotler and Keller (2012), who claimed that Millennials have an intense concern for environmental protection that has turned them toward more ethical consumption (Bucic et al., 2012). Many (sixteen participants) mentioned that the experience should be authentic and natural, as this quote (SA-NE 8) suggests: *“You don’t want to be in nature, but hear the traffic. You want to experience that raw authenticity of nature”*. Participants preferred wildlife tourism experiences to occur in a natural habitat, and were outspoken about captive wildlife settings: *“I prefer a national park over the zoo. I don’t enjoy seeing animals in captivity”* (SA-NE 4).

4.4 Expectations of wildlife experiences: Nature

Nature was the fourth theme identified by the focus groups. One participant said: *“For me, what is important is that I need a beautiful view when I drink tea; that is the time I use for self-reflection and to marvel at the creation”* (SA-PE 2). Participants also wanted a remote wildlife tourism experience: *“The further away from anything the better, because then you can feel completely immersed in wildlife”* (SA-NE 2). For some (12 mentions), the scenery and being in nature was even more important than interacting with the wildlife: *“I am not that big into wildlife; for me, it is more about relaxing in nature and getting away from city life”* (SA-PE 3). This confirms Giachino, Truant and Bonadonna (2020) who found that Millennials are drawn to nature-based destinations specifically for the opportunity of relaxing and being immersed in nature and substantiates the findings of Grünewald, Schleuning and Böhning-Gaese (2016), that scenic, natural, and authentic landscapes contribute positively to wildlife tourism experiences.

4.5 Perceptions of South African National Parks (SANParks) as custodian of wildlife tourism experiences

Since national parks are synonymous with wildlife and offer a vital part of the wildlife tourism experience, it was important also to gather the perceptions of Millennials about SANParks as the custodian of wildlife tourism experiences in South Africa.

Table 3: Perceptions of SANParks

Question	Theme	Categories
What are Millennials' perceptions of South African National Parks as custodian of wildlife tourism experiences?	Wildlife	-Animals and wildlife -Bush and nature -Kruger National Park and other parks
	Management	- Expensive - Sustainability and credibility

The two major themes that emerged from the focus groups were related to wildlife and management (see Table 3). As expected, animals and wildlife was the most frequently mentioned category (10 mentions) under the wildlife theme, followed by bush and nature (nine mentions). As SANParks' flagship park, it is not surprising that many (nine mentions) thought of the Kruger National Park when they heard the word 'SANParks'. The second theme related to management, and participants shared both positive and negative views.

The name 'SANParks' held some credibility and promises of sustainability (nine mentions). As participant NC 5 opined: *"If I walk into a park or any destination that has the SANParks logo, for me that also adds a bit of credibility. If I see that, I know that it is going to be a well-managed destination"*. This supports Reinius and Fredman (2007), who found that the term 'national park' has a stronger impact on tourists than other protected area labels, and Eagles (2001), who stated that the term 'national park' has a significant brand identity, and is more appealing than less-known names such as 'conservation area'.

Many participants (12 mentions) suggested that the tourism experiences and accommodation on offer were beyond their financial reach: *"It is quite expensive, and for a student or someone who has just started working or anyone with a family, I think that it is too expensive"* (SA-PE 8). This confirmed Douglas, Mostert and Slabbert (2019), who found Millennials to be cost-conscious. Another misperception was that SANParks only caters to the international market, and that Millennials are not its target market: *"So when I plan a holiday there, I try and find accommodation outside the park. In my mind I know that I am not the target market, as it is for the international tourists"* (BAM 1). These findings correspond with those of Stone and Nyaupane (2016), who revealed that local residents in Botswana associate visits to national parks with international visitors, and viewed the facilities in national parks as overpriced and out of their reach. Efforts should be made to change these perceptions and to market national parks as reasonably priced holiday destinations that are within the reach of the Millennial market.

Butler and Richardson (2015) observed that many Black African South Africans were worried about being made to feel unwelcome or about facing racial conflict in national parks. Based on this result, they concluded that national parks are still seen as White leisure spaces in South Africa, despite significant organisational and political changes since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. This concern was not raised by any of the Black African participants in our research. It could be that our sample was different from that used by Butler and Richardson. Since their results did not distinguish between generations, it is difficult to say whether this might be a perception of older Black Africans in South Africa.

4.6 Likelihood of visiting a national park

Most participants indicated the likelihood of their visiting national parks in the future, contradicting the assumption of Smith and Kirby (2015) that younger generations are not interested in nature-based experiences. Most indicated that they are likely to visit specific parks, while others mentioned that they are likely to visit any or all of the 19 parks, as this participant (NC 3) remarked: “...but I would be happy to visit any of our national parks. I think it is a privilege to go to any of our national parks”. Only three participants said that they were not likely to visit any of the parks, while another three were uncertain.

One participant (SA-PE 5) mentioned that she had been to the Kruger National Park before, but it was unlikely that she would return: “...like, for Kruger, it was a novelty, especially growing up, as everyone has to go to the Kruger as a family. Once you have seen a lion and spotted the ‘big five’ then the novelty flattens off. I would rather take the money I have to spend and try another experience”. It is also true that wildlife tourism experiences do not appeal to everyone, as this participant (SA-NE 1) commented: “For me, it is very unlikely. Nature is not really my thing that I like, and I am sure there is nothing wrong with the actual parks, it is just something that you have to have a passion for”. One of the participants (SA-NE 3), who seemed uncertain whether she would go to a national park, commented: “I think that it is not very likely that I will. It is not such a novelty for me that I would spend money to see these animals, because I have seen them before, and it is not a very unique experience for me”. This confirmed Stone and Nyaupane (2016), who noticed that national parks are not as out of the ordinary for local residents as they are for international tourists.

It became evident from the comments that many participants (seventeen mentions) were largely uninformed and unaware of who SANParks is and what national parks are. Some held the perception that the 19 National Parks in South Africa all offer the same experience, and that there is no distinction between the parks. The following comments made by Black African women in the primary school children group attest to this:

“If we know what they were we could answer, we cannot answer this because we don’t know, I don’t have an idea what they are? I have never even seen an advert of any of these places or a poster, so I actually don’t have any idea of what a national park is besides animals.” (PRI 1)

“As I said before, elephants are all the same, so it does not matter in which park you are, they are the same, and that is the perception that I have. I don’t see what is going to be different in the different parks.” (PRI 7)

This lack of awareness could be attributed to the fact that half of our participants have never overnighted in a national park, while 11 participants said they have never visited a national park. In their study, Cini and Saayman (2014) discovered that Millennials who visited a national park were not even aware of the fact that they were visiting a national park. Butler and Richardson (2015) also observed a general lack of awareness and knowledge about appropriate activities at national parks among their respondents, and that this lack of knowledge was a barrier to travel to the national parks. Their respondents also reported a lack of promotion and little publicity about

national parks. The Black African South Africans who participated in our study did not share the opinion of Stone and Nyaupane (2016), who claimed that the low number of visits by local Botswana residents demonstrated that national parks were developed for Whites, are not neutral spaces, and are viewed as exclusionary in nature.

6. CONCLUSION

Frameworks that are used to manage natural resources sustainably (e.g., Hughey, Ward, Crawford, McConnell, Phillips & Washbourne, 2004) often do not consider tourists' changing perceptions of wildlife, demonstrating that, as those perceptions change, there must also be a change in how wildlife interactions are managed. It is still unclear whether Millennials' expectations and perceptions of wildlife tourism experiences differ from those of previous generations and if so, whether a change in the management of natural resources is necessary.

This study contributes to our understanding of Millennials as consumers of wildlife tourism experiences. It extends the tourism literature by investigating the expectations and perceptions of Millennials about wildlife tourism, knowledge of which is vital to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the wildlife tourism industry (Newsome et al., 2019). Unlike previous studies that have viewed Millennials as a homogeneous market, our study shows distinct differences between family life cycle groups and ethnicities. The study also responds to calls from Butler and Richardson (2015), Donaldson et al. (2016), and Flores et al. (2018) to extend our understanding of park visits by Millennials of other ethnic backgrounds. The findings reveal that the likelihood that Millennials from our focus groups would visit (or not visit) the parks was not linked to any racial perceptions, as claimed by Butler and Richardson (2015) and Stone and Nyaupane (2016), but rather to a product offer that either appeals or does not appeal to them, and to a lack of awareness of the available products. The findings of our study have managerial and practical implications for wildlife tourism management. Without understanding what will satisfy Millennials' wildlife tourism needs, unsuitable services or products may be offered that might lead to reduced visitor satisfaction and have negative effects on the natural environment.

Some of the findings suggest that Millennials lack knowledge and awareness of national parks. This lack of knowledge could lead to a lack of interest in engaging in nature-based experiences (Cini & Passafaro, 2019). Education is necessary to cultivate a love for nature and wildlife that has positive impacts on species conservation. Given the importance of securing societal support among future generations for the protection of wildlife (Weiler, Moore & Moyle, 2013), management could take a number of actions to instil deeper connections with nature beyond hedonistic experiences. Cini and Saayman (2014) propose educational programmes and hands-on conservation activities as an effective way to educate and attract this influential market. Kline et al. (2020) further note Millennial's educational preferences for engaging and interactive activities. Millennials (and all visitors) should be educated about what responsible tourism is – and what it is not. Through interpretive experiences, Millennials and their children could also be informed of the importance of conservation efforts.

More needs to be done to increase the awareness of SANParks' mandate among this cohort. Park management should focus on developing more relevant and engaging

promotional campaigns to attract the diverse Millennial subgroups. According to Douglas et al. (2019: 150) Millennials regard social media as the most popular information channel to use, and also the most effective in persuading them to visit a destination. When using social media, they want to see images of “everyday people enjoying themselves”. From current marketing messages, they perceive national parks as a destination for older people (Douglas et al., 2019). Furthermore, Kaihatu et al. (2020) state that Millennials regard information from their peers – those that they see as similar to themselves as most credible and trustworthy. They therefore suggest that managers should try to work with social media influencers, by inviting them to visit their destination, and in return these influencers can share their experiences regarding education, nature, culture and ethics on their social media platforms. Furthermore, Millennials can also be incentivised to share their own experiences on social media. Croy, Moyle and Moyle (2020) propose that, for the general public to hold positive perceptions of the benefits of parks, multiple visits must be encouraged. Since Douglas et al. (2019) found that Millennials are cost-conscious and that they place importance on discounts, specials, and free items when deciding on a holiday destination, park management should engage in various marketing and promotional efforts to encourage multiple visits by Millennials.

Participants’ most frequently mentioned expectation of a wildlife tourism experience is the opportunity to see wildlife, and especially the big five. Conserving habitat and protecting species is thus vital to the sustainability of the industry. However, since sightings of wildlife can be sporadic and unpredictable, it might be useful for wildlife tourism management to de-emphasise big five sightings and to focus marketing on more readily viewable species (Newsome et al., 2019).

Our findings confirm those of Torres (2015) that the Millennials group is not homogeneous; so park management should endeavour to meet their varied expectations. However, it should be noted that many of the national parks in South Africa already offer a variety of tourism accommodation options, including camping, self-catering units, and even hotel stays. Most of the camps in these national parks have amenities such as convenience shops, restaurants, and swimming pools, thus apparently addressing the needs of Millennials. Wildlife tourism organisations should not need to change their product completely to appeal to this market. Our findings support the suggestions of Grünewald et al. (2016) that management should aim to preserve natural habitats and structures to improve the wildlife experience of Millennial tourists instead of further developing artificial infrastructure and features. Given the differences between participants of different family life cycle stages and ethnicities, park management should also emphasise the uniqueness of each of their 19 parks in marketing material, to appeal to a greater audience.

While our findings cannot be assumed to represent the expectations and perceptions of all Millennials, whether in South Africa or worldwide, they do contribute to our understanding of Millennials as consumers of wildlife tourism experiences. Besides, the aim of our research was not to generalise the findings to the wider population of Millennials, but rather to provide in-depth explanations and meanings (Carminati, 2018). Our study can also be used to inform future quantitative studies about Millennials as tourists. Such studies are essential to ensure that wildlife tourism programmes continue to meet the expectations of changing markets. Wildlife tourism destinations will continue to come under pressure to increase their visitor numbers

and accommodate more visitors, since this is now a central part of their performance management, therefore, understanding this younger generation may be a key to future visitor management.

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