



Understanding Tourist Responsibility and Moral Reasoning in Small Island Ecotourism

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ABSTRACT: Small islands are frequently promoted as ecotourism destinations due to their ecological sensitivity and bounded environments, yet little is known about how tourists interpret and negotiate ecological responsibility in these contexts. This qualitative study explores how tourists make sense of ecological responsibility during ecotourism experiences on small islands in Eastern Indonesia. Drawing on in depth interviews with twenty six foreign tourists across multiple island destinations, the study examines moments of environmental awareness, tensions between care and convenience, moral justifications, and perceptions of acceptable ecological impact. The findings show that ecological responsibility is not enacted as a fixed commitment but as a situational and negotiated process shaped by emotional responses, perceived constraints, and responsibility attribution. Tourists often engage in selective and symbolic sustainability practices that allow them to reconcile environmental concern with leisure expectations. By conceptualizing ecological responsibility as moral negotiation, this study contributes to sustainable tourism and ecotourism literature by offering a context sensitive understanding of how sustainability is interpreted and practiced in small island settings. The findings provide insights for designing ecotourism strategies that align ethical responsibility with visitor experience.

Keywords: ecotourism, small islands, ecological responsibility, moral negotiation, sustainable tourism

INTRODUCTION

Small islands have emerged as prominent sites for ecotourism development due to their ecological fragility, spatial boundedness, and strong reliance on marine and coastal ecosystems (Nurhasanah & Van Den Broeck, 2022). In Eastern Indonesia, small islands across Lombok, Sumbawa, and East Nusa Tenggara are increasingly positioned as ecotourism destinations that promise nature based experiences while emphasizing conservation and environmental stewardship (Elbadriati & Larasati, 2025; Yasin et al., 2025). At the same time, these islands face persistent sustainability challenges related to waste management, freshwater scarcity, coral reef degradation, and limited governance capacity. As tourism expands, small islands become spaces where the tension between ecological protection and tourism consumption is especially visible, placing sustainability concerns at the center of visitor experience.

Within these ecotourism contexts, tourists play a critical role in shaping ecological outcomes. Visiting small islands often exposes tourists to tangible signs of environmental vulnerability, such as damaged reefs, plastic pollution, or infrastructure limitations, which can provoke moral reflection about responsibility and



care for the environment (Cristiano et al., 2020). However, tourism experiences are also shaped by desires for convenience, comfort, and enjoyment, creating contradictions between ecological awareness and actual practice (Väisänen et al., 2023). These tensions highlight that ecological responsibility in ecotourism cannot be understood solely as compliance with rules or adoption of pro environmental behaviors, but must also be examined as a moral and interpretive process situated within specific contexts.

Existing research on ecotourism and sustainable tourism has largely relied on quantitative approaches that examine attitudes, intentions, and self-reported behaviors (Luekveerawattana, 2024; Schönherr & Pikkemaat, 2024). While this literature has advanced understanding of factors associated with pro environmental conduct, it often treats ecological responsibility as an individual attribute or outcome variable (Flecke et al., 2024). Such approaches offer limited insight into how tourists interpret responsibility, justify their actions, or negotiate ethical dilemmas when confronted with real world trade offs in fragile island environments. Qualitative studies that explore moral reasoning, responsibility attribution, and ethical tension from the tourist perspective remain relatively scarce, particularly in small island contexts in the Global South where ecological limits and governance constraints are most pronounced.

Recent scholarship has increasingly called for a shift toward more interpretive and ethically grounded analyses of sustainable tourism. Scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding sustainability as a socially embedded and emotionally mediated process rather than a purely rational choice, highlighting the roles of moral emotion, responsibility shifting, and situational constraint in shaping tourist behavior (Hu et al., 2026; K. H. Nguyen & Tran, 2025). At the same time, research on small island tourism has underscored that ecological limits are not only biophysical but also socially constructed through tourist perceptions and experiences, suggesting the need for deeper qualitative engagement with visitor sensemaking processes (Mandić et al., 2025; Van Bekkum et al., 2026).

Responding to these gaps, the purpose of this study is to explore how tourists negotiate ecological responsibility when engaging in ecotourism on small islands in Eastern Indonesia. Rather than assessing whether tourists behave sustainably, the study focuses on how responsibility is constructed, limited, deferred, or shared through narratives and moral reasoning. By examining how tourists balance care for fragile environments with convenience and enjoyment, the study seeks to illuminate the ethical tensions embedded in small island ecotourism experiences.

This study contributes to the sustainable tourism literature in several ways. Theoretically, it advances understanding of ecological responsibility by conceptualizing it as a moral negotiation process shaped by context, emotion, and situational constraint. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry for capturing ethical complexity that is often overlooked in survey based research. Empirically, it enriches knowledge of small island ecotourism in Eastern Indonesia, a region that remains underrepresented in in depth qualitative studies despite its growing importance in global tourism. From a practical perspective, the findings offer insights for destination managers and policymakers by revealing how tourists perceive responsibility and where sustainability expectations become fragmented, informing more realistic and context sensitive ecotourism strategies for small island destinations.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Ecotourism and Small Island Contexts

Ecotourism has long been promoted as a development pathway that reconciles environmental conservation with economic benefits, particularly in ecologically sensitive destinations (Garcia et al., 2019). Small islands are frequently positioned as ideal settings for ecotourism due to their high biodiversity, distinctive cultures, and clear ecological boundaries. However, research increasingly recognizes that small islands face structural vulnerabilities that complicate ecotourism implementation, including limited resource capacity, dependence on external supply chains, and constrained governance systems. These conditions intensify the environmental impacts of tourism and heighten the visibility of ecological degradation, making sustainability challenges more immediate and experiential for visitors.

Recent studies emphasize that small island ecotourism cannot be understood solely through environmental indicators or policy frameworks. Instead, it must be situated within social and experiential dimensions that shape how sustainability is perceived and enacted by tourists. Adrianto et al. (2021) argue that ecological limits on small islands are both biophysical and socially interpreted, meaning that tourist perceptions and responses play a crucial role in determining sustainability outcomes. Similarly, Díaz-Pérez et al. (2025) highlight that small island tourism systems are characterized by asymmetries between

environmental vulnerability and tourism demand, creating contexts in which ethical considerations become central to visitor experience.

Despite this recognition, much of the literature continues to frame ecotourism in small islands normatively, focusing on best practices, certification schemes, or destination level governance. Less attention has been given to how tourists themselves understand and respond to ecological fragility during their visits. This gap is particularly salient in island contexts where tourists encounter visible trade-offs between conservation goals and tourism infrastructure, prompting reflection on responsibility and care.

Ecological Responsibility in Sustainable Tourism

Ecological responsibility is a core concept in sustainable tourism research and is commonly examined through models of pro environmental behavior, environmental attitudes, and behavioral intention (Li et al., 2023). Drawing from theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and Value Belief Norm theory (Stern et al., 1999), this body of work has identified factors that influence tourists' willingness to act sustainably, including environmental concern, perceived behavioral control, and social norms. While these approaches have generated robust empirical findings, they tend to conceptualize responsibility as an individual disposition or measurable outcome.

Recent critiques argue that such approaches oversimplify the ethical complexity of sustainability in tourism contexts. Zientara et al. (2024) note that tourists often operate within constrained environments where sustainable choices are not always accessible, affordable, or clearly defined. As a result, responsibility is frequently negotiated rather than straightforwardly enacted. Toldos et al. (2026) further emphasize that sustainability decisions are shaped by emotional responses, situational pressures, and moral reasoning processes that are difficult to capture through survey based methods.

Qualitative research has begun to highlight that tourists may reinterpret responsibility in ways that allow them to reconcile ecological concern with leisure expectations. This includes practices such as delegating responsibility to destinations or operators, engaging in symbolic sustainability actions, or temporally limiting responsibility to specific moments of the trip. However, these insights remain fragmented and are rarely examined explicitly within small island ecotourism contexts, where ecological limits are more apparent and moral tensions may be intensified.

Moral Negotiation and Ethical Tensions in Ecotourism

Moral negotiation refers to the processes through which individuals interpret, justify, and manage ethical obligations in contexts characterized by competing values (Nguyen et al., 2025). In tourism studies, this concept has been used to explain how travelers navigate tensions between enjoyment and responsibility, particularly in relation to environmental and social impacts. Rather than acting as purely rational decision makers, tourists engage in moral reasoning that allows them to balance care for destinations with personal desires for relaxation, convenience, and authenticity.

Emerging qualitative research suggests that ecotourism contexts are especially fertile grounds for moral negotiation because they foreground ethical expectations while simultaneously offering consumption oriented experiences (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2021). Tourists may experience moral discomfort when confronted with environmental degradation, yet resolve this discomfort through narratives that normalize harm, emphasize limited individual impact, or highlight compensatory actions. Such processes have been linked to concepts such as moral licensing, responsibility shifting, and ethical distancing.

In small island settings, these moral negotiations are likely to be intensified due to the visibility of ecological fragility and the perceived immediacy of tourism impacts. Yet, few studies have systematically explored how tourists articulate and negotiate ecological responsibility in these contexts. Most existing work focuses on resident perspectives, governance challenges, or policy effectiveness, leaving the tourist moral experience underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing ecotourism theory beyond prescriptive frameworks and toward a deeper understanding of how sustainability is lived and contested in practice.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how tourists negotiate ecological responsibility in small island ecotourism contexts in Eastern Indonesia. A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to understand moral reasoning, responsibility attribution, and ethical tension as lived and

interpreted experiences rather than as measurable behavioral outcomes. This design is appropriate for examining complex sustainability issues that are embedded in context, emotion, and situational constraint.

The study was conducted across multiple small island ecotourism destinations in Eastern Indonesia, including islands within Lombok, Sumbawa, and East Nusa Tenggara. These islands share characteristics of ecological fragility, limited infrastructure capacity, and strong reliance on marine based tourism, making them suitable contexts for examining ecological responsibility in practice.

Informants were foreign tourists who were visiting small islands for leisure purposes and who self-identified their trip as involving nature based or ecotourism related activities. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that informants had direct and recent experience of small island environments and were able to reflect on sustainability related decisions during their visit. Inclusion criteria required that informants were non Indonesian nationals, stayed on a small island for at least one night, and participated in activities that involved interaction with natural environments such as beaches, reefs, or coastal landscapes.

Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no substantively new insights related to ecological responsibility and moral negotiation emerged from additional interviews. Saturation was achieved after twenty six interviews.

Data were collected through in depth semi structured interviews conducted between June and August 2025. Interviews were conducted in English and took place in informal settings such as accommodation common areas, beaches, or quiet cafes to encourage open reflection. Each interview lasted between forty five and seventy minutes.

The interview guide was designed to elicit narratives of responsibility, care, and ethical tension rather than direct evaluations of sustainable behavior. Key prompts invited informants to describe moments when they became aware of environmental fragility, situations where convenience conflicted with ecological concern, and how they justified or reflected on their decisions. Follow up questions probed how responsibility was attributed among tourists, operators, local communities, and destinations.

All interviews were audio recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. To protect anonymity, no real names were recorded and each informant was assigned a unique code.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following an iterative and inductive process. Transcripts were first read multiple times to achieve familiarization with the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture expressions of responsibility, justification, emotional response, and ethical tension. These codes were progressively refined and grouped into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns of moral negotiation across informants.

Throughout the analysis, particular attention was paid to how informants framed ecological responsibility temporally, spatially, and relationally, for example whether responsibility was limited to specific activities, shifted to other actors, or justified through compensatory reasoning. Analytical memos were used to document reflexive insights and emerging interpretations, supporting transparency and rigor in the analytical process.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement in the field and the use of rich, thick description in data analysis. An audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development was maintained to enhance dependability. Reflexivity was addressed through continuous reflection on the researcher's positionality and assumptions regarding sustainability and tourism. Table 1 presents an overview of the informants included in the study. Informant codes are used consistently in the Results section to attribute quotations.

Table 1. Informant Characteristics

Code	Nationality	Island	Length of Stay	Activities
T01	German	Lombok	3 nights	Snorkeling, beach tourism
T02	Australian	Lombok	2 nights	Diving, island exploration
T03	French	East Nusa Tenggara	4 nights	Hiking, nature photography
T04	Dutch	Sumbawa	3 nights	Surfing, coastal touring
T05	British	Lombok	1 night	Beach leisure
T06	Canadian	East Nusa Tenggara	5 nights	Wildlife observation
T07	Swedish	Lombok	2 nights	Snorkeling
T08	Italian	Sumbawa	3 nights	Cultural and nature tourism

T09	Spanish	Lombok	2 nights	Beach activities
T10	American	East Nusa Tenggara	6 nights	Ecotourism excursions
T11	New Zealander	Lombok	3 nights	Diving
T12	Japanese	East Nusa Tenggara	4 nights	Nature based touring
T13	Belgian	Sumbawa	2 nights	Surfing
T14	Swiss	Lombok	3 nights	Island exploration
T15	Irish	Lombok	2 nights	Beach leisure
T16	Austrian	East Nusa Tenggara	5 nights	Wildlife and nature tourism
T17	Danish	Lombok	1 night	Beach tourism
T18	American	Sumbawa	3 nights	Surfing
T19	Finnish	East Nusa Tenggara	4 nights	Hiking
T20	French	Lombok	2 nights	Snorkeling
T21	Australian	East Nusa Tenggara	6 nights	Ecotourism tours
T22	German	Sumbawa	3 nights	Coastal touring
T23	British	Lombok	2 nights	Diving
T24	Canadian	East Nusa Tenggara	4 nights	Nature photography
T25	Norwegian	Lombok	3 nights	Island leisure
T26	Italian	Sumbawa	2 nights	Cultural tourism

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. All informants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary and informants were free to withdraw at any stage of the interview process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Encountering Ecological Fragility on Small Islands

Tourists' awareness of ecological fragility on small islands often emerged through direct sensory encounters rather than abstract understanding of sustainability principles. Initial recognition was commonly triggered by visible environmental conditions that contrasted with expectations of pristine island environments. Informants frequently described noticing coral damage during snorkeling or diving activities, accumulations of plastic waste along beaches, and signs of infrastructure strain such as limited freshwater availability or informal waste disposal sites. These encounters functioned as moments of realization in which the vulnerability of small island ecosystems became tangible and immediate.

Several informants described coral reefs as a key site of recognition. One visitor to East Nusa Tenggara reflected on how damaged coral altered their perception of the destination, stating, *"I expected the reef to be untouched, but when you see broken coral so close to shore, it makes you realize how fragile everything is here"* (T03). Similarly, a younger informant visiting Lombok noted that reef degradation was unexpected given the island's ecotourism image, explaining, *"You come here thinking it is all natural and protected, but then you see parts of the reef that are clearly stressed or damaged"* (T07). These observations were not framed as technical assessments but as experiential moments that prompted reflection on environmental vulnerability.

Waste accumulation was another prominent trigger of ecological awareness. Informants described plastic waste as particularly confronting because of its visibility and perceived incompatibility with small island environments. A visitor to East Nusa Tenggara recounted feeling unsettled by the presence of waste in areas marketed as remote and natural, noting, *"Seeing plastic on such a small island feels different. It feels heavier, like there is nowhere for it to go"* (T16). This sense of spatial boundedness intensified awareness of ecological limits, as tourists perceived that environmental pressures were concentrated rather than dispersed.

Emotional reactions to these encounters varied but commonly included surprise, discomfort, and concern. Some informants expressed empathy toward local communities who must manage environmental pressures with limited resources. Others described a sense of unease that disrupted the expected leisure experience. Importantly, these emotional responses were often described as spontaneous and unplanned, arising from everyday activities such as walking along the beach or participating in water based tourism rather than from formal environmental information or interpretation.

Comparisons with other destinations frequently surfaced implicitly in informants' narratives. Tourists drew on prior travel experiences to frame their recognition of fragility, often contrasting small islands with

larger or more developed destinations. These comparisons were not always articulated explicitly as evaluations but served as cognitive reference points that shaped perception. For example, some informants suggested that environmental damage felt more visible and consequential on small islands because of their scale and isolation. As one informant noted, *“On a small island, everything feels closer. If something is wrong environmentally, you notice it immediately”* (T03).

Overall, encounters with ecological fragility represented an early and formative stage in tourists’ engagement with sustainability on small islands. These moments of recognition did not necessarily lead to immediate judgments or behavioral change, but they established a context in which ecological responsibility became salient. By grounding awareness in lived experience rather than abstract principles, these encounters set the stage for subsequent moral negotiation explored in the following sections.

Care Versus Convenience in Ecotourism Practices

Following initial encounters with ecological fragility, tourists described a series of situations in which concern for the environment came into tension with practical considerations and leisure expectations. Rather than presenting sustainability as a clear guide for action, informants portrayed ecotourism practices as shaped by everyday trade-offs between care for fragile environments and the desire for comfort, efficiency, and enjoyment. These tensions were most visible in routine decisions related to accommodation, transport, food consumption, and participation in marine activities.

Many informants articulated a strong awareness of ecological responsibility while simultaneously acknowledging limits to what they were willing or able to do during their stay. For example, one tourist visiting Lombok explained that although they were conscious of water scarcity, their behavior did not always align with this awareness, stating, *“I know water is limited here, but after a long day in the sun, it is hard not to take a long shower. You tell yourself it is just once”* (T05). This narrative illustrates how care for the environment was present but moderated by immediate bodily needs and expectations of comfort.

Time pressure and the short duration of island visits further intensified these trade-offs. Several informants described prioritizing convenience due to limited time, particularly when engaging in island hopping itineraries. A visitor to Sumbawa reflected on transport choices by noting, *“You know the boats are not great for the environment, but when you only have a few days, you choose the fastest option without thinking too much”* (T18). In such cases, ecological consideration was acknowledged but temporarily suspended in favor of maximizing the travel experience.

Participation in marine tourism activities also revealed tensions between care and enjoyment. Snorkeling and diving were widely described as central motivations for visiting small islands, yet informants expressed uncertainty about how to balance these activities with reef protection. One diver explained, *“You try not to touch anything and you follow the rules, but at the same time you are there to enjoy the reef. It feels like you are always negotiating how careful is careful enough”* (T11). This sense of ongoing negotiation suggests that responsibility was experienced as situational and flexible rather than fixed.

Importantly, informants rarely framed these compromises as outright neglect of environmental concern. Instead, they described them as reasonable adjustments within the context of a holiday. Care for the environment was often positioned as one value among many, rather than as an overriding principle. As one tourist summarized, *“You want to be respectful, but you are also on vacation. There is always a balance you make, even if you are not fully comfortable with it”* (T07).

Across accounts, care versus convenience emerged not as a binary choice but as a dynamic process shaped by situational constraints, emotional states, and expectations of tourism consumption. These narratives indicate that ecological responsibility in small island ecotourism is frequently enacted through compromise, setting the conditions for subsequent moral justification and responsibility framing explored in the next section.

Moral Justifications and Responsibility Framing

As tourists navigated tensions between care and convenience, they frequently engaged in moral justifications that helped them manage discomfort associated with environmentally consequential choices. Rather than denying awareness of ecological impacts, informants commonly reframed responsibility in ways that rendered their actions acceptable within the context of a short term leisure experience. These justifications reveal how ecological responsibility was interpreted as shared, conditional, and situational rather than absolute.

One prevalent pattern involved shifting responsibility to external factors such as tourism operators, local authorities, or destination managers. Informants often expressed the view that while individual behavior mattered, structural conditions ultimately determined environmental outcomes. A visitor to East Nusa Tenggara articulated this perspective by stating, “*I try to be careful, but in the end it is up to the operators and the government to manage this properly. They know the situation better than tourists do*” (T10). This framing allowed tourists to maintain a sense of moral awareness while reducing personal accountability for broader environmental impacts.

Temporal limitation of responsibility also emerged as a common justification. Several informants suggested that the brevity of their stay reduced their individual impact and, by extension, their moral obligation. One tourist explained, “*I am only here for a couple of days, so whatever I do will not really change much. It feels different if you stay longer*” (T02). This narrative positions responsibility as proportional to duration, implicitly legitimizing less stringent ecological consideration during short visits.

Compensatory reasoning further shaped how responsibility was framed. Informants described offsetting environmentally harmful actions through alternative behaviors that were perceived as positive or supportive. For instance, some emphasized choosing locally owned accommodations, participating in community based tours, or purchasing local products as ways to balance their overall impact. As one informant noted, “*I might not be perfect environmentally, but I support local businesses, and that makes me feel like I am contributing in another way*” (T21). Such narratives suggest that responsibility was understood holistically, encompassing social and economic dimensions alongside environmental concern.

These moral justifications did not necessarily eliminate ethical tension. Instead, they functioned as narrative strategies that allowed tourists to reconcile competing values within the ecotourism experience. Responsibility was rarely rejected outright. Rather, it was reframed to fit the perceived limits of individual agency and the practical realities of small island tourism. In doing so, tourists constructed a moral logic in which care for the environment coexisted with acceptance of compromise.

Overall, moral justifications and responsibility framing played a central role in shaping how tourists made sense of their ecological impact on small islands. These processes illustrate that ecological responsibility in ecotourism is not simply a matter of awareness or intention, but an ongoing negotiation shaped by context, perceived agency, and ethical reasoning.

Selective Responsibility and Symbolic Sustainability

Beyond broad moral justifications, tourists often described enacting ecological responsibility in selective and symbolic ways. Rather than pursuing comprehensive behavioral change, informants tended to focus on specific actions that were visible, manageable, and socially recognizable as sustainable. These selective practices allowed tourists to maintain a sense of ethical engagement while minimizing disruption to their overall travel experience.

Many informants emphasized easily observable behaviors such as avoiding plastic straws, using refillable water bottles, or participating in beach clean ups when available. These actions were frequently described as meaningful markers of responsibility, even when informants acknowledged that they represented only a small portion of their overall environmental footprint. One visitor to Sumbawa explained, “*I always use my own bottle and avoid plastic where I can. It might not solve everything, but at least it feels like I am doing something*” (T08). Such statements illustrate how symbolic actions served as moral reassurance rather than comprehensive solutions.

In contrast, practices that required greater effort, discomfort, or inconvenience were more commonly avoided or justified as impractical. Informants spoke about difficulties in consistently reducing water use, declining motorized transport, or refusing certain marine activities. A tourist visiting Lombok reflected on this selectivity by noting, “*You pick the things that are easy to control. Some things are just part of being here, and you let those go*” (T14). This selective approach suggests that responsibility was strategically bounded according to perceived feasibility and personal thresholds.

Social visibility also played a role in shaping symbolic sustainability. Informants indicated that actions observed by others, such as using eco labeled products or following posted environmental rules, carried greater moral weight than less visible behaviors. One informant remarked, “*When there are signs or people watching, you are more careful. It makes you feel accountable, even if you are not sure it really changes much*” (T25). This highlights how responsibility was partially performed in relation to social cues and expectations within the destination.

Selective responsibility did not necessarily reflect indifference toward ecological issues. Instead, it represented a pragmatic adaptation to the constraints of tourism contexts. By focusing on symbolic actions, tourists were able to express environmental concern while maintaining the pleasures and conveniences associated with small island travel. However, this selectivity also revealed the limits of individual level responsibility in addressing broader sustainability challenges.

Overall, symbolic sustainability functioned as a key mechanism through which tourists negotiated ecological responsibility. These practices enabled tourists to align their self-identity with ecotourism ideals without fully confronting the structural and behavioral changes that comprehensive sustainability would require.

Negotiating Limits and Acceptable Impact

As tourists reflected on their experiences, many began to articulate implicit boundaries regarding what they considered acceptable environmental impact in small island ecotourism contexts. Rather than rejecting the idea of limits, informants often engaged in nuanced evaluations of where ecological pressure became excessive and when regulation or restriction was perceived as legitimate. These reflections revealed that acceptance of sustainability measures was closely tied to perceptions of fairness, transparency, and proportionality.

Informants commonly acknowledged that small islands have limited capacity to absorb tourism impacts, particularly in relation to waste, freshwater use, and reef ecosystems. Several expressed the view that some form of regulation was necessary to protect fragile environments. A visitor to East Nusa Tenggara noted, *“It is clear that these islands cannot handle unlimited tourism. At some point, there have to be rules, otherwise everything will deteriorate”* (T19). Such statements indicate a general recognition of ecological limits, even among tourists who had previously described compromises in their own behavior.

However, acceptance of limits was often conditional. Informants distinguished between regulations that were perceived as reasonable and those seen as restrictive or poorly justified. For example, restrictions on reef access or waste management were more readily accepted when their purpose was clearly communicated. One tourist explained, *“If they explain why something is restricted, it makes sense. You feel like you are part of protecting the place rather than being controlled”* (T04). In contrast, rules that appeared arbitrary or inconsistently enforced generated frustration and resistance.

Fairness emerged as a central criterion in evaluating acceptable impact. Informants frequently questioned whether responsibility was distributed equitably among tourists, businesses, and authorities. A visitor to Sumbawa reflected on this issue by stating, *“I am willing to follow rules, but only if everyone is held to the same standard. It feels unfair if tourists are blamed while big operators continue as usual”* (T13). This perspective highlights how support for limits depended not only on ecological concern but also on perceptions of justice and shared responsibility.

Some informants also expressed willingness to adjust their behavior if limits were framed as enhancing the quality of the experience rather than diminishing it. For instance, crowd controls or zoning measures were sometimes viewed positively when they were associated with preserving tranquility or protecting natural features. As one informant observed, *“If limits mean fewer people and a better experience, then it actually benefits everyone, including the environment”* (T19).

Overall, tourists’ negotiation of limits reveals that ecological responsibility in small island ecotourism extends beyond individual action to include expectations of governance and collective regulation. Acceptance of sustainability measures was not unconditional but shaped by how limits were communicated, enforced, and justified. These findings underscore that ecological responsibility is embedded within broader moral judgments about fairness, legitimacy, and acceptable impact, reinforcing the view of sustainability as a negotiated social process.

Discussion

This study explored how tourists negotiate ecological responsibility in small island ecotourism contexts in Eastern Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that ecological responsibility is not experienced as a stable personal attribute or a linear determinant of behavior, but rather as a dynamic and situational process shaped by lived encounters, emotional responses, and contextual constraints. This supports recent calls within sustainable tourism scholarship to move beyond attitude-behavior models and toward more interpretive, ethically grounded analyses of sustainability practices (Pegatariana et al., 2025; Sulfiana, 2025).

The findings show that tourists' encounters with visible ecological fragility, such as coral degradation and waste accumulation, often function as moments of moral awakening rather than triggers of immediate behavioral change. This aligns with [Donaire et al. \(2024\)](#), who argue that ecological limits in small island tourism are not only biophysical realities but also socially and experientially constructed through visitor perception. In this study, recognition of fragility heightened ethical awareness but simultaneously revealed the limits of individual agency, reinforcing the idea that sustainability awareness alone is insufficient to resolve moral tension ([Donaire et al., 2024](#)).

The tension between care and convenience identified in this study resonates strongly with research emphasizing situational constraint in sustainable tourism contexts. [Boermans et al. \(2024\)](#) note that tourists frequently operate within infrastructures that restrict sustainable choice, particularly in remote or resource constrained destinations. The present findings extend this argument by demonstrating how tourists actively interpret such constraints as moral boundaries, recalibrating responsibility to accommodate bodily needs, time pressure, and expectations of leisure. This supports the view that sustainability in tourism is embedded within everyday practices and emotional states rather than governed by purely rational decision making ([Manosuthi et al., 2026](#)).

A central contribution of this study lies in its analysis of moral justifications and responsibility framing. Tourists routinely engaged in responsibility shifting, temporal limitation, and compensatory reasoning to manage ethical discomfort. These processes mirror patterns identified in qualitative research on moral disengagement and ethical self-regulation in tourism consumption ([Lee & Park, 2025](#); [Wu et al., 2025](#)). By situating these mechanisms within small island ecotourism, the study demonstrates how spatial boundedness and environmental visibility intensify moral reasoning while simultaneously encouraging diffusion of responsibility across actors such as operators and authorities.

The emergence of selective responsibility and symbolic sustainability further extends ecotourism theory. Rather than pursuing comprehensive behavioral change, tourists emphasized visible and socially legible practices that affirmed an environmentally responsible self-identity. This finding aligns with work on symbolic environmentalism and green signaling, which suggests that visible sustainability actions often function as moral reassurance rather than substantive transformation ([Grund et al., 2024](#); [Moser, 2024](#)). In small island contexts, where ecological harm is difficult to avoid entirely, symbolic sustainability allows tourists to reconcile ecotourism ideals with consumption oriented practices.

Negotiations surrounding acceptable impact and visitor limits highlight the relational nature of ecological responsibility. Tourists largely accepted the necessity of regulation in fragile island environments but conditioned their support on fairness, transparency, and shared responsibility. This echoes governance oriented tourism research emphasizing legitimacy and procedural justice as prerequisites for sustainability policy acceptance ([Estévez et al., 2021](#); [Gao et al., 2025](#)). Importantly, tourists were more supportive of limits when such measures were framed as enhancing environmental quality and visitor experience, reinforcing arguments that sustainability interventions gain traction when aligned with experiential value rather than moral obligation alone ([De Costa et al., 2025](#)).

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to ecotourism and sustainable tourism literature by conceptualizing ecological responsibility as a process of moral negotiation rather than a behavioral endpoint. This responds directly to critiques of dominant pro environmental behavior models, which often overlook ethical reasoning, emotional ambivalence, and responsibility attribution ([Li et al., 2023](#)). By integrating moral negotiation into small island ecotourism research, the study advances a more context sensitive and ethically nuanced framework for understanding sustainability in practice.

The study also contributes to small island tourism scholarship by demonstrating how ecological fragility intensifies ethical reflection without necessarily resolving contradiction. Small islands function as moral landscapes where sustainability is highly visible but responsibility remains fragmented across spatial and institutional scales. This challenges normative assumptions that ecotourism settings inherently foster sustainable conduct and supports calls for more critical and grounded analyses of ecotourism practice in the Global South ([Ramaano, 2025](#)).

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that ecotourism strategies in small island destinations should move beyond individual behavior messaging toward more structurally supportive and ethically coherent interventions. Tourists expressed willingness to engage with sustainability but required credible governance, clear communication, and feasible alternatives. This supports arguments that sustainability responsibility should be framed as collective rather than individualized to reduce moral disengagement and responsibility shifting (Torelli, 2021).

The prominence of symbolic sustainability highlights the need to align visible practices with substantive environmental outcomes. While symbolic actions can reinforce awareness, overreliance on them risks normalizing superficial sustainability. Transparent communication about ecological limits and the rationale behind regulations can strengthen legitimacy and foster deeper engagement with sustainability goals.

Finally, framing sustainability measures as enhancing visitor experience rather than restricting enjoyment may increase acceptance of limits in small island ecotourism. By linking ecological protection to experiential quality, destination managers can align moral responsibility with tourists' own values and expectations, fostering more sustainable forms of engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how tourists negotiate ecological responsibility in small island ecotourism contexts in Eastern Indonesia using a qualitative approach. The findings demonstrate that ecological responsibility is not experienced as a stable or uniform commitment, but rather as a situational and interpretive process shaped by lived encounters with environmental fragility, emotional responses, and practical constraints. Tourists became aware of ecological vulnerability through direct sensory experiences, yet this awareness did not automatically translate into consistent sustainable practices. Instead, responsibility was continuously negotiated through compromise, moral justification, and selective engagement.

By conceptualizing ecological responsibility as moral negotiation, this study advances ecotourism scholarship beyond dominant attitude behavior frameworks. The findings reveal that tourists actively interpret, limit, and redistribute responsibility in ways that allow them to reconcile environmental concern with leisure expectations. Small islands emerge as moral landscapes in which ecological limits are highly visible, yet responsibility remains fragmented across individuals, operators, and governing institutions. This highlights the importance of understanding sustainability not only as a technical or managerial challenge but also as an ethical and experiential phenomenon.

The study makes several contributions to sustainable tourism research. Theoretically, it enriches understanding of ecological responsibility by foregrounding moral reasoning, responsibility attribution, and situational constraint. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry for capturing ethical tensions and interpretive processes that are often overlooked in survey based research. Empirically, it provides in depth insight into small island ecotourism in Eastern Indonesia, a region that remains underrepresented in qualitative tourism scholarship despite its growing prominence.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses exclusively on tourist perspectives and does not incorporate the views of local residents, tourism operators, or policymakers, whose interpretations of responsibility may differ. Second, the qualitative design prioritizes depth over breadth, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Third, interviews were conducted in English, which may have shaped the narratives produced and constrained the expression of more nuanced ethical reflection among some informants.

Future research could extend this work in several directions. Comparative qualitative studies involving multiple stakeholder groups could provide a more holistic understanding of how ecological responsibility is negotiated across tourism systems. Longitudinal research could examine how moral reasoning evolves over time or across repeated visits to small island destinations. Future studies may also integrate qualitative insights with quantitative approaches to explore how patterns of moral negotiation relate to observable behavioral outcomes. Finally, research across different cultural and institutional contexts would further refine understanding of how ecological responsibility in ecotourism is shaped by place specific norms and governance arrangements.

Overall, this study underscores that fostering sustainability in small island ecotourism requires attention not only to environmental management and regulation but also to the moral and interpretive processes

through which tourists make sense of responsibility. Recognizing and engaging with these processes is essential for developing ecotourism strategies that are both ethically grounded and practically effective.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with the conduct of this research, the analysis of the data or the preparation of this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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