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Trouble in Paradise: Does Nature Worship Harm the Environment?

Consumers nurture romantic ideas of nature by engaging in practices that are often harmful to the environment, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#). Could eco-friendly products provide a solution?

“Nature is often considered the ideal place to escape from everyday life. Consumers enjoy romantic escapes from culture in contexts as diverse as surfing, tropical island holidays, and the Burning Man festival. But by viewing nature as simply the opposite of culture, consumers often expedite the destruction of the experiences of nature they desire most,” write authors Robin Canniford (University of Melbourne) and Avi Shankar (University of Bath).

Consumers preserve romantic ideas of nature as an escape from urban life and culture by hiding or purging elements of culture and social tensions from their experiences of nature. Paradoxically, these actions can harm the environment and subject the experiences of nature to increasing legal and commercial regulation.

For example, although the Maldives are frequently considered an island paradise, tourists have left behind so much waste that entire islands are being swamped by trash that is polluting the crystal blue sea tourists travel so far to experience. On Australia’s Gold Coast, violence against other surfers has become such a common method of alleviating crowded experiences of nature that police have been drafted in to patrol the perfect sandy beaches in order to control the violence. Boat charters and private resorts that limit the number of consumers at certain locations in order to preserve an unspoiled experience of nature have subject these experiences to increased regulation and commercialization.

However, consumers are also aware of the fragility of nature and seek to alleviate potential damage with increasingly ecologically friendly consumer technologies.

“Rather than seeking to merely hide the fact that nature and culture are interdependent, consumers seek to advance practices that leave nature as untouched as possible. Demand for eco-friendly products offers an opportunity for outdoor equipment manufacturers and tourism service providers to help consumers enjoy nature in less damaging ways,” the authors conclude.

Robin Canniford and Avi Shankar. “Purifying Practices: How Consumers Assemble Romantic Experiences of Nature.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2013. For more information, contact Robin Canniford (rcan@unimelb.edu.au) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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