

From Perceptions to Practices: The Role of Tour Guides in Responsible Tourism at Ba Be Lake, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Responsible tourism requires translating broad sustainability goals into the responsibilities and concrete actions of tourism stakeholders. This study explores how tour guides at Ba Be Lake perceive and practice responsible tourism while examining the conditions that facilitate or constrain the enactment of responsibility in their professional activities. Using an exploratory qualitative design, this study involved 18 experienced tour guides who had directly guided visitors at Ba Be Lake. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that tour guides do not conceptualise responsible tourism solely in terms of environmental protection but also associate it with respect for local culture, benefits for local communities, and the guidance of tourist behaviours. The responsible practices reported by participants primarily involved explaining, reminding, and persuading visitors, guiding appropriate ways of interacting with local communities, interpreting cultural values, and encouraging the use of local products and services. However, the responsibilities recognised by tour guides cannot always be fully enacted in practice. The identified constraints arise from tour schedules and design, visitor responses, professional authority, predetermined service arrangements, and destination conditions. The findings suggest that the gap between perceptions and practices should not be reduced to a lack of awareness or personal commitment. Instead, the role of tour guides in responsible tourism is conditional, depending simultaneously on individual capabilities, visitor cooperation, tour organisation by tourism businesses, and supportive destination conditions. This study therefore highlights the need to move beyond simply raising awareness and toward creating enabling conditions that allow tour guides to enact responsibility in their everyday professional practices.

KEYWORDS: responsible tourism; tour guides; perceptions; practices; Ba Be Lake; qualitative research.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Responsible tourism emphasises the translation of broad sustainable tourism development goals into the specific responsibilities and actions of stakeholders involved in tourism. The Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism highlights the importance of minimising negative economic, social, and environmental impacts; increasing benefits for local communities; conserving natural and cultural heritage; and creating more meaningful experiences through stronger connections between tourists, local people, and destinations (International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002). From this perspective, the issue is not only which sustainability goals a destination seeks to pursue, but also how relevant stakeholders understand their responsibilities and how those responsibilities are enacted in specific situations.

Among the stakeholders involved in tourism, tour guides occupy a distinctive position because they interact directly with tourists throughout their destination experiences. Cohen (1985) showed that the role of tour guides extends beyond wayfinding and information provision to encompass instrumental, social, interactionary, and communicative functions. More recent studies have continued to conceptualise tour guides as intermediaries connecting tourists with local communities, tourism businesses, and destinations, while also participating in economic, sociocultural, and environmental exchanges (Şengöz et al., 2025). From this position, tour guides can interpret destination values, guide tourist conduct, and translate sustainable development principles into concrete behaviours during tours.

Ba Be Lake provides a particularly relevant context in which to examine these issues because tourism in the area depends simultaneously on natural resources and the cultural life of local communities. Tourism experiences are closely associated with the lake landscape, forests, and natural ecosystems, while also relying substantially on community villages, stilt houses, local cuisine, and cultural practices. Luong and Le (2026) show that community-based tourism development at Ba Be Lake involves issues related to cultural authenticity, community participation capacity, governance, and benefit distribution. Accordingly, the responsibilities of tour guides in this context extend beyond environmental protection to include respect for local culture, support for local benefits, guidance of tourist behaviour, and the maintenance of visitor experiences.

Previous studies have provided important evidence of the potential of tour guides to encourage responsible behaviour. In Vietnam, Doan et al. (2025) show that tour guides in climate-affected areas of the Mekong Delta use storytelling, education, role modelling, and polite intervention to encourage responsible consumption behaviour among tourists. Their study also indicates that the enactment of this role is influenced by time constraints, differences in tourist motivations, and the need to balance education with the visitor experience. At the business level, Chan and Tay (2016) similarly show that positive attitudes toward responsible tourism are not always fully reflected in practice. However, existing studies have focused mainly on the roles, strategies, or impacts of tour guides, while paying less integrated attention to how tour guides themselves define the scope of their professional responsibilities and how those responsibilities are enacted, negotiated, or constrained in specific professional situations. This issue is particularly important when responsibilities toward the environment, local communities, and culture may conflict with tour schedules, business decisions, tourist expectations, or limits on tour guides' professional autonomy.

Against this background, this study explores how tour guides perceive responsible tourism, define their own roles, and enact these responsibilities in their guiding practices at Ba Be Lake. It also examines the conditions that facilitate, constrain, or otherwise shape tour guides' ability to fulfil their professional responsibilities. The study addresses the following three research questions:

RQ1: *How do tour guides perceive responsible tourism and their roles in the context of Ba Be Lake?*

RQ2: *How are the responsibilities perceived by tour guides reflected in their professional practices at Ba Be Lake?*

RQ3: *What conditions facilitate, constrain, or shape the enactment of these responsibilities in tour-guiding practice?*

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Responsible tourism: from sustainability goals to responsibility in practice

Responsible tourism is closely related to sustainable tourism but places greater emphasis on the responsibilities and actions of stakeholders involved in tourism activities. In examining the discourses of sustainable and responsible tourism, Mihalic (2016) distinguishes sustainability primarily as a development orientation or concept, whereas responsibility is more closely associated with putting that orientation into practice through appropriate actions. This distinction does not separate the two concepts; rather, it highlights an important point: sustainability goals acquire practical meaning only when relevant stakeholders translate them into concrete decisions and actions.

This perspective is consistent with the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism, which frames responsibility across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The Declaration emphasises minimising negative impacts, generating economic benefits for local communities, promoting local participation, conserving natural and cultural heritage, and improving the quality of interactions between tourists and destinations (International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002). In an empirical study at Kinabalu Park, Tay et al. (2016) similarly show that tourism stakeholders interpret responsible practices in terms of ecological, economic, and sociocultural dimensions. Responsible tourism should therefore not be reduced to environmental protection alone but should also be considered in relation to local communities, local culture, and the economic benefits associated with the destination.

A notable feature of the responsible tourism perspective is its shift in emphasis from sustainability goals at an abstract level to questions concerning actors and actions: who is regarded as responsible, what those responsibilities entail, and how they are enacted in specific situations. Accordingly, in studying tour guides, establishing whether they endorse the principles of responsible tourism addresses only part of the issue. It is also necessary to examine how they understand the scope of their professional responsibilities and how those responsibilities are expressed in actual guiding practices.

2.2. Tour guides as intermediaries and practitioners of responsible tourism

The role of tour guides has long been regarded as extending beyond wayfinding or the provision of information. Cohen (1985) identifies two fundamental spheres of the tour guide role (leadership and mediation) and distinguishes four components within these spheres: instrumental, social, interactionary, and communicative functions. This framework laid the foundation for understanding tour guides as actors positioned between tourists and destinations, simultaneously organising visitor experiences and interpreting values and norms with which tourists may be unfamiliar.

Within the context of sustainable development, this intermediary role has been extended to include responsibilities toward the destination. Weiler and Kim (2011) argue that tour guides are well positioned to connect tourists with natural and cultural values through interpretation, while also communicating, monitoring, and modelling appropriate tourist behaviour. However, they also note that this potential is not always fully realised in guiding content and practice. This observation highlights the need to distinguish between what tour guides are

capable of doing or are expected to do and what they are actually able to accomplish under specific professional conditions.

Recent empirical studies provide further evidence of the diversity of these practices. In their study of Tibetan tour guides, Pu and Cheng (2023) show that tour guides may engage in sustainable tourism practices through roles involving leadership, mediation, resource management, and the promotion of economic benefits, with host–guest relationships playing an important role in shaping such practices. More broadly, Şengöz et al. (2025) describe tour guides as actors involved in sociocultural, economic, and environmental exchanges among multiple stakeholders, including tourists, local communities, tourism businesses, and policymakers. These findings indicate that tour guiding takes place within a network of multi-stakeholder relationships rather than solely through bilateral interactions between tour guides and tourists.

Evidence from Vietnam likewise shows that the role of tour guides can be expressed through concrete actions in the field. In their study of the Mekong Delta, Doan et al. (2025) found that tour guides used storytelling, role modelling, and polite intervention to educate tourists about environmental issues and encourage responsible consumption behaviour. This study is particularly relevant because it shifts attention from expected roles to the strategies that tour guides themselves reported using in their interactions with tourists.

Overall, these studies provide a strong basis for viewing tour guides both as intermediaries and as practitioners who directly enact principles of sustainability and responsibility at destinations. However, the present study does not assume in advance that all tour guides perform the same predetermined set of roles. Instead, it focuses on how participants themselves understand the scope of their professional responsibilities, which actions they regard as falling within the responsibilities of a tour guide, and how those responsibilities are reflected in the practices they report.

2.3. Enacting responsibility under professional constraints

The expectation that tour guides should contribute to sustainable tourism development does not mean that they always have sufficient conditions to fulfil such expectations. Weiler and Kim (2011) note that the potential of tour guides as agents of sustainability is not always fully realised. From a different perspective, Mak et al. (2011), in their study of tour guiding in Hong Kong and Macau, identify role conflict as an important issue affecting service quality and professionalism in the guiding occupation. This suggests that tour guiding not only involves multiple functions but may also place guides in situations where competing professional demands cannot easily be satisfied simultaneously.

More recent evidence further highlights the context-dependent nature of tour-guiding practices. Doan et al. (2025) show that tour guides' efforts to promote responsible consumption behaviour among tourists in the Mekong Delta are constrained by limited interaction time, differences in tourists' motivations and attitudes, pressure to maintain visitor satisfaction, the need to balance education with entertainment, and other professional conditions. The study also indicates that factors such as itinerary design, organisational support, and material conditions may either facilitate or constrain the enactment of sustainable practices. These findings suggest that analyses of tour guides' practices need to situate individual actions within the organisational and situational conditions in which guiding work takes place.

This observation is also consistent with the recent review by Yu et al. (2026). Drawing on a synthesis of 267 studies on tour guides, the authors show that tour guides' roles and professional activities are influenced by multiple groups of factors, including stakeholder expectations, challenges arising from the external environment, organisational factors, professional capabilities, and individual characteristics. Notably, the review identifies role conflict and the gap between idealised expectations of tour guiding and professional realities as issues that warrant further investigation. This suggests that the key question is not simply whether tour guides recognise their responsibilities or engage in responsible practices, but also how they enact, adjust, or limit those responsibilities while simultaneously responding to the demands of tourists, businesses, local communities, and destinations.

On this basis, the present study does not assume a linear causal sequence from perceptions to behaviour. The term “perceptions” is used to refer to how tour guides interpret the meaning of responsible tourism and understand their own professional responsibilities; it is not treated as a psychological variable to be measured. Similarly, “practices” in this study refers to the professional actions that participants reported undertaking during tours; interview data are not treated as direct observational evidence of behaviour.

Accordingly, the study employs three interrelated analytical domains: (1) how tour guides understand responsible tourism and their own professional responsibilities; (2) how those responsibilities are reflected in the practices they report; and (3) the conditions that facilitate, constrain, or shape their ability to enact responsibility within professional contexts. These three domains are used to guide the organisation and interpretation of the qualitative data rather than as components of a causal model to be tested.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design and study context

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to examine how tour guides interpret responsible tourism, understand their professional responsibilities, describe related practices during tours, and explain the conditions that influence their ability to enact those responsibilities. This design was appropriate to the research objectives because the study did not seek to measure levels of perception or test causal relationships. Instead, it aimed to clarify how responsibility is understood and enacted in specific professional situations.

Ba Be Lake was selected as the study context because tourism in the area is closely associated with both natural resources and the cultural life of local communities. Experiences involving the lake, forests, and community villages create frequent interactions among tour guides, tourists, and local residents. This setting therefore provides an appropriate context for examining responsibilities related to resource protection, respect for local culture, support for local communities, and the guidance of tourist behaviour.

3.2. Participants and sampling strategy

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit tour guides with direct experience at Ba Be Lake who could provide information relevant to the research questions. The inclusion criteria were: (1) at least one year of tour-guiding experience; (2) direct experience guiding tourists at Ba Be Lake; and (3) professional experience sufficiently recent to enable participants to describe situations and practices at the destination.

A total of 18 tour guides participated in the study. Participant selection sought variation in professional experience, employment arrangement, and the types of tourists primarily served in order to capture a diversity of experiences within the dataset.

Table 1. Characteristics of study participants

Characteristic	Category	Number of participants
Gender	Male	11
	Female	7
Tour-guiding experience	1–3 years	4
	4–7 years	7
	≥ 8 years	7
Experience guiding tourists at Ba Be Lake	1–2 years	4
	3–5 years	8
	≥ 6 years	6
Employment arrangement	Employed by a tour operator	10
	Freelance tour guide	8
Primary tourist group served	Domestic tourists	9
	International tourists	5
	Both	4
Frequency of guiding at Ba Be Lake	Frequently	7
	Fairly frequently	7
	Occasionally	4

(Source: Authors' compilation from interview data)

Note: Sample size, $n = 18$.

Sample size was considered using the logic of information power proposed by Malterud et al. (2016). The research questions were relatively focused, participants belonged to a specific occupational group and all had direct experience at the destination, while the interviews allowed detailed exploration of professional situations. Accordingly, sample size was not determined by a fixed numerical threshold or solely by the concept of data saturation; instead, it was considered in relation to the amount and relevance of information provided by the dataset for addressing the research objectives.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 35–50 minutes. The interview guide was organised around six broad areas: (1) participants' understandings of responsible tourism; (2) how they perceived the roles and responsibilities of tour guides; (3) practices related to the environment, local culture, and communities; (4) how they responded to inappropriate tourist behaviour; (5) situations in which actions they believed should be taken could not be fully carried out; and (6) conditions that facilitated or constrained the enactment of responsibility during tour guiding.

In addition to questions about their views, participants were asked to recount at least one specific situation involving tourist behaviour or a professional situation that they had previously handled. This approach enabled the data to move beyond general statements of principle and capture how participants described the enactment of responsibility in specific circumstances.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Identifying information relating to individuals and businesses was removed, and each participant was assigned a code ranging from TG01 to TG18.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the approach of Braun and Clarke. The analysis was organised around six iterative phases: familiarisation with the data, coding, developing initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analytical report (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). These phases were not treated as a rigid linear sequence; coding, data comparison, and refinement of interpretations were carried out through multiple rounds of reading and analysis.

The analysis combined direction from the research questions with openness to issues emerging from the data. The research questions provided initial areas of interest, including understandings of responsibility, professional practices, and the conditions influencing the enactment of responsibility. However, the codes and the organisation of the findings were not treated as a fixed a priori framework; rather, they were reviewed and refined throughout the analysis of the full interview dataset.

The analytical process resulted in four interrelated domains of findings: (1) how tour guides understand responsible tourism and the scope of their own roles; (2) the responsible practices they reported; (3) situations in which actions they believed should be undertaken could not be fully enacted; and (4) conditions that facilitated or constrained the enactment of responsibility. This organisation was used to clarify the relationships among perceptions, practices, and professional context rather than to imply a linear causal sequence from perceptions to behaviour.

In some of the results tables, the number of participants mentioning each issue is reported to help readers identify its distribution within the dataset. These counts are descriptive only within the 18 interviews and are not used to assess the importance of a theme, test differences, or generalise to the wider population of tour guides.

IV. RESULTS

Analysis of the 18 interviews revealed four main groups of findings: (1) how tour guides understand responsible tourism and their professional roles; (2) the responsible practices they reported during tours; (3) situations in which actions they believed should be undertaken could not be fully enacted; and (4) conditions that facilitated or constrained the enactment of responsibility.

The findings presented below reflect participants' accounts during the interviews. The number of participants mentioning each issue is reported to describe its presence within the dataset, not to assess the relative importance of themes or to generalise to the wider population of tour guides.

4.1. Perceptions of Responsible Tourism and the Role of Tour Guides

The tour guides participating in the study described responsible tourism in multiple ways. Environmental and resource protection was the most frequently mentioned aspect, but participants also referred to respect for local culture, guidance of tourist behaviour, benefits for local communities, and the preservation of the destination for the future.

Table 2. Perceptions of responsible tourism and the role of tour guides

Theme	Number of tour guides mentioning the issue (n/18)
Perceptions of responsible tourism	
Environmental and resource protection	17
Respect for local culture	16

Theme	Number of tour guides mentioning the issue (n/18)
Guidance of responsible tourist behaviour	15
Generating benefits for local communities	14
Preserving the destination for the future	11
Self-defined roles of tour guides	
Providing and explaining information	17
Educating/guiding tourist behaviour	16
Connecting tourists with local communities	14
Interpreting local culture	14
Contributing to the protection of destination resources	13

(Source: Authors' compilation from interview data)

Note: The figures indicate the number of participants who mentioned each issue at least once during the interviews. They are intended only to describe the presence of issues within the dataset and do not indicate the relative importance of the themes.

One tour guide explained:

“Being responsible is not just about not throwing rubbish into the lake. Tourists also interact with local people, eat in local homes, and visit villages, so we need to help them understand how to behave in ways that do not negatively affect local life and culture” (TG04).

In addition to their understandings of responsible tourism, participants described the role of tour guides as extending beyond the provision of information. TG11 stated:

“Tourists often do not know what they should or should not do. The tour guide is the person in between. We understand the destination better than the tourists, so we need to tell them and explain things to them” (TG11).

However, some participants also distinguished between the tour guide’s responsibility to explain and remind tourists and the managerial or enforcement functions that fall within the remit of other actors. TG16 commented: “Tour guides can remind people and explain things, but we cannot control everything. Some matters have to be the responsibility of the destination management authority or the tourism business” (TG16).

Thus, across the interviews, tour guides identified a range of responsibilities relating to the destination, tourists, and local communities, while also recognising certain limits to the scope of their professional authority.

4.2. Responsible tourism practices reported by tour guides

The practices reported by participants were concentrated in four main areas: environmental protection, culture, local communities, and the guidance of tourist behaviour.

Table 3. Responsible tourism practices reported by tour guides

Area	Reported practice	n
Environment	Reminding tourists not to litter	16
	Explaining environmental/resource protection regulations	13
	Reminding tourists to avoid damaging landscapes, flora, and fauna	11
	Encouraging reduced use of single-use plastics	10
Culture	Explaining local customs and culture	15
	Guiding appropriate behaviour	14
	Explaining the meaning of cultural experiences	12
	Reminding tourists to ask permission before photographing local residents	11
Local community	Encouraging the use of local food and services	13
	Recommending locally operated homestays and services	12
	Encouraging the purchase of local products	10

Area	Reported practice	n
Tourist behaviour	Explaining and persuading rather than simply prohibiting	14
	Directly reminding tourists when inappropriate behaviour occurs	13
	Using stories or examples to raise awareness	10
	Modelling appropriate behaviour	9

(Source: Authors' compilation from interview data)

Environment-related practices

Reminding tourists not to litter was the most frequently mentioned practice within the environmental category. Several tour guides explained that they usually provided reasons for such requests rather than simply issuing reminders.

"If I only say, 'Don't throw rubbish away,' tourists may feel that they are being told off. I usually explain beforehand that the lake is both a source of livelihood and Ba Be's main landscape attraction, so we should keep our rubbish with us until we reach a bin. When tourists understand the reason, they are more willing to cooperate" (TG03).

In addition to reminding tourists to retain their waste, participants referred to explaining regulations concerning resource protection, discouraging actions that could affect landscapes, plants, and wildlife, and encouraging tourists to reduce their use of single-use plastics.

Culture- and conduct-related practices

Culture-related activities were also frequently mentioned. Tour guides reported introducing local customs, stilt houses, cuisine, and cultural activities, while also advising tourists on appropriate ways of behaving within community spaces.

"Some tourists see local people wearing beautiful traditional clothing and immediately raise their cameras to take a photograph. I usually tell them beforehand that if they want to take a close-up photograph or photograph a particular person, they should ask first. That is also a way of showing respect to the host community" (TG07).

Beyond providing cultural information, some tour guides reported reminding tourists to ask permission before taking photographs and explaining forms of behaviour considered appropriate when interacting with local residents.

Practices related to local communities

Some tour guides reported introducing or encouraging tourists to use local food, homestays, services, and products when the tour programme allowed.

"If tourists ask what to eat or what to buy, I usually recommend local products first. If tourists come here but all their spending goes outside the locality, it is difficult for local people to see the benefits of tourism" (TG12).

Practices within this category primarily involved introducing and recommending products and services provided by local residents.

Practices for guiding tourist behaviour

When encountering behaviour considered inappropriate, many tour guides reported prioritising explanation or persuasion before resorting to more direct reminders.

"One group had a tourist who was going to leave a bag of rubbish at the resting place. I did not speak harshly. I explained that waste collection in that area was difficult and that it would be better if our group took the rubbish to the collection point. Afterwards, everyone gathered the rubbish themselves" (TG09).

In addition to explanation and direct reminders, some participants reported using stories, examples, or their own behaviour to guide tourists' conduct.

Overall, the practices reported by participants were enacted primarily through providing information, explaining, reminding, recommending, and persuading.

4.3. Dilemmas in enacting responsibility

Fifteen of the 18 participants recounted at least one situation in which they believed that a particular action should be taken but were unable to carry it out fully in actual tour-guiding practice.

The situations described mainly concerned environmental protection requirements, the time available for cultural interpretation, tourist responses, the scope of tour guides' professional authority, and services that had already been predetermined within the tour programme.

Table 4. Dilemmas in enacting responsibility

What tour guides believed should be done	Situation encountered in practice	Dilemma	n
Reduce waste and single-use plastics	Tours continued to use many convenience-oriented products	Environmental responsibility ↔ operational convenience	10
Provide in-depth cultural interpretation	Limited time at the destination	Cultural interpretation ↔ itinerary schedule	9
Intervene when tourists behaved inappropriately	Concern that tourists might become dissatisfied or complain	Professional responsibility ↔ tourist satisfaction	9
Influence tourist behaviour	Limited authority of tour guides	Responsibility ↔ professional autonomy	8
Prioritise local services	Services had already been booked by the tour operator	Community support ↔ fixed tour programme	7

(Source: Authors' compilation from interview data)

Note: The figures indicate the number of participants who mentioned each type of situation at least once during the interviews. They are intended only to describe the presence of these situations within the dataset and are not used to rank their relative importance.

Environmental responsibility and tour design

Some tour guides reported that reducing the use of single-use plastics was not entirely within their decision-making authority.

"We can remind tourists to reduce their use of plastic bottles, but on many tours the bottled water has already been prepared in advance. The tour guide is not the person who decides that part of the tour" (TG02).

This situation indicates that some aspects of environmental practice had already been determined during tour preparation before the guide began directly accompanying the group.

Cultural interpretation and itinerary time

Time at the destination was identified by some participants as a constraint on providing more in-depth explanations of local culture and ways of life.

"If the group stays in the village for longer, I can explain more about the Tay people, their way of life, and their customs. But some tours stop only briefly; tourists take photographs and then leave, so I can only explain the main points" (TG10).

When programmes allowed only short stops, tour guides reported having to reduce the depth of cultural interpretation and focus on essential information.

Addressing tourist behaviour while maintaining a positive visitor experience

Some participants noted that reminding tourists about inappropriate behaviour required careful consideration of how such reminders were communicated because they could affect tourists' reactions.

"Some tourists are travelling for leisure and do not like being reminded too often. I still have to say something, but I need to choose how I say it, because if I am too strict, they will not be happy" (TG06).

TG14, however, described a different approach:

"If what a tourist is doing clearly affects the environment or local people, I will still remind them. I would rather have the tourist be slightly unhappy than allow a problem to occur" (TG14).

These two accounts show that tour guides may adopt different approaches when reminding tourists of appropriate behaviour carries a risk of affecting their experience or satisfaction.

Supporting local communities within predetermined tour programmes

Some tour guides explained that their desire to prioritise local products and services could not always be realised when suppliers or services had already been selected by the tourism business in advance.

In such cases, guides could still introduce additional local products or services when tourists expressed an interest, but their ability to alter the main components of the tour programme remained limited.

Overall, these situations show that actions tour guides believed should be undertaken could not always be fully enacted in tour-guiding practice. The constraints described by participants were primarily associated with tour design, time, tourist responses, professional authority, and service arrangements determined in advance.

4.4. Conditions facilitating and constraining the enactment of responsibility

Beyond specific dilemmas, participants identified a range of conditions that could either facilitate or hinder the enactment of responsibility during tours. These conditions were grouped into four levels: the individual tour guide, tourists, tourism businesses and tour arrangements, and the destination and local community.

Table 5. Conditions facilitating and constraining the enactment of responsibility

Level	Facilitating factors	n	Constraining factors	n
Individual tour guide	Sense of professional responsibility	15	Lack of specialised training	7
	Professional experience	14	Limited knowledge in some areas	6
Tourists	Tourist awareness and cooperation	12	Pressure to maintain tourist satisfaction	11
	Tourist interest in environmental and cultural issues	9	Lack of tourist cooperation	10
Tourism business/tour	Clear policies and guidance	10	Overly tight tour schedules	13
	Time allocated for local experiences	8	Limited authority to modify the programme	10
Destination and local community	Clear regulations at the destination	11	Limited infrastructure for waste collection and treatment	8
	Effective community cooperation	9	Uneven coordination among stakeholders	7

(Source: Authors' compilation from interview data)

Note: n indicates the number of participants who mentioned each condition at least once during the interviews. These figures are intended only to describe the presence of issues within the dataset and are not used to rank the relative importance of the factors.

At the individual level, a sense of professional responsibility and professional experience were described as facilitating factors, whereas a lack of specialised training and limited knowledge in certain areas were regarded as difficulties.

At the tourist level, cooperation and interest in environmental or cultural issues made it easier for tour guides to explain expectations and remind tourists about appropriate behaviour. Conversely, a lack of cooperation or pressure to maintain tourist satisfaction could make such situations more difficult to manage.

At the level of tourism businesses and tour programmes, tight schedules and limited scope for modifying the programme were among the difficulties mentioned relatively frequently.

“If the programme is too tightly scheduled, it is difficult for the tour guide to do anything additional. Everything has to follow the timetable” (TG01).

By contrast, clear guidance from tourism businesses was viewed as a supportive condition. TG13 explained:

“If the company makes it clear from the beginning that this is a responsible tour, with clear guidelines for both tourists and tour guides, it is easier for us to act accordingly. If the tour guide is the only person saying these things, the effect is limited” (TG13).

At the destination and community level, participants referred to clear regulations and community cooperation as facilitating conditions. In contrast, limitations in infrastructure, waste management, or uneven coordination among stakeholders could make it more difficult to put guidance for tourists into practice.

Overall, the conditions identified by participants extended beyond the tour guides themselves and also involved tourists, the organisation of tours, and destination-level conditions.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings first show that tour guides at Ba Be Lake understand responsible tourism in terms that extend beyond environmental protection and connect these responsibilities directly to their own professional roles. This finding is consistent with multidimensional approaches to responsible tourism, in which responsibility encompasses environmental, economic, and sociocultural dimensions (Tay et al., 2016). The fact that tour guides viewed themselves not only as providers of information but also as actors involved in explanation, behavioural guidance, and connecting tourists with local communities is consistent with Cohen's (1985) conceptualisation of

the intermediary function of tour guiding and with more recent views of tour guides as actors linking multiple stakeholders within the tourism system (Şengöz et al., 2025). In the context of Ba Be Lake, this role becomes particularly evident because tourism experiences depend simultaneously on the natural landscape and the everyday life of local communities. Tour guides therefore do more than help tourists understand the destination; they also frequently translate destination values into concrete guidance for tourist conduct.

At the level of practice, responsibility was expressed primarily through relatively small-scale interactions that occurred directly during tours, such as explaining why natural resources should be protected, advising tourists on appropriate ways of interacting with local residents, encouraging the use of local products, and choosing persuasion rather than simple prohibition. These findings are consistent with Doan et al. (2025), who found that tour guides in the Mekong Delta used storytelling, role modelling, education, and polite intervention to encourage responsible tourist behaviour. At Ba Be Lake, however, the reported practices extended beyond environmental concerns to include cultural respect and community benefits. This difference may be understood in relation to the characteristics of the destination, where tourism experiences are closely tied to community villages, stilt houses, local cuisine, and cultural practices, alongside the lake and forest resources. This suggests that, at the level of tour-guiding practice, the relatively broad principles of responsible tourism are made concrete mainly through communication choices and situational responses during direct interactions with tourists.

A more notable finding concerns the gap between what tour guides believed should be done and what they were actually able to do in practice. This finding is consistent with Chan and Tay's (2016) observation that positive attitudes toward responsible tourism are not always fully reflected in practice, and it also aligns with studies identifying role conflict and professional demands that cannot always be satisfied simultaneously in tour-guiding work (Mak et al., 2011). However, the data from Ba Be Lake suggest that this gap should not be attributed simply to a lack of awareness or commitment among tour guides. In many situations, the constraints arose from factors beyond their direct control, including tour design, limited time at the destination, services selected in advance, tourist responses, and restricted authority to modify the tour programme.

Accordingly, the relationship between perceptions and practices should not be understood as a linear process in which positive perceptions necessarily lead to corresponding actions. Tour guides may clearly recognise particular responsibilities while still having to consider how those responsibilities can be enacted when multiple professional demands arise simultaneously. Differences in how participants responded to the possibility of tourist dissatisfaction provide one example. Some guides preferred softer forms of intervention in order to maintain a positive visitor experience, whereas others were willing to accept a degree of dissatisfaction when they believed that the environment or local communities might otherwise be adversely affected. This indicates that responsible practice involves judgement and negotiation among the competing demands of specific situations rather than serving as a direct and uniform reflection of tour guides' perceptions.

The findings also show that the capacity to enact responsibility is not determined solely by individual capability. Professional experience and a sense of responsibility may help tour guides manage particular situations, but visitor cooperation, the way tourism businesses organise tours, and conditions at the destination were also described by participants as factors that could either facilitate or constrain responsible practice. This is consistent with Doan et al. (2025), who identified interaction time, tourist attitudes, pressure to maintain satisfaction, and organisational support as conditions associated with efforts to encourage responsible behaviour. It is also consistent with the review by Yu et al. (2026), which suggests that tour guides' professional activities are shaped simultaneously by individual factors, organisational conditions, stakeholder expectations, and the external environment.

The context of Ba Be Lake helps clarify the significance of these conditions. Some aspects of itineraries, service arrangements, and supplier selection may already have been determined before tour guides directly accompany visitors, while the guides themselves remain the actors who interact most frequently with tourists at the destination. This position allows them to influence how tourists understand and behave at the destination, but it does not give them control over the entire design or operation of the tour. When tourism businesses provide clear guidance, tour programmes allocate sufficient time for local experiences, tourists are willing to cooperate, and appropriate support is available at the destination, the enactment of responsibility becomes easier. Conversely, tight schedules, limited professional autonomy, or uneven coordination among stakeholders may narrow the range of actions that tour guides are actually able to undertake.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the role of tour guides in responsible tourism should be understood as conditional. Tour guides are able to interpret, educate, connect, and guide behaviour, but the extent to which they can perform these functions depends on the professional context in which they operate. This perspective recognises tour guides' agency while avoiding placing the entire responsibility for responsible tourism outcomes on individual guides. More importantly, the study shifts attention from the question of whether tour guides have "sufficient awareness" to the question of which conditions enable them to enact the responsibilities they recognise. Accordingly, enhancing tour guides' awareness and capabilities is necessary but not sufficient;

responsible tourism practice also requires corresponding support through tour design, tourism businesses, tourists, and destination-level management conditions.

VI. CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study clarifies how tour guides at Ba Be Lake understand and enact responsible tourism within a specific professional context. The findings show that participants did not limit responsibility to environmental protection but also associated it with respect for local culture, the guidance of tourist behaviour, and concern for community benefits. In the practices they reported, these responsibilities were expressed primarily through explaining, reminding, persuading, advising tourists on appropriate conduct, and encouraging the use of local products and services when circumstances allowed.

A more important finding concerns the gap between what tour guides believed should be done and what they were able to do in actual tour-guiding practice. The constraints identified were related not only to individual capabilities but also to tour schedules and design, tourist responses, the scope of professional authority, service arrangements determined in advance, and destination conditions. The gap between perceptions and practices should therefore not be interpreted simply as a lack of awareness or commitment among tour guides; rather, it needs to be understood in relation to the specific professional conditions under which they work.

The findings further suggest that the role of tour guides in responsible tourism is conditional. Their ability to interpret destination values, guide tourist behaviour, and connect tourists with local communities and the destination depends not only on their own sense of responsibility, knowledge, and experience, but also on tourist cooperation, the way tourism businesses organise tours, coordination with local communities, and supportive conditions at the destination. Promoting responsible tourism at Ba Be Lake should therefore move beyond raising tour guides' awareness alone and also create conditions that enable them to enact responsibility in their everyday professional practice.

From a practical perspective, tour-guide training should first shift its emphasis from the transmission of general principles toward the development of situational capabilities. In addition to knowledge of the environment, local culture, and communities, tour guides need opportunities to develop their ability to explain expectations and address tourists in sensitive situations, select appropriate communication strategies when tourists behave inappropriately, and manage situations in which responsibilities toward the destination may conflict with the need to maintain a positive visitor experience. Scenario-based simulations and exercises grounded in real-world contexts may therefore be more appropriate to the characteristics of tour-guiding work than simply adding further theoretical knowledge.

For tour operators, the findings suggest that responsibility for enacting responsible tourism should not be placed entirely on tour guides when tour design does not provide corresponding conditions. Principles concerning the reduction of single-use items, respect for local culture, prioritisation of local services, and guidance of tourist behaviour should be incorporated from the tour-planning stage. Tourism businesses should also provide tourists with clear guidance before departure, allocate sufficient time for interpretation and local experiences, and provide tour guides with an appropriate degree of flexibility to respond to situations that arise at the destination.

For destination managers and local communities, tour guides are more likely to enact responsibility effectively when environmental protection and behavioural expectations are communicated clearly and consistently and are supported by appropriate conditions. This includes visible and accessible guidance at the destination, adequate infrastructure for waste management, and coordination among destination managers, tourism businesses, tour guides, and local communities. Local communities should also participate in identifying and communicating norms relating to appropriate conduct, photography, use of local services, and participation in cultural activities, thereby providing tour guides with a clearer basis for communicating accurate and consistent information to tourists.

Overall, responsible tourism development at Ba Be Lake should be approached as a shared responsibility among multiple stakeholders rather than as an expectation that tour guides alone resolve issues arising during tours. Tour guides occupy an important position because they directly connect tourists with local communities and the destination, but their ability to fulfil this role depends on the conditions created by the wider tourism system. Policy and management efforts should therefore focus not only on improving tour guides' understanding of responsibility but also on creating conditions that allow those responsibilities to be enacted feasibly and consistently in practice.

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