



# THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY IN THE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF AVITOURISM

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## ABSTRACT

*Creativity and imagination can be said to serve as cornerstones in the nexus of science, philosophy, and the humanities. Similarly, creativity and imagination can serve as the foundation for the way in which avitourism is produced and consumed. Avitourism involves the practice of travelling to places outside one's usual environment and engaging in birdwatching activity. This study is an investigation into the role of creativity and imagination in how avitourism destinations as well as service providers develop birdwatching experiences for tourists. The conception of avitourism products, such as birdwatching tour packages including the facilities and ancillary services that are offered to visitors, are a reflection of creativity and innovative use of natural and man-made resources combined with scientific knowledge. The ultimate goal is to ensure engaging, fulfilling, and sustainable birdwatching experiences for tourists. On the operational level, birding guides use their communicate their knowledge of science and natural history, reinforced by years of experience in the field, to inform and enrich avitourists' experiences. The skills in communicating this knowledge in a way that*

*engages the audience cannot be understated. Similarly, birdwatching destinations harness creativity and imagination in developing infrastructure that maximises their birding potential and visitor experiences, but is also aligned with sustainability principles. Through this analysis, this paper underlines the importance of creativity and innovation in providing satisfying avitourist experiences, while also promoting sustainability and conservation of birds and their habitats.*

**Keywords:** Avitourism, birdwatching tourism, creativity and imagination, tourism narratives, sustainable tourism.

**Cite this Article:** John Henry V. M & Ankathi Raghu. (2025). The Role of Imagination and Creativity in the Production and Consumption of Avitourism. *International Journal of Tourism Research (IJTR)*, 2(1), 54-66.

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## 1. Introduction

Imagination and creativity play an understated role in how human experiences are shaped across various domains, ranging from science, philosophy, and the arts, to the practice of tourism. In the management of all things related to travel and tourism, creativity is involved at all levels, from the conceptualization and development of destinations, products and services, to maximising user-engagement and satisfaction. Industries are best able to realise their creative sides in an experience economy, entertainment economy, and in educational tourism. The modes through which creativity and innovation are expressed in tourism have undergone rapid development, driven by creative business development approaches, and by the prevalence of internet and other contemporary media [1].

Though destinations around the world express creativity in their own ways, there are certain common elements to them, such as inducing the active participation of visitors, creating authentic experiences, creative potential development, and engaging and developing the skills of participants [2]. On the crest of the creative wave of the tourism industry is the development of innovative practices in production and consumption. Service providers are driven to redevelop and package a whole range of tourism products and services with ‘experiences’ being at the forefront of industry-consumer interaction in the highly competitive experience economy [3]. This is very much the case for avitourism, a niche travel activity based on the recreational observation of birds. Avitourism, the largest sub-sector of the overlapping nature-based tourism

and ecotourism markets, is based on innovative approaches to local destination planning and development, and enhancing birder experiences, engaging and improving the birdwatching skills of the visitors, with the long-term goal being the conservation of birds and bird habitats.

Originally a passive leisure activity, avitourism has evolved into a lucrative industry in its own merit. Avitourists are characterised as being well educated, high-spending, and pro-conservation. These factors have led to progressively increasing competition among global birdwatching destinations vying for avitourist visitation and foreign exchange earnings. Innovations in sustainable infrastructure, visitor experience management, along with advances in technology, have transformed birdwatching destinations into stimulating spaces where nature and cultural interpretation converge. The onus is on service providers to design and produce authentic, ‘originally local’ experiences for tourists [2]. Avitourism products and services such as guided birding tours, nature trails, informational programmes, and eco-stays, are being developed with the intention of positively shaping the way tourists experience nature and avifauna. Service providers in the avitourism sector, such as bird tour operators and birding guides, have adopted compelling story-telling and experiential learning methods in order to ensure that tourists gain both knowledge and enjoyment from their birding experiences.

Beyond the day-to-day tourist visitation of birding sites, and perhaps serving as the overriding theme in the background, is the pressing need for the conservation of natural spaces. Avitourism has long been considered by administrators and conservationists alike as being a means not only to secure funding for preservation activity, but also to involve local communities in the process. Communities that actively participate in avitourism projects gain benefits such as employment generation and the overall improvement of living standards. This ‘conservation through commodification’ creates an incentive for local community members to safeguard their interests through bird and habitat conservation. Thoughtfully curated destinations that combine artistic and scientific approaches to habitat management, infrastructure design, and local community engagement, are gaining both economic and environmental benefits.

This study examines the role of creativity and innovation in the design, delivery, and consumption of avitourism experiences, and the resulting benefits to the stakeholders involved. We explore how avitourism destination administrators and service providers utilize nature and biodiversity, as well as local cultural resources in order to create satisfying birding experiences. In discussing the intersection of imagination, tourism management, and conservation, this paper underlines the role of creativity and innovation in the evolution of avitourism as a force for positive change.

## 2. Literature Review

Avitourism is the practice of traveling to places outside one's environment for the purpose of observing birds [4], [5]. Also known as birdwatching tourism, avitourism is a subsector of nature-based tourism and ecotourism [6], [7]. As it is a subsector of ecotourism, avitourism places importance on social, economic and environmental sustainability [8]. Given its wide-ranging implications, the literature on creativity and innovation is vast, spanning entire disciplines such as management, economics, and geography [9]. According to the creative cognition approach, creativity is founded on several aspects of ordinary everyday thinking processes and is therefore, common to all people [10]. Originally associated with gifted individuals and then with products, creativity and creative processes have come to be seen as products of their respective social contexts and creative environments [2]. Tourism is a creative industry, and destinations in a globalised world are forced to differentiate themselves from their competitors, and are increasingly turning to creative and innovative tools to achieve these goals [1], [3]. It is important for creativity involved in tourism to be embedded in the very destination itself. Creativity is therefore harnessed in a number of ways in the tourism industry, including the creation of tourism experiences, revamping existing offerings, using new techniques to improve visitor experience, and to create a conducive atmosphere [1].

Innovation in the tourism industry can take the following forms: “product innovations, classical process innovations, process innovations in information handling, management and institutional innovations” [11]. Innovation is pursued by businesses through the development of new products and processes with a view to gaining competitive advantages and deriving economic surpluses. Such innovations in tourism are often directed by green consumerism and environmental legislation, and driven by market competition and technological progress [11]. Ecotourism, wherein the touristic experience of natural areas results in social, economic, and environmental benefits, is a multi-billion-dollar business global business. It provides a non-resource-extractive alternative to local communities, incentivising biodiversity conservation [12].

There are three avenues for new product development in nature-based tourism activities such as avitourism: the ‘guiding system’ which involves the processes involved in the conduct of birding activity at the destination, such as bird tours, routes, guidelines and codes of conduct; tour operators’ services, involving the promotion and packaging of the product; and infrastructural components, such as watchtowers, accommodation, and nature trails [11]. Classical process innovations are related to improving the scope and performance of existing operations. This can be achieved through the adoption of new technology in order to use

resources more efficiently. Often, such measures also result in a more sustainable operational framework [11]. Process innovations in information handling pertain to how businesses and nature-based destinations manage data in relation to tourism activities. In the case of businesses, information regarding clients, packages, and ecological footprint is to be handled appropriately with a view to achieving higher efficiency. As for parks and destinations, the determination of the carrying capacities of natural areas, along with monitoring the ecological load borne by such spaces over long periods of time, are of interest to administrators [11].

Management-level innovations encompass the employing appropriately-trained staff, involving local residents in tourism activities, conservation work, as well as decision-making, and encouraging tourists to adopt environmentally conscious practices through a combination of regulations and incentives [11]. One instance of innovation in management in the avitourism sector is in evaluating the socio-cultural impacts of bird festivals, paying particular attention to the local inhabitants [9]. Institutional innovations pertain to the laws, norms and structures that guide how people and organizations interact within a system. Innovations of an institutional nature are required to address systemic disadvantages and challenges such as environmental impacts, and to enable the stakeholders within a system to adapt to changing worldviews, market demands, and resource constraints within an evolving technological landscape [11].

### **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore how imagination and creativity are involved in the production and consumption of avitourism. The data for the study have been gathered from a wide range of information sources, such as journal articles, books, websites, newspapers, magazines, brochures and other promotional material related to avitourism. Through the analysis of these sources, we draw insights into how avitourism experiences are conceptualized, marketed, and managed on the ground. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes that showcase the role of creativity and innovation in the nexus of birdwatching and tourism. Themes identified were chiefly related to management processes, infrastructural design, product development, marketing, and storytelling by guides.

### **4. Findings**

This study has yielded several insights into the various ways in which imagination and creativity are harnessed in the production and consumption of avitourism activities around the world.

#### 4.1 Destination management

Avitourism destination management is concerned with the maintenance of natural spaces that are conducive to the creation of engaging experiences and sustainable activities for birdwatchers. This requires park administrators and other destination management officials to combine environmental stewardship based on scientific knowledge, and creative thinking in order to efficiently utilize resources and maximise visitor satisfaction.

##### 4.1.1 Infrastructure Towers

Birdwatching towers serve as important infrastructure in the practice of the hobby, providing vantage points for the observation of birds in their natural habitats with minimal disturbance. Towers are a common infrastructural component in a wide variety of birdwatching ecosystems, such as rainforests, wetlands, and grasslands. Over the years, towers have had innovative features added to them. One such feature is multi-level platforms and viewing-decks, which allow birdwatchers to view birds and habitats from different heights. Such a feature is especially useful in forest ecosystems, where the different layers of the forest tree-cover are inhabited by different groups of species. Similarly, towers have incorporated hidden observation windows with one-way glass or otherwise concealed windows to allow unobtrusive viewing of birdlife at close quarters.

##### 4.1.2 Birding Platforms

Birdwatching platforms are elevated structures that are located on one side of a slope, such as the side of a hill or an escarpment. They are often located at the end of a walkway. The advantage of birding platforms is that they utilize the terrain in such a way that the requirement for construction materials is minimised, needing raised pillars on only one side of the platform. Perhaps even more importantly, platforms offer an accessible alternative for birdwatchers who may be unable to climb up towers. With one side of the platform at ground-level on the side of the slope, and the other high above the ground, birding platforms offer visitors the prospect of exposure to different layers of vegetation as they move across the surface.

##### 4.1.3 Blinds and Hides

Birding blinds and hides are essential elements to augment the practice of birdwatching. The underlying idea with blinds and hides is for the birdwatcher to remain concealed so as to not 'spook' or deter birds from being in close proximity. Once the tools of the hunter of wild game, blinds and hides have now become a mainstay in the wildlife watching industry.

## 4.2 Marketing and Promotion

Imagination and creative expression play a vital role in how avitourism products and services are marketed and promoted to general audiences. Traditional marketing channels, such as television documentaries, magazines and newspapers, continue to be relevant in the field of birdwatching and avitourism. Destination administrators often collaborate with private service providers and conservation agencies in crafting effective promotional materials. The present-day marketing of birdwatching as a service is also heavily reliant on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and X to reach potential consumers. These platforms serve as excellent tools for showcasing high quality photography and video content, powerful calls-to-action, as well as personalised offerings. Destinations use such platforms to showcase the natural features, birdlife, as well as the amenities and activities that are offered.

Such content is also hosted on dedicated websites, along with personal testimonials from birders, as well as notifications of upcoming events and tours. The predominant theme in present day marketing of avitourism is that destinations and service providers create promotional narratives that reinforce the nexus between birdwatching and conservation.

## 4.3 Storytelling in Interpretation

Birdwatching is greatly enriched by creative storytelling. Not limited to the finding and identification of bird species, bird guides and naturalists often engage birders through storytelling that captures the imagination, allowing them to transform bird walks into informative as well as entertaining journeys of discovery. Bird guides often draw upon science, folklore, and personal anecdotes to liven birding tours, actively shaping the way birdwatchers perceive and connect with birds, making each trip memorable for all involved.

### 4.3.1 Mythology and Folklore

Birds are deeply entrenched in human culture and folklore. Our ancestors drew birds onto cave walls as early as 18,000 years ago at Gargas in the French Pyrenees, and the human fascination with birds has only grown over the millennia [13]. The vibrant *Indian pitta* is often referred to by bird guides as '*navrang*' owing to its bright plumage, the peacock is revered as the *vahana*, or conveyance, of Lord Kartikeya in Hindu mythology, while guides often elaborate on the cultural significance of owls, generally associated with omens and considered as symbols of wisdom.

### 4.3.2 Anthromorphisation of Birds

We tend to assign human traits and features to the objects in the world around us (Guthrie, "anthropomorphism"). In the practice of birdwatching, guides and naturalists frequently

anthropomorphise birds in order to make them more relatable to audiences. For instance, the courtship of the *baya weaver*, in which the male birds weave the rudimentary foundation of the nests, and wait for a female to inspect and approve the structure. While nests that are favoured by the female birds are completed and lived in, those rejected are abandoned, leaving the male weaver to begin again for scratch in the hope of better luck. Such an approach at communicating information on birds encourages the participant birdwatchers to empathise with birds, thereby reinforcing biophilic values that could ultimately result in conservative and eco-friendly lifestyle choices.

#### 4.3.3 Bird Behaviour as Environmental Themes

Birds guides also use storytelling to interpret bird behaviour in the context of environmental themes. *Bar-headed geese*, the highest-flying birds in the world, undertake a trans-continental migratory journey that takes them over the peaks of the mighty Himalayas. Sighted in their wintering grounds in India at locations such as Ladakh and Nizamabad, guides are known to refer to them as the mountaineers of the avian world, shedding light on their endurance and ability to navigate vast distances accurately. In the case of vultures, naturalists are able to communicate the dangers they face due to rampant diclofenac poisoning and their drastic decrease in numbers, and their importance to the ecosystem as scavengers and agents that prevent the outbreak of diseases.

#### 4.4 Technological Applications

The birdwatching community has made imaginative use of technology in order to make the activity more accessible and enriching for all. The use of technological advances in the practice of birdwatching has also leads to a better scientific understanding of birds and their ecosystems, with the vast amounts of information now available at the touch of a button. The application of technology in birdwatching has also resulted in notable contributions to research and avian conservation.

##### 4.4.1 Citizen Science

Citizen science is the phenomenon of recreational birdwatchers contributing to science by generating data for research. Birdwatchers, ranging from casual ‘backyard birders’ to seasoned ornithologists, collectively log vast amounts of information on avian species abundance, diversity, and migration patterns. Around the world, the generation of real time data on birds helps scientists study various aspects of avian biology and ecology, ultimately informing conservation efforts. *eBird* by The Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s, *iNaturalist*, and *Bird Count India* are a few citizen science platforms.



A creative aspect embedded within citizen science is how institutions and online platforms drive data contribution by the use of gamification. There are several hundred bird counts and bird races around the world, which encourage participants to get involved and contribute through prestigious events. The *Global Big Day*, *Great Backyard Bird Count*, *Christmas Bird Counts*, and the *Campus Bird Count* in India, are limited time-frame events of around two to three days in which birders can participate and contribute their sightings lists. These events incorporate the use of leaderboards and awards in order to motivate competition among birdwatchers. The data generated through these events goes into the preparation of detailed reports and informing public policy, such as the *State of India's Birds* report, prepared by Bird Count India, which relies heavily on citizen science-generated data.

#### 4.4.2 Digital Field Guides

Another departure from the traditional practices in birdwatching is the use of digital field guides. Previously, birdwatchers depended on often bulky books to use to make notes about their sightings, as well as to look up the birds they encounter. While traditional field guides still comprise a great source of high-quality information, the recent use of electronic field guides in the form of apps has made their use in the field redundant. Field guide apps not only save space and result in smaller kits for the birdwatchers to carry, they also are much more convenient to use owing to their quick search and auto-identification features.

#### 4.4.3 Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) in Birdwatching

The application of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technology has taken the participant immersion aspect of birdwatching further than ever before. Users can now point their phones at a bird and receive immediate inputs regarding the species identity, as well as information about the behaviour and ecology of the respective birds. *Merlin* by eBird, *Seek* by iNaturalist, and *Bird Watch AR* are platforms that have incorporated Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality technology in order to enhance users' birding experience. Apps such as *Merling* and *BirdNET* also allow the real-time recording and identification of bird sounds. Users simply have to download the respective 'packages' for the location they are in, and begin recording for immediate bird sound identification.

#### 4.4.4 Remote Birding Through Live Streams

As with the majority of normal human activity, the covid pandemic severely limited birdwatching activity across the globe. Birdwatchers who were able to observe avifauna in their backyards or in the vicinity of their homes were considered the lucky ones. One major outlet to this was the growth in the popularity of 'remote birding' consisting of the live streaming of bird nests, bird feeders, as well as fountains and bird baths. *Explore.org* is one such online platform

that saw rapid growth in popularity during this period. Today, years after the pandemic, remote birding through live streams is still popular, especially among those who want to observe the behaviour of birds in other parts of the world, without the intention of actually travelling all the way to those places. Additionally, live footage from bird nests gave even experienced birders something new to observe, as much of the activity within bird nests are out of sight for birdwatchers.

## 5. Discussion

Creativity and imagination are deeply intertwined in birdwatching, both as a local leisure activity, and as a driving force behind global travel. Every step in the process by which birdwatching is experienced as a leisure and travel product has been refined over the years, owing no small debt to the human imagination. From the conceptualization of the final experience, the development of birding areas and their supporting infrastructural components, the creation and marketing of the plethora of core and ancillary services, the designing of immersive and entertaining experiences, to the post-consumption sharing of birding activities that further feeds into the cycle, each aspect is greatly improved by the application of creativity.

Innovations in infrastructure have given birdwatching a wider reach, as well as making the activity more inclusive. Infrastructural components such as elevated canopy walks allow birdwatchers an unhindered and intimate eye-level view of birds, enhancing birder experiences. This marks a departure from the long-held necessity of having to look up into the canopy from the forest floor. This is particularly important for those birders who want to sight species that are very rarely seen below the canopy. Similarly, advancements in the construction of hides and blinds, with better concealment, and more effective soundproofing, also reduces the behavioural impacts that the presence of humans has on birds, allow them to go about their daily lives. Innovations in accessibility of destinations have made birding more inclusive, bringing the differently abled into the fold. Similarly, nature-based modes of accommodation, such as eco-lodges, bring together sustainable architecture with functionality and user application. The usage of sustainable, locally-sourced materials, environmentally inspired design, and wildlife-friendly landscaping techniques, are all made possible through imaginative design and development.

Perhaps the aspect of birdwatching and avitourism that is most enhanced by the application of the imagination, field tours by birdwatching guides are transformed into deeply enriching and unforgettable experiences through the art of creative storytelling. The creation of compelling narratives is achieved by bringing together science, mythology and folklore, as well

as personal anecdotes of the guides and naturalists. Such an incorporation of storytelling techniques enables the forging of emotional bonds between birdwatchers and the birds they encounter.

Birdwatching destinations as well as private service providers have increasingly turned to creativity to differentiate their offerings from those of their competitors. Game-based birdwatching tours, engaging activities, thematic-based tours, photography centric tours, and night-time birds are a few of the way in which this is achieved by birdwatching destinations and service providers. Bird festivals and allied events are also such tools that producers use to draw large groups of birdwatchers over fixed cycles. In recent times, several birdwatching tours and events have placed the inclusion of local communities in their activities. The reasons for this are manifold: it allows them to draw from traditional knowledge, which is by its very nature, localised and distinct for other regions; it helps involve the local inhabitants, providing employment options, raising the standard of livelihoods, as well as incentivising the communities to engage in the conservation of local environments; and it serves as an additional motivation for a global birdwatching community that is increasingly particular about sustainability and inclusion.

Marketing strategies implement the creative use of media, visual storytelling, and leverage social media effectively in innovative ways to reach consumers. Visually-appealing documentaries about destinations, specialised tours, and species, interactive social media campaigns involving digital storytelling and collaborations with influencers are used to strengthen brand presence in the birdwatching market. Another aspect of birdwatching and avitourism that is, in essence, born and nurtured in the imagination is technology. Recent advances in technology, leading to the contemporary heavily tech-dependend way of life, have also greatly influenced birdwatching over the last couple of decades. Digital field guides, AI-powered bird identification features that incorporate Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR), are now commonplace, and essential parts of the contemporary birdwatcher's toolkit.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has sought to serve as a review of the multitude of ways in which creativity and imagination are enmeshed in the very fabric of birdwatching as a global leisure activity. By analysing various forms of media, such as journal articles, books, websites, newspapers, magazines, brochures, and other promotional material related to birdwatching, this study has identified major channels through which creativity and the imagination are expressed in the

production and consumption of birdwatching and avitourism. We identify *destination management, marketing and promotion, interpretation, and technological applications* as the channels where imagination and creativity are most strongly expressed. However, this study is limited by its lack of focus on the post-experience storytelling of birdwatchers, most commonly expressed through social media posts, photography, and blogs. The authors acknowledge the vital role of creativity in these forms of expression.

As birding and avitourism continue to progress and expand, the scope for creative expression can only grow larger, in the pursuit of ensuring that the activity stays relevant in a marketplace that is increasingly oriented towards producing experiential activities and attractions. Similarly, creative expression can also help bring scientific and conservation related approaches with community-centric sustainability goals. In the long-term, the future of birdwatching, and indeed, of birds and bird habitats, depends on the imaginative fusion of nature, culture, and technology.

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**Citation:** John Henry V. M & Ankathi Raghu. (2025). The Role of Imagination and Creativity in the Production and Consumption of Avitourism. *International Journal of Tourism Research (IJTR)*, 2(1), 54-66.

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