sustainability

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Post-Pandemic Shifts in Pro-Environmental Attitudes and Behaviors in a Marine Protected Area

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Abstract: Interest in understanding environmental attitudes and behaviors after traumatic events has been widely studied, but research specific to the COVID-19 pandemic has yielded inconclusive results. This study addresses a gap by exploring the relationship between COVID-19 and pro-environmental behavior (PEB) in marine protected areas (MPAs), which are vital for preserving marine ecosystems and biodiversity. We focus on scuba divers' environmental attitudes and behaviors within an MPA, using a mixed methodology that combines surveys based on the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) scale with covert participant observation. Our findings indicate a moderate increase in pro-environmental concerns post-pandemic, particularly regarding nature's fragility. However, a gap remains between expressed attitudes and actual behaviors, with notable differences in pro-ecological behavior during leisure activities compared to behavior at home. Additionally, risk perception related to COVID-19 has gained prominence, often overshadowing environmental concerns. This study contributes to a better understanding of environmental attitudes and behaviors in the context of MPAs during the ongoing social changes post-COVID-19. These insights can guide more sustainable management of MPAs and inform future research, which should further explore these trends in similar contexts.

Keywords: pro-environmental behavior; sustainable development; new ecological paradigm; pro-ecological attitudes; ethnography; marine protected area

Citation: Vila, M.; Costa, G. Post-Pandemic Shifts in Pro-Environmental Attitudes and Behaviors in a Marine Protected Area. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 7410. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16177410

Academic Editor: Giacomo De Carolis

Received: 28 July 2024
Revised: 22 August 2024
Accepted: 26 August 2024
Published: 28 August 2024

1. Introduction

The aftermath of crises or traumatic events has been extensively researched. Changes that occur following such crises, whether gradual or radical, imply notable shifts in social, economic, political, and environmental dynamics. These changes can be categorized based on their association with formal responses, such as government actions, legal measures, and the restructuring of organizations, as well as informal responses, which often involve local-level actions by individuals, groups, and households [1]. Additionally, these consequences include shifts in societal norms, new belief systems [2], long-term changes in consumer behavior leading to new preferences [3], and enduring changes in people's values and attitudes toward sustainable practices [4,5].

Expectations of a shift toward more sustainable practices followed the traumatic event of the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasized the deep interdependence between humanity and biodiversity, revealing vulnerabilities at the interface of human and natural systems, highlighting the environmental limits of human activities and bringing attention to the importance of sustainable consumption. The COVID-19 crisis was viewed as an opportunity to curb excessive consumption and, in turn, reduce the depletion of the planet's finite resources [6,7]. It was foreseen as the transition to a sustainable future, similarly to previous global crises or the current climate crisis [8–10]. The pandemic generated disruptions with respect to consumption, changes in habits and priorities, and

ongoing societal challenges [11–14] that call for actions that are more socially responsible, environmentally friendly, and caring for the wider society [15,16].

During the pandemic, sustainability in general, and in certain sectors such as tourism in particular, increased its relevance because it was strongly affected by measures meant to counteract the pandemic, such as restricted mobility and social distancing [9]. COVID-19 reinforced the idea that human activity, behavior, and attitudes towards the environment are some of the causes of ecological degradation [17–19]. Consequently, the post-COVID-19 academic literature has shown a growing interest in understanding the attitudes towards environmental issues and how they affect behavior, and this can contribute to a more sustainable development [20]. Academic research has shown that the pandemic facilitated changes across various dimensions related to sustainable development, including an increased emphasis on environmental stewardship [21], a shift towards more environmentally sustainable consumption [22], and a rise in expenditure towards pro-environmental and sustainable products [23].

Pro-environmental behavior (PEB), understood as "any behavior intended by the individual to have a positive impact on the environment" [24] (p. 14), is critical regarding this needed understanding of the attitudes toward environment and is essential to ensure environmental sustainability. PEB has been widely studied to better understand how humans relate to the environment and to propose actions that could be used to encourage people to live more sustainably [25–27]. Different studies have focused on classifying both behaviors and intentions underlying behaviors into typologies. One relevant example of the former is the classification between: environmental activism; non-activist behaviors in the public sphere; private sphere environmentalism; and other environmentally significant behaviors [28]. Another well-known typology [29] recognizes four types of sustainable behavior: pro-ecological, frugal, equitable, and altruistic. Other studies suggest two categories of behaviors: personal practices, which are focused on the private sphere; and high- or low-commitment civic actions [24,30,31]. Intentions have also been an object of study [27,32]; they can be explained by external factors, personal characteristics related to demographic variables [33], and personality aspects like attitude, personal capability, habit, and routine or an individual's level of environmental knowledge [34–36].

Different terms such as green behavior, pro-environmental or pro-ecological behavior, environmentally significant behavior, or environmentally friendly behavior have been used in the literature, often with similar meanings. Environmental behavior is used in general in this article, and the term ecological is treated as part of the environmental problems. Nevertheless, the term ecological will be used similarly to how the authors referenced in this article have used it [37,38].

Previous studies have proposed different measures for pro-ecological orientations, such as unidimensional or multi-dimensional constructs, and some have also analyzed the influence of factors such as gender, nationality, or household income on attitudes towards tourism and the environment [39–41]. Three measures have become the most widely used [42]: the ecology scale [43], the environmental concern scale [44], and the new ecological paradigm (NEP) scale [39,45]. The NEP scale by Dunlap [39] examines the attitudes, beliefs, or worldviews of people with respect to the natural environment. The NEP scale was originally proposed by Dunlap and Van Liere in 1978 [45] and was later revised in 2000 [39], and it is considered an indicator of pro-environmental orientation. Environmental concern represents "the degree to which people are aware of environmental problems and indicate a willingness to contribute personally to their solution" [46] (p. 485). It refers to "the evaluation of environmental issues including general attitudes, emotional beliefs or worries about environmental problems, and the importance of consequences of environmental problems for oneself, others, and the biosphere" [47] (p. 122). The NEP scale is among the most widely used and well-validated instruments for assessing environmental worldviews via individuals' psychological factors relative to the environment [39,42,48]. It aims to unveil a broad spectrum of ecological viewpoints and environmental items to verify environmental concerns [49]. The original NEP scale consisted of 12 items based

on 4-point Likert scale responses [45]. The new NEP scale consists of five dimensions as a reflection of the five components of ecological worldviews: limits to growth, anti-anthropocentrism, the fragility of nature's balance, rejection of exceptionalism, and the possibility of an ecocrisis. Each dimension is measured by 3 items (15 items in total). The NEP was found to be positively related to self-reported environmental behaviors [50], suggesting that the individual's ecological conception of the world is a consistent predictor of environmental behavior.

Within this context, the relationship between PEB and COVID-19 has been studied from different perspectives, evaluating the impact of the pandemic with respect to how people become involved in such activities, the consumers' perceptions, and the change in their behavior [6,17,51]. In the sphere of pro-environmental consumption, some studies pointed out that the pandemic was associated with an increase in pro-environmental consumption [52,53]. According to Dangelico et al. [52], various changes regarding sustainable consumption occurred during the pandemic that can be summarized as an overall increase in PEB, increased awareness of the impact of human behavior on the environment, and a higher concern for environmental problems. Nevertheless, other studies such as Urban and Kohlova [54], demonstrated that the pandemic had no uniform effect on PEB and environmental attitudes. Moreover, Iwinska et al. [55] refer to some studies that showed that the pandemic was detrimental to consumers' pro-environmental behavior, though the respondents indicated strong intentions to adopt eco-friendlier practices when the pandemic was over.

MPAs are an interesting field to study PEB as they play a key role in managing measures to safeguard marine ecosystems and biodiversity [56]. Their purpose is to protect marine habitats and the variety of life that they support by placing limits on human activity. In this regard, our main objective is to explore and gain an understanding of the pro-ecological behavior and/or attitude of scuba divers visiting the Medes Islands, one of the main MPAs in the Western Mediterranean, after COVID-19. The case of the PEB of scuba divers in MPAs has been infrequently studied [17]. The purpose of our study is to contribute to the research on the relationship between COVID-19 and PEB in the case of MPA, as the results to date are inconclusive.

As a nature-based activity, PEB intentions of scuba divers have been determined as a two-factor construct comprising low- and high-effort PEBs [57]. Low-effort PEBs refer to behaviors that require a lower commitment to undertake the activities (e.g., recycling), while high-effort PEBs indicate behaviors that comparatively require more time and attention (e.g., volunteering time for conservation projects). Such a two-factor classification of PEBs has been subsequently employed and validated [58,59], confirming the suitability of using this classification in sustainability research.

Finally, based on the assumption that environmental concerns and attitudes may be relevant for influencing PEB, as suggested by previous research [60–62], some authors suggested a better understanding is needed with respect to attitudes during vacations or leisure time [27] and differences between residents and non-residents [63]. There is a general agreement [64] that pro-environmental behavior may not be solely determined by a pro-environmental orientation even though the latter is a necessary condition to achieve it. Nevertheless, according to prior studies, attitudes, and orientation, together with place attachment and commitment to the environment and its conservation, are determinants of PEB [32,65].

2. Materials and Methods

To achieve our objective of exploring the trends of pro-environmental concerns and behaviors in the case of the activity of scuba diving carried out in a marine protected area, our study consisted of two phases. The first phase took place in 2018. Then, COVID-19 occurred during the exploitation of the results, and after COVID-19, the research team decided to carry out the second phase with a similar sample to obtain a longitudinal view of the process. The study consisted of surveys and ethnography. A substantial number

of empirical studies on environmental attitudes or behavior hinged on a cross-sectional quantitative survey, in which data may be biased and may not represent an individual's actual behavior. Field observation methods, longitudinal studies, qualitative approaches, and gathering data in situ require more funding, time, and effort during the preparation but proved to be a closer proxy for measuring one's intention [17,66].

Surveys were performed at the Medes Islands (Costa Brava, Spain) to analyze changes in scuba divers' ecological perceptions after COVID-19. They constitute one of the principal MPAs in the Western Mediterranean. Scuba diving represents up to 70% of the gross domestic product for some villages. Located in the region of Costa Brava in Catalonia, Spain, it is a small archipelago formed by seven islets and several coral reefs. It has spectacular marine life due to its privileged position, its geological form, the influence of the wind, and the northern currents that bring in deep water. Protection of the marine area dates back to 1983, with a prohibition of fisheries and the extraction of live marine resources in a zone of 75 m around the islands; this protection was extended in 1990, establishing the Marine Partial Nature Reserve. Moreover, in 2010, the reserve was transformed into a much larger marine and terrestrial natural park, allowing integrated regulation and protection of the area [67].

Ethnography was used to carry out an in-depth exploration in a real situation, consistently with contemporary qualitative and inductive methods where the purpose was to share and examine on-the-ground activities and behavioral patterns [68,69]. The use of ethnography was conducted following Fielding and Fielding [70] and Blaikie [71], prioritizing the exploration of behavior and language. Triangulation techniques were employed to gain a deeper understanding of the research subject, aiming for greater insight rather than to validate and objectify its interpretation [72,73]. The combination of surveys and ethnography allowed researchers to obtain a more complete vision of action in its context, overcoming the weakness of each methodology.

2.1. NEP Scale Surveys

In the first part of the survey, we asked respondents about their agreement or disagreement with the 15 statements/items from the NEP scale. We used the 5-Point Likert scale, with 5 being "strongly agree" and 1 being "strongly disagree". The questionnaire stated the following: "Listed below are statements about the relationship between humans and the environment. For each one, please indicate whether you: strongly agree (SA); mildly agree (MA); are unsure (U); mildly disagree (MD); strongly disagree (SD)". According to the wording of the questions, agreement with odd-numbered items indicates a pro-ecological view, and disagreement with the seven even-numbered items indicates a pro-ecological worldview [39]. In the second part of the questionnaire, demographic questions were asked. Because of the variety of respondents, questionnaires were designed in four languages: we used previous versions that were in English [39] and French [74]; Catalan and Spanish translations were carried out by authors and double-checked by a linguistic expert.

Data were collected randomly from scuba divers at the Medes Islands from June to September 2018 and again from June to September 2022 using paper questionnaires. Hence, the sample consisted of two groups that were surveyed after their diving experience. The first group is called "pre-COVID" with 116 scuba divers, and the second group is called "post-COVID" with 82 divers. Data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0. The main characteristics of our sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the sample.

In Percentages	Gender		Age			Nationality		
	Male	**Female**	**18–29**	**30–39**	**>40**	**Spanish**	**French**	**Other**
pre-COVID	61	39	22	47	31	58	33	9
post-COVID	59	41	31	40	29	65	25	10

2.2. Cover Participant Ethnography

Longitudinal ethnography was used to allow immersive ethnographic fieldwork to be conducted over an extended period or via appropriately timed revisits [75,76]. It was temporarily built in, with a specific focus on change and considering the future at the outset [77,78]. The specific method used was participant observation [79,80] to achieve a more interactive analysis of the collected information. The essence of the method is that the researcher observes the subject of research by directly participating or as part of the studied population. In our study, the researchers observed, noted, and recorded; and then described, analyzed, and interpreted people and their interactions to obtain a systematic image of their behavior. Researchers acted as covert participants to carry out unobtrusive data collection and to access the data without revealing their presence [81], concealing their identity to assume another role [82]. Observation as a covert participant has generated various debates in different fields of the social sciences, but it reduces effects on the natural behavior of participants [83,84]. The researchers of this study behaved according to ethical standards to safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants [85–87], not recording the conversations but only taking notes before and after the experiences.

To enhance the understanding of the research subject, we have utilized triangulation techniques [88]: data triangulation with visual and verbal data; investigator triangulation with interpretation of the collected data conducted by different researchers; and explicit triangulation by combining field observations with interviews conducted with scubas after the activity. A Repeated Cross-Sectional (RCS) survey design [89,90] was used. This type of survey design involves asking for the same information to an independent sample at each wave. Thus, it involves the use of two groups of individuals from the same population at two different time points. The primary motivation behind this design is the ability to measure gross change at the element level, making it particularly suitable for studying transitions, such as those investigated in the context of the COVID effect. The use of the repeated cross-sectional design is well-established in the literature, and specifically in studies related to COVID-19 [91–94].

This study was carried out in the field [95], employing what other researchers have called "wet ethnography" [96]. The two researchers that participated in the ethnographic study were able to observe social processes as they occurred. Data were generated during an inductive and iterative process; that is, data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously, forming ideas based on some data, and then tested and refined. Primary data were collected during the two pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods, as mentioned before. Researchers interacted with 178 scuba divers who used the services of 3 different operators (named for the purpose of the study: US, RM, and LI) in the area; they participated in 8 tours, with 4 tours during each period, which amounted to around 72 h in various settings: the entire activity lasts 8 h, including the blowing bubble hours plus purely social hours. Details of the operator companies; the used code, dates, and corresponding period; and a description of the participants for each tour are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant profiles.

Operator	Group Code	Date	Period	Number of Scuba Divers in the Group	Nationality (in Decreasing Ordered of Presence in the Group)	Scuba Divers with Previous Experience in Medes
US-1	A1	25 May 2018	Pre-COVID	34	France, Spain, The Netherlands, Italy	6
US-2	A2	31 May 2018		23	France, Spain, Germany, The Netherlands, Italy, Portugal	11
LI-1	A3	8 June 2018		31	Spain, UK, France, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Russia	9
RM-1	A4	14 June 2018		21	Spain, France, UK, Portugal, Italy	5
US-3	B1	21 May 2022	Post-COVID	29	France, Spain, The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Italy	11
US-4	B2	27 May 2022		27	Spain, Germany, France, The Netherlands, Italy	9
LI-2	B3	11 June 2022		39	France, Spain, The Netherlands, Italy	12
RM-2	B4	17 June 2022		29	Spain, France, UK, Germany, Poland	11

3. Results

3.1. Surveys

Considering previous studies [39,41], a pro-ecological orientation is defined as the sum of the relative frequency of the two highest answers: strongly agree (SA) and agree (A) for odd items and strongly disagree (SD) and disagree (D) for even items. Higher indices show higher pro-ecological attitudes. Subsequently, any significant variations between the pro-ecological orientation results obtained pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 (see Table 3) were analyzed, and the overall pattern shows a moderate increase. The ceiling effect from this modest increase may be due to the already strong pro-ecological responses obtained before the COVID-19 lockdown. Taking the 85% confidence level ($s < 0.125$) in Kendall's Tau b test, we observed 9 items that showed significant variations (items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 15).

Table 3. Pro-ecological orientation. Variations between pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19.

Item Description	Item Number	Pro Ecological	
		Pre-COVID	Post-COVID
Limits of growth			
We are approaching the limit of the number of people the earth can support	1	76.7	84.1
The earth has plenty of natural resources if we just learn how to develop them	6	12.1	13.4
The earth is like a spaceship with very limited room and resources	11	61.2	63.4
Anti anthropocentrism			
Humans have the right to modify the natural environment to suit their needs	2	64.7	70.7
Plants and animals have as much right as humans to exist	7	93.1	90.2
Humans were meant to rule over the rest of nature	12	63.8	67.1
Fragility of nature balance			
When humans interfere with nature to often produces disastrous consequences	3	75.9	85.4
The balance of nature is strong enough to cope with the impacts of modern industrial nations	8	76.7	86.6
The balance of nature is very delicate and easily upset	13	95.7	96.3
Rejection of exceptionalism			
Human ingenuity will ensure that we do NOT make the earth unlivable	4	70.7	64.6
Despite our special abilities humans are still subject to the laws of nature	9	54.3	62.2
Humans will eventually learn enough about how to be able to control it	14	60.3	70.7
Possible ecocrisis			
Humans are severely abusing the environment	5	93.1	93.9
The so called "ecological crisis" facing humankind has been greatly exaggerated	10	89.7	82.9
If things continue on their present course, we will soon experience a major ecological catastrophe	15	78.4	81.7

As an overall result, pro-ecological belief increased in most items (except for items 4, 7, and 10). Moreover, the following observations were interesting:

- The endorsement of elements related to the rejection of the exceptionalism dimension changed in different directions, and a decrease in the case of human ingenuity ensures that we do not make Earth unlivable.
- Most relevant increases in pro-ecological orientation correspond to the fragility of the natural balance (items 3 and 8).
- In addition, item 1 with respect to the reality of the limits to growth has gained adherents even though it is the dimension that demonstrates lower pro-ecological beliefs.

It can be summarized then that the ecological orientations of scuba divers in our sample changed between pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 lockdown, showing a moderate increase in favor of pro-ecological attitudes.

3.2. Ethnography

To understand the ongoing process of social change in an uncertain scenario, in which individuals are "processes of becoming", the results are presented based on the changes observed, involving a dynamic, reflexive process [97].

Our findings highlight the main pro-environmental concerns, insights, and motivations behind scuba divers' behavior observed during the period under study. Moreover, the findings were grouped according to three main trends: an increased discrepancy between attitudes and actual behavior; different reasons for returning to the destination; and divergent behaviors when on vacation. In the following paragraphs, some citations are used to describe the trends; they begin with an identification where GX denotes the code of the tour: A1 to A4 corresponds to the pre-COVID-19 period, while B1 to B4 corresponds to the post-COVID-19 period (see Table 3).

3.2.1. Increasing Discrepancy between Attitudes and Actual Behavior

In our study, the scuba divers' selection of an activity in an MPA does not seem to be mainly motivated by their willingness to protect the fragile nature of the area. The scuba destination and the nature they can see under the water are motivations for them to travel. After the pandemic, which reduced the types of social holidays people can take, people simply wanted to benefit from the destination as much as possible and have a pleasant experience. For example, a participant said the following:

> "No doubt; we scubas are environment oriented. All my friends call me the eco-sustainable-happy guy. It is a whole lifestyle, a way of living."
>
> (A3)

Moreover, she showed us pictures of previous trips to MPAs worldwide.
Other participants from a post-COVID-19 tour said the following:

> "Now, seriously, I want to come back to my previous life, whatever it is, I just want to escape with my buddy… let's talk about the rest in a few years."
>
> (B1)

A small group of French scuba divers from B4 just smiled when they were asked about why they came back after three years until one of them said the following and they all laughed:

> "For the sea and the fishes and their protection, of course!!"

A Spanish couple (B3) listening to the information provided by the dive instructor with respect to the rules and regulations mumbled the following:

> "Ok, ok, just let me finally recover my life and disappear, those fishes have had enough time to be alone, let's play with them a little bit."

The scuba divers from the ethnographic study showed a lower degree of commitment and involvement than expected. They were interested in activities that reflect more general and more relaxed behaviors than safeguarding and improving the destination's resources. This was the case of a group in the A1 tour who, once they arrived at the apartments of the dive operator, checked all local information: All types of local resources and leaflets of eco-centers were looked at, and one building was visited before dinner. Similar insights were captured in other groups both pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19:

> "Guys, remember, we are proud of our positive impact in these islands…"
>
> (A4)

> "Really what I would like nowadays is simply a liveaboard… I prefer to live with divers, eat with them…. enough being worried about the others, and others… now we need an eternal dive with no call."
>
> (B2)

Another diver on the same tour said the following:

"Buff. . .. Now no more societal sunlight please, we suffered enough. . ."

The divers shared their personal information during the trip: where they came from, transport used, and other locations previously visited. Someone said the following:

"Guys, it looks like we are downsizing...closer, cheaper, faster, no more paradises. . . even no fly time!"

(B1)

When the instructor for the B4 tour talked about the impact divers have on the MPA, two couples just nodded and threw their heads back. And one of them mumbled the following:

"Too late, buddy, too late, today we know we just enjoy."

3.2.2. Reasons for Returning to the Destination

Divers talked a lot about preferences for travel destinations that showed modified behavior. COVID-19 influenced perceived health risks, the perception of uncertainty, and travel anxiety. The divers indicated that they preferred short-haul destinations within their own country or nearby. They became aware of the advantages of their region again, including nearby countries. They modified their perception regarding the need to fly somewhere to participate in nice diving activities or to see some pristine coral reefs. The criteria used for choosing the final diving location are still the evaluation of prices, climate, and facilities offered, especially in mass tourism markets in which cost is the salient characteristic or the safety of the destination. Within this framework, pro-environmental alternatives are likely to be only prioritized once the other main reasons are satisfied.

A group (A4) was sharing pictures of destinations that they visited during the last 3 years: Caribe, Thailand, and Belize. They began a kind of game listing how many of them have been in each destination and voting for the best place. During this game, a Spanish man said the following:

"What a long list, we have to keep mixing both the Costa Brava with these international destinations."

A French lady on the B2 tour began to talk about the places that she wants to visit, and somebody said the following:

"That was the past, let's face it, things change, let's enjoy what we have now. . . a back roll is a back roll."

"We have adapted...short trips, under control, known places, long weekends. . . let's see what happens in the future."

(B1)

3.2.3. Divergent Behavior on Vacation

Previous studies have discussed the relationship between PEB at home and PEB on vacation, with different conclusions probably due to the context-specific characteristics of the PEB [27]. It is commonly accepted that vacation induced PEB intentions are rarely transformed into actual long-term PEB [98].

Our research suggests that the difference between behavior at home and behavior on vacation is maintained and appears to be even higher after COVID-19. PEB at home is more relevant than its role on vacation because it requires time and money or the sacrifice of comfort, but scuba divers' needs are more focused on enjoyment. The consumption lifestyle at home implies that routines for the sake of environmental protection are perceived as a reduction in comfort. As COVID-19 was a traumatic and long event, it encouraged scuba divers to view vacations and scuba diving as somehow an indulgence. It increased the need for extraordinary events relative to which rules and restrictions can be forgotten not only in terms of sanitary care but also in terms of environmentally respectful behavior. A

holiday culture, in a hedonistic manner, was noticed in our field observations, and these would probably not have been accepted in the scuba divers' place of origin.

An excerpt from our field notes of the A4 group includes the reaction of some divers who watched how others used an illegal anchor; finally, one shouted at them:

"You would never do that at home, right?"

They all stood up while observing this group of individuals who did not even answer them, and they just nodded as a sign of disapproval.

Another excerpt described a Spanish man talking with his wife while sailing to the first stop for diving:

"Come on, let's try the Yamaha DPV. . .I know, I know, I said I'd never use one. . . this will a one in my life pure pleasure seeking..."

(B2)

4. Discussion

This paper sought to contribute to the research agenda regarding scuba divers' pro-environmental behaviors. Because activities such as scuba diving are important drivers of ecological processes and in line with the growing interest in understanding the perceptions of environmental issues and how these perceptions may affect behaviors regarding the environment, we carried out a study to explore the environmental behavior and attitudes of scuba divers at the Medes Islands. This study used a longitudinal approach, and we studied changes after the traumatic COVID-19 pandemic. The study combines two methodological approaches, surveys using the NEP scale and ethnography, to better explain the phenomenon under study. This study was exploratory and aimed to generate insights relative to what, if any, changes in pro-ecological attitudes and behaviors have been observed after COVID-19 based on the case of scuba diving in an MPA.

During COVID-19, many expectations were in place regarding the possibility of accelerating the transformation of tourism into a sustainable activity, including changes in traditional business models that are often built around the use of natural resources [9,10] as scuba diving. Despite the severity of COVID-19, the results of our research suggest that attitudes are only slightly more pro-environmental after the pandemic. Changes in behaviors are not so aligned with this idea, and, consequently, it is not clear that there is a genuine intention to pursue a transition into a more sustainable approach to the marine ecosystem.

Some of the trends appearing in our research study have already been identified in prior research [17], as detailed in the Introduction section; however, the scenario defined after the pandemic modifies some of these trends and specifically leads to their prominent role in actual scuba divers' behavior. Analyzing the attitudes obtained from the surveys relative to our sample, there is an increased pro-ecological orientation observed in most items. It is worth mentioning the case of the fragility of the natural balance and a higher perception of the possibility of an ecocrisis. The balance of nature seems to be at risk, and humans are abusing the environment according to the scuba divers in our sample. But there is less agreement on the importance of the limits of growth and the acceptance of humans being subject to the laws of nature.

The scuba divers mentioned that they increasingly look for responsible experiences after the pandemic, but this positive attitude regarding environmentally benign activities is not always reflected in their actions. Pro-environmental behavior is frequently subordinated to their desires to escape and to seek authentic experiences, and this trend has increased after the pandemic [51]. The high-effort PEB [57]—representing a stronger commitment and more active participation in actions that protect and enhance a destination's environment, biodiversity, and sustainability—does not seem to be their priority. Attitudes of environmental activism were observed in the public sphere, such as those who preach the virtues of responsibility and/or portray community activism behavior, but they are conscious of the fact that human impacts can be detrimental to survival.

The rational choice framework is now stronger after the pandemic, emphasizing self-interest and more utilitarian aspects instead of frameworks stressing altruistic moral or pro-social motivation: concerns for other species, for local people, for the next generation, or entire ecosystems. Following the main classifications [29], one can observe a trend towards pro-ecological or frugal behaviors but not altruistic ones. In any case, behavior is more about personal practice than civic actions [30].

After the pandemic, risk perception played a relevant role in the destination's choice [99]: mass tourism destinations were avoided, shorter and closer-to-home destinations were preferred, and the type of activity that was proven to be able to cope better with the consequences of the pandemic or dramatic events was considered as a favorite. Also, known destinations may provide a higher level of safety. In this context, according to our observations, there has been a change in priorities when choosing a destination, and a pro-environmental attitude is not the most important criterion.

COVID-19 incentivized indulgence during leisure time, the need for relaxation, joy, admiration of nature, and enjoyment increased according to our sample; thus, the attention focused on the environment was not a priority. The low level of commitment and involvement observed in divers led to low-effort behaviors: those that require less time, less attention, and fewer risks. Pessimism leads to more rational choices and utilitarian aspects. Further studies could clear up the question regarding the pessimism [100] that was generated by the pandemic.

All in all, this research has allowed us to explore possible adjustments in both pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors in the period under study. The different results obtained from the surveys and the ethnography—the first being increased pro-ecological attitudes after COVID-19 and the latter being increased indulgence with less concern for the effects of their presence in an MPA—must be read with the ceiling effect in mind: attitudes and behaviors before COVID-19 in the case studied were strongly pro-ecological; therefore, the conclusions must be interpreted from the peculiarities of scuba diving practice, which consciously contributes to the conservation of the MPA.

To conclude, there is a consensus that COVID-19 could have been an opportunity to correct some undesirable situations that affect the sustainable development of our planet, but there are still many necessary actions to be taken. Scuba diving can contribute in many positive ways to the sustainable development of a destination, but it may also have damaging effects on MPAs; the necessary, sustainable, and effective management of destinations requires thorough measures, such as establishing PEB programs for both residents and non-residents, and collaboration between stakeholders. A better understanding of divers' behaviors and attitudes should facilitate these measures.

Finally, our study is not without limitations. The fact that the data are situation-specific and difficult to replicate, together with the possible observer/researcher bias, comprises a threat to the validity of the observation. As in all ethnographic studies, we dealt with observer bias and tried to address it by checking all observation notes against a second researcher to see if there was agreement. Also, the notes were reviewed after each observation and then tested and refined. Studying a larger sample could also improve our knowledge.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.V. and G.C.; methodology, M.V. and G.C.; software, M.V. and G.C.; validation, M.V. and G.C.; formal analysis, M.V. and G.C.; investigation, M.V. and G.C.; resources, M.V. and G.C.; data curation, M.V. and G.C.; writing—original draft preparation, M.V. and G.C.; writing—review and editing, M.V. and G.C.; visualization, M.V. and G.C.; supervision, M.V. and G.C.; project administration, M.V. and G.C.; funding acquisition, M.V. and G.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research (CUHSR) of ESADE, Ramon Lull University.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects participating in the survey. And it is not applicable for subjects observed in the ethnography as authors were acting as covert participants.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting reported results can be found due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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