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Ethical Issues in Tourist Guiding and Their Possible Solutions

Abstract

Research problem. Tourist guides play an essential part in the tourism sector as mediators of a country's culture, history, and image. Despite their key role in representing national culture and ensuring the quality of tourism services, the ethical challenges they face in professional practice remain insufficiently examined in the scientific literature. There is still a lack of clarity regarding the most prevalent ethical issues encountered by guides and the effective measures for addressing them. *Research object:* ethical problems in the work of tourist guides. *Research aim:* to analyze ethical problems in the work of tourist guides and their possible solutions. *Research methods:* analysis of scientific literature and documents, qualitative research through interviews, quantitative research via written surveys, and data systematization. *Conclusions.* Ethical problems in guiding often include tours led by unqualified persons, dissemination of incorrect information, competition among guides, plagiarism, and remuneration agreements with travel agencies. Both guides and tourism representatives point out key issues such as plagiarism, tax abuse, confidentiality breaches, competition, and conflicts of interest. Ethical behavior is not related to age – both younger and older guides may act unethically. The resolution of ethical dilemmas relies on codes of ethics, international guidelines, and continuous professional development, yet personal responsibility, values, awareness, respect, communication and conflict management skills, as well as the promotion of cultural tolerance remain crucial. To prevent such problems, greater emphasis on ethics in guide training programs and the continuous improvement of professional qualifications is recommended. Ethical standards should serve not only as theoretical statements but also as practical tools to support responsible decision-making.

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Keywords

Tourist Guide, Excursion, Professional Ethics, Ethical issues, Codes of Ethics

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1 Introduction

The relevance of the study. In the tourism sector, which is considered one of the most important channels for disseminating a country's culture, history, and image, tourist guides occupy a unique position. Tourist guides perform essential tasks, such as accompanying tourists on planned routes, providing information about places to visit, and ensuring that visitors have a positive and safe experience (Türkmen, 2023). A guide is not only a provider of information but also an ambassador of the country's culture, creating the first impression for both local visitors and foreign tourists. The profession involves constant interaction with stakeholders in the tourism industry, making the

guide a key contact person for many individuals and organizations (Çokal & Yılmaz, 2020; Türkmen, 2023). Guides communicate with diverse groups of tourists who hold different beliefs, attitudes, and views, some of whom may make tactless comments or even provoke. According to Yarcın (2007), guides do not always manage to maintain balance in their professional relationships and face various challenges and ethical problems. The competence and ethical behavior of guides directly affect tourist satisfaction, repeat visits, and recommendations (Al Jahwari, Sirakaya-Turk, & Altintas, 2016; Eren, Dedeoğlu, & Okumus, 2024; Lin, Lin, & Chen, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the ethical issues arising in the professional practice of guides and to discuss possible solutions.

This is important for improving the quality of tourism services, strengthening the country's cultural image, and enhancing the prestige of the guiding profession.

The research problem. Issues of professional ethics are particularly relevant in fields that involve direct interaction with people, cultural exchange, and service provision. However, scientific literature predominantly addresses the ethics of other professions or general ethical issues in the tourism sector (Gómez-Alatorre, Cuñado, & Ferrero, 2022; Yarcın, 2007; Türkmen, 2023; Eren, Dedeoğlu, & Okumus, 2024), while the ethical problems of tourist guides and their possible solutions remain insufficiently examined. Consequently, there is a lack of clarity regarding which ethical problems are most common in the work of tourist guides and what measures should be implemented to address them effectively.

The object of the study: ethical problems in the work of tourist guides.

The Aim of the study: to analyze ethical problems in the work of tourist guides and their possible solutions.

Study objectives:

1. To review the theoretical aspects of professional ethics of tourist guides;
2. To identify the main ethical problems in the professional practice of tourist guides;
3. To explore ways of solving ethical problems in the professional activities of tourist guides.

Research methods: analysis of scientific literature and documents, qualitative research through interviews, quantitative research via written surveys, and data systematization.

2 Theoretical Aspects of Professional Ethics of Tourist Guides

The quality of tourist guide services is one of the most important factors for success in the tourism business (Lin, Lin, & Chen, 2017). Guides need to be aware of cultural differences, as they inevitably encounter diverse cultures when leading excursions for foreign tourists. What is considered acceptable and polite behavior in one culture may be intolerable in another, potentially leading to conflict. In addition to professional knowledge and competence, understanding professional ethics is essential for guides. Guides often establish professional associations and organizations in their countries. In many European Union countries, guides have adopted a code of professional ethics (Statkuvienė, 2024). Some guides and associations join the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations and/or the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, adhering to their approved ethical provisions – the Code of Guiding Practice (World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, 2025). Professional guide organizations work to develop principles of professional ethics for guides. Nevertheless, the guiding profession continues to face

various ethical challenges. An ethical problem involves violating accepted behavioral principles and cultural values, causing harm to others, disregarding human rights and equal opportunities, neglecting duties, or demonstrating a lack of responsibility (Pučetaitė, 2016). Every professional should care about the prestige of their profession or organization and commit to acting morally to protect it (Molotkienė, 2022). This is particularly relevant for tourist guides, who are considered ambassadors of their country (Kumar, 2016; Prakapienė & Prakapas, 2012; Stonienė, 2008; Stutzenberger, 2021). Scientific literature addresses several ethical issues that arise in the professional activities of guides, which can be categorized into the following groups:

1. Negligent performance of duties. According to Stonienė (2008), there are qualified professional guides and unqualified or "amateur" guides. "Amateurism" and indifference are incompatible with the guiding profession. Nevertheless, some guides continue to demonstrate negligence in preparing for excursions and prioritize remuneration over professionalism. A guide must always be professionally prepared, provide high-quality excursion services, and engage in continuous professional development (Camarena, 2012; Kumar, 2016). Guides are expected to provide only accurate, verified, up-to-date, and relevant information. They should critically evaluate the literature used to prepare excursions, cross-check facts, consult multiple sources, distinguish between knowledge and opinion, and maintain an impeccable appearance.

2. Excursions by unqualified individuals. Excursions are sometimes conducted by individuals with knowledge but without a formal guiding certification or authorization to lead excursions. Barauskaitė (2012) refers to them as self-taught guides. Excursions conducted by such unqualified persons often disregard established methodologies for preparation and conduct, and participants may receive unreliable or inaccurate information. These excursions undermine the professional reputation of guides and the concept of excursions as a formal service. The Law on Tourism of the Republic of Lithuania (2025) defines the concept of an excursion, emphasizing that it may only be conducted by certified guides.

3. The ethics of beneficial relationships. The ethics of beneficial relationships manifest when guides express gratitude to tourism sector employees or colleagues for providing excursion offers, when they agree to work for less pay in exchange for receiving more excursion bookings from certain travel agencies, or when tourists are referred to colleagues with whom the guide has a personal preference. The ethics of beneficial relationships are evident when guides fail to avoid conflicts of interest. According to Kumar (2016), competing service providers and sellers in tourist regions encourage guides to direct tourist groups to them and may reward the guide by returning a portion of the amount paid by the tourists. Schmeer-Sturm

(2012) notes that such arrangements are an additional source of income for guides, often coordinated with souvenir shops or restaurants. Bruckner (2021) describes this as a dishonest practice and advises guides not to accept such gifts.

4. Tax abuse. Guides provide services after obtaining a business license or conducting individual activities, paying income tax as well as social and health insurance contributions (State Tax Inspectorate, 2025). However, some guides accept cash payments without issuing proper invoices or issue them on incorrect dates. Guides must comply with all tax and insurance regulations. Free excursions for tips may appear altruistic, but Navalón-García and Mínguez (2021) describe them as a "disguised" business, generating variable income from tips collected at the end of the excursion.

5. Failure to observe the principles of ecological ethics. Ecological ethics involves the moral obligation to protect the natural environment and preserve conditions necessary for life (Kalenda, 2007). Guides should prioritize nature conservation, draw participants' attention to harmful behaviors, encourage resource preservation, and ensure compliance with public order. They must act responsibly, care for the sustainability of the planet (Camarena, 2012), and set an example for excursion participants (Bruckner, 2021; Kumar, 2016).

6. Competition between guides. Sometimes guides compete with each other, avoid sharing information or deliberately withhold it, create discord, or act in a biased or subjective manner. According to Bruckner (2021), guides should not make public statements about excursions conducted by their colleagues. Nevertheless, competition among guides often manifests through public criticism of a colleague's work or through belittling, insulting, or slandering behavior.

7. Protecting the country's image. The guide's behavior and language shape visitors' perceptions of the country and its image (Kumar, 2016). The guide serves as an ambassador for their country, acting as a cultural attaché and demonstrating patriotism (Stonienė, 2008). Every guide must act as an ambassador, refrain from speaking negatively about their country or its leaders, and avoid disparaging the country's image in front of excursion participants. During excursions, guides must comply with the laws, rules, and traditions of the country.

8. Discrimination against colleagues or clients. The country's tourist information centres invite residents to free excursions on various holidays. Guides also attend these excursions for professional development, learning, or personal curiosity. Often, a guide expresses dissatisfaction verbally or non-verbally when a colleague or other guides are attending their excursion. However, Stonienė (2008) emphasizes that every excursion participant must be welcomed and treated respectfully. Discrimination may also

occur toward clients. Guides must pay equal attention to all excursion participants (Kumar, 2016) and show respect to each individual, regardless of age, gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, political ideology, religion, or differing opinions.

9. Application of unethical working methods during excursions. The guide must commit to respecting minors, the vulnerable, and the disadvantaged (Italian Association for Professional Interpretive Nature Guides, 2015). According to Barauskaitė (2012), during an excursion, guides should positively influence the emotions, moods, and communication of participants, creating a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, as irritation or coercive behavior can have a destructive effect. Every guide should use engaging methods for presenting objects and telling stories that are appropriate to the age, knowledge, experience, and abilities of the excursion participants (Stonienė, 2008). However, not all guides invest sufficient time in providing quality service to all groups of participants, nor do they dedicate time to reflecting on the excursion or learning about generational differences.

In summary, ethical behavior by guides has a direct impact on the experience of excursion participants, the quality of excursions, and the reputation of the tourism sector. Ethical issues in guiding most often relate to the accuracy of information, compliance with national laws, respect for the rights and dignity of tourists, the authenticity and preservation of cultural heritage, commercial interests, relationships with colleagues, and social, environmental, and professional responsibility.

3 Ethical issues in the professional practice of tourist guides

In order to analyze ethical issues in the professional activities of guides, a quantitative survey was conducted in Lithuania from October 30 to November 15, 2023. Responses were received from 104 Lithuanian guides (16.3% men and 83.7% women) who lead excursions in Lithuania and abroad. Most participants were between 40 and 69 years old (81.7%), while the smallest group was between 20 and 29 years old (1%). 14.4% of respondents had up to 6 years of guiding experience, whereas 85.6% had been guiding for 6 to 21 years or more.

In parallel, a qualitative study was conducted, consisting of interviews with five informants working in the tourism sector who cooperate with guides and receive feedback from excursion participants about the quality of the excursions and the guides' behavior. Informants' data were coded to preserve confidentiality (Table 1).

The study sought to identify the ethical problems encountered by guides in their work (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 shows that more than half of the surveyed guides have encountered excursions led by unqualified

TABLE 1 Participants of the qualitative study

Institution	Code	Description of activities	Experience working with guides
"X" City Tourism Information Centre	TIC	Organization of excursions, creation of excursion routes	21 years
"X" Museum	M	Supervision of guides, accreditation of guides	12 years
Cruise ship service company	CS	Cruise ship services, excursion route planning, guide services booking, excursion organization	More than 20 years
Inbound travel agency	IT	Finding guides for organised excursions	30 years
Outbound travel agency	OT	Organization of excursions, creation of excursion routes, hiring of guides	5 years

Source: compiled by the author based on qualitative survey data, 2023

individuals – those who have not completed guide training courses or obtained a guide certificate. Nearly half of the respondents reported encountering guides spreading incorrect information, experiencing competition between colleagues, or observing plagiarism of excursion methods or excursions developed and used by other guides. More than a third of survey participants believe that travel agencies coordinate guide remuneration and set the price for excursions. If a guide is dissatisfied with the offered price, another guide is sought. Some agencies pay guides fixed, similar, or identical fees for providing excursion services. A quarter of respondents reported that guides are negligent in their duties and inadequately prepared for excursions. The same proportion indicated that guides use unethical working methods, most often manifested through disrespectful communication with younger participants, raising their voices, or punishing

children for not listening to the guide telling stories. Additionally, a quarter of respondents noted that guides damage the country’s image and interfere with colleagues. When a guide arrives at a tourist attraction and finds a colleague already working there, they should choose a more secluded spot and avoid using a loudspeaker. Likewise, the guide already leading a group should show mutual respect and not interfere with the colleague who has arrived. Slightly less than a quarter of survey participants reported that guides abuse tax regulations, engage in conflicts of interest, and violate confidentiality. Respondents also indicated that guides sometimes discriminate against colleagues or clients and offer rewards to tourism sector employees for providing excursion offers in order to receive more of them in the future. A smaller proportion of survey participants believe that guides fail to fulfill their obligations to guiding organizations,

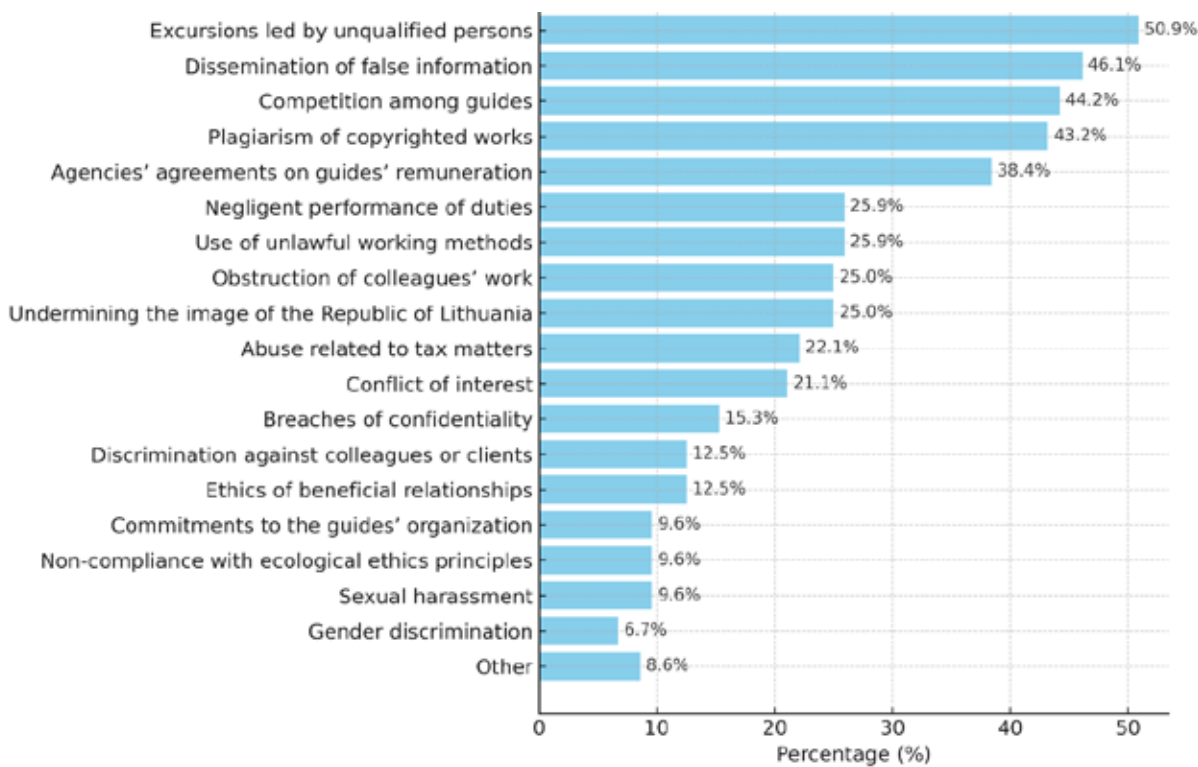


FIGURE 1. Ethical problems in the professional activities of guides

Source: compiled by the author based on quantitative research data, 2023

such as by not following organizational rules or not contributing to organizational activities. According to 9.6% of respondents, guides disregard ecological ethics. In some cases, guides prioritize pleasing their tourist groups over following rules, which leads to violations in national parks or protected sites, such as taking tourists to restricted areas or failing to warn clients about protected plants that must not be picked. According to the survey, 9.6% of respondents have experienced or heard about sexual harassment at work. Guides may encounter harassment from colleagues, group leaders, drivers, travel agency employees, or tourists. Such behavior creates an unpleasant and humiliating environment, including lewd remarks, offensive language, discussions about body shape, unwanted physical contact, and lustful glances. Additionally, 6.7% of respondents reported sexual discrimination. Female guides are sometimes not hired for physically demanding tours, and some travel agencies accommodate a male guide in the same room as a bus driver, which would be impossible for female guides without incurring extra costs. Respondents also mentioned other ethical issues, such as an unwillingness to improve their knowledge and inappropriate clothing. One participant, who has been leading excursions for 1–5 years, is convinced that there are no ethical problems in the work of a guide in general. Considering that this person has not been working as a guide for very long, it can be assumed that they have led only a few excursions and, most likely, have not yet encountered any ethical issues. Three guides with 11 to over 21 years of experience also reported not having encountered any ethical problems in their work. However, the number of excursions conducted does not always correlate with years of experience. Some guides lead only a few excursions

per season, whereas others work actively year-round. Consequently, each guide's experience and exposure to ethical issues may vary. Moreover, ethical issues are subjective – what may be considered a major problem for one guide may seem trivial to another.

It was also of interest to determine what unethical situations tour operators had observed in the work of tourist guides. The number of informants' responses regarding ethical issues of tour guides is presented in Table 2.

Informants reported encountering all of the ethical problems listed in Table 2 in their work as guides, either regularly ('Yes') or occasionally, except for cases in which travel agencies discriminate against guides based on gender when hiring them for specific excursions (canoeing, kayaking, cycling) or car-based tours (guide-driver), and instances in which guides discriminate against tourists (e.g., refusing to lead excursions for people with disabilities or other groups requiring additional preparation). One participant noted that guides sometimes discriminate against colleagues and express significant dissatisfaction when other guides join their excursions. According to the informants, the most common ethical problems in the professional activities of guides are plagiarism of routes and guiding methods created by colleagues (4 'Yes' responses), tax-related misconduct (3 'Yes' responses), and failure to maintain confidentiality agreements with organizations booking excursions (3 'Yes' responses). Most study participants (3) indicated that guides' rhetoric and working methods do not offend the dignity of excursion participants. However, one informant reported that a guide once sprayed children with water during a tour in order to capture their attention. Occasionally, guides undermine the image of the Republic of Lithuania (4), interfere

TABLE 2 Unethical situations in a guide's work

Statements	Yes	No	Occasionally	No response
Guides are negligent in performing their duties	1	1	3	0
Excursions are led by unqualified individuals without a guide certificate	1	2	2	0
Guides provide incorrect or misleading information	2	0	3	0
Guides offer rewards to tour operators or colleagues for providing excursion suggestions	0	2	2	1
Guides fail to avoid conflicts of interest	2	0	2	1
Guides abuse tax issues	3	1	0	1
Guides breach the principle of confidentiality	3	1	0	1
Guides disregard the principles of ecological ethics	0	2	2	1
Guides face sexual harassment	1	1	1	2
Guides compete with each other	2	1	1	1
Guides interfere with the work of their colleagues	1	1	3	0
Guides plagiarize routes created by other colleagues	4	0	1	0
Guides undermine the image of the Republic of Lithuania	0	1	4	0
Guides are discriminated against when hiring for specific tours or tours by car (guide-driver)	0	4	0	1
Guides discriminate against tourists	0	4	0	1
The guide's rhetoric and working methods offend the dignity of the tour participant	1	3	0	1

Source: compiled by the author based on qualitative survey data, 2023

with the work of colleagues (3), perform their duties negligently (3), or provide incorrect, outdated, or unverified information (3). Informants also noted other ethical problems in the work of guides, including failure to wear a guide badge, lack of foreign language skills, overconfidence, irresponsible preparation for excursions, lack of curiosity, tardiness, disloyalty, uncivilized behavior, conflicts, and the consumption of alcoholic beverages or smoking in front of tourists. Barauskaitė (2012), Bruckner (2021), Camarena (2012), and Schmeer-Sturm (2012) similarly emphasize that alcohol consumption and smoking in front of guests should be strictly prohibited.

The study sought to identify the age group of guides who are more likely to behave unethically. Three informants (TIC, IT, CS) did not answer this question. Informant M noted that younger guides tend to be very confident and reluctant to accept criticism. This view was supported by informant OT, who stated that younger guides may refuse to lead an excursion if the excursion organizer objects or provides critical remarks. However, IT noted that older guides with a 'more difficult character' may also behave unethically.

In summary, the most common ethical problems in practical guide work include excursions led by unqualified individuals, the dissemination of incorrect information, competition between guides, and plagiarism of routes prepared by colleagues. Unethical behavior may also arise due to salaries set by travel agencies and internal agreements that can encourage conflicts of interest, tax evasion, or breaches of confidentiality. Organizations that hire guides also report plagiarism of colleagues' routes, abuse of tax regulations, failure to maintain confidentiality, competition among guides, avoidance of conflicts of interest, and dissemination of incorrect information. The study further highlighted issues that are less frequently discussed in the scientific literature, such as sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and non-compliance with organizational rules. Ethical problems are not directly related to age or experience, as both younger and older guides may behave unethically.

4 Possibilities for Addressing Ethical Issues in Guide Activities

Ethical problems in guiding arise for various reasons. They are related to the individual characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, and responsibilities of the guide. When the resolution of ethical dilemmas relies on personal experience, moral convictions, intuition, or subjective assessment of a situation, it may pose risks to the quality of services, the credibility of the country's cultural image, and the sustainable development of the tourism sector. Therefore, it is essential for every guide to be aware of the ethical issues inherent in their professional activities and to be able to address them appropriately

when they arise. In order to avoid ethical dilemmas, guides should obtain all necessary permits to carry out their activities and comply with the laws and regulations of the country. They should act as reliable ambassadors for the country, prepare responsibly for each excursion, constantly update their knowledge, check facts, use reliable sources, clearly distinguish facts from legends, and avoid providing false information. If excursions are led by persons who are not authorized, guides should report this to the responsible authorities. Additionally, guides should avoid conflicts of interest and unethical relationships, fulfill obligations to tourism companies and guide organizations, act in a socially responsible manner, and observe the principles of ecological ethics. They must also avoid harassment and discrimination, ensure equal attention to all tourists, use inclusive communication, select guiding methods appropriate to the age of participants, adhere to fair competition principles, use only ethical working methods during excursions, and create and follow uniform ethical instruments. The more guides agree on uniform professional ethical standards and adhere to them, the less room there is for differing interpretations of the ethical or unethical nature of a situation. International and many national guide organizations have developed ethical guidelines. Codes of ethics and professional standards serve as a framework to assist guides in making responsible decisions in complex situations. However, simply creating and publishing an official document is not sufficient – it is essential to ensure its implementation and effectiveness. A code of ethics must be publicized, regularly updated, and supported by a functional ethical infrastructure. Promoting enabling ethics, moral education, practical application of ethics, and adherence to ethical criteria at work is crucial. While a code of ethics provides principles for moral behavior and helps improve the moral atmosphere, it cannot transform a person prone to wrongdoing into an exemplary guide, prevent all fraud, or prescribe correct behavior for every situation (Paliduskaitė, 2011). Therefore, a guide's professional conscience, values, awareness, and experience remain essential.

According to Beržinskas (2006), the quality of a business is determined by the quality of the people working in it. Paraphrasing this idea, it can be concluded that the quality of excursions depends on the professionalism of the guides leading them. Therefore, the moral and ethical education of guides is essential. It is recommended to organize training on professional ethics, implement educational activities, engage guides creatively in promoting ethical values, and foster their ethical awareness. Through training courses, seminars, and practical activities, guides can analyze real-life situations, develop conflict management and communication skills, and gain a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. Such training enhances their ability to make ethical decisions. Ethical dilemmas and

their possible solutions should also be discussed with future guides during training programs.

In summary, guides must be able to recognize and appropriately resolve ethical dilemmas arising in their professional activities. Such dilemmas are often caused by non-compliance with laws regulating guiding activities, breaches of service agreements with clients, conflict situations, as well as the moral qualities, attitudes, and beliefs of the guide. To ensure ethical conduct, it is recommended to develop uniform ethical documents, adhere to codes of ethics, and promote a shared understanding of professional standards. Equally important are shaping the quality of guiding services, fostering guides' awareness and responsibility, and ensuring respectful and ethical communication with tour participants, colleagues, travel agency staff, and other tourism professionals. Individual responsibility, self-reflection, consultations with colleagues, and recommendations from ethics committees serve as valuable tools for ethical decision-making. Clear and constructive communication, knowledge of rules and cultural norms, and respect for each person help prevent potential conflicts during tours and reduce the likelihood of ethical dilemmas.

5 Conclusions

1. In the tourism sector, guides play a crucial role in communicating with various stakeholders. This diversity of communication requires not only professional knowledge but also a high level of ethical sensitivity and the ability to ensure respectful interaction. Many guides join international or national professional organizations that establish and enforce uniform ethical standards to prevent violations of professional ethics. Nevertheless, various ethical problems may arise in guiding practice, ranging from negligence in performing duties and excursions led by unqualified individuals to conflicts of interest, violations of legislation, tax evasion, disregard for ecological principles, or discrimination. Such issues undermine the prestige of the guiding profession, harm the country's image, and reduce the credibility and sustainability of the tourism sector. Therefore, it is essential for guides to be well-versed in professional ethics, to recognize the ethical dilemmas that may

arise in their activities, and to take measures to avoid them.

2. Guides encounter various ethical problems in their professional activities, which are also observed by tour operators. A good reputation and impeccable behavior are important for all institutions that hire guides. The study revealed ethical issues that are not widely discussed in the scientific literature, such as plagiarism of routes, remuneration agreements between travel agencies, breaches of confidentiality, failure to fulfill obligations to guiding organizations, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. Tourism representatives most often highlight the following ethical problems in the professional activities of guides: plagiarism of routes created by colleagues, abuse of tax regulations, breaches of confidentiality in agreements with organizations booking excursions, competition between guides, and conflicts of interest. According to the guides themselves, the most frequent problems include tours led by unqualified individuals, dissemination of incorrect information, plagiarism of routes or guiding methods created by colleagues, competition among guides, and remuneration agreements between travel agencies. The findings indicate that unethical behavior is not related to age, as both younger and older guides may act unethically.

3. Ethics should not be merely a theoretical declaration but rather a practical guideline to support decision-making in professional guide activities. The resolution of ethical dilemmas can be informed by professional codes of ethics for guides, international guidelines, and systematic professional development programs. These measures provide a formal basis for ethical decision-making, ensure compliance with professional standards, and help harmonize practice criteria in an international context. However, codes of ethics cannot address all ethical issues that arise in the work of a guide; therefore, a guide's personal responsibility, values, awareness, transparency, respect for others, communication skills, conflict management abilities, and promotion of cultural tolerance are essential. Such strategies not only facilitate the resolution of conflicts but also help prevent them from arising. Greater attention should also be given to ethical dilemmas in guide training programs, alongside encouraging the continuous professional development of guides.

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