

A REVIEW: ECOTOURISM AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT

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Abstract

The need to preserve the world's inherent assets for future generation is becoming an essential goal not only for travel and tourism but also for all other industries that used the earth's natural resources. However, tourism, as one of the world's fastest growing industries, has a multitude of impacts, both positive and negative, on the environment. Negative impacts will arise when the level of visitor use is superior to the environment's ability to cope with this use. Positive impact will arise when every tourist understands the real and main concept of environment and sustainable tourism by heart, not just by word. The purpose of this paper, firstly, is to increase the knowledge about some concepts about environment and tourism, sustainable development and tourism, ecotourism, and their relationships.

As awareness and experience of the activity has grown, so has our need for a more comprehensive and detailed definition. This conceptual paper tries to give a brief insight of ecotourism and its potential impact.

Key Words:

Ecotourism, sustainable, impact of ecotourism, possible indicators, resistance, components

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is a confusing term. It is a concept that has its roots in the evolution and reform of tourism planning. It is a term that has been widely contested and hotly debated (Wall, 1997; Orams, 1995) by academics and professionals alike. Depending on one's perspective and priorities – government, tourist, entrepreneur, etc. – it can be viewed as a philosophy, a strategy, a product, a marketing ploy or a form of travel. The net result of two decades of discussion and experience is that there continues to be little agreement over what exactly ecotourism is.

THE EMERGENCE AND INITIAL RESISTANCE TO 'ECOTOURISM'

The combination of historical changes in the environmental movement, the field of sustainable development, and the tourism industry led to the search for alternatives to mass tourism, such as ecotourism. Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin, a member of various Mexican non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is widely credited with coining the term ecotourism, using "ecoturismo" in written correspondences in 1983, and using "ecotourism" in an advertisement for one of his ecological tourism projects in the March- April 1984 edition of American Birds. (Wearing and Neil, 4). He emphasized ecotourism as ecological tourism which could become very important for conservation. (Ibid)

The term was also related to other forms of tourism that were emerging at the time, including "nature tourism," and "low impact tourism." Ecotourism fell between these forms, and was presented as a type of tourism that could both focus on nature and reduce negative environmental impact. Ceballos-Lascuráin could not have predicted the staying power of this term, nor could he have anticipated how much controversy it would spark. Even though ecotourism is now a widely used term and the World Tourism Organization (WTO) has shown that ecotourism and nature-based tourism account for more than 20 percent of total international travel, (Vanasselt) the concept was initially met with skepticism.

Ecotourism was not initially understood or accepted by experts in the environment, tourism, or development fields. These experts questioned whether ecotourism was simply a fad, "a tourism industry marketing exercise that effectively packages 'nature' for affluent urban dwellers to 'experience' a romantic world now lost to us moderns", or "a way for environmentalism to enter the mainstream in the 1990s after losing its impetus in an economic

rationalist world.”(Wearing and Neil, xii) The motivations of project managers and communities involved in ecotourism projects were questioned, as some wondered whether the possibility of high profits from ecotourism activities in comparison to other competing land uses was given priority over conservation of resources. (David B. Weaver, “Magnitude of ecotourism in Costa Rica and Kenya,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 26.4 (1999/10): 796)

Although ecosystems were being preserved, the main motivations seemed to be economic and the reasons behind ecotourism were therefore questioned. Interested individuals and groups were and remain to be skeptical about whether the concept can be sustainable. Although many ecotourism activities aimed to have fewer negative environmental impacts than other tourism activities, travel-related resource consumption still existed in any type of tourism and could even be exacerbated if tourists are encouraged to visit distant, exotic ecotourism sites.(Gössling, 304)

If tourists must travel half-way around the world to visit ecotourism sites, much environmental degradation could be caused by the plane flights through the release of carbon dioxide. Other groups, including the local communities who were being asked to implement ecotourism, were skeptical for different reasons. They did not understand the need for a different product in the tourist market, and harboured reservations about the capacity of ecotourism to generate sustainable benefits. (John R. Watkin, International Institute for Environment and Development, and East African Regional Conference on Ecotourism (Nairobi, Kenya, 2002), *The evolution of ecotourism in East Africa: from an idea to an industry* (London: International Institute for Environment and Development, 2003) 7).

EVOLVING DEFINITIONS OF ECOTOURISM

With the ensuing wide acceptance of ecotourism as a legitimate and useful idea, various parties began to define exactly what ecotourism should entail. Since ecotourism is a theoretical concept that was introduced into the tourism industry through the blending of the related fields of conservation and sustainable development, the term can be framed in a variety of ways. If conservation is the chosen focus, then ecotourism can be seen as travel to natural areas that does not harm the environment and that supports preservation of nature. If sustainable development is the focus, then ecotourism can be seen as travel to natural areas that can occur now and far into the future and that provides financial or other benefits to the communities that implement

ecotourism projects. If tourism is the focus, then ecotourism can be seen as a type of tourism that draws a different demographic than does traditional mass tourism to an ecologically-based location. Therefore, those who attempt to define ecotourism can situate it within any one of these contexts, which has led to a diversity of definitions.

Some definitions identify ecotourism solely as a form of tourism that has a natural or exotic area as the destination. Other definitions are more elaborate, and include conservation and the support of local communities in the planning or implementation of projects. With such a multiplicity of definitions, it is difficult to know if any of these definitions could be a “correct” description of ecotourism. Ecotourism specialist Ron Mader said that, “ecotourism is defined by its lack of definition,”

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines ecotourism as “Tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both of the past and present) found in these areas” (GOI 1998). Ecotourism produces viable economic opportunities for the host communities.

Eco – tourism focuses on local cultures, wilderness adventures, volunteering, personal growth and learning new ways to live on our vulnerable planet. It is typically defined as travel to destinations where the flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the adverse effects of traditional tourism on natural environment, and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors initiatives.

Ecotourism is considered the fastest growing market in the tourism industry, according to the world tourism organization with an annual growth rate of 5% worldwide and representing 6% of the gross domestic product, 11.4% of all consumer spending- not a market to be taken lightly.

The term ecotourism was coined by Hector Ceballos- Luscurn in 1983, and was initially used to describe natural – based travel to relatively undistributed area with an emphasis on education. The concept has, however developed to a scientifically based approach to the planning, management and development of sustainable tourism product and activities.

“Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.” (The Ecotourism Society,1991)

“Travelling to relatively undisturbed or un-contaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.”

(Ceballos-Lascurain,1987)

“Is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas,, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature and any accompanying cultural features — both past and present that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.”

(IUCN or the World Conservation Union, 1996)

CONCEPT OF ECOTOURISM

The concept and genesis of ecotourism evolved from a creative strategic view for conservation, promotion and protection into a massive global economical enterprise. Although its popularity is gradually gaining the tourism industry more than any other type of travel, ecotourism has encountered many questions during the first few decades of its evolution. Ecotourism is difficult to define clearly because successful eco-tour operators fully explained the problems encountered and vast different concepts. Following diagram (Fig No:1) will help more in understanding the concept of ecotourism.

There are numerous contrasting ideas between the tourism industry, who regard ecotourism as an exciting new venture and product to market and environmental groups, who tend to see it more on a philosophy for conservation and protection of natural and cultural dimensions.



Fig No: 1 Concept of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is also greatly influenced by the goals of investors, developers, tour operators, economists, politicians, and international aid and socio-cultural agencies. There is further debate from native groups and cultural organizations who contest the development of ecotourism saying it focuses too narrowly on the environmental and social-cultural and economic issues are not taken into active consideration.

There are many reasons for the naturalistic and greening of the tourism industry. To appreciate what the ecotourism is, it is essential to understand the history of environment and cultural responsible travel in general. Each passing decade contributes to a growing consciousness of human beings.

Since the 1960s we have become increasingly concerned over peace, human rights, and the environmental and landscape destruction of our planet and in the subsequent stages the concern of socio-cultural dimension are focused. These ideological changes are reflected and adapted in the changing face of the travel and tour industry worldwide.

The responsible tourism or eco-friendly tourism movement evolved in the 1970s as a reaction to many negative consequences of tourism prostitution, crime, drugs trafficking, and cultural devastation, destruction of natural landscape and natural resources, and economic discrepancies. The movement grew to include cultural organizations, educational groups, ethnic institutions and friendship tours. Active participation and grassroots involvement of local communities at different level is felt. Benefit sharing was greatly highlighted where the local community stands at the core of the debate. Conservationists and planners were realized the role of community in controlling the wilderness of the tourist destinations. These new forms of tourism helped facilitate international conferences, the formation of local community organizations at different level, as well as other alliances among progressive organizations.

The ideologies of the responsible tourism movement helped spawn the rise of an environmental friendly tourism movement in the early 1980s which looks into the wilderness of the destination. Wilderness may be in the form of biological and physical landscape. This shift was initiated by conservation groups and development organizations and greatly supported by consumers concerned about the environment. One of the first global responsible and friendly tourism conferences in 1988 combined the two movements.

OBJECTIVE OF ECOTOURISM

A vital force for peace was to identify initiatives and measures through which the global tourism industry and other concerned groups could facilitate and contribute to the goal of global peace through friendly tourism. The strong roots of ecotourism lie in the profitable interaction of the responsible tourism movement and nature travel. Responsible travel should always associate with the nature travel.

Environmental organizations, looking forward for ways to promote and finance conservation efforts, developed the first models of ecotourism in Africa and Latin America by collecting and using fees generated by tourists to support conservation activities.

Conservation organizations helped implementing international laws thereby protecting the endangered and vulnerable species. Large pockets of natural unique lands and water were set aside as conservation and protected areas.

However, because of the fragility of the favored areas, such as islands ecosystems and mountain parks, the increased numbers of tourists soon began to take toll. The original designers and planners of ecotourism realized and understood that ecotourists were loving nature to death and search began for a more comprehensive definition of ecotourism and more and more numbers of concept and definitions have been framed with different conceptual views.

The most accepted and agreeable definition of ecotourism today is "responsible travel to the natural areas that sustain and conserve the well being of the local people". Still there is ample room to change or expand the concept of ecotourism due to the driven force of the modern tourists in one hand and planners, policy makers and local partners on the other hand.

Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the negative aspects of conventional tourism on the environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, an integral part of ecotourism is the promotion of recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, and creation of economic opportunities for local communities. These reasons, ecotourism often appeals to environmental and social responsibility advocates.

The concept of ecotourism is widely misunderstood and in practice is often used as a marketing tool to promote tourism that is related to nature. This is an especially frequent malpractice in the realm of Jungle tourism. Critics claim that these green washing practices,

carried out in the name of ecotourism, often consist of placing a hotel in a splendid landscape, to the detriment of the ecosystem.

Table No: 1 Objectives for ecotourism and possible indicators

Function	Objective	Examples of variables indicating achievement of objective
Protection of natural area	Provision of local socioeconomic benefits	<p>Increased employment opportunities</p> <p>Local distribution of tourism revenues</p> <p>Improved local infrastructure (transportation, communications, access to and provisions of goods and services)</p> <p>Improved access to social benefits (e.g. health care, education)</p> <p>Improved intercultural relations and appreciation (through positive interactions from host and tourist)</p> <p>Local capacity building towards self-sufficiency/ decentralization / local empowerment</p>
Education	Conservation of the natural area	<p>Money generated from tourism revenues to contribute to maintenance, protection and management of natural area and its inhabitants</p> <p>Protection which occurs from concerned participants in ecotourism and conservation (through donations or through active involvement)</p>
Generation of money	Provision of environmental education services	<p>Passive and active learning through interpretive services in protected area or ecotourism site</p> <p>Involvement and participation of local communities, committees and schools in environmental education or interpretive services and programs</p> <p>Heightened awareness and nature</p>

		appreciation (transformative values) for visitors and local residents
Quality tourism	Provision of a high-quality experience	If objectives 1 – 3 are fulfilled
Local participation	Increased foreign exchange Promotion of environment stewardship/advocacy	By receiving international tourists who contribute to the local economy Both tourists and local residents support conservation of natural resources because of transformative values nurtured from positive experiences with nature

According to them, ecotourism must above all sensitize people to the beauty and the fragility of nature. They condemn some operators as green washing their operations: using the labels of "green" and "eco-friendly", while behaving in environmentally irresponsible ways.

Although academics disagree about who can be classified as an ecotourist and there is little statistical data, some estimate that more than five million ecotourists - the majority of the ecotourist population - come from the United States, with many others from Western Europe, Canada and Australia.

COMPONENTS OF ECOTOURISM

The components of Ecotourism are:

1. Contributes to conservation of nature and biodiversity.
2. Sustains the well being of local people and conserve their culture
3. Includes conservation education
4. Involves responsible action on the part of tourists and the tourism industry
5. Is delivered primarily to small groups by small scale businesses
6. Requires lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources

CHARACTERISTICS OF ECOTOURISM

The main characteristics of Ecotourism are:

1. Visitor management that does not exceed the carrying capacity of the site.
2. Minimum environmental impact to the site.
3. Direct financial benefit for conservation.
4. An increase in visitor length of stay.
5. Small-scale development.

6. Use of sustainable resources for energy, such as solar panels.
7. Local economic diversification, so that the area is not dependent on tourism for revenue.
8. Coordination with government institutions and local NGOs.
9. A comprehensive approach to flora and fauna education, rather than a focus on one or two “flagship” species.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

The impact of ecotourism is similar to the impact of small-scale construction, water and sanitation, and roads, but there is added concern for sensitive environments. Potential adverse impacts include:

1. Soil erosion or compaction from: poorly designed roads and trails that do not follow natural contours; off-road movements to avoid wet, rutted, or gullied areas; off-road or off-trail traffic to view unique wildlife or resource features; and poorly planned infrastructure or excessive use in areas such as camp sites and tour routes.
2. Deterioration of water resources and quality due to inappropriate design and siting of latrines, septic tanks, and solid waste.
3. Deforestation from firewood harvesting, camping, and construction.
4. Destruction of unique flora.
5. Changes in animal behaviour due to human interference.
6. Pollution from litter, oil residues, or vehicle exhaust.

Local resource users living near protected areas can also be affected adversely. Tourists can have a significant impact on a community’s cultural and economic integrity. The seasonal nature of tourism can conflict with labour needs for crop planting and harvesting, and enhanced protection of an already protected area can conflict with a community’s traditional use of the area for non-timber products (fuel wood, medicinal plants, game meat). At the same time, the potential benefits of ecotourism can adversely affect the environment of the protected area. An increase in employment, infrastructure (roads, electricity, telecommunications) technical assistance, or services (education, healthcare) can stimulate people to migrate to the vicinity of a protected area. Also, improved economic conditions are often accompanied by increased production of solid waste.

Table No: 2: Possible economic, infrastructural & social benefits to local people from ecotourism

Type of benefit	Form of benefit	Examples of indicators
Economic benefits	Increased employment opportunities (guides, transportation, construction; protected area employees; restaurants, motels, shops, retail, etc.) Entrepreneurship Distribution of tourist revenues	Number of Locals employed in tourism-related employment Number of local entrepreneurs (restaurants, shops, entertainers, accommodations) Ratio of locals to outsiders
Infrastructure benefits	Access to goods and services Quality/access to health care; education Communication infrastructure Transportation infrastructure	Distance of nearest town for goods and services including health care/education provisions Quality of mail delivery, telephones, electricity supply? Quality of roads, public transportation?
Social welfare benefits	The indirect benefits of improved infrastructure and socio-economic status Status of environmental conditions Intercultural appreciation Strengthening of cultural pride heritage	Health and education levels of residents, effects of increased disposable income Nature of local tourist interactions Locals attitudes towards tourists and tourism Authentic or commoditized opportunities to view or experience local culture

CONCLUSION

Eco-tourism is a logical component of eco-development. It is a complex and multidisciplinary phenomenon and has a tremendous role to play in the interpretation of nature and natural resources, as well as in the understanding of human history and its interaction with the rural environment, and the diffusion of environmental knowledge and awareness.

It can serve as an important tool for environmental education and for raising ecological awareness, both in tourists and local people, and government officials: Eco-tourism has been

defined by the World Conservation Union as environmentally responsible travel and visits to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

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