ECOTOURISM:

CURRENT APPLICATION AND FUTURE POTENTIAL

Lindy Pokorny

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Introduction

Ecotourism has been a contested issue since its emergence in the 1970s. Not only is there extensive debate about whether it is ultimately beneficial to local communities and their environments, but there is confusion as to what "ecotourism" even is. There is no agreed upon definition or understanding of the concept, and it is frequently used interchangeably with related terms such as "sustainable tourism" and "nature tourism." This paper will first seek to establish a concrete understanding of what ecotourism is and what differentiates it from similar fields. I will explore the financial, social, and environmental benefits of ecotourism and examine its theoretical goals as well as several successful applications. I will then examine the financial, social, and environmental drawbacks and pitfalls of ecotourism, using several examples of detrimental application attempts. Through discussion of certification practices as they currently stand, I will transition into a discussion of how to make ecotourism more sustainable, through both governmental and industrial changes and through the actions of individual travelers. I will conclude by briefly analyzing the tourism industry as a whole, and answering the question of whether or not ecotourism is a viable way for communities to increase revenue while promoting environmental conservation.

Ecotourism vs. Sustainable Tourism vs. Nature Tourism

Ecotourism emerged in the 1970s as environmentally conscious travelers began to seek vacations that were less detrimental to the earth than conventional mass tourism (Cox and Cusick 2015). In the 1990s, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) defined ecotourism as 'travel to protected natural areas as a means of economic gain through natural resource preservation. A merger of recreation and responsibility'. However, in 2001 they released the statement: 'ecotourism should be seen as a subset of responsible tourism' and can be described as 'tourism to natural areas that is determined by, and benefits, local communities and the environment.' This

latter definition is in keeping with that of the Ecotourism Society (now renamed the International

Ecotourism Society (IES)), which is 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the

environment and improves the well-being of local people' (Russell and Wallace 2004, 1).

Ecotourism is praised as the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry, and the United

Nations declared 2002 the International Year of Ecotourism (Carrier and Macleod 2005).

      Ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and nature tourism are very similar by all accounts.

Ecotourism and nature tourism are (incorrectly) used interchangeably, although "nature tourism"

is used with much less frequency. Nature tourism is a contested term to begin with, because most

people that use it think of "nature" as pure wilderness, untainted by human involvement. This

definition does not take into account the effect that humans have (and have always had) on their

environment, instead choosing to "appropriate nature while seeing themselves as nonpredatory"

(West and Carrier 2004, 494). It is generally about visual appreciation, and does not involve

active learning about conservation or benefit local communities.

      Sustainable tourism is a general term that includes ecotourism under its umbrella.

Ecotourism refers specifically to travel to more "natural" or secluded areas, and can only

avoid damaging the environment and the local economy by relying on small to medium-sized

businesses. Not only does ecotourism avoid damage, it actively seeks to make a positive impact.

Sustainable tourism can be applied to any form and destination of travel and can involve large

businesses. It merely seeks to minimize or eliminate negative impacts on the environment and

local communities.

      Because there are no concrete, universally accepted definitions of these terms, there

is often misuse by companies, stemming from either a genuine misunderstanding or a willful

intention to mislead the public. Because of this, there is a great discrepancy between companies

that are deeply committed to protecting the environment and those that actively exploit the

environment under the guise of "interacting with nature." There is no agreed upon definition of ecotourism, and therefore can be no agreed upon standard for certification of self-reporting "eco-friendly" companies, which I will discuss in more detail later.

Ecotourism is theoretically a practice which benefits the environment and local communities, primarily by providing a source of revenue. It ties environmentalism to consumerism, making the individual desire for a cleaner world into a profitable practice.

Financial Benefits

Ecotourism has been presented as a viable solution to economic hardship in small Third World countries in particular because of the relatively large income it can provide. Figures from 2004 estimated that "ecotourists spend between $93 billion and $233 billion a year in developing countries" and predicted a steady increase in those numbers (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 167). Ecotourism makes elements of an environment profitable that may have been considered a nuisance previously. For instance, African villagers who "considered elephants at best a target for hunters and at worst a menace to agriculture, suddenly began to realize that they could be a valuable resource" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 168). Creating game parks and charging admission to tourists that want to see animals roam freely in their natural habitats is more lucrative than it may seem. One study concluded that the worth of a single lion in a park like this is approximately $575,000 (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004).

Because of this, ecotourism has become a significant factor in the economies of several nations. Thailand, Costa Rica, and Mongolia are among the countries where ecotourism's effect on GDP is growing at a rate of 10% annually. In the Maldives, tourism accounts for as much as 40% of their GDP (Brandt and Buckley 2018). According to Brandt and Buckley, "the amount spent on ecotourism is estimated to be 10 times more than that spent by official aid agencies and the United Nations Global Environment Facility on conservation projects" (112).

Theoretically, this source of revenue is plentiful enough that the earnings can support not only national GDP, but local individuals and families, as well as provide funding for conservation efforts.

Social and Environmental Benefits

Ecotourism benefits both the tourist and the community that they visit. The consensus is that many existing ecotourism programs provide tourists with the opportunity for meaningful contact with diverse ecosystems (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004). While this may not be true in every case, it is inarguable that at least some ecotourists come home from their travels with a new perspective, and perhaps even a deeper commitment to protecting the natural environment. The prevailing theory is that people are actually more receptive to new ideas and information in unfamiliar settings (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004). Someone who has already made an active choice to support ecotourism instead of more conventional mass tourism is more likely to come away with a better understanding of sustainability and the part they play in achieving it.

The ecosystem benefits from the accompanying conservation efforts. If nothing else, ecotourism is better for the environment than most alternatives. Carrier and Macleod (2005) point out that "C02 emissions may be less harmful than alternative uses of the environment that ecotourists travel to see - and for local people" (317). Ecotourism provides numerous jobs to locals, and provides an alternative to other employment like unregulated logging and mining, illegal hunting, and drug trading (Pattullo 2005).

Successful Ecotourism

African nations, as mentioned earlier, are a prime example of successfully functioning ecotourism. In eastern and southern Africa, conservation sites are not only beneficial in terms of environmental protection, but as a source of revenue and employment. This generates a cycle

that supports the creation of more protected areas, therefore incentivizing conservation efforts and increasing job opportunities and profit (Kothari et al. 2015).

There are examples of how ecotourism has made global impacts, as well as local ones, through personal and cultural connections between tourists and their host communities. Horton writes about how ecotourism on Osa has fostered positive, personal relationships between tourists and local residents (2009). He expands on this by explaining that "ecotourism offers at least the potential to forge more complex, cross-national and cross-class advocacy networks centered upon common values and discourses of social justice and localized environmentalisms" (Horton 2009, 105).

Financial Drawbacks and Pitfalls

Unfortunately, ecotourism is not a fail-safe, fix-all solution. Conservation is a means for commerce, but also requires sufficient funding for its management. This has been achieved primarily through user fees. There has been much criticism about exactly where this money goes, however. One concern is that the money generated goes into a general treasury and is not used specifically to benefit the environment (Pattullo 2005).

The most prevalent financial concern is how revenue is infrequently shared with the local community despite the fact that they generally bear the largest burden. Fritsch and Johannsen estimated that only a very small fraction of money spent by ecotourists is actually shared with the Third World country destination communities (2004). Tourism involves people coming in from the outside, and this often means foreign companies will capitalize on the opportunity to make money in a way that makes them look good. They establish businesses in growing ecotourism sites, and subsequently many of the decisions for a local community end up being made hundreds of miles away by corporate executives who will not be personally affected. These executives often see the majority of the profit, with little or no profit being shared with

the community. These companies may hire locally, or may bring in their own employees. If the community is lucky enough to host one of the former, at best they are constantly subject to the whims of foreign executives. For instance, "the people of Haines, Alaska, found themselves jobless almost overnight as a result of discussions in corporate headquarters in London's financial district" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 155).

Foreign companies increase competition for local businesses, which may already suffer because not all tourists engage in the economy. There is growing complaint about self-sufficient tourists, who source food, camping, and other items from outside the region instead of purchasing locally (Adler et al. 2013). Additionally, tourism is not a necessity and is therefore susceptible to a large amount of inconsistency and uncertainty. Many factors will affect the number of tourists and therefore the amount of revenue that a community sees. These issues can range from political instability in the host country to specific events that discourage travel (for instance, 9/11) to financial hardship in foreign economies. Tourists will only travel if they have disposable income. Tying all these factors to the economic success of a community is a dangerous gamble.

Social and Environmental Drawbacks and Pitfalls

It is stunningly easy for ecotourism to become focused on the commercial aspect and subsequently forget about conservation, even becoming actively detrimental to the environment it is meant to support. Ecotourism has the potential to help the environment, but in order to do this it also makes demands on it. These demands may harm the environment more than is justifiable by financial gain and conservation efforts. In fact, "natural systems are often stressed beyond their capacity to recover" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 141). The very idea of ecotourism, where travellers can visit more natural areas that have traditionally been secluded, is inherently disruptive to the environment and its community. Some seek out the most remote

and "untouched" destinations they can, and these so-called "egotourists" often disturb delicate ecosystems and intrude upon local culture (Horton 2009).

Ecotourism necessarily must develop previously isolated communities in order to make them accessible to visitors. This means that transportation networks like roads, airports, and trains need significant improvement, which is strongly associated with deforestation. The corresponding spike in population growth requires the use of more forest resources, which also increases the risk of deforestation (Brandt and Buckley 2018). Conservation efforts can counteract many of these effects, but high-value old growth forests will be vulnerable if not explicitly protected, and these have a different value to ecosystems than the newer forests we develop (Brandt and Buckley 2018).

These processes and general factors of tourism itself depend heavily on the petroleum economy. The use of harmful fossil fuels is something that is universally understood to be detrimental to the earth and its atmosphere. One unavoidable aspect of ecotourism that requires an unbelievable amount of petroleum is jet air transport. "It produces more pollution per passenger-mile than any other form of transportation, producing 3 percent of the world's total CO_2 emissions —which is equivalent to the entire output of all industry in Great Britain. It is also responsible for the production of four million tons of nitrogen oxides, which could be responsible for exacerbating future global warming" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 175). Many wonder if conservation, local revenue, and environmental education for tourists is actually worth the amount of damage that is done simply to get the visitors to their destination. Can we even call it ecotourism if it inextricably produces this undoubtedly negative effect on the environment?

This question is exacerbated by the fact that even once tourists arrive at their destination, many companies who consider themselves part of ecotourism are not only not helping the environment, but actively abusing it. Developers are not shy about the fact that ecotourism is primarily about commerce, and they will do what they have to in order to make the most money even if that means hurting the very thing they use to attract their customers. At an international

trade show in 2002, Kurt Kutay, president of Wildland Adventures, Inc., stated, "Our soft-adventure clients are not interested in a 'reality tour'—after all, they're on vacation." David Kagan, president of an ecolodge development company called Wilderness Gate, admitted, "If we have to add air conditioning or drive every guest to the lodge to stay open, that's what we'll do. And we'll still call ourselves an ecolodge" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 178).

Unsuccessful Ecotourism

There are countless examples of ecotourism gone wrong in all manner of ways. Many have financial issues. For instance, Guyana's new ecotourism industry has been effectively dominated by outside investors who use the land for profit and basically disregard its residents (Pattullo 2005). This is a clear example where local communities are disenfranchised. Hawai'i, a particularly famous tourist destination, is another, where "despite the key role of Native Hawai'ians in the marketing of Hawai'i, they have benefited the least from tourism of any ethnic group in the islands" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 146).

Beyond the lack of apparent benefits, there are even more instances where communities are purposefully forced out of their own environments. In St. John, when they established the Virgin Islands National Park, there was obvious discrimination against local people. Residents were alienated from the land they routinely cultivated in the name of making it more "natural" (again, calling to mind the question of whether something can be considered "natural" despite and perhaps even because of human involvement) without providing any kind of economic compensation or other benefits (Pattullo 2005). In Bangladesh, whole communities were relocated in the interest of developing ecotourism attractions (Russell and Wallace 2004). In Myanmar (Burma), there are reports of millions of people being displaced by coastline ecotourism, to the point where some anthropologists have suggested the adoption of a new term: "tourism refugee" (Mostafanezhad et al. 2016).

Despite this displacement, communities often increase their populations beyond carrying capacity, creating new and horrific environmental issues. In Montego Bay, populations have risen so suddenly that the waste and sewage facilities have not had time to expand accordingly, and every time it rains rubbish is swept into the bay. The expansion of buildings is, conversely, happening too quickly, and their development is filling in environmentally sensitive coastal areas, including a number of mangrove stands. Water transportation, including extensive dredging and landfills to accommodate for cruise ships, has expanded so drastically that it has altered the coastal current. And, of course, local communities are alienated and displaced, even to the extent of being denied access to their own beaches in the interest of private, restricted hotel areas (Carrier and Macleod 2005).

Closer to home, ecotourism has devastated some private areas in Kentucky. ATVs (or "All Terrain Vehicles") are considered a way to explore nature. ATV users claim that nature is common property, and any damage they do is offset by their contributions to the economy through the purchase of vehicles and excursion expenses. However, the cost it would take to repair the extensive damage they do to the environment has been estimated at approximately five billion dollars a year. The influx of ATV use has "terrorized wildlife, torn up endangered plants, plowed through and damaged the Rockcastle River (which is designated by the state as "wild and scenic" further downstream), and done untold devastation to public and private forestland—while local protest has effectively been silenced" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 59). There are governmental regulations set to counteract these harmful activities, but they go largely unenforced. The lack of governmental guidance is distinctly apparent in all these cases where ecotourism has done more harm than good.

Certification Practices

It is baffling that despite the environmental detriment these companies cause, they still advertise as "eco-friendly" or "green" companies. Since there is not a set definition of

"ecotourism," there has been a rise in greenwashing and related certification practices that apply their own very loose interpretations. Greenwashing is defined as "companies, products, or processes that are promoted as 'green' but may not actually adhere to good environmental practices" (Cox and Cusick 2015, 200). Greenwashing, beyond disguising harmful practices, dilutes the importance and integrity of other businesses that actually do commit to environmental protection.

The sheer number of eco-labelling and certification schemes should be an indicator of the lack of uniformity in regards to criteria for being considered "eco-friendly" or "green." "Although the World Tourism Organization (WTO) has identified over 105 eco-labels and certification schemes for tourism, only 5000 companies have joined such schemes, mainly because they are voluntary and offer no distinct benefits" (Nepal 2002, 109). There are no material benefits for companies beyond being able to advertise and "prove" their commitment to the environment with the stamp of approval from a certification company tourists have likely never heard of and probably do not care about. Any company can advertise themselves as environmentally friendly without needing certification, and the vast majority of tourists will not even think to look for it. "British Airways, for example, trumpeted that it had reduced emissions by passenger-mile between 1991 and 1993—conveniently ignoring the fact that because the number of people traveling farther had grown, its overall emissions increased by 6 percent" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 99). Since there's no universal definition for "ecotourism," there can be no specific regulations set by governments as to what companies can claim to be part of it.

How Government and Industry Can Make Ecotourism More Sustainable

The first step to ensuring that ecotourism becomes a uniformly beneficial practice is establishing a universal definition. There needs to be an internationally agreed upon, officially stated list of criteria that companies must meet in order to consider themselves part of ecotourism. Some governments have loose definitions of what this entails, and some have even

set regulations, but there needs to be steps taken to specify and tighten policy in every country, and furthermore, these need to be dutifully enforced.

Since there is no universally recognized company that provides certification to companies claiming to be "eco-friendly" or "green," there should also be an establishment of a central organization that all tourists can use to measure how well companies follow through on their claims of environmental advocacy.

While there should be an international agreement on the basic requirements of ecotourism, there should also be regulations set that are specific to each nation and its unique ecosystems and culture. The most important part of this process is the involvement of local people. In every case of ecotourism gone wrong, the overarching theme has been the lack of consultation of locals who best understand the environment, the culture, the community, and how to care for it. The most important things to include in the strategy are "careful zoning and environmental protection measures including promotion of alternative energy resources, forest conservation and management, conservation education and community development" (Cater 1993, 114).

Local stakeholders will ultimately be the ones who implement the joint strategy, and they deserve the chance to represent their own interests in the planning of it. If both federal and local governments are satisfied with the strategy, it's much more likely that both will fully commit to its execution. If this is not done, small businesses will be the first to suffer, and since these are integral to the authentic experience of the ecotourist, ecotourism cannot succeed without them (Cox and Cusick 2015).

Governments should dedicate resources to making training and communication accessible to local communities, ensuring that proper funding is provided. Those involved should be educated on the potential pitfalls of tourism and how to avoid them, as well as how to properly market and produce an authentic ecotourism experience. The Internet should also

be made widely available in order to provide access to global markets and funding for ecolodge operations (Nepal 2002).

Governments can provide these things, but many of these goals can also be achieved through individual, mindful companies and organizations. They can use local knowledge to maximize profits while minimizing their negative effects on an environment and its people. Beyond the financial gain and humanitarian and environmental benefits, working with local people can provide customers with a more genuine and enjoyable experience that celebrates culture without abusing it for the sake of commerce. In turn, this will better the reputation of the organization and ultimately make it more profitable.

What You Can Do to Make Ecotourism More Sustainable

Ecotourism can only remain sustainable and successful if individual travelers make a concentrated effort to do their part. There are several ways to achieve this.

Consider taking less short trips to far away places. Instead of three one-week vacations, consider the significantly smaller impact you could make taking one three-week vacation. Regardless of what you are doing, it would be hard to counteract the degradation caused by your transportation in one week (especially if you're doing that three times), but if you travel responsibly, a three-week vacation can arguably end up balancing out your negative impact (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004). You may also consider vacationing closer to home. Additionally, this is a way for people with less disposable income to become involved in ecotourism, which has been criticized for its elitism.

Do your research. Find out what your environmental impact will be based on your travel and what companies you choose to support with your business and adjust accordingly. Don't automatically trust a company that is "certified" as eco-friendly. Look up what that certification entails and if the company obtained it by practicing conservation or simply saying

that they would and paying a fee.

Engage in local culture. Support local economy by purchasing products from residential businesses, eating at family-owned restaurants, or staying in small inns or local hotels. Take the time to learn about the community and the environment that you are visiting. Even activities like hiking, white-water rafting, or scuba diving can become conservationist activities if you use them as learning tools and take subsequent action. Teach your friends about your experiences when you get home, and engage in conservation efforts in your own community. If you travel and donate to the community you visit, that's fine, but if that is all you do you will almost certainly have caused more harm than good. If you educate yourself and take those lessons through the rest of your life, the benefits will be significant.

Conclusion

Obviously, not all tourism can be ecotourism. Ecotourism is largely distinguished by its small scale, and it is clear that the majority of mass tourism is done on a much bigger, commercial level. However, all tourism can be sustainable. There is no reason that all travel cannot strive to make as little negative impact on the environment as possible. "We cannot turn the environment into a commodity for the wealthy to enjoy and destroy" (Fritsch and Johannsen 2004, 236-237). If we want to continue using the earth, we need to consider how to counteract the things we are already doing to damage it.

Ecotourism has been presented as a solution to non-sustainable mass tourism. It is supposed to be a viable way for communities to increase revenue while promoting environmental conservation. Unfortunately, not all "ecotourism" has been able to execute this. It is more common for a company to claim that they are part of ecotourism, but hurt the environment and local communities in reality. While there are successful examples, there are steps that need to be taken before ecotourism can be considered consistently practical and achievable. There needs to

be an international understanding of exactly what "ecotourism" entails, governmental regulations need to be updated and enforced with the help of local communities, and individual travelers need to remain mindful and engaged. If these provisions are met, then ecotourism can finally become everything it is meant to be.

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