



An Overview of Ecotourism

Dr. Iftikhar Hussain

Associate Professor

Lanka Mahavidyalaya, Lanka, Assam, India

Email: iftikharhussain760@gmail.com

Abstract

In order to truly understand ecotourism and pros and cons associated with, it is necessary to do some background research. Ecotourism, perhaps the most over-used and mis-used word in the travel industry. A walk through the rainforest is not ecotourism unless that particular walk somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there. Ecotourism has been called by many names such as ‘soft tourism’, ‘responsible tourism’, ‘green tourism’, ‘alternative tourism’ and so on. Ecotourism implies a scientific, aesthetic or philosophical approach, although the ‘ecotourist’ is not required to be a professional scientist, artist or philosopher. Ecotourism definitions require that the indigenous host community receives the benefits and despite its small-scale and seasonal character, ecotourism has the potential to deliver economic benefits on multiple levels.

Key words: Ecotourism, Natural resources, Community, Environment, Impacts.

1. Introduction

In order to truly understand ecotourism and pros and cons associated with, it is necessary to do some background research. Ecotourism, perhaps the most over-used and mis-used word in the travel industry. A walk through the rainforest is not ecotourism unless that particular walk somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there. A rafting trip is only ecotourism if it raises awareness and funds to protect the watershed.

Ecotourism is more than a catch phrase for nature loving travel and recreation. Ecotourism is consecrated for preserving and sustaining the diversity of the world’s natural and cultural environments. It accommodates and entertains visitors in a way that is minimally intrusive or destructive to the environment and sustains and supports the native cultures in the locations it is operating in. Responsibility of both travelers and service providers is the genuine meaning for ecotourism. Ecotourism also endeavors to encourage and support the

diversity of local economics for which the tourism related income is important. With support from tourists, local services and producers can compete with larger foreign companies and local families can support themselves.

When Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin has coined the term “ecotourism” in 1983, it is not the only one being used to describe the new form of nature travel that is developing. Scace et al. have identified 35 terms that may possess links to ecotourism (Butler, 1992). Among the best known of these are: nature tourism, nature-based or nature-oriented tourism, wilderness tourism, adventure tourism, green tourism, alternative tourism, sustainable tourism, appropriate tourism, nature vacations, study tourism, scientific tourism, cultural tourism, low- impact tourism, agro-tourism, rural tourism, and soft tourism. These terms share some general concepts (particularly in that they are an alternative to mass consumptive tourism), but they are not synonymous. To assume that they are to make ecotourism a catch-all term to be applied indiscriminately to almost any activity linking tourism and nature (Farrell, et al., 1991).

2. History of Ecotourism

Ecotourism has been called by many names such as ‘soft tourism’, ‘responsible tourism’, ‘green tourism’, ‘alternative tourism’ and so on. The only consistency found within these names is the link to nature. Despite the variety of names, visitors have long been traveling to natural and pristine areas under the semblance of recreation and tourism. This has led some observers to question whether ecotourism is simply a new name for an old activity (Wall, 1994). The history of ecotourism started in the 1950s. Before that, the concept was not widely recognized or understood. In the history of ecotourism, it existed in a few different forms that primarily try to achieve the same thing that the current ecotourism does. Ecotourism is first introduced in Africa in the 1950’s with the legalization of hunting. This need for recreational hunting zones led to the creation of protected areas, national parks, and game reserves. In the 1980s, the concept of ecotourism became much more widely known and studied around the world. Over the years, ecotourism has become more and more popular because people have begun to realize the importance of preserving the environment. More and more people are aware and scared of what might happen when the earth's natural resources run out or run low. With knowledge, people are more curious about exploring natural environment and doing good deeds at the same time (Thulasimala et al., 2010)

The travel department of the American Museum of Natural History conducted natural history tours since 1953 (Blangy et al., 1993). In the early twentieth century, African wildlife-based tourism visitors have enjoyed trips to wilderness areas for the intrinsic nature of the experience. The ecotourism stem can be traced back to the late 1980s (Orams, 1995; Hvenegaard, 1994), while others (Higgins, 1996) suggest that it can be traced to the late 1970's. Nelson (1994) illustrates that the idea of ecotourism is in fact an old one, which manifested itself during the late 60s and early 70s when inappropriate use of natural resources became a concern. Ecotourism at this time has been used as a tool for environmental conservation strategy.

The origins of nature travel are truly remote. Herodotus was one of the first nature tourists. His extensive travels included visits to the Black Sea, Egypt, Southern Italy, Athens and the Aegean Sea. Other notable precursors of ecotourism include Pytheas, Strabo and Pliny the elder, all of whom travelled, moved by a desire to see the natural and cultural environments of the world in which they lived (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1992).

In later times, Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta, Bernardino de Sahağun, Joseph de Acosta and Eusebio Kino have given vivid accounts of the new lands they discovered. More recently, savants and explorers such as Charles de la Condamine, James Cook, Alexander Von Humboldt, Louis-Antonie de Bougainville, Charles Darwin, John L. Stephens, Henry Bates, Alfred Russell Wallace, David Livingstone, Sven Hedin, and Carl Lumholtz have dedicated themselves to travel to remote areas with the fundamental purpose of discovering, studying and describing landscapes, life forms and different cultures (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1992).

Nature travel during the 19th century is essentially a quest for spectacular and unique scenery. During this time, the national park concept is created; and while the founders of national parks want to protect the environment rather than provides resorts, it is the tourists who have “provided the economic and political rationale needed to translate philosophy into accomplishment” (Butler, 1992). If an activity is to qualify as ecotourism, it must demonstrate the following characteristics (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1992).

- i. It promotes positive environmental ethics and fosters “preferred” behavior in its participants.
- ii. It does not degrade the resource.
- iii. It concentrates on intrinsic rather than extrinsic values.
- iv. It is oriented around the environment in question and not around man.
- v. It must benefit the wildlife and environment.
- vi. It actively involves the local communities in the tourism process so that they may benefit from it, thereby contributing to a better valuation of the natural resources in that locality.
- vii. It involves considerable preparation and demands in-depth knowledge on the part of both leaders and participants.

3. Ecotourism at present

There are many difficulties in defining ecotourism without proper attention being paid to underlying philosophical and ethical principles. However, the most used definition of ecotourism today is the one coined by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as mentioned in chapter one. TIES defines ecotourism as a nature-based form of specialty travel, which involves, “Responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people” (Bagul, 2009). The World Conservation Union came up with a more comprehensive definition: “Ecotourism 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 socioeconomic involvement of local populations” (The World Conservation Union, 1996). In certain literatures, it was suggested that the term ‘ecotourism’ was coined by Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin, who was at the time (July 1983) Director General of Standards and Technology of SEDUE (the Mexican Ministry of Urban Development and Ecology) and founding president of PRONATURA (an influential Mexican conservationist NGO). He provided the first definition of the term and according to him (Bagul, 2009) - “Ecotourism is that tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas. Ecotourism implies a scientific, aesthetic or philosophical approach, although the ‘ecotourist’ is not required to be a professional scientist, artist or philosopher. The main point is that the person who practices ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing him or herself in nature in a way that most people cannot enjoy in their routine, urban existences. This person will eventually acquire a consciousness and knowledge of the natural environment, together with its cultural aspects, that will convert him into somebody keenly involved in conservation issues.” (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1989).

In general, ecotourism should satisfy conservation and development objectives (Lindberg et al., 1996). However, even though the TIES definition has been widely accepted, it is not a functional definition for collecting statistics. Since no global initiative exists at present for gathering ecotourism data, ecotourism is considered a specialty segment of the larger nature tourism market. Ecotourism, however, should be viewed as a distinct from of nature tourism, as nature tourism is not defined by its benefits to both conservation and

people in the host country. It is generally agreed that ecotourism products and attractions are primarily nature-based, with the prefix 'eco' usually understood to stand for 'ecological' (Lascuráin, 1988). At one end of a nature-based product continuum, a product or destination may feature the entire ecosystem of the area, so that a 'montane rainforest' or 'coral reef' is experienced. This indicates a 'holistic' approach towards the product, since an ecosystem implies an integrated, interconnected entity.

4. Community based ecotourism (CBET)

Community based ecotourism(CBET) refers to ecotourism programs, which take place under the control and active participation of the local people who inhabit or own a natural attraction (Lindberg et al., 1999). CBET works closely with local people provides incentive for conservation and more often, works outside of parks in locally owned land. Communities are an integral part of ecotourism ecosystem. They can help to sustain ecosystem. Communities are to be affected first by any influences of ecotourism destination areas. For sustainable ecotourism involvement of communities in planning and local management is essential (Coltman, 1989; Carter et al., 1994).

In ecotourism, indigenous communities or local communities are an inseparable part. Any project or venture to develop ecotourism by ignoring local communities cannot be considered as ecotourism. Furthermore, community based ecotourism implies that a community is taking care of their natural resources in order to gain income through operating a tourism enterprise and using that income to improve their lives. It involves conservation, business enterprise and community development (Bhattacharya et al., 2011).

5. Impacts of ecotourism

Ecotourism is extensively accepted as a strategy with the potential to provide ecological, economic, and social benefits at the local and national level. Although a set of explicit objectives or standard principles of ecotourism does not definitively exist, clearly the aim of ecotourism is to channel economic benefits to local communities thereby creating a greater incentive for continued involvement of the local people and thus a greater chance of success for biodiversity conservation. The following section gives the detail of environmental, economic and social impacts of ecotourism on the natural area as well as the local population.

5.1 Environmental Impacts

One of the major challenges that face ecotourism is how to develop without destroying the environment. Although ecotourism has many examples where it has had a positive impact on the environment, negative

environment fallout may occur such as over consumption of natural resources, disruption of wildlife and human congestion in natural area through the increase of ecotourists (Herbig et al., 1997). In terms of the positive environment impact, weaver (2006) has pointed out that ecotourism plays a significant role in bringing about the greatest environmental benefit. Ecotourism provides a direct financial incentive for the preservation of relatively undistributed natural habitats. Some environmental impacts may be unavoidable because of the environmental sensitivity of the area. These impacts are planned to be minimized by careful planning including the determination of carrying capacity and zoning, permissible construction types, and activities (Bagul, 2009).

Environmental impacts are considered both the direct and indirect impacts on the natural environment. Advantageous and detrimental environmental impacts are listed in Table (1). It should be noted that the severity of impacts depend upon the type of activity as well as the type of ecosystem affected.

Table 1: Environmental impacts of ecotourism

Positive Impacts of Ecotourism	Negative Impacts of Ecotourism
Creation of wildlife reserve/sanctuary	Disruption of breeding habits
Justification for park protection	Change in wildlife migration pattern
Habitat restoration	Water pollution by sewage or petrol disposal
Less intensive resource use option	Visual impact(litters, facilities)
Reduce incentive for other more resource intensive uses	Compaction of soil causing increase run-off and erosion
Environmental education	Over exploitation of bio-logical resources
Increased stewardship	Land use changes in primary production areas
Impetus for private conservation efforts	Destruction of vegetation
Community building which promotes conservation	Nil

Source: Matthews,E.J. (2002)

5.2 Economic Impacts

Ecotourism definitions require that the indigenous host community receives the benefits and despite its small-scale and seasonal character, ecotourism has the potential to deliver economic benefits on multiple levels. This includes foreign exchange earnings, increased employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and a more diversified local economy (Lindberg, 2001; Wight, 1994).

Direct and indirect economic benefits of ecotourism will be realized if the resource capacity is not exceeded by the tourism demand. Direct impacts include revenues from initial tourism spending such as food and lodging. Indirect impacts accrue to the local communities when, for example, restaurants and lodges buy local goods and services. Although sometimes local communities receive all income generated from tourism, often a large amount of profit generated in local communities eventually end up with local elites, outside operators, or government agencies (Scheyvens, 1999). This money that flows out of the community in order to support tourism are referred to as economic or revenue leakage. Revenue leakage accounts for a

significant percentage of income that would otherwise be directed towards the local community (Boo, 1990). The amount of leakages occurring depends upon the local economy and the level of self-sufficiency. A few sources of leakages include the continual need to import foreign goods and services, repatriation of profits from foreign-owned hotels and restaurants, and advertising and marketing efforts abroad. Lindberg and Enriquez (1994) estimated that 55 percents of every tourist dollar spent in developing countries leaks back into developed countries. In Tangkoko DuaSudara, Indonesia, the village receives minimal benefits with the current income distribution structure. Forty-seven percent of revenues heads to the major tour company and only 7 percent accrues to guides -and the head reserve guard get 20 percent of this (Kinnaird et al.,1996). The only way to avoid significant economic leakage is to acquire goods and services as much as possible from the local community and for locals to maintain ownership of tourist establishments. Table (2) lists the positive and negative local economic impacts of ecotourism:

Table 2: Economic impacts of ecotourism

Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
Increased employment opportunities	Leakages of revenue
Increased household income	Uneven distribution of revenue/income inequalities
Funding for Infrastructure	Reduced access to resources(i.e. medicinal plants, wood)
Funding for Protected areas	Local lose income because of a public protected area.
Revenue Sharing	Foreign ownership of business
Improvement in living standard	Inflation increases the prices of goods, services and land

Source: Matthews, E.J., (2002)

5.3 Social Impacts

Lasting success of ecotourism development projects depends on participation of local indigenous communities in all phases of planning and implementation. However, ecotourism development is often imposed from the national level with local communities excluded from the planning, preparation and implementation phases of ecotourism development projects (King et al., 1996). It has been claimed that the long-term success of the tourism industry depends upon the level of agreement and support of the adjacent local community. Often, however, the residents of these protected areas do not fully understand the potential environmental, economic and social impacts of ecotourism and thus may not support ecotourism development.

Social impacts include capacity-building opportunities, such as cooperatives and training, increased cultural pride as a result of ecotourism, and increased government support such as protection and the reduction of illegal practices (Wearing, 2001). It should also be noted that economic impacts do indeed have a profound

influence on consequent social impacts. For example, tourism can lead to increased prices of goods and services, rendering the locals unable to remain in the area.

One of the most significant influences of ecotourism on local indigenous communities is the “commodification” of their culture whereby people and their cultural artifacts and symbols are treated as commodities that can be bought or sold (Scheyvens, 1999). This often occurs when a desire for short-term economic benefits outweigh a desire to maintain long-term local support (Wight, 1993). King and Stewart (1996), state “for indigenous people, the commodification of nature implies a change in the meaning of their environment from a source of direct sustenance with a use value to a commodity with an exchange value”. Other impacts include the loss of indigenous knowledge and a change in social structure whereby people begin to emigrate and shed traditional practices in order to cater to tourists (Brandon, 1996). The shift from traditional life-supporting activities to service activities such as ecotourism may be perceived by many indigenous cultures as negative (Place, 1991).

6. Local involvement

Viewed as a form of alternative tourism, the emphasis in ecotourism development should be on small-scale, locally owned activities. This has three important repercussions for beleaguered third world economics. Firstly, the facilities in terms of infrastructure and super-structure are simpler and less expensive than those of demanded by the conventional mass tourism, and are consequently less of a drain on the limited financial investment available. As such, ecotourism development may well prove a viable alternative in cases where funds for large tourism development are not available. Secondly, locally owned and operated businesses are not enmeshed in the multinational tourism concerns, and therefore, can have much higher input of local products, materials and labour. This not only has greater multiplier effects throughout the local economy, but also reduces import leakages and the remittances from expatriate labours which result from large-scale, foreign-owned operations. Thirdly, the profit made should accrue locally instead of flowing back to the parent country. In the capital scarce situation of most third world countries, this is a particularly attractive prospect (Salpekar, 2009).

7. Conclusion

In order to maximize the positive impacts of ecotourism, local communities must be included in the planning and development of ecotourism projects starting in the early stages. In order to participate fully in the planning process, they must be aware of the impacts and be supportive of the development. Furthermore, it is

important that local communities ‘have a basic level of awareness of the potential benefits and costs of tourism’ to successfully participate in the planning process (Woodley, 1993).

The critical factor concerning local community participation is community control, which means that communities have the power to decide whether or not tourism is an appropriate development avenue for them to pursue and in what form it should be pursued. It stresses the importance of encouraging such groups to participate in decision-making and the implementation of policy. The existence of participation levels, measures of degree of power sharing, scope of community involvement, methods and decision-making structure being employed in the process and to whom power is being devolved, all contribute to the perception of success.

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