Conserving our Natural Resources: The Rise of Ecotourism

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Abstract: The greatest challenge facing the global community is how to bridge the gap between today's unsustainable resource use practices and a sustainable future use. This requires a paradigm shift away from the conquest and economic growth mentality which is embedded in our economic, political and social systems which led to the destruction of vast areas of native forests, pollution of inland and coastal waterways and the extinction of numerous species of native flora and fauna. This paper explores the concept of sustainable tourism, how it is related to ecotourism, the rise of ecotourism concept, its activities, definition and principles of ecotourism, the impact of ecotourism (environmental, economic and socio-cultural). It also highlights the importance of community empowerment to achieving successful ecotourism. Finally it concludes by giving recommendations for an effective ecotourism as a means of practising sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Ecotourism, Conservation of natural recourses, Community empowerment

1 Introduction

> *"Within the realm of purposes everything has either its price or its dignity. If something has a price, something else can be put in its place as an equivalent. However, something beyond any price and disallowing for whatever equivalent is excelled by dignity" (Kant, 1961, first published 1785, In Hampicke, 1999, p. 160).*

Recently the role of tourism has become more recognized in the context of sustainable use of natural resources and conscious of the pressures from economic growth and the need to protect our natural and social environment. The preservation of the tourism product (i.e. the environmental, social or cultural heritage specific to each country) is the only way to ensure a future for everyone.

Christ, Hillel, Matus, and Sweeting (2003) in an UNEP publication emphasise that tourism is the world's largest industry on the basis of its contribution to global domestic product (GDP), the number of jobs it generates, and the number of clients it serves. Statistics produced by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) and International Hotel and Restaurant Association (IHRA) in 1999 echoes the same view i.e. tourism generates 11 percent of global GDP, employs 200 million people, and transports nearly 700 million international travellers per year. Those figures are expected to double by 2020. With such a scale and rate of growth in the tourism industry, it presents both opportunities and poses threats for biodiversity conservation.

Accordingly there is a dire need to explore the relationship between tourism development and the value of our natural resources. Losing our biodiversity could result in serious reductions in the goods, services and ecosystems which makes economic prosperity and human survival possible. Hence the call for preserving the world's inherent assets for future generations has become a necessity.

This paper explores the concept of sustainable tourism, how it is related to ecotourism, the rise of ecotourism concept, its activities, definition and principles of ecotourism, the impact of ecotourism (environmental, economic and socio-cultural). It also highlights the importance of community empowerment to achieving successful ecotourism. Finally it concludes by giving recommendations for an effective ecotourism as a means of practicing sustainable tourism.

2 Sustainable Tourism Concept

2.1 Overview of the Tourism Industry

Tourism is defined as the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes (WTO, 1993). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2001), travel and tourism achieved the following economic impact:

- USD3.3 trillion contribution to global GDP, almost 11% of total GDP;
- 207 million jobs worldwide, over 8% of all jobs; and
- USD630 billion in capital investment, almost 9% of all capital investment.

Accordingly, the travel and tourism industry should be aware of the pressures resulting from such economic growth and the need to protect our natural and social environment. Preserving the tourism product is the only means to ensure a sustainable future for everyone globally. As a result a growing number of multinational travel and tourism companies adopted 'corporate citizenship' programmes to create a more responsible consumer behaviour by using their products and services to educate and inform their customers and by opening a dialogue between the community and themselves as a means of promoting sustainable tourism (WTTC, IFTO, IH&RA, & ICCL, 2002).

2.2 Why Sustainable Tourism?

Traditional mass tourism developments have been a major threat to biodiversity conservation because management controls and effective planning mechanisms have been lacking. Sustainable tourism had emerged as a more responsible form of mass tourism development by contributing to biodiversity conservation by:

- Offering less destructive livelihood alternatives to local communities and landowners in buffer zones and conservation corridors, away from unregulated logging, intensive cattle-ranching, monoculture, hunting, and unsustainable tourism;
- Providing an incentive for public and private landowners in critical ecosystems to permanently conserve biodiversity-rich properties, by offering revenue-producing, low-impact economic use;
- Providing protected-area managers with additional financial resources from visitation and donations; and
- Raising visitor awareness, promoting community involvement and interest in conservation issues, and generating political support for conservation through environmental education during travel (Christ et al, 2003).

Sustainable tourism is tourism which continues to be viable over time. i.e. the manner of development is appropriate and sustainable over time. Moreover, the environment's ability to support other activities and processes is not impaired. The Commonwealth of Australia (1991, pp42-43) presented the following characteristics of ecologically sustainable tourism which:

- Develops in accordance with the wisest use of environmental resources and services at the national, regional and local levels;
- Operates within the biophysical limits of natural resources use;
- Maintains a full range of recreational, educational and cultural opportunities across generations;
- Maintains biodiversity and ecological systems and processes;
- Develops in a manner which does not compromise the capacity of other sectors of the economy to achieve ecological sustainability.

Echoing similar believes are the principles for sustainable tourism developed in the United Kingdom to guide its practical application:

- The environment has an intrinsic value and its long-term survival must not be prejudiced by short-term considerations.
- Tourism should be recognised as a positive activity, with the potential to benefit the community, place, and visitor.
- The relationship between tourism and the environment must be managed so tourism does not damage the resource, prejudice its future enjoyment, or bring unacceptable impacts.
- Tourism activities and developments should respect the scale, nature and character of place.
- In any location, harmony must be sought between the needs of the visitor, place and host community.
- In a dynamic world, some change is inevitable and can be beneficial, but adaptation should be at the expense of any principle.
- The tourism industry, governments, and the environmental agencies should respect these principles, and work together to achieve their realisation (English Tourist Board et al., 1991).

2.3   Relationship between Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism

Ecotourism is considered a tool used by governments to ensure that sustainable management and development of the country's natural and cultural resources are being maintained (WTO, 2003). On the other hand, Wall (1992) mentioned that sustainable tourism will not be based on ecotourism only, but any role played by ecotourism would be a beneficial contribution to sustainable tourism. While Western (1993) and Wight (1993) explained that not all products that purport to be ecotourism are sustainable because they are wrongly described and do not adhere to the principles of ecotourism and should involve:

- Environmentally sound development, and no degradation of the resource;
- First-hand, participatory, enlightening experiences;
- All-party education (communities, government, NGOs, industry and tourists);
- Recognition of the intrinsic values of the resources;
- Acceptance of the resource on its own terms recognising limits, which involves supply-oriented management;
- Understanding and partnerships between many players;
- Promotion of ethical responsibilities and behaviour towards the natural and cultural environment;
- Long-term benefits (economic and non-economic) to the resource, industry and the local community; and
- Responsible conservation practices related to both internal and external operations.

Furthermore, ecotourism aspires to achieve sustainable development results through the following components:

- Contributing to conservation of biodiversity.
- Sustaining the well being of local people.
- Including an interpretation/learning experience.
- Involving responsible action on the part of tourists and the tourism industry.
- Delivering primarily to small groups by small-scale businesses.
- Requiring the lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources.
- Stressing on local participation, ownership and business opportunities, particularly for rural people (Wood, 2002).

Wood (2002) distinguished between adventure tourism and ecotourism (although both are subcomponents of nature tourism) by stating that ecotourism has stronger links to rural and cultural tourism than adventure tourism. Although ecotourism is a sub-component of sustainable tourism and embraces its economic, social and environmental principles, ecotourism embraces the following specific principles which distinguish it from the wider concept of sustainable tourism:

- Contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage;
- Includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, and contributing to their well-being;
- Interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors;
- Lends itself better to independent travellers, as well as to organised tours for small size groups (WTO, 2004).

Victor Middleton and Rebecca Hawkins (1998) emphasised that in order to improve sustainable practice in the travel and tourism industry we need to look at the following two dimensions:

1. The first dimension lies in improving sustainable practice at the destinations chosen by visitors. The reason being that tourists can leave negative effects on the physical, social and cultural environment of their chosen destination. For example the erosion of coral reefs for construction and leisure activities or of mountains through walking and skiing, excessive use of fresh water for bathing, swimming, watering gardens and golf courses. Another example would be turning traditional arts and rituals into a form of entertainment and profit for hotels or disrupting traditional wage patterns which favour males and perhaps causing the abandonment of traditional ways of earning a living.

2. The second dimension is focusing on the way the travel and tourism industry conduct their development and operational decisions. Some business operations take place at the destination e.g. resort hotels or holiday villages, attractions and car rentals. On the other hand, other business operations take place away from the destination e.g. operations by airlines, ferries and other activities of tour operators and travel agents.

3 Rising Awareness of Ecotourism Concept

3.1 Ecotourism Term Launch and Culmination

Hector Ceballos-lascurain, a member of various Mexican non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is widely credited with coining the term ecotourism, using "ecotourismo" 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 & Neil, 1999). The term was also related to other forms of tourism that were emerging at the time i.e. "nature tourism" and "low impact tourism". Now ecotourism is a widely used term and the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) indicated that ecotourism and nature-based tourism account for 20% of total international travel (Vanasselt, 2005).

Ecotourism has been questioned by experts in the environment, tourism and development fields by questioning the motivations of project managers and communities involved in ecotourism projects to gain high profits from ecotourism activities in comparison to other competing land uses which was given priority over conservation of resources (Wearing & Neil, 1999). Despite such scepticism, ecotourism still has the potential to provide economic benefits for countries that were searching for means of development. Therefore, finding ways to sustain the ecotourism industry became essential to the preservation of these ecosystems and to the sustainable development of these areas (Sindiga, 1999).

Due to the rapid expansion and growth of ecotourism globally, the United Nations designed the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism and its commission on Sustainable Development requested international agencies, governments and the private sector to undertake supportive activities (WTO & UNEP, 2002).

3.2 Ecotourism Activities

Ecotourism includes activities in which visitors enjoy hands-on experiences, such as bird-watching in the Brazilian rainforest, hiking the mountains of Nepal, participating in a traditional village celebration, or taking a canoe trip down a river. Local guides usually accompany small groups of tourists on expedi-

tions, teaching them about the local flora, fauna, and culture of the region. Ecotourism is characterized by small-scale outfits in remote locations where commercialization and mass-tourism outfits have not yet penetrated. Tourists typically stay with local families, or at small, environmentally-friendly hotels called "eco-lodges". Donald E. Hawkins (1995) stated that the term eco-lodge is an industry label used to identify a nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy of ecotourism. Wood (2002) explained that many eco-lodges offer their own guides and interpretation walks because their visitors are frequently independent travellers that are not travelling with a tour guide. Usually local farmers and indigenous people with in-depth knowledge of the local flora and fauna are hired to guide for eco-lodges. On the other hand, Hector Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) stressed the importance and quality of the surrounding environment (e.g. nearby natural and cultural attractions), the way ecotourism is operated and marketed and the way local communities are involved in the process are more important things than the eco-lodge itself.

3.2   Ecotourism Definition and Principles

This section provides definitions of ecotourism, its relevance to sustainable tourism, its principles and components.

Since ecotourism is a theoretical concept that was introduced into the tourism industry through the amalgamation of the fields of conservation and sustainable development, the term can be defined in various ways. From a conservation perspective, ecotourism can be seen as travel to natural areas that does not harm the environment and that supports preservation of nature. Sustainable development perspective sees ecotourism as travel to natural areas that can occur now and in the future which could provide financial or other benefits to the communities that implement ecotourism projects. Finally from a tourism perspective, ecotourism can be seen as a type of tourism that attracts different types of visitors than the traditional type of tourism i.e. visitors who are environmentally friendly and seeking ecologically-based locations.

Oxford English Dictionary (2003) defines ecotourism as "tourism to areas of ecological interest (typically exotic and often threatened natural environments), especially to support conservation efforts and observe wildlife."

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism by stating that "Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people" (TIES, 2003).

The World Conservation Union states in 1996 that 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-socio-economic involvement of local populations" (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996).

The World Tourism Organization (2003) defined ecotourism as "a form of sustainable tourism within a natural and/or cultural areas where community participation, protection and management of natural resources, culture and indigenous knowledge, systems and practices, environmental education and ethics, as well as economic benefits are fostered and pursued for the enrichment of host communities and the satisfaction of visitors" (p64).

The following Table 1 illustrates the six criteria of the various principles of ecotourism presented by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) and the World Ecotourism Summit, Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism (WTO & UNEP, 2002). The criteria and principles in this table provide the goals that ecotourists look for and what ecotourism operators aspire to achieve.

3.3   Ecotourism Inception

Ecotourism started as an idea with the aim of contributing to the conservation of natural resources worldwide as indicated by Thresher (1981) in a research conducted in the 1970s in Kenya. The late 1980s saw a remarkable increase in ecotourism which led governments in various countries to show interest in ecotour-

Table 1   The Six Criteria of Ecotourism Principles

Ecotourism Principle	Quoted Text	Source
Primary focus on natural environment as the attraction	• Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people	The International Ecotourism Society
Promotes conservation	• Provide direct financial benefits for conservation • Contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage	The International Ecotourism Society Quebec Declaration
Provides financial benefits for local communities	• Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people	The International Ecotourism Society
Encourages community empowerment through participation	• Includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, and contributing to their well-being	Quebec Declaration
Reduces negative impact from tourism	• Lends itself better to independent travellers as well as to organised tours for small size groups • Minimize impact	Quebec Declaration The International Ecotourism Society
Promotes cultural education and awareness	• Build environment and cultural awareness and respect • Interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors • Provides positive experiences for both visitors and hosts • Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate	The International Ecotourism Society Quebec Declaration The International Ecotourism Society The International Ecotourism Society

Source: Adapted from the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) & United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). (2002). *The World Ecotourism Summit: Final Report.* Madrid, Spain: World Tourism Organisation.

ism, recognise its enormous capabilities for conserving the natural and cultural heritage of their nations and also its rich potential for ensuring sustainable development. Accordingly, ecotourism was promoted by businesses and governments initially without basic principles until the following principles were developed by the International Ecotourism Society as a result of meetings with stakeholders in 1991:

1. Specialised marketing to attract travellers who are primarily interested in visiting natural areas.
2. Management skills that are particular to handling visitors in protected natural areas.
3. Guiding and interpretation services, preferably managed by local inhabitants, that are focused on natural history and sustainable development issues.
4. Government policies that earmark fees from tourism to generate funds for both conservation of wild lands and sustainable development of local communities and indigenous people.
5. Focused attention on local people, who must be given the right to prior informed consent, full participation and, if they so decide, given the means and training to take advantage of this sustainable development option (Wood, 1997).

The above principles could be considered as blueprints for planning and managing a successful ecotourism business with the aim of meeting higher social and environmental goals. Furthermore, another set of

standards (Ecotourism Guidelines for Nature Tour Operators) was published in 1993 by the International Ecotourism Society and distributed worldwide. Those guidelines concentrated on the following issues: preparing travellers, minimizing visitor impacts on destinations, minimizing nature tour company impacts, providing training to industry workers, contributing to conservation, providing competitive local employment and offering site-sensitive accommodations (TIES, 1993).

Ecotourism is still in its infancy compared to the ambitions on its behalf. Strasdas (2001) alerted that there are two observable types of shortcomings related to ecotourism that occur especially in developing countries:

1. The first shortcoming is related to highly attractive and accessible areas i.e. the very popular tourist destinations like world heritage sites. Those sites usually render substantial profits for the tourism operators; nevertheless, only a small proportion of the money reaches conservation organisations or local people. This could lead to adverse environmental impacts, which contributes to the deterioration in the quality of tourism offered on such areas.

2. The second shortcoming is related to the less attractive or less accessible areas. In this case ecotourism has been developed through technical and financial donations to help in conservation or rural development. Due to the small scale of such initiatives, environmental and social impacts can be managed, but there is no guarantee of commercial success which limits their capacity to create positive economic impacts.

One of the greatest efforts conducted in the field was the Australian initiative of establishing a research program in 1994 which led to the formation of the only ecotourism-specific certification program in the world in 1996 (Wood, 2002).

4   Impact of Ecotourism

This section introduces ecotourism stakeholders, discusses the objectives of ecotourism and the positive and negative impacts of ecotourism by examining the social, economic and environmental benefits associated with ecotourism.

As established earlier ecotourism is a sector of the travel industry formulated from small-and-medium sized organisations, communities and non-governmental organisations. The common factor among those stakeholders is that they develop and implement ecotourism programs in remote and fragile destinations for both the group tour and independent traveller markets. They are serviced by tour operators who provide the niche marketing and booking services for a significant proportion of organised ecotours worldwide.

Linberg, Enriquez and Sproule (1996) stated that ecotourism has the following three objectives:

1. Generating financial support for the formation, management and protection of natural areas.
2. Benefiting residents living near the natural areas economically.
3. Local residents supporting conservation as a result of their economic benefits.

Looking at those objectives, we find a striking similarity between them and the objectives of sustainable tourism discussed by Shaw and Williams (2002). Shaw and Williams contend that sustainable tourism is akin to sustainable development and that sustainable tourism is an important form of economic development in the host community. They further point out that sustainable tourism educates the tourists, making them more aware and more sensitive to the physical and cultural surroundings of the host areas. These similarities relate to the importance of ecotourism as another factor in sustainable community development. The following Table 2 shows the benefits and drawbacks associated with ecotourism as discussed by Weaver (1998).

A myriad of research reported on the environmental damage associated with all types of tourism (Archer & Cooper, 2001; Hawkins & Khan, 2001; Shaw & Williams (2002); Weaver, 1998; and Weinberg, Bellows & Ekster, 2002). Hence, it is not possible that ecotourism will have zero impact on the physical

environment even with the best intentions of all involved parties. On the other hand, Scheyvens (1999) is proposing community empowerment as a means of achieving a successful community-based ecotourism. The following Table 3 illustrates Scheyvens four levels of community empowerment.

5 Conclusion

Ecotourism concept emerged due to the historical changes in the environmental movement, the field of sustainable development and as an alternative to mass tourism. Ecotourism is a business and can be profitable, but it should be a responsible business that aims to meet higher social and environmental goals through good management and planning techniques.

This research paper discussed the importance of sustainable tourism as a means of saving our environment from degradation and destruction for our future generations. It explored ecotourism as one of the tools of sustainable tourism versus mass tourism. During this journey the research paper revealed how ecotourism is related to sustainable tourism, the various definitions and their principles, its various activities, who are the main players in the field of ecotourism, the positive and negative impacts of ecotourism and finally how to empower the communities involved to achieve successful ecotourism.

Due to the infancy of the ecotourism field we cannot say without doubt that ecotourism could be the

Table 2   Positive and Negative Impacts of Ecotourism on the Local Community

Type of Impact	Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
Environmental	• Incentives to protect environment • Eco-tourist's assistance with habitat enhancement • Education in protected areas	• Success = rapid growth • Tourism causes damage and stress • Financial value on nature
Economic	• Revenue from eco-tourists • Job creation • Indirect revenue (multiplier effect) • Stimulates peripheral rural economy	• Start up costs • Ongoing expenses • Uncertain revenue • Damage to crops by wildlife
Socio-cultural	• Aesthetic/spiritual experiences • Fosters awareness among residents and eco-tourists	• Intrusion on local culture • Cultural influence • Displacement of local culture due to parks

Source: Adapted from Weaver, D. (1998). Ecotourism in the Less Developed World. Wallingford, UK: CAB International.

Table 3   Level of Community Empowerment to Achieving Successful Ecotourism

Level of Empowerment	Community Empowerment Outcome
Psychological	• Enhances self esteem of residents • Member seek further education • Increase status of women and youth
Social	• Improved community cohesion • Tourism profit used for community development • Enhances community's equilibrium
Political	• Political structure represents needs of all community members • Special interest groups (e.g. women, youth) have a voice
Economic	• Lasting economic gains • Profits shared equally • Visible signs of improvement in community due to profits

Source: Adapted from Scheyvens, R. (1999). Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities. Tourism Management. Vol.20, pp245-249.

panacea for all maladies and ailments of mass tourism. Nevertheless, it is a good step forward in the right direction towards sustainable tourism as long as the right actions are taken in putting forward the required guidelines and following them through by participation from all involved stakeholders to preserve our natural environment.

6   Recommendations

Each region affected by ecotourism should develop its own principles, guidelines and certification procedures based on the materials already available internationally. In developing the guidelines the following issues should be considered:

1. The amount of control that traditional/indigenous communities retain when ecotourism is developed in natural areas that they mange or inhabit.
2. The efficiency and social fairness of current concepts of protected areas for long term conservation of biological and cultural diversity.
3. The risk that unregulated tourists contribute to lowering genetic capital and traditional knowledge belonging to traditional communities i.e. biopiracy.
4. How to balance the needs of medium-and-large-scale investors who are from outside the local communities (Wood, 2002).

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