Ecotourism sustainability

Lori W. Hedrick
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations

Part of the Hospitality Administration and Management Commons, and the Tourism and Travel Commons

Repository Citation
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations/483

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
Ecotourism Sustainability

By

Lori W. Hedrick
Bachelor of Science in Applied Science
Winston-Salem State University
2000

A professional paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Hospitality Administration
William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2008
Abstract

Ecotourism Sustainability

Ecotourism is defined by the Ecotourism Society as “responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people”. The effect of this type of tourism poses both negative and positive impacts on the tourist and society. The importance of true ecotourism is to conserve and improve the environment, but the sustainability of this type of tourism can face ecological and economic challenges.

By

Lori W. Hedrick

Seyhmus Baloglu Ph.D., CHE, Committee Chair
Associate Dean for Academic Research/Professor
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................... 2

Table of Contents .............................................................................................................................. 3

Part One
  Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 4
  Purpose ............................................................................................................................................... 4
  Justification ...................................................................................................................................... 5
  Constraints ........................................................................................................................................ 5

Part Two
  Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 6
  Ecotourism Orientation ....................................................................................................................... 6
  Environmental Responsibility ............................................................................................................... 7
  Tourism and the Environment ............................................................................................................. 8
  Ecotourism Destruction ...................................................................................................................... 8
  Ecotourism Precautions ..................................................................................................................... 10

Part Three
  Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 13
  Results ............................................................................................................................................... 15
  Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 16

References .......................................................................................................................................... 18
Part One

Introduction

Perhaps the most over-used or distorted word in the travel industry is “Ecotourism”. To understand the concept of ecotourism, the word must first be defined. The Ecotourism Society defines it as “responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people” (Ecotourism, n.d). For example, taking a stroll through a rainforest is not considered ecotourism unless that stroll benefits that environment and the people who live there. Ecotourism, also called nature-based tourism is becoming a greater focal point for locations that need to attract revenue as well as offering a different kind of recreational experience (Williams, 1996). The problem with ecotourism is the question of will this type of tourism continue to offer vacationers an enticing lure to locations while imposing no permanent impact to the locale being explored.

Purpose

The presumption is that the idea behind ecotourism is positive. The rationale is that if tourists, who traditionally have some flexible income, are persuaded to visit the environmentally challenged locations, and then they may be persuaded to make constructive contributions to these locations, whether is be monetary or perform an act that has an environmental impact. The purpose of this paper is to discuss in detail the influences of ecotourism on the environment. The positive and comparative negative impacts will be discussed and examined.
**Justification**

Ecotourism activities can have an immediate and lasting effect on the environment and the economy, whether it is positive or negative. In practice, the impact of ecotourism is broader than simply saving the environment. The inevitable conflict between profits and preservation must be weighed and the options available considered.

It must be agreed upon that ecotourism is a concise long-term goal and not a questionable tourist scam. This segment of tourism is marked by intense controversy. Views on ecotourism range from the most severe charges of exploitation to the widespread account of its positive impacts.

**Constraints**

The constraint of the study of ecotourism is the fact that the subject is relatively new to the tourism industry. The subject of combing environmental conservation and vacationing is a relatively innovative concept and the long-term effects are still unknown.
Part Two

Literature Review

Introduction

Various aspects, of course, impact U.S. tourism. These include the apparent issues current increase in the price of gasoline and airfare but they also include less obvious considerations such as tourist insight. Some countries and regions are simply considered more desirable tourist destinations than others. The comparative appeal of an area, however, depends on the tourist's specific interest. Compared to Europe, the U.S. is often perceived as being a fledgling in terms of cultural attractions. Granted, the U.S. has relatively few historic sites and great museums. What it does have is tremendously diverse natural resources and captivating indigenous Native American culture, both existing and in archaeological reflections. These resources are currently fueling a growing emphasis on ecotourism and nature-based tourism.

Ecotourism orientation

The benefits of increased tourism to the United States can apply to the economics of the country as well as to the conservation of sensitive environmental and cultural areas. What is being experience in the United States is not unique to this country, cultural and archaeological resources as well as environmental resources around the globe are faced with the daily struggle for survival (Olson, 1995). Many are in the process of being destroyed by the poverty- ridden communities whose inhabitants live on their outskirts. Some are destroyed for their artifacts or to obtain any natural resources which they might contain, others are destroyed for development purposed. This is an increasing reality of life in the United States as well. Stopping the senseless destruction of anthropologically and ecologically important areas in our nation requires funding
but it generates a more stable economy as well. Ecotourism offer very viable solutions for both natural areas and economy.

*Environmental responsibility*

In the U.S. ecotourism offers more possibilities in many ways than a more traditional form of tourism. Despite the fact that the European presence in the United States has spanned only a few centuries, the country has a diverse and intriguing original history. This history serves as a drawing card for tourist around the world. In addition, the varied ecosystems are a draw to tourist as well. Ecotourism is an occurrence which has evolved partially out of the efforts of environmentalists to put an economic value on natural areas and sites to aid in their preservation from development. In finding the solution to deforestation, for example, environmentalists have recognized the need to help communities find a new economic base. It is next to impossible to convince communities whose livelihood depends on the practices of deforestation, whether is for the profits from lumber sales or for land to produce food, to refrain from those practices unless these communities can be offered feasible alternatives for economic profit. Megan Epler Wood, executive director of the Ecotourism Society notes the growth experienced in ecotourism and attributes that growth to: "massive dissatisfaction with the simplistic travels offered by travel firms and facilities, as well as a growing interest in educationally enhanced travel" (Marshal, 1996, p. 14).

One possible means of achieving funding for the preservation of resources and for the overall economic welfare of the country is through the implementation of measures such as ecotourism which would serve the double edged purpose of giving the resource economic value and thus protecting it from future development activity. The concepts of ecotourism were spawned in the 1980s (Marshal, 1996).
Ecotourism Sustainability

Tourism and the environment

The concepts of ecotourism did not actually originate in the U.S. but they are currently one of the fastest growing tourism trends there never-the-less (Marshal, 1996). One group of entrepreneurs, sparked by the rising interest in nature, proposed a system called "ecotourism" with the expectation that they could increase revenues in developing nations. Ecotourism is a nature-based tourism, the concept of which was developed from the idea that there were communities that lived on the outskirts of habitats in need of preservation and that these communities as well as the attracting ecosystems could benefit from tourist dollars. Kiddy Roedel, an ecotourism conference director, defines ecotourism as: “a nature-based form of specialty travel, defined as responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people” (Marshal, 1996).

The concepts of ecotourism have been successful at least to some degree in developing countries and it can enjoy that same or perhaps greater success in the United States. Many Americans and international visitors alike are interested in visiting the nation's unique habitats and indigenous cultural sites. The money they spend as a result of this travel industry brings a significant amount of money into adjacent communities and begins to serve to prevent increased devastation to suffering habitats (Padgett, 1996).

Ecotourism destruction

Ecotourism are not wholly positive solutions to the threatened habitats, in fact, are fragile at best. Experience has already shown that in third world countries where the concept was first initiated that ecotourism sometimes comes with a cost of its own. In these countries the successes of the ecotourism programs were to soon meet with an unanticipated complication. The number of tourists who were visiting quickly outgrew the available facilities and pressure began to be
exerted insisting on the expansion of these facilities. This, in itself, resulted in more habitat
destruction.

The U.S. can learn from the mistakes made in third world countries in regard to
ecotourism. An excellent example of the impacts of ecotourism can be seen in a project which
was initiated in the highlands of Mexico. Tourist groups sought to visit millions of monarch
butterflies in their natural winter habitats in the rainforests. But the increased popularity of this
program promoted deforestation for the creation of facilities for the tourists (Padgett, 1996).

Many locals are extremely enthusiastic about the potential positive effects of the
ecotourism movement upon the economies and environment of their region. For example,
wildlife in Guatemala has suffered greatly at the hands of poachers -- up till now the only
profitable way to make a living in many rural areas -- as well as the gradual conversion of their
forests to farmland. But now, with ecotourism making inroads in the area, communities will have
a reasonably lucrative alternative to poaching endangered species, or felling large areas of
precious forest for agricultural use. Gary Lee quotes Carlos Sosa, director of Conservation
International Guatemala, as saying that "Ecotourism dollars makes protecting the environment a
profitable business for locals" (Lee, 1995, p. 18).

Situations such as that outlined above are sometimes complicated even further by the
human propensity for infiltrating areas not only in large numbers but also with massive amounts
of equipment and other paraphernalia in tow (Postrel, 1998). High tech equipment gives
consumers access to areas which before they could only imagine. It also gives them the potential
for significant damage to sensitive environmental areas which might be better protected by
restricted access rather than increased access.
These scenarios tell us that ecotourism is a solution to environmental preservation only if it is carefully thought out and regulated. To do otherwise would further endanger the natural areas and indigenous cultural attractions, not protect them as envisioned. There are numerous mechanisms available which allow the appropriate development of a culturally or environmentally significant object or site.

Ecotourism precautions

The Ecotourism Society identifies several precautions which are a necessary component of ecotourism. They insist that appropriately designed ecotourism projects avoid impacts to the ecosystem or culture that is the focal point of the tourist activity, serve to acquaint the tourists not just with the beauty or curiosity of an attraction but also its value and the importance of conserving that value, nets revenue that can be used to that purpose, and: "Minimizes use of fossil fuels, conserving local plant and wildlife, and blending with the natural environment" (Marshal, 1996).

But not all experts are as confident about the glories of ecotourism as either Lee or Sosa. Journalist Caroline Arlen, describing her own eco-vacation in The U.S. News and World Report, felt that her group had done the local environment more harm than good. On her particular trip to the Amazon, a number of vacationers came down with intestinal disorders after drinking and bathing in the same water into which their sewage was dumped. A teacher on Arlen's trip described how a village boy, trying to make points with the ecotourists, had captured a sloth and dragged it into the camp so the ecotourists could take pictures of it.

This may not be that unusual. The Ecotourism Society, an organization of conservation and travel professionals, aims to promote "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people," but many outfitters who have jumped
on the ecotourism bandwagon actually have little understanding of or compassion for its underlying philosophy. Of 34 ecotourism operators contacted for Arlen's article, 27 said that "they do not give environmental concerns high priority" and one travel agent responsible for booking such tours admitted she was "mostly concerned with comfort." One ecotourism described in the article seemed to transform itself midstream into something reminiscent of a hunting safari; a disillusioned traveler with this group told Arlen that the vacation was advertised "as being an ecotourism facility with a world-record variety of birds . . . but on the first night they said, 'We're going to take you caiman hunting.' A boat set out at dusk to search for the alligator-like reptiles. A guide spotted a baby, jumped into the river and caught it" (Arlen, 62).

Other examples of violations abound. Timber around Nepal's Himalayan trails has been stripped to heat water for vacationers' tea. On one "ecosafari", the tourists so terrified a mother cheetah that she killed all her cubs. In Costa Rica, a native tour guide attracted monkeys to the camp with candy and gum, and in the Amazon, a guide cut down an endangered palm tree -- despite being asked not to by his shocked clientele -- to make a "hearts of palm" salad (Arlen, 1995, p. 63). And Adam Freedman adds that Costa Rica's Manuel Antonio Park -- a hot spot for ecotourists -- is getting 1,000 tourists a day, who have unwittingly the famous howler monkeys into garbage foragers (Freedman, 1995, p. 38).

Part of the problem, according to Arlen, is that there is very little supervision of the agencies responsible for booking the tours, even less supervision of the tour guides themselves, and very little standardization of what the term "ecotourism" really means. She quotes Tom Stanley of Mountain Travel-Sobek, an adventure/travel outfitter based in El Cerrito, CA, assaying, "Bulldozer races in the Amazon could be called ecotourism" (Arlen, 1995, p. 64). And if they were, people would go. Travel experts see ecotourism as the fastest-growing segment of
the travel industry, netting well over $200 billion a year (Freedman, 1995, p. 38). Although
etourism appealed mostly to birders and scientists a decade ago, Arlen points out that today's
mass-market promotions zero in on the everyday traveler, who often is unprepared for the
primitive conditions he or she could face in the wild. Therefore, the wild has to be "tamed" to
suit these tourists.
Part Three

Introduction

Unfortunately one of the factors which make ecotourism a sustainable approach in the United States also keeps it in its infancy state as well. More or less ecotourism is viewed as an inferior type of tourism by those that consider themselves above participating in getting back to nature activities. These types of stereotypical views sometimes discourage individuals from pursuing ecotourism therefore questioning the sustainability of its future.

The realities of ecotourism are far different from the misperceptions. Statistics indicate that 56% of ecotourists range between the ages 35-54 (Marshal, 1996). Most, 82% have college degrees (Marshal, 1996). There are other relevant facts as well. Couples tend to travel without their children and the average length of a trip ranges between eight and fourteen days (Marshal, 1996). Preferred times of travel are predictable as well with June through September being the most frequently traveled months (Marshal, 1996). The real distinction which separates ecotourists from typical tourists, however, is a deep appreciation of conservation, wildlife and native cultures (Broydo, 1996).

Tourism comes in many forms, attracts a variety of people and groups, and includes many factors. Sustainability is becoming more of a focus in the tourism industry as communities, federal agencies, states and individuals alike are making a dedicated effort to bring tourists into their environmentally and culturally important areas. These individual are improving their infrastructures and road systems with the hopes of attracting tourists. Most are making sincere efforts to not only increasing their economic base, but also to ensure the survival of these areas even in the face of tourism. Tourism can have an immediate and lasting effect on
the nation's diverse economics and will go a long way toward carrying the precious environmental and cultural resources successfully into the next century.

According to David Fennell, the sustainability of ecotourism depends on the following factors:

1. Development within each locality of a special sense of place, reflected in architectural character and development style, sensitive to its unique heritage and environment.

2. Preservation, protection and enhancement of the quality of resources, which are the basis of tourism.

3. Fostering development of additional visitor attractions with roots in their own locale and developed in ways which complement local attributes.

4. Development of visitor services which enhance the local heritage and environment.

5. Endorsement of growth when and where it improves things, not where it is destructive, or exceeds the carrying capacity of the natural environment or the limits of the social environment, beyond which the quality of community life is adversely affected (Fennell, 2003).

Five basic principles of sustainability are the idea of planning and strategy making, the importance of preserving essential ecological processes, the need to protect both human heritage and biodiversity, the need to develop in a manner that fosters long-term productivity sustainable for future generations, and the goal of achieving a better balance of equity among nations. Generally, the idea of sustainable growth is that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Fennell, 2003).

The two sustainability principles that are linked to the classifications of ecotourism are the need for giving back to local communities and returns for the environment through support for conservation. Economic sustainability is usually provided in the form of both direct and indirect benefits of employment, monetary exchanges and even infrastructure development. Environmental sustainability is enhanced through better resource conservation, as well as cash. It
is beyond doubt that the long-term feasibility of the ecotourism industry essentially relies on maintaining the natural environment on which the industry depends, and provide fair economic return to local communities (Black, 2007).

Results

Determining the future of ecotourism is as filled with uncertainty as any other exercise in forecasting or fortune-telling. It seems that ecotourism is here to stay, but that it is currently still at a very early and delicate stages in its growth. Individual ecotourism enterprises and in general concepts and principles of ecotourism are continually plagued by larger participants who pursue ecotourism for other purposes, mainly financial gain. This is not simply a question of business competition, where successful ecotourism ventures may be undercut or bought out. Whereas the best examples of ecotourism are making real and important contributions to conservation of the natural environment and the development of disadvantaged communities, these instances are still extremely rare and most of them are very small in number. Unless and until they can either grow greatly in economic terms without losing their basic principles, or exert political leverage far outweighing their size, they can do rather little to reduce the pace of environmental degradation across the planet. Realistically, there seem to be very few human social organizations that may have both the power and the speed necessary to change human behavior towards sustainability. Under the appropriate conditions ecotourism can indeed be one such tool, with assured success. If for this reason alone, it seems advisable to encourage successful ecotourism ventures and endeavors to replicate them worldwide (Buckley, 2003).

Ralf Buckley states, “for tourism to make useful contributions to conservation, its enormous revenue-generating power must be channeled and focused through a conservation framework. Such frameworks may be established either by law, as in the case of public lands, or
by private convictions, as in the case of private reserves, such as those established by Earth Sanctuaries Limited and CCA. As the ecotourism sector continues to grow, the continuing vigilance of organizations such as the United Nations Environment Program and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Sustainable Tourism Division of the World Tourism Organization and international conservation organizations, such as Conservation International and the World Wide Fund for Nature, will become increasingly important. And finally, as the debates of the International Year of Ecotourism and the World Summit on Sustainable Development move into their implementation phase, perhaps it is time to reconceptualize ecotourism in post-2002 jargon: ecotourism is geotourism with a positive triple bottom line.”(Buckley, 2003, p.264).

Conclusion

Ecotourism can work if there are successful ecotourism ventures which do implement all the basic criteria of a nature-based product, minimal-impact management, an informative and a prominent environmental program and a significant contribution to conservation of the natural environment. Tour operations and products that fulfill all these conditions, however, are relatively rare (Buckley, 2003).

Ecotourism can make a clear positive contribution to worldwide conservation. There are private enterprises in various parts of the world that have established private conservation reserves funded through tourism and where, as far as can be judged, the conservation benefits greatly outweigh the tourism impacts. Such significant benefits are most common in areas and countries where, in the absence of tourism, the reserved land would otherwise be used for agriculture or other primary trades. There are also private and community enterprises which, without establishing privately held reserves, have successfully used tourism to
improve the conservation prospects of endangered animal or occasionally plant species, either by reducing hunting, poaching, trapping and collecting or by changing land management practices so as to expand or improve the habitation available for the species concerned.
References


