

Ecotourism and its Effects on Native Populations

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Introduction

Tourism, especially international tourism, is one of the world's fastest growing industries. The world has seen an "increase in international tourist arrivals from 25 million in 1950 to 664 million in 1999" (Griffin, 2002, 25). People have always had a great desire to travel the world, to experience other environments, and to simulate foreign ways of life. In its most basic sense, tourism can be defined as "travel outside one's normal home..., the activities undertaken during the stay, and the facilities created to cater for tourist needs" (Dowling, 2003, 1). However, this description is not as basic as one might think; rarely are the facilities created to cater for tourist needs discussed in tourism. Tourism is not only the act of a foreigner visiting a foreign land, but also the participation of and effects on the local populations of touristed areas. These facilities and programs become part of the local culture, and it is up to the planning of tourism to make sure that they stay within the original framework of the culture.

With the definition of traditional tourism in mind, ecotourism can be discussed as a different entity based on the involvement of local populations in all aspects of tourism. Indigenous populations are the most knowledgeable about the area, and they "possess the practical and ancestral knowledge of the natural features of the area" (Wearing, 2001, 402). Maintaining this historical bond between the culture and its environment is important to the survival of an ecotourism program. This is especially important now, in a time when ecotourism is part of the development strategy of nearly every developing country. Not only is ecotourism an essential part of the development approach for Costa Rica, Tanzania, and Kenya, but it is also the greatest earner of foreign currency in these countries (Moreno, 2005, 217). And while it is important to ensure that cultures are allowed to maintain their sense of identity, it would also be contradictory to expect them to remain static. It is important "that tourism of a culture not inhibit

the culture from growing and changing” with the natural flow of expansion (Wearing, 2001, 399).

This paper seeks to discover the history, the present, and the future of ecotourism. This will be done through the analysis of case studies of ecotourism throughout the world, as well as management practices from all levels of ecotourism governance. Analysis of the benefits and consequences of each specific example of ecotourism programs can lead to the ultimate goal of a defined set of ecotourism guidelines. These would have various changes from region to region, culture to culture, depending on the resources available, but the general framework would remain similar.

Background

A successful ecotourism program must involve aspects of both environmental planning and social planning for the destination regions. Without one or the other, the program will focus too heavily on the environment or too heavily on the culture at a detriment to the neglected aspect. Ecotourism cannot be developed out of every type of conventional tourism; it takes a conscious effort to maintain the integrity of local cultures and environments. The World Conservation Strategy laid out by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in 1980 echoes this sentiment: “With the emphasis on ‘ecodevelopment,’ there has been a strong move [to focus on] the interdependencies between environmental and economic [and social] issues” (Dowling, 2003, 6).

Environmental Planning

According to Dowling (2003, 3), there are four main dimensions to the environmental maintenance of a successful ecotourism program: it must have a strong nature base, support for conservation in the area, sustainable management practices, and an element of environmental

education for locals and tourists. Support for conservation and sustainable management are especially important to ecotourism destinations because they are “usually concentrated in sensitive and unique environments” (Diamantis, 2004, 15). These unique environments represent different uses to different people. Locals use their environment delicately to maintain a balance and future for their culture. Foreigners see a unique environment as an untapped source waiting to be developed or harvested for its resources. Also, visitors are mostly unaware of the impact that their presence imposes on these delicate environments. By simply expecting to live at the same standards they do in their home country, tourists use the resources on the local island much more frivolously. These negative consequences to the environment can be eliminated through proper education of both native and foreign people with respect to tourism.

Social Planning

Social planning in a destination region is equally as important as environmental planning for ecotourism. Both locals and tourists must understand the goals of a program if everyone is to be working towards the same goal. The most important social factor is to make sure that “local populations have a crucial level of awareness of the prospective benefits and costs of tourism to contribute effectively in the planning process” (Diamantis, 2004, 13). Wearing (2001, 396) acknowledges that “the community is rarely asked by private operators about their vision for the area, nor have they been traditionally part of the planning process.” As the study of ecotourism has increased, there has been a trend to include the community more in development. The simplest and most effective way to ensure community involvement in ecotourism is through the development of community organization programs. Members of the community meet with selected ecotourism development officials to discuss their culture, ways of life, and visions for ecotourism. The development officials then teach the community about the positive and negative

effects of ecotourism. This input is used to the highest degree to make sure that both groups work together to reach a common goal.

A survey developed in Mexico by Diamantis sought to explore and compare the effectiveness of community organization programs, using the cities of San José and Alta Cimas as examples. Each of these cities had an ecotourism program in effect at the time of the study, and the only noted difference between the two is the presence of a community organization program in Alta Cimas for two years prior to the study, where San José did not have one. The objective of the program in Alta Cimas was to allow the citizens equal input into the development of social, economic, and conservation projects related to their ecotourism industry. Through a simple survey of the impacts of ecotourism, it was found that the citizens of Alta Cimas were more conscious of the positive and negative impacts of ecotourism than the citizens of San José (Diamantis, 2004, 13).

Benefits for Local Communities

Benefits for local communities are wide reaching. Not only is there emphasis on proper environmental management, emphasis on improving social operations has been effective in these areas. Ecotourism provides new jobs in the local community through the growth of hotels, restaurants, and guided tours. This creates business growth and provides additional income for often economically unstable areas. Also, an outlet to new markets for local products is created, in that locals are able to sell their goods directly to the consumer without having to use an intermediary. While this is great for local businesses, the local citizens themselves are put at a disadvantage. The new market for local goods in effect raises their global price, making it harder for locals to afford goods they have grown accustomed to. Other social benefits of ecotourism include improved funding for facilities and an improved infrastructure, the acquisition of new

skills and technologies, increased cultural awareness by the culture itself as well as by the rest of the world, and also improved land use patterns for development in the area (Dowling, 2003, 13 and Wearing, 2001, 397).

Tourist Spending

Tourist money goes to advancing the quality of tourism services as well as the local way of life. In the ideal situation, “a large part of the revenue gained will stay within the region” (Diamantis, 2004, 14). When the locals are the hotel owners, the restaurant workers, and the tour guides, it is only proper business that they get to keep the money that they make and not have to share it with foreign powers.

Problem Description

Ecotourism faces a set of problems that threaten the entire program. While growth in the popularity of ecotourism may be beneficial monetarily, the growth of “the global tourism industry often does so at the expense of the social and ecological integrity of destination regions” (Dowling, 2003, 10). The social integrity of a region is compromised when development occurs too quickly and without proper input from the local communities. This becomes a major issue with the involvement and control of foreign powers in the development of ecotourism. The ecological integrity is also compromised with the lack of proper planning, as well as with an influx in tourists who do not understand the delicate balance in the ecological stability of the region.

Developing countries “possess a powerful economic incentive to develop tourism rapidly and with as few constraints as possible” (Griffin, 2002, 28). The benefits of tourism on a developing country are immediate and widespread. This presents a danger to the development of ecotourism in a developing country. Ecotourism takes years of planning across many different

levels of governance, “including intranational, national, regional, local, and site scale” (Dowling, 2003, 9). Locals at the smaller scales have an important level of involvement in ecotourism planning, but without their complete cooperation, it is easy for foreigners at the intranational level to acquire development rights. When offered enough incentives, developing countries can be quick to cede control of tourism development to foreign interests (Griffin, 2002, 29).

Without having full control of tourism planning, “the culture of the host society is as much at risk from tourism as the physical environment” (Wearing, 2001, 395). Many indigenous cultures affected by tourism are not accustomed to the fast-paced, material-oriented lifestyle of developers and the tourists that soon follow. Without trying to demean these people, it is very easy to let foreigners take control of the tourism industry when they promise that the immediate benefits will far exceed the costs, environmentally and socially, in the future. Relinquishing control of the tourism industry makes it easy to then “turn instead to the representation of environments and cultures as ‘products’” (Crouch, 2003, 78).

The island of Dominica is a prime example of a developing country that rushed into a growing tourism industry. Dominica did not take the time to include community involvement and develop a grand scheme for the management of tourism; the island and its government are examples “of the consequences of naïve opportunism and political corruption” (Weaver, 2004, 160). Now much of the island has become overshadowed by the industry that was supposed to raise their economy. Local cultures are being exploited and misrepresented, and the industry promotes further environmental degradation on the island because of poor planning, much to the detriment of those that still rely on the island’s natural resources. The island turned to ecotourism “out of a sense of desperation” as their economy moved away from an emphasis on

product output like bananas, and now they have nothing to fall back on if this program completely backfires (Weaver, 2004, 160).

The Future of Ecotourism

The discussion of the effects on local populations brings forth another problem. Should the tourism industry be pushing for further development of existing ecotourism destinations, or should the focus be on opening up new destinations for expansion (Griffin, 2002, 27)? Existing destinations already have a tourism framework developed into which the ecotourism industry could utilize. These destinations have also already built a name for themselves, and people seem to stick with popular places. However, further developing existing destinations could have a completely opposite effect in that it could begin to marginalize the culture and counteract the principles of ecotourism with overdevelopment. The sustainability “of the community in a peripheral area tends to decline as tourism intensifies” (Wearing, 2001, 395). On the other hand, opening up new ecotourism directions could be great for the region of development. Economic and environmental benefits are documented with correct implementation of ecotourism, and expansion into new areas could help these areas maximize their resources. Beginning programs in new areas is only going to be successful depending on “the capacity of local peoples to exert some control over the commonly held resources that attract ecotourists” (Moreno, 2005, 221). What might more likely happen is the case of Dominica where ecotourism spreads too quickly without proper input from local cultures.

There is also conflict with the conventional tourism industry. It is known that conventional tourism does not always take into account the consequences of their actions, “such as the inclusive resort in which restaurants, shopping, and entertainment are... typically isolated from local communities” (Moreno, 2005, 218). Local goods and services are ignored for cheaper

goods from other places, and there is little regulation over the effects of things like excursions into the country where they may cause disturbance. Tourists also can easily get schemed into what seems like an ecotourism site. Resort developers “are likely to recognize the benefits of luring would-be ecotourists by offering nature tours” and cultural events (Moreno, 2005, 218). Without universal standards, ecologically minded people could easily see an event like this and believe that they are experiencing something that they are not. Practices like this by conventional tourist operations are illegal or immoral, but the public who wants to experience true ecotourism needs to be educated as to what the industry entails.

Examples

Ecotourism is implemented differently around the world, and the impacts on native cultures vary similarly. It is universal that tourism is a crucial industry to provide economic support to developing countries. An international pact in 1996 designated the tourism industry as the paramount economic growth strategy within Central America (Moreno, 2005, 218). Two prime examples of the effect of ecotourism in Central America are Bay Island in Honduras and Ambergris Caye in Belize. While the areas grew dramatically, most of the effects of ecotourism have not been positive.

A similar example to the survey in Alta Cimas and San José, Mexico is the difference between two communities in Indonesia that have ecotourism programs. In this region, the “lack of consultation and participation by local communities has fueled hostilities and loss of trust” by the locals (Benson, 2004, 4). However, the two communities have very different cultures, and the effects of global communication are obvious on one culture compared to the other.

The final example is not in a developing country, but rather in one of the world’s most established countries: Canada. The northern regions of the country are popular ecotourism

destinations because of the native aboriginal and Inuit populations. The newest Canadian province, Nunavut, became an autonomous territory in 1999, and their government chose ecotourism as their best way to get money (Hashimoto, 2004, 210). Their approach to the tourism industry is far different and more representative of its original goals.

Bay Island, Honduras

Bay Island, Honduras is an example of where the rapid spread of ecotourism is not sustainable. This region of Honduras still lacks proper sanitation facilities and safe drinking water, but the luring effects of tourism caused them to develop anyway. The population has grown by nearly 50% with the expansion of ecotourism from 10,000 to 90,000 visitors per year. This has led to what is being called a “rapid dilution” of the local culture (Moreno, 2005, 222-223).

The blame is being placed mostly on foreign-based operations. By 1996, approximately 40% of hotel owners and a greater percent of diving operations were foreign-owned (Moreno, 2005, 223). There was no dialogue between developers and the entire local community, nor did they take into account the lack of proper facilities. The few locals that do take part in and benefit from ecotourism in Bay Island are those “with sufficient income to invest” in the first place (Moreno, 2005, 224). This unequal distribution of ecotourism wealth in a community can cause hostility. It is apparent why the locals feel resentment towards the tourism industry as it uses up the resources without providing any type of reimbursement (Wearing, 2001, 400).

Ambergris Caye, Belize

The growth of tourism in Ambergris Caye, Belize is very similar to Bay Island. In the ten years between 1984 and 1994, tourism grew by 50%, and in this case, nearly 75% of hotels were foreign-owned (Moreno, 2005, 227). With the expansion of the tourism industry, Belize

needed more people to work the new facilities. By the early 1990s, approximately 50% of all Belizeans had a job in the tourism sector (Moreno, 2005, 227). While this continued to provide jobs and allow for local input, the traditional fishing industry that has always thrived in the area has seen a noticeable decrease in skilled and able workers. This could pose a problem for feeding the locals as well as tourists who come in wanting to experience everything related to the local ways of life.

There is a bright side to ecotourism in Ambergris Caye, however. The local government has implemented a plan for more sustainable growth of the industry to limit the continued expansion. Every hotel that is to be built can have a maximum of 60 beds, and the total growth per year is 120 beds (Moreno, 2005, 227). This limits the input of foreign developers because many do not see a 60-bed operation as being a worthwhile investment of time and money. Also, in order to maintain the important tradition in the region of having an unpaved center of town, the plan forces the construction of further paved roads along the edge of town (Moreno, 2005, 227). The government is working with native cultures to maintain their local traditions much better than the developers of Bay Island, Honduras are doing.

Sulawesi, Indonesia

Indonesia is representative of most remote Pacific Island nations, where ecotourism is of enhanced significance “where opportunities for other forms of economic development may be limited” (Benson, 2004, 3). Local cultures feel the pressure to provide a tourist industry, and often they are prime examples of areas that use foreign developers who do not take careful consideration of the culture.

Two communities in Indonesia, the Bajau and the Kaledupan, are similar to the communities previously mentioned in Mexico in that one community (Kaledupan) is more aware

of the positive and negative impacts of tourism than the other. This is directly related to the level of remoteness of the community. The Bajau are an interesting people because they once lived entirely at sea. All of their structures were built on the sea and on structures jutting from the land into the water. They only moved to land recently because of pressure by the government of Indonesia. They still remain a remote society, but allow for tourists to bring in supplemental income. The Kaledupan are a very opposite culture. They are more typical of mainstream Indonesia with jobs in the manufacturing sector, and they have “a more formal education and greater access to global media” (Benson, 2004, 10).

What truly sets these two cultures apart with respect to ecotourism is that Kaledupan is part of Operation Wallacea. Operation Wallacea is a British ecotourism group that helps assimilate native cultures with a proper tourism program. Through a more extensive survey similar to the Mexico study, it was determined that the Kaledupan community is more “aware of the consequences of their actions with regard to the environment” than the Bajau people (Benson, 2004, 9). It is not known if this type of operation would work with the Bajau people because of the culture’s pride in their remoteness, but allowing them to become more aware of the consequences could prove to be beneficial.

Nunavut, Canada

Ecotourism is a long-standing tradition in Canada, especially in the northern provinces. Their interesting history and unique adaptations to their environment have led tourists to the area for years. Canada’s established ecotourism industry shows that ecotourism is not only a profitable enterprise in tropical and/or developing countries. The industry throughout Canada is worth approximately \$CDN270 million and employs 14,000-16,000 people in mostly seasonal and part time jobs (Hashimoto, 2004, 207). This makes ecotourism a substantial economic

industry in Canada, but what is more impressive is the way ecotourism is implemented in the country.

In 1996, the Aboriginal Tourism Team Canada issued their goal to “represent Aboriginal people as world leaders in tourism in harmony with our culture” (Hashimoto, 2004, 211). And for the most part, they have been successful. They have a high reverence for the environment, and it translates directly to their treatment of tourism. The Aboriginals work through themselves to control the tourism industry, not through a foreign party. This allows them to have a full share of the revenue generated, and they can divide the profits equally.

The only environmental issue in Nunavut pertaining to the sustainability of tourism is the conflict in how to incorporate hunting and fishing (Hashimoto, 2004, 217). The environment in northern Canada is not conducive to growing crops, so the culture has adapted to creating a sustainable harvest of wild animals. With a growing tourism industry, it is difficult to allow tourists to participate in hunting and fishing because they do not know the local practices that continue its sustainability. Even more crucially is the problem of what to feed incoming tourists if their presence places stress on their local food habits. The Aboriginals are currently working on solutions to continue progress with their mission statement.

Conclusion

Ecotourism will not be an immediate success in every culture that attempts it. Sustainable tourism can only exist in an area where human activity is already sustainable. The Solomon Islands in the South Pacific may seem like a good place for ecotourists to visit, but their ongoing civil war and unsustainable logging practices contradict the basic tenets of ecotourism (Weaver, 2002, 137).

A few solutions to ecotourism problems have been suggested. In order to make tourism more successful, a region should “provide high quality facilities and services and thereby attract high spending tourists” (Griffin, 2002, 30). Fewer people would come through the area to cause conflict, and the ones that do will hypothetically be more sympathetic to the cause since they have more money to invest in an ecotourism program in the first place. An immediate problem with this solution is that high quality facilities and services require greater introductory capital in the development and building stage. Most places do not have a lot of money to invest, so they would first need to provide lower quality goods to increase their wealth to build the higher quality ones. This could seem wasteful as well as detrimental to the local environment if enough attention is not paid to the low quality services.

Place	Positive	Negative
Bay Island, Honduras	Economic growth, awareness	Still insufficient facilities, overpopulation, unequal distribution of wealth
Ambergris Caye, Belize	Economic growth, development plan, awareness	Loss of cultural aspects, foreign-ownership
Sulawesi, Indonesia	Community management plan, awareness	Loss of cultural aspects
Nunavut, Canada	Community management plan, economic growth	Conflict with traditional hunting and fishing

(A review of ecotourism examples around the world)

Another way to ensure the success of an ecotourism program is to establish a universal ecotourism monitoring program. A universal program would be able to set rules and monitor the progress of ecotourism around the world. Monitoring would not have to be an elaborate process, however; monitoring “can occur through a range of formal and informal means, including informal conversations, group discussions, and questionnaires” (Wearing, 2001, 398). This follows the establishment of community management plans in tandem with ecotourism developers, in that the input of the community is crucial to its success. A system of participatory

rural appraisal (PRA) is already being implemented around the world in relation to ecotourism. Local communities get to discuss their visions and hopes for the future with developers, accentuating local knowledge as vital part of the process. Giving communities access to the development process enables them to self-analyze once the developers are gone. It is also important to educate children about ecotourism in touristed areas. Raising children with the knowledge about the costs and benefits of ecotourism puts them at a great advantage for generations to come, making continuing a sustainable tourism practice much more likely (Wearing, 2001, 398-404).

Not all the benefits from ecotourism fall on the people of the visited site. Citizens of more developed countries who participate in ecotourism can serve as a useful tool between the two cultures. Interaction with “less resource-exploitative models of lifestyle... can be beneficial” to advanced industrial societies (Wearing, 2001, 397). Remote cultures have truly innovative ways to maintain their sustainability, and every developed nation can serve to learn from these cultures. For the visitor, “ecotourism will help to raise environmental awareness and ethics which they will take back with them to their home” (Diamantis, 2004, 15).

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