

The challenge of ecotourism: A call for higher standards

John N. Shores

1828 Kilbourne Place NW, Washington, USA

1996

jshores@capaccess.org

Keywords: nature, ecology, tourism, ecotourism, nature based tourism, economy.

Abstract

One of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism business is nature-oriented tourism. The travel industry has enlisted the support of environmental organizations and park agencies and is promoting nature travel as the hottest "environmentally correct" activity available. But is ecotourism the panacea these promoters claim? The author argues that ecotourism really means environmentally sound tourism. The definition must be sufficiently rigorous to create a goal that challenges tour operators, park officials, and the traveling public. The definitions in popular use are too lax and may foster the false idea that a trip or tour is environmentally benign when in fact it is destructive of the local, regional, and global environments. The solution is to establish a 0-5 scale to classify the stages of ecotourism, much like the difficulty scales used to classify whitewater rafting or technical climbing. The author proposes preliminary criteria for defining the Ecotourism Level (EL) of different stages in the greening of the travel system.

Introduction

Tourism is one of the growth sectors of the world economy. In the developing countries, tourism of all types contributes roughly US\$ 50 billion annually. (Anon 1989) Even in the current period of widespread economic recession and depression, tourism has remained surprisingly strong.

Under the broad umbrella of tourism, one of the hottest segments is travel with nature as a principal objective. Known under a variety of names, nature-based tourism is promoted by the travel industry as a unique opportunity to see and experience natural environments and local customs in ways not available to participants in mass tourism.

Nature tourism is developing a popular following. It is touted by some of its champions as a solution to chronic under funding of national parks and other protected areas. Others see it as one of the central elements in sustainable

economic development. It is promoted as a panacea much the way the green revolution was promoted in recent decades.

Nature tourism is supposed to attract foreign investment in the "smokeless" tourist industry; bring national and international tourists to visit natural and cultural sites; provide local employment for rural populations; preserve ecosystems and cultures; and generally solve the ecological, economic, social, and political woes that hinder sustainable rural development.

But is this realistic?

The Rainbow of Definitions for Nature-Based Tourism

Nature-based tourism encompasses a broad spectrum of activities and enterprises. The lack of generally accepted definitions has hindered our abilities to identify and analyze nature tourism and its many variations.

From a review of travel industry advertising, we might conclude that nature-based tourism is any travel that includes viewing or appreciating elements of the green environment. The travel has a green component as one of its values or attractions. This definition is so broad that almost any travel would qualify, as long as something green was seen along the way. This might best be termed "incidental" nature-based travel.

Another definition of nature-based tourism is linked to the motives of the traveler:

"Traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas." (Ceballos-Lascurain 1987).

This definition focuses on the motives of the traveler, but fails to consider the impact this travel may have on the site or culture visited. As one author has pointed out, "[Travelers can destroy what attracts them, the very qualities that make a place special." (Reilly 1978)

Travelers who want to select and support truly "green" tours need clear and reasonable terms to distinguish among different advertising claims. Today the traveler is faced with a variety of offers for nature-based tourism.

The Rainbow of Nature-Based Tourism

Incidental: Any travel during which the traveler views or appreciates the green environment.

Nature-Centered: Travel in which nature is the central value rather than an after-thought.

Support: Travel organized to provide appreciable financial support for the protection of the green environment visited or enjoyed.

Involvement: Travel in which the traveler personally engages in activities that support conservation or restoration.

Ecological: Travel in which all activities are ecologically benign.

Current Usage of "Ecotourism"

"Ecotourism" today unfortunately is used as an all-inclusive term. People are using the term so loosely that nearly all travel qualifies. The goal posts are spread so far that every attempt scores a goal. This adversely affects protected areas and biodiversity in several ways.

Continued use of all-encompassing definitions in the nature-tourism arena weakens the power of the concept, contributes to ambiguity, and encourages misuse and abuse of the idea. Precise definitions will allow us to communicate with requisite accuracy among ourselves and communicate with authority to the broader traveling public. Both are important if the concept of nature-based tourism is to make a meaningful contribution to the conservation of protected areas.

During the past two decades, it has become increasingly popular to be "green." Hoping to take advantage of this wave of popularity, some individuals and organizations have begun to advertise their products and services as environmentally friendly. Unless the consumer or traveling public is much more informed and motivated to choose appropriately, green stamps or green seals will not have any meaning. Worse yet, the label may be used to deceive the traveling public.

It is in the best interests of local communities, the travel industry, and protected-area practitioners that green stamps and labels be adopted, that these endorsements have precise requirements, that the requirements be respected, and that the public be informed and motivated to insist on compliance.

A few examples will show the range of these benefits. Communities will benefit because local impacts of nature-based travel will be benign. The travel industry will benefit because an attractive market segment will have products that can be differentiated and sold at a premium. Protected-area practitioners will benefit because the visiting public will have less of a negative impact on

resources and broader public support for protected areas will come from these travelers once they return home.

Bringing Ecology Back Into Ecotourism

How can we ensure that the concept of ecotourism develops along this beneficial path? The prefix "eco" that we hang on the front of tourism comes from the Greek word "oikos" meaning "house." It is the same prefix we use on economics and ecology. In the case of ecotourism, the immediate origin should be the word "ecology" if we are to reclaim the term and support it with strength and precision.

Ecotourism means quite simply "ecologically sound tourism" or "ecologically sensitive tourism." The same amount of caring we would afford our own home is implied. Ecotourism is "tourism to the house or home." All of the attention and maintenance that a homeowner puts into a house should be the amount of care we put into tourism. The ecotourist must care for the place visited as much as she or he cares for and appreciates home.

Are there efforts under way to set standards? The vast and decentralized travel industry is not easily controlled, but a few leaders among its members have become strong supporters of standard setting and voluntary compliance. Some of the earliest efforts were by tour operators sensitive to the problems of local participation in nature travel.

Journeys International, a tour organizer operating out of Ann Arbor, Michigan, established the Earth Preservation Fund and directed 10% of all ground costs into the fund. Proceeds were used to finance conservation activities in the countries visited by Journeys. The fund has supported efforts such as tree planting and environmental sanitation and clean-up.

One of the early efforts at guidelines for nature travel was the National Audubon Society's "Travel Ethic for Environmentally Responsible Travel"(tm). Audubon promotes these guidelines as the rules for its tours and urges all tour operators to adopt them as goals. The seven major points deal with wildlife, sustainability, waste disposal, environmental appreciation, strengthening local conservation, respecting bans on trade in endangered species, and respect for the cultures visited. The Audubon ethic is copyrighted and cannot be reproduced without written permission from the National Audubon Society.

The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) has developed similar guidelines in association with Club Med(tm).

ASTA's Ten Commandments on Ecotourism

"Whether you are traveling on business, pleasure, or a bit of both, all the citizens of the world, present and future, would be grateful if you would respect the ten commandments of world travel:

1. Respect the frailty of the Earth.
2. Leave only footprints. Take only pictures.
3. To make your travels more meaningful, educate yourself about the geography, customs, manners, and cultures of the region you visit.
4. Respect the privacy and dignity of others.
5. Do not buy products made from endangered plants or animals.
6. Always follow designated trails.
7. Learn about and support conservation-oriented programs and organizations working to preserve the environment.
8. Whenever possible, walk or utilize environmentally sound methods of transportation.
9. Patronize those members of the travel industry who advance energy and environmental conservation; water and air quality; recycling; safe management of waste and toxic materials; noise abatement; community involvement; and which provide experienced, well-trained staff dedicated to strong principles of conservation.
10. Ask your ASTA travel agent to identify those organizations which subscribe to ASTA Environmental Guidelines for air, land, and sea travel."

The time has come for establishing criteria that focus on the conservation of the resources, both cultural and natural. The standards must be clear and defined in steps or phases so that travelers can make rational choices among tours and operators. Unless the conservation community takes the lead in insisting on rigor in the definitions, they will quickly deteriorate to the least common denominator -- and anything green will qualify as ecotourism.

The Proposed Scale of Ecotourism

What the industry needs and the public must demand is a ruler for measuring the impact of tourism on natural and cultural resources. Although there can be many motives for a trip, travelers are not in the habit of conducting an

environmental impact assessment for each part. Eventually we can define the different types of tourism and the impacts they cause. For a start, I have proposed a scale for classifying nature-based travel. The scale measures the level of achievement according to the principles of ecotourism.

The scale is not strictly cumulative. Different levels of the ecotourism scale in some cases measure different attributes rather than increasing or decreasing amounts of the same attribute. For example, Level 1 involves net financial flow of support from the traveler to the site visited. Level 2 involves a separate attribute, personal commitment.

The scale is still in a preliminary phase of development and is presented as an example of the kind of cooperative effort that will involve travelers, tour operators, local communities, and environmentalists.

Level 0

EL 0: The entry level of ecotourism requires that the travelers be exposed to or made aware of the fragility of the ecosystems they have come to enjoy. This is the very lowest "awareness" threshold. Incidental nature travel would usually qualify at this level.

Level 1

EL 1: Level 1 ecotourism requires that a net positive flow of monetary support occur between the traveling ecotourist and the ecosystems visited. Financial earmarks, whether airport departure taxes or designations of a portion of land travel costs, would qualify at this level.

Level 2

EL 2: Level 2 requires that the ecotourist engage in a personal way in supporting the environment. Some ecotourists have planted trees; others have participated in litter cleanups.

Level 3

EL 3: Qualifying at Level 3 requires certifying that the specific tour system is benign to the environment. The system should include the international air travel as well as on-site transport and accommodation. Level 3 requires demonstrating that the net effect of the traveler's presence is neutral or positive.

Level 4

EL 4: Level 4 requires demonstrating that the net effect of the travelers is positive. On-site efforts to use appropriate technology, low energy consumption, recycling, organic agriculture, sustainable harvesting methods, and make a personal contribution to ecosystem restoration can be used to balance less environmentally benign aspects of the larger travel system that might involve air travel, stays in luxury hotels, and excessive energy consumption.

Level 5

EL 5: This should be the ultimate goal for ecotourism supporters, whether they are tour operators, the traveling public, or the resource management agencies. A perfect "5" in ecotourism would be a trip where the entire system was operating in an environmentally sound way. This means that the trip advertising, transport, accommodation, and treatment of residual products must all be considered. No deluge of third class mail solicitations, no advertising in non-recyclable magazines. Transportation must be environmentally benign (no Concordes, limited use of petroleum products -- in fact, maybe only solar and animal transport would qualify, other than walking and swimming). On-site accommodations and all visitor and staff activities must be benign to the environment. Heating and air-conditioning would be solar and low-impact. Foods and souvenirs would be produced in sustainable ways. All residual products would have to be handled in a benign way. Sewage containment and treatment would be an absolute requirement. Used products would be recycled, soaps and cleaning solutions would be biodegradable, and non-degradation of the environment would be the standard.

The Ecotourism Challenge to Tour Operators, Park Agencies, and Others

Tour operators and resource management agencies must come together to ensure envirocentric travel and use in national parks and their surrounding lands. Several efforts are needed. Park managers need to develop clear criteria for setting the limits of acceptable change for each ecosystem. Local communities, resource industries, tour operators, and national environmental organizations will each have viewpoints to consider.

Tour operators need to learn enough about the ecosystems they visit to understand the need for restrictions and limits. This same information can be used to enrich the visitor experience, as well.

Local communities need to be encouraged to take the long view in selecting a development path for their landscape and their economy. They may find partners in development and conservation by inviting the environmental groups to work with them to find solutions and the capital to make them happen.

Environmental organizations have the challenge of ensuring the objectiveness of the policy environment, where each interest group may hold a set of values very different from the next group. Promoting dialogue and facilitating conflict reduction will be continuing challenges. Providing independent analysis of official data, and independent data collection when the official data are in question, are also roles for the environmental organizations.

What the Traveling Public Can Do

The challenge of ecotourism depends on the traveling public. Through voting with dollars and pressuring with votes, the traveler can change the way the travel business treats natural areas. The first step is to be an informed traveler.

Make the effort to collect information before you travel, not just about the air fares and accommodations, but maps, guidebooks, history books, and field guides about the places you intend to visit. Get detailed information from your tour operator. Find out about the travel and lodging arrangements.

Find out if your tour operator adheres to a set of standards or code of ethics. Are these environmentally friendly? Do all of the links in the travel chain also adhere? Can you find and patronize an operator that follows the minimum disturbance approach?

Ask how food is purchased and how waste is disposed. This is a good time to ask about special dietary requirements such as organic or vegetarian food stuffs. Are non-plastic, low-energy alternatives used? Is glass and aluminum recycled?

How many people will be in your tour? How many other groups will be in the site or vicinity? Some parks and reserves have established limits for visitors overall or during certain seasons.

Does the tour use animal labor such as riding or pack animals? How are these animals treated? How is wildlife treated?

There is a certain amount of truth in the cliché "take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints." Yet today we may ask that eco-travelers leave even less. Stay on marked trails and avoid shortcuts that create paths for erosion or soil compaction -- politely called "social trails" but actually very real disturbances in fragile ecosystems. And unless you have reliable information to the contrary, avoid picking wild fruits and flowers and do not collect souvenirs. In fact, some articles of natural and cultural heritage should not be touched: rock and cave art, friezes, carvings, and other monuments may be harmed by dermal oils or even excessive carbon dioxide. Wildlife may be harmed or patterns disrupted by getting too close. Young can be particularly vulnerable and should not be approached if there is any doubt.

Become an eco-traveler who slows down and spends more time studying and learning about one place. This will not only increase your level of enjoyment, but also decrease your travel costs and probably contribute less carbon and ozone to global climate change, too.

Perhaps most important, vote with your money, support the operators who adhere to high standards and admonish the others to do better. The tour operators must be competitive to survive, but the eco-traveler can endeavor to see that only the green survive, and that the very greenest prosper.

Conclusion

Ensuring that nature-based travel establishes and maintains high standards will be a challenge for all parties. The roles are different for each player, but together they can find the ecologically sensitive and economically viable methods and practices that will ensure survival of the attractions of nature and culture, without harming the resources. These endeavors will be worthy of the label "ecotourism" at Levels 4 and 5, and the travelers who participate will be true ecotourists.

Will the parties see their ways to adhere to the highest principles and standards of ecotourism? Or will mass tourism overtake the site and result in the demise of this goose that lays golden eggs. The choice is ours to make, as travelers and as stewards for this Earth.

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