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Environmental Impact of Ecotourism

In APA Style

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ABSTRACT

The environmental impact of ecotourism is a wide area of study today. This paper will look at the variety of ways in which different people identify exactly what ecotourism is in relation to the environment, as well as the different marketing ploys being used to convince people that they are actually travelling in a more environmentally friendly manner. The necessity for education and the combined efforts of all those affected by this industry will be discussed as a requirement for making ecotourism as environmentally responsive as it promises to be. As well, it will be considered as to whether ecotourism is the answer in terms of environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism, as defined in 1993 by the Ecotourism Society, is "...purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people" (Weaver, 2001, p. 412). When reading a definition such as this, a person is led to believe that this truly is the answer to reducing the negative impact that the tourism industry is having on the environment and the steady depletion of scarce resources in many areas of the world. In reality, there is a wide variation in how people perceive nature and the environment, as well as the impact they are having on their surroundings. Perhaps it is the marketing techniques being employed that are to blame and it is strictly because people are naïve as well as overly trusting when it comes to travel. They believe that what is being marketed to them as ecotours and environmentally friendly travel is truly what it claims to be, when in reality it has become one of the best ploys the tourism industry has seen in years as a

new way to get people excited about travelling again. The question is, if all the stakeholders involved were to work together, and if proper education was attained by these same individuals and industries, could ecotourism truly be the answer to the long-term sustainability of the environment?

ATTITUDES & BELIEFS

As stated by the authors in the article “An Evaluation of Deep Ecotourism and Shallow Ecotourism,” “ecotourism can refer to a wide range of activities which might have different environmental impacts and attract people with different sets of values and motivations” (Acott, La Trobe, Howard, 1998, p. 238). For many individuals, it is strictly due to how they perceive nature as to why they feel it is important that the environment is preserved. There is deep controversy over whether nature is valuable within itself or whether it is only valued in its usefulness to humans. Those who value nature in terms of its long-term use for humans tend to think more in terms of economics first and preservation and conservation second. Although these things are obviously important, these people believe that the necessity of maintaining the environment and resources is to ensure that we have these things in the future to help to sustain the economy. Those who believe that nature is valuable within itself are the real ecotourists who will continue to work towards reducing the impact that people are having on the environment and resources. They are the ones who truly practise ecotourism in the sense that they immerse themselves in the local culture and utilize local resources as do the local people. They do not expect westernization in any way because they value nature and the environment for exactly what they are, with no desire to disturb them. While realizing that humans are an

integral part of nature and that interaction is inevitable, their impact will be as minimal as possible (Acott, La Trobe, Howard, 1998).

Unfortunately, the reality is that very few individuals actively seek out environmentally friendly ecotours. Perhaps the largest majority of tourists looking to travel in this manner are just plain innocent to it all. They truly believe that if it is advertised as being environmentally friendly, then that it must be (Weaver, 2001). These individuals, more so than any other, have been the prime target of the tourism industry's greatest marketing ploy — ecotourism.

MARKETING

The concept of ecotourism has been used to not only renew interest in what were already considered to be popular destinations, but also as a means to attract tourists to areas that lack the “sun and sand” advantage and have not previously been able to profit from the economic benefits of tourism (Zhenhua Liu, 2003). This has, unfortunately, led to the term “eco” being tacked on to virtually any type of holiday and tour “...in order to exploit public sensibility about the environment” (Stark, 2002, p. 103). “A tour advertised as environmentally friendly can be just as suspect as many of the products tarted up with green packaging in your grocery store” (Stark, 2002, p. 103). The sad part is that there are ecotours available that truly do respect the environment in addition to everything else that ecotourism is supposed to entail. However, unless the tourist is extremely knowledgeable when it comes to his or her environmental awareness, as well as respectful of nature as being a separate entity of its own, ecotourism is at the mercy of the abusive marketing techniques currently being employed.

A possible solution to this dilemma is to enlist all stakeholders involved in the tourism industry to put in place standards and regulations, as well as proper educational opportunities, to ensure that the enormous potential of true ecotourism does not pass us by before it is too late.

WORKING TOGETHER

In order to make ecotourism successful, all concerned parties must work together. From the government, environmental organizations, tourist businesses, and, most importantly, the local community, everybody can benefit: environmentally, economically, and socio-culturally. It only makes sense that the results that will ensure the most prosperity in all these areas are best achieved through working together.

First and foremost, “the government needs to set standards and monitor ecotourism projects, both government and private, setting environmental protection standards and carrying out environmental impact studies, and helping to implement the principles and practices of sound ecotourism” (Honey, 1999, p. 9). This can be carried out with the help of the private sector in particular as they quite often undertake studies prior to development that are not put to public use upon completion. This is just one example that could prove to benefit all involved, if resources can be shared to accommodate everyone’s needs and desires.

Policy creation, where everyone is involved in the design, can further help to benefit everyone. When standards are in place that help to protect the environment and resources, it can only make sense that true ecotourism can finally be appreciated. By working together to create this, the needs of all the stakeholders hopefully can be accommodated so that maximum benefits for all can be achieved.

Conceivably, those who will benefit the most from these implementations are the local people of the ecotourism destinations themselves. A study based in Costa Rica has shown that there is a need to "...incorporate greater local participation in protected area decision making and benefit sharing" (Stem, Lassoie, Lee, Deshler, Schelhas, 2003, p. 389). This study also shows that the local people are more inclined to practise good conservation behaviour and participate wholeheartedly in environmentally friendly practices when they are directly involved or are economically advantaged by the tourism industry. At present, a large portion of the industry is strictly controlled by the government and outside influences, creating animosity from the local culture as they see their precious environment and resources being utilized by tourists at a direct disadvantage to themselves. Enabling local people to be active participants in the creation and implementation of the regulations and policies by which they are forced to live will ultimately lead to a healthier, less hostile environment for all (Stem, Lassoie, Lee, Deshler, Schelhas, 2003).

Identifying the need for a philosophy of teamwork among all those involved in and affected by ecotourism leads to the important issue of education, and the significance of making everyone as knowledgeable as possible about the environmental impact of ecotourism.

EDUCATION

As stated previously, it is crucial that environmental impact studies remain a high priority for governments as well as all stakeholders in the ecotourism industries. They need to work together to ensure that everyone remains as informed as possible on all aspects of this widely evolving industry. It is presumptuous to assume that it is the

ecotourists themselves who are having the greatest impact on the environment when the government, organizations, and tour industry as a whole need to take more responsibility in educating people and sharing knowledge to reduce the overall impact that they are having on the environment. “One step toward ensuring ecotourism’s survival is helping to build a more discriminating and informed traveling public” (Honey, 1999, p. 9).

Unfortunately, what is generally being marketed to the public is the environmental pleasures involved with ecotourism, rather than the risks. As stated in *The Encyclopedia of Ecotourism*, there are two necessities involved in environmental education:

1. “Satisfying tourist demand for information regarding natural and cultural attractions, thereby providing a satisfying recreational experience.”
2. “Changing in a pro-environmental way, the knowledge, attitudes and/or behaviour of the tourist, with a view to minimizing impacts and producing a more environmentally and culturally aware citizen” (Weaver, 2001, p. 9).

At present, the first necessity is being satisfied with seemingly little regard for the second. This is knowledge that must be achieved in order to make ecotourism a more sustainable industry, rather than just another form of mass tourism, which is presently the direction in which it is heading.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS & SUSTAINABILITY

Many people believe that if ecotourism is carried out in the way it was meant to, it will be the answer to sustaining our environment from the current hazards of mass tourism. The concept of ecotourism as a whole, although appealing, needs to be looked at

in terms of the environment that it is affecting. Ultimately, different forms of activities cause different impacts in different ecosystems, therefore varying in their ecological significance. This leads back to knowledge. Through proper studies and education of all those affected by ecotourism, measures need to be taken to ensure that the utilization of different environments needs to be directly conducive to the long-term impact that use will have on them. Strategies need to be put in place that will ensure that standards and policies are upheld for any given area in order to obtain sustainability (Weaver, 2001). Implementation can then be placed into the hands of land management agencies who can take "...two main approaches to controlling impacts...they can harden the natural environment against impacts, typically through construction of infrastructure such as tracks or toilets...they can control visitors so as to limit the area, timing and type of impacts" (Weaver, 2001, p. 388).

From an individual perspective, attention must be drawn back to the earlier discussion in regards to how people perceive nature, the impact they are having on the environment, and what they foresee as necessary in order to sustain it. The perspective that needs to be achieved through education is that nature is valuable within itself without regard to its usefulness to humans (Acott, La Trobe, Howard, 1998). "Strongest sustainability will occur when people think more in terms of nature having more of an intrinsic value than extrinsic" (Acott, La Trobe, Howard, 1998, p. 241).

CONCLUSION

Ecotourism is a steadily growing trend that shows no signs of diminishing in the near future. Due to its nature, it ultimately is going to have the largest environmental impact, in many ways more so than any form of tourism in the past. "It is precisely these

more remote and pristine areas which ecotourists seek that are extremely fragile and sensitive to human impact, however lightly they tread, and most vulnerable to cultural disruption and environmental degradation” (Zhenhua Lui, 2003, p. 470). The necessity to properly educate people and work together as stakeholders in ecotourism’s future is more essential than ever. If we continue to think of nature in a solely economical and materialistic mind frame, we will not even be able to repair the damage we have already created, let alone move towards a more environmentally friendly mode of tourism (Stark, 2002).

“Tourists who are not normally environmentally friendly or aware of the impact they can have may benefit from ecotourism and attain experience that can reflect into other areas of their life” (Weaver, 2001, p. 9). Changing people’s attitudes, working together as a team, and providing the proper resources to allow people to gain the appropriate knowledge can all work towards a healthier tourist experience for all involved. We can only hope that these experiences will lead to the creation of a more sustainable environment as a whole and that “...a person who travels according to a deeper environmental consciousness will continue to pursue a sustainable lifestyle regardless of their location” (Acott, La Trobe, Howard, 1998, p. 240).

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