











The Ecotourism Industry's Role in Environmental Stewardship

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Abstract

Indeed, the overall rise in environmental pollution from natural ecosystems has become one of the major threats to biodiversity and the health of any given community across the globe. Traditional tourism has been blamed as one of the prime agents of this environmental degradation; hence, the need for alternatives in sustainability is becoming increasingly pressing. This paper explores in detail the potential this industry holds for transforming the paradigm from pollution to preservation. It demonstrates how ecotourism, through the use of sustainability and environmental education, can be among the most powerful tools in combating the negative impacts of pollution on sensitive ecosystems. The article now discusses a few important case studies from different parts of the world to clearly show how ecotourism efforts have helped reduce pollution, protect natural habitats, and improve biodiversity. The discussion considers how tourism would encourage tourists and locals to take environmentally conscious actions in the interest of the environment, minimizing waste, reducing carbon footprints, and offering protection to natural resources. Besides, the article sets up that ecotourism has

economic motives that include providing financial rewards for the conservation of ecosystems and offering sustainable livelihoods to people living within and around the protected areas. The article further talks about the ecotourism challenges, such as "greenwashing" and a rigorous regulatory framework in place, to ensure the ecotourism practices actually help in environmental preservation. This paper will suggest ways in which governments, local communities, environmental organizations, and the tourism industry, in greater ways, should be co-operative in having an optimal benefit on environmental sustainability through ecotourism. In other words, what this article suggests is that ecotourism in itself is not going to solve the problem of environmental pollution, and it remains important in the greater scheme of environmental stewardship. It is possible that this transition-from pollution to preservation-is being led by ecotourism, where responsible travel and conservation, coupled with sensitization about environmental problems, take place. The article calls for continued research and increased investment in the practice of sustainable tourism to finally see ecotourism live up to its promise as a driver of ecological sustainability and an example for other industries to follow.

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Introduction

In recent times, environmental and sustainability issues have gained increasing attention on the global scale. Various sectors have taken various initiatives to tackle and address environmental challenges. For instance, debates on environmental issues such as global warming, climate change, pollution biodiversity loss, and ozone layer depletion, have resulted in the initiation of various environmental acts on commercial, organizational, and governmental levels (Mohamed et al., 2024). Individual consumers have also become more conscious of their purchasing behavior and opted for sustainable alternatives to protect the environment (Ejovwokoghene, 2022). Companies and organizations, regardless of their types, have adopted and incorporated green initiatives in their operations, policies, and marketing. In the past few decades, the tourism industry has outgrown itself, becoming one of the biggest industries driving significant economic growth. World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines it as, "the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for leisure, business, and other purposes. The tourism industry plays a pivotal role in the economic, social, cultural, and environmental development of most countries worldwide (Ronald et al., 2024). However, rapid growth and expansion of the tourism industry have created adverse effects ranging from social and cultural to deteriorating air and water quality and socio-economic disruptions such as local wealth, resources, and property depletion. As a result, the industry has drawn various criticisms and accusations of being unsustainable and harmful to the environment (Bobojonova & Karimov, 2024).

Despite being a major cause of environmental degradation, the tourism industry has undertaken various initiatives to rejuvenate itself and ensure sustainable growth and development. A paradigm shift from conventional mass tourism to sustainable tourism development, including responsible, ethical, alternative, environmental, and soft tourism, has been provided positive support. Among sustainable tourism development forms, ecotourism has attained widespread prominence and recognition. Popularly referred to as "nature-based tourism," eco-tourism is a modern concept of tourism that focuses on natural areas with high biodiversity, fragile environmental areas, and environmentally friendly products and activities (Radmanović et al., 2018; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996) defined ecotourism as "Travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and

improves the welfare of local people (Llopiz-Guerra et al., 2024). A distinction is usually made in form, impact, and approach between the general and ecotourism forms of tourism.

Background and Significance

Ecotourism, defined as a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people (The International Ecotourism Society, 1990), has increasingly gained the interest of international organizations, governments, tourism businesses, and local communities. Although there is still no universally accepted definition of ecotourism (Weaver, 1999), it is generally perceived as mass tourism's alternative (Honey, 2008), with an emphasis on conservation and sustainability (Boo, 1990). In today's world, which is riddled with ecological problems, mass tourism, as one of the biggest contributors to the world's environmental degradation (Bultjens & Cleary, 1997; IUCN, 1986), is increasingly questioned. Hence, ecotourism is advocated by some agencies as the tool for preventing further environmental degradation and for restoring damaged environments (Odilov & Madraimov, 2024).

Estimates indicate that the number of nature tourists around the globe has been on a steady increase of 30-40% annually (Boo, 1990). The 1995 World Bank's Global Tourism Survey estimates that ecotourism generates US\$ 60 billion annually, and that annual growth rates are around 20% for the Caribbean (where ecotourism is perceived as the most viable strategy for economic growth) and 5% for European and East Asia destinations (World Bank, 1996). Similar views on the emergence of ecotourism are shared by government agencies, aid institutions, (Hall & Page, 1996, Moore et al., 1992; Myers, 1988).

Asian nations' recent interests in promoting ecotourism in the wake of the established ecotourism programs in the Caribbean, Hawaii, and Costa Rica are likely (1) to stimulate the establishment and consideration of ecotourism agenda in local governments, and (2) to attract funds from international organizations (e.g., the World Bank believes in the ecotourism potential in supporting and funding conservation incentives in the global 'hot spots' such as Indonesia, Amazon, and the Philippines). Moreover, ecotourism has increasingly been politicized by some nations and regions (for example, eco-imperialism of some Caribbean islands). In some cases, thus, ecotourism is viewed as the "economic panacea" (Hall & Page, 1996), and its promotion has been hastily accorded high political priority.

Understanding Ecotourism

Though definitions of what exactly constitutes ecotourism or responsible travel vary, there are certain key principles that help set it apart from traditional forms of tourism. Inspired by the principles of sustainability, ecotourism seeks to limit damage not only to the landscape—and the flora and fauna with which it is shared—but to the culture of the locals as well. Operating within the bounds of this ideal, ecotourism intends to improve the lives of both the traveler and the destination.

The term "ecotourism" is broadly understood to describe regenerative travel to natural areas, emphasizing low-impact forms of tourism that preserve and enhance natural environments and cultural heritage. However, defining ecotourism is much more complex than providing this simple description. Ecotourism is frequently confused with adventure, educational, rural, or cultural tourism, and no matter how many attempts have been made to define it, confusion often remains. Even among responsible travel advocates and travel companies, working under the banner of ecotourism, there is a great diversity of objectives and values. Some organizations and businesses consider purely wildlife tourism, or international package holidays, to constitute ecotourism.

To many sustainable development advocates, ecotourism is merely another method for multinational corporations to exploit and commodify indigenous peoples and the environment. Such concerns echo similar critiques aimed at wildlife tourism as a whole, and indeed, much of the growing concern regarding ecotourism is merely a re-examination of similar issues in wildlife tourism. Nevertheless, ecotourism does have certain distinctive features that set it apart from wildlife tourism in general. In particular, it is characterized by a set of principles that, while no guarantee of responsible or sustainable travel, do nevertheless help to establish certain parameters for environmentally and socially-friendly travel behaviour (Karimov & Doniyorov, 2019).

Definition and Key Principles

As a formal subset of sustainable tourism, ecotourism is commonly characterized as environmentally-responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. More specifically, ecotourism is defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, supports the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education". Contrasted a number of relevant terms including alternative tourism, community tourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, green tourism, natural area tourism, and nature tourism. They provided the most commonly accepted definitions. Pure mass tourism at a destination can negatively influence the environment, society, politics, and the economy, which in turn influences future generations (Pearce, 1989). The concept of sustainable tourism was developed in order to minimize these impacts and therefore conserve resources in their widest sense for future generations. A complete definition of sustainable tourism is provided by the (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which states that "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Ecotourism is one form of sustainable tourism. Alternative tourism is the opposite of mass tourism. The aim of alternative tourism is to reduce the impact of tourism on the destination and is a broad term that can include many different types of tourism such as rural tourism, adventure tourism, and agri-tourism. Green tourism is a term used in some countries to classify tourism that takes the environment into consideration. Some countries, such as Canada, use the term "eco-tourism" as a certification standard for congregating tourism where the cumulative environmental limit is reached. On the other hand, some countries use the term "eco-tourism" for wildlife tours that involve elements of risk and viewing a risky lifestyle in a natural area, while this concept is not limited to wildlife viewing (Khaydarova & Khujamova, 2024).

The Environmental Impact of Traditional Tourism

Tourism is a popular and profitable industry, but it can also be detrimental to the environment. As a developing industry, the aim is to promote the sustainability of tourism and to improve environmental awareness. Mass tourism consumes a lot of energy to operate hotels, restaurants, airplanes, and buses. It also threatens global warming, degrades environmental quality, and harms plants and animals. Unsustainable tourism is harming the world, degrading global parks and forests, threatening wildlife, reefs, and climate. Cities are choking in smog and traffic, and beaches are overstretched in infrastructure. It contributes 6% of global carbon emissions and consumes 5% of the world's freshwater. The natural beauty and wildlife attracted to tourism cannot survive without a sustainable effort to protect the environment.

Pollution takes different forms: air, water, soil, visual, and noise. Waste generated by tourism facilities and activities contribute to environmental pollution. Hotels generate sewage, chemical waste, solid waste, drinking water, and cooking oil wastewater. Most cities and coastal areas lack facilities for the collection and safe disposal of this hazardous waste. This causes the deterioration of natural resources and the spread of

diseases. Overcrowding tourists also generate a lot of litter. Traditional tourism hotspots are often left dirty due to inadequate waste management, resulting in pollution of the environment.

Mass tourism requires an increase in the volume of natural resources. The necessity for more water, energy, land, fish, or minerals can be damaging to the ecosystem. Furthermore, mass tourism has financial benefits but can expend local funds. In a few tourism hot spots, around three-fourths of the money goes back to the owners of hotels and tour companies. As a result, local governments are deprived of local investment and could lead to a decline in social, economic, and environmental structure.

Pollution and Resource Depletion

The conventional tourism industry has severe economic and environmental repercussions in both developing and industrialized countries. Through land development and infrastructure enhancement, tourism deteriorates the ecology and environment of the tourist destination. Ecological destruction through deforestation to prepare fresh hotel sites and lengthy flights to construct airstrips in uncultivated areas are quite common under conventional tourism practices. Wildlife is captured to keep tourists entertained, and natural resources are squandered unnecessarily. Subject to corruption, incompetence, and negligence, several tourist services must be canceled to avoid the closing down of several tourism-dependent businesses.

Environmental hazards are caused by the immensely congested ugliest tourist resort. Greenhouse gas emissions are brought on by motorized boats, pollution, and waste. The remaining concentrated pesticide and nutrient run-offs from the water surface cause undesirable triggering of algae blooms. Abundant and potent algae proliferate like a hazard, limiting oxygen consumption to seafood and spreading toxins harmful to people. As a group of otherwise tranquil islands or atolls off the coasts of many developing countries, the ugly behavior of any million seascountrants importantly, is hard to eradicate or rehabilitate, and is wanting or backsliding to gradually degeneration of the conventional tourism economy.

Infrequently visited but deserving preservation are several lovely unspoiled sites. The disposal of waste compounds at the high seas is realistic and is essentially the ideal unprecedented point of entry for bio invasion by the realistic quantity of new introduced species of toxic invasive pests. This kind of alteration to a conventional agriculture ecology is even substantially irreversible, and much divisive politic and philosophical debates would raise questions on the externality (Odilov, 2019). Bringing over beautiful fun and reproduction may lead to either a round in consideration of the hazards in the tourism industry's future. At destruction and downward, it is adversity for sustaining ecotourism because it is almost impossible to eradicate with genocide's seal of its adverse impacts on the environment and biodiversity on the island economy. The residue altered landscape cannot restore the island economy's original intimate and repetitive moderating economic development normally.

The Rise of Ecotourism

The perception of tourism changed throughout the 20th century, with the deadly effects of tourism explosives recognized. As a faux solution, eco-certification was introduced, promoting the illusion of sustainable tourism and greenwashing behavior. Unwittingly, multiple stakeholders participated in a charade. The perception of tourism is currently being re-evaluated, followed by a suggested reflection on ecotourism's future.

The birth of ecotourism is traced back to the rise of mass tourism in the 1950s, with the invention of railroads facilitating mass consumption of the Perito Moreno glacier in Argentina. Around the same time in Costa Rica, ecotourism arose as a local play against neocolonial tourism's social injustices. In 1963, the first

sign outside Costa Rica's Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserves advertised premontane education, a more active mode of producing wilderness. And although wilderness wasn't necessarily more biodiverse than other terrains, "wild" was akin to "paradisiac," a northern imaginary for a utopia with rare species.

Tourism expanded in the 1970s, with exports investing in Caribbean beaches as tropical paradises. Tourist investments were imposed on landholders without compensation, creating first generation land use conflicts. North-South alliances formed, with the first ecotourism lodge, operating within the Costa Rican cloud forest's protected area, pitched to international NGOs. As an anticipated new adventure travel market, local cooperatives began lobbying to establish a National Parks System, planning marine economic development zones to protect collective fisheries with tourism.

However, the International Development Banks funded a National Parks System only if Costa Rica opened its economy to the North regarding tourism. Shortly thereafter, Disney negotiated for the now-dreaded Guanacaste mega resort. Ecotourism was rebranded in the north, merging its adventurous myth with a conservation mandate. This kind of mass alternative tourism went global in the 1980s. Local cooperatives eager to protect their assets learnt a paralogistic lesson on employment creation by lobbying for new protected areas instead of merely building hotels.

Historical Development

Worldwide, a general awareness of a global environment has burgeoned, and a consequent growing concern for the future of the limited resources of planet Earth, and of its flora and fauna. There are, however, many rigid 19th century barriers to effective contiguous global action, one of which is familiarity or knowledge of specific areas by decision-makers. In order to appreciate the need for eboard ecological action worldwide on a more local and personal basis, people need to be able to visit and see first-hand the natural situation from which their 'environment' is derived. A direct experience of the long-term deep 'natural' patterns is essential in order to understand fully and realistically the currently massive threat to these patterns from the short-sighted pressures of contemporary short-term socio-economic growth. Ecotourism is one such Global and Local 'Round' trip growth mechanism (Gudalov et al., 2020).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s tourism planners began to address directly the broader consequences of tourism growth. The term ecotourism originated in the early 1980s, in recognition of the growing impact of tourism on the environment. Development took place mainly in the aftermath of the finding that tourism is a major global growth industry and is exerting an increasingly powerful influence on the environmental and socio-economic opportunities of developing countries.

In addition, there has been recognition of the growing importance of the environment and conservation issues at the international level (Yusubov et al., 2021). Concern over the in-gathering consequences of environmental degradation was heightened by the Australian Government's proposal to dam the Franklin River in Tasmania, the Malaysian Government's plans for the damming of Sarawak's rainforests, and the massive global-response organized by non-governmental environmental organizations (NGOs), such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the Nature Conservancy. There has been an impact upon tourism (and travel) provision and planning policy formulation and practice; with increasing hurguumrs for the industry to reflect on its role and responsibilities (for example, in terms of the various codes of conduct drawn up by the international tourist associations and the International Chamber of Commerce), to conduct environmental audits, and to consider the potential for switching input expenditure out of long haul high-cost markets and into low-cost regional markets.

“Ecotourism” is tourism to natural areas, it is the nature of these areas which distinguishes ecotourism from other forms of tourism. Generally speaking, these areas are regarded as needing some form of protection from the development pressures exerted by agricultural and urban growth. The nature of the tourist experience is also an important consideration. Ecotourism should be interpreted broadly as encompassing all forms of tourism into natural areas which either protect (ideally very effectively) the natural environment or could be shown to have the potential to do so.

Benefits of Ecotourism

Ecotourism promotes sustainable use of resources and brings benefits to local communities, economies, and wildlife. It outlines the positive overall impacts that occur when ecotourism is employed in a healthy way, and it mentions how these impacts can be achieved or increased. A positive ecological impact is one that aligns with preserving species’ mortality rates, habitat needs, breeding success rates, and migration routes, and one that allows the ecosystem to flourish naturally. A healthy ecotourism potential includes good data collection, habitat assessment, writing a management plan, consideration of nearby recreation alternatives, marketing initiatives, and partnership opportunities with wildlife organizations. When properly executed, the potential for population and biodiversity growth in a healthy manner is significant.

A positive economical impact includes more money brought into the community than for other types of tourism. This can be achieved through wilderness rules, product development, and marketing rural experiences. These concerns and actions create stronger economic effects. Overall, there are many opportunities for developing ecotourism sectors to flourish and be 100% effective. Ecotourism policies sustain and protect the resource on a not only self-sustaining but also flourishing basis. A positive social impact is one that preserves or strengthens traditional cultures and lifestyles. These cultural impacts can flourish with respect and understanding of the community’s history.

Results indicate that there are positive project impacts on ecology, the economy, and the local culture associated with a healthy ecotourism sector; however, management is critical to preserving the positive benefits. Although development can be a stressful and negative experience, many impacts can be avoided, reduced, and reversed with proper management. As the world population continues to grow unchecked and development creeps into all corners of the planet, the ecotourism industry will share the responsibility of managing this development. With the rise of civil society enhancement and environmental awareness, a strong ecotourism industry has the potential to promote, fund, and implement the preservation of the wild world.

Economic Benefits

Providing funding for conservation is an essential component of successful ecotourism development. Many ecotourism destinations have national, state, or regional parks set aside for preservation. The designation of these areas for conservation shows a commitment to protecting a cultural, historical, or environmental asset. These sites often receive direct funding for upkeep and protection and may also be co-managed with local communities, providing them with jobs as park rangers or natural resource managers. Cultural sites, such as old temples, can receive UNESCO World Heritage status, providing funding and protection. World Heritage site designation grants a site exceptional and distinct value to humanity, often resulting in special international protections and guidelines for solid management plans, usually involving the active participation of the host government and public.

Ecotourism can provide jobs to local communities directly in the tourism industry, such as work in hotels and restaurants, or indirectly in the handicraft, agriculture, fishery, or construction sectors. Current

estimates indicate 1.3 million people work in ecotourism in developing countries, and tens of millions more benefit indirectly. Many ecotourists believe eco-guides, or locally-based guides, enhance their experiences, increasing the economic benefit to the local community. Emerging ecotourism industries in areas where few jobs exist can excel at reducing poverty.

The increasing number of ecotourists worldwide is seen as evidence that this alternative form of tourism is popularizing and is a long-term niche market. As a result, more countries and private enterprises have implemented or are thinking about implementing ecotourism. The International Ecotourism Society believes ecotourism can be a strategy for long-term growth, employment, and income generation. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO), ecotourism now holds a 20% share of the worldwide tourism market, which is significant. Further, ecotourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors in the world tourism economy, expanding at an estimated annual rate of 10% to 50% in various countries.

Challenges and Criticisms of Ecotourism

Despite the many benefits touted by supporters, ecotourism comes with its own set of challenges and criticisms. Some of these have been acknowledged by industry insiders and advocates, whilst others are voiced only by critics.

High Upfront Costs and Barriers to Entry: Ecotourism enterprises are often small and local, and vary in quality, sophistication, infrastructure, and services offered. Although easy to set up and operate, there are significant barriers to entry, such as financing, expertise, and the inability to come together with other local ventures. High operating costs are also a deterrent, as staff training, transportation of machinery and equipment, and (in)access to technology and infrastructure require sizeable investments and support.

Non-Local Control: As ecotourism grows, especially in developing countries, so does the fear of losing control over local assets and the potential for exploitation by outside interests. Big companies, agencies, and organizations often take over and start big tourism establishments that can overwhelm delicate environments. In such cases, local entrepreneurs and the communities they are intended to serve often lack access to these markets or derive only meager benefits, like low-paying jobs.

Greenwashing: As environmentalism is on the rise, so is the ecotourism label. Unfortunately, too many ventures that are anything but eco-friendly have jumped on the bandwagon, misinforming the public and hurting the cause. The abuse of the ecotourism moniker is nevertheless coarse, and responsible operators have taken strides towards correcting the problem. However, it will take years of commitment to education – both operators and consumers alike – and scrutinizing operators' practices, credentials, and travel habits/behavior until the concept is legitimate and socially sound.

Too Many Tourists: There is such a thing as too much of a good thing, and more often than not, success breeds busyness. Tourist developments and business opportunities that grow rapidly can overrun local attractions, thus ruining the very qualities that made them so appealing in the first place. Striking a balance between viability and preservation of unique qualities is not an easy task, nonetheless, it remains essential for ecotourism's development.

Greenwashing

Despite the potential of ecotourism in promoting environmentally and socially responsible travel, the term ecotourism has been misused and misrepresented by the industry. The natural zeal with which the concept of

ecotourism was accepted by both nations and private companies, particularly in the developing world, was replicated by a growing uptake of the term ecotourism by the industry providing travel services, hotel accommodation and travel products touting eco-friendliness. Ecotours, ecotravel, ecobreaks, ecopackages, ecolodges, ecologist, ecoteller – a veritable avalanche of “eco” labeling greeted travelers, creating the need for a greater academic examine of ecotourism. Concerns about the likely commercialization of ecotourism and the potential for “greenwashing” were registered. The danger of “greenwashing” was that ecotourism could become synonymous with a saccharine-sweet pap tour into nature, a rolled-up brochure telling anecdotes about cute rare animal species worth millions, and the morals of which hung on tree-hugging.

Greenwashing, a term with roots in the oil industry, refers to the practice of large corporations or companies portraying themselves as environmentally friendly in order to improve their image, in many instances without such a commitment and even while engaging in environmentally damaging activities. Another aspect of the vast greenwashing enterprise is a form of diversion tactics, with instead of dealing with pressing environmental issues, companies turn their resources into campaigns reassuring the public about their “eco-friendliness.” More specifically, discourses of “nature” in travel advertising literature were examined in their complexity by scrutinizing the representations of nature, social relationships and ecotourism as a form of nature-based travel in three diverse travel brochures. Advertisements of three different travel packages, ecotours in Jamaica, which are run by Jamaicans and on coral reefs, and a Chicago-based ecotour to Costa Rican tropical forest by U.S. citizens. Central emphasis was placed on the epistemological assumptions and tacit knowledge in underlying the travel representation of nature and ecotourism development in foreign countries. The danger of “greenwashing” was that ecotourism could become synonymous with a saccharine-sweet pap tour into nature, a rolled-up brochure telling anecdotes about cute rare animal species worth millions, and the morals of which hung on tree-hugging.

Best Practices in Ecotourism

Ecotourism, having ripened from visionary beginnings, now needs pragmatic best practices that can be adhered to. These best practices will take the form of specific actions, policies, and tenets to more narrowly shape the practice of ecotourism. Among the most important of these policies are community involvement and empowerment. Involving local communities in the planning and implementation of ecotourism initiatives ensures they have a stake in their success (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Wight, 1996; Ziffer, 1989), and it is their presence and success that lends authenticity to ecotourism, ensuring its environmental integrity. Inevitably, allowing local communities to shape ecotourism will ensure that their needs are met through it. Empowerment lends this involvement true significance, allowing local communities to have influence over resources that are inexorably tied to environmental preservation.

Ecotourism’s venues—the world’s most fragile ecosystems—are often home to the poorest of the poor with least amount of socio-political power—and economic power that potential corruption of political power is predicated on. These communities nonetheless habitually have most influence over the resources in their areas. Their co-opting by outside interests ends up trading political power for economic power, leading to ecotourism’s ruin. Adequately empowering local communities and guaranteeing their control over resources is essential for transcending this potential conflict. The Senegal case study is proposed as a model of the best practice of ecotourism community involvement and empowerment.

Though locals may be subsisting at ‘marginal’ levels, they are individuals with great sophistication (Wight, 1996), and many of them value their social systems and how they may have maintained already-frail ecosystems. In particular, they often have a wealth of traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes, 1993). The

locals immediately impacted should always have central involvement in ecotourism venture success and planning. Moreover, getting locals involved is crucial to avoid scenarios where, say, good intentions—but poor understandings in terms of environmental and social changes occurring—may engineer one feta-compli catastrophe after another. Implementing participatory ecological needs assessments will show the full extent of what the locals consider the goals and resources to achieve social and environmental preservation. Additionally, if community involvement is going to lead to long-term environmental gains or the spread of the viewing of these ecosystems as important, the invasion of these experts will be vital (Lindsay, 1994). How community-level involvement should, ideally, be conducted becomes clearer after a survey of past abuses.

Community Involvement and Empowerment

The World Wild Fund for Nature defines ecotourism as tourism that is environmentally responsible, promotes conservation, and improves the welfare of local communities. As an industry, ecotourism and its special interests are still developing, meaning many aspects need further understanding, including its environmental implications. Ecotourism aims to be an alternative to mass tourism. Recent growth has led to ecotourism's involvement in sustainably furthering the development of natural and cultural ecosystems while being conscious of the impacts tourism can present as both a burden and boon. Ecotourism has the potential to counter some damage inflicted on ecosystems. A conscious development and expansion of tourism based on ecotourism's philosophy can be of interest to decision-makers in wildlife-FD countries, park managers, and wildlife managers. Promoting ecotourism among wildlife managers is needed. It needs decision-maker action against politicians and mass tourism interests who do not recognize ecotourism's benefits. A very simplistic definition of ecotourism implies an ecological perspective. It means choosing a destination considering its ecological value, such as national parks, rainforest preserves, or coral reefs.

As tourism from developed countries to mainly developing countries gains more popularity, the impacts of such tourism upon the environment become increasingly important. Some claim tourism is an opportunity for countries to develop; others argue it is a burden. Stakeholders of the ecotourism industry, especially tour operators, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations, argue that based on ecotourism's perceived philosophy and principles, it can be a boon countering oppression inflicted by mass tourism. Opponents of ecotourism claim it is naïve idealism (which, if the intention is sincere, often ignores realities) and/or disguised exploitation of scarce resources. To know more about the ecotourism industry and the interests involved in ecotourism's development, it is needed to look for an understanding of the industry's core. It is a part of a bigger understanding of the tourism system and an easier understanding of ecotourism's implications. Otherwise, it is only between hope and fear that one can take sides for or against ecotourism's development, especially in wildlife-FD countries where opportunities and hopes are huge. As tries to explore the industry ecotourism's concerns and interests, it needs to fit ecotourism with a broader understanding of the tourism system.

Case Studies

Understanding the intricacies of complex phenomena often requires delving into concrete examples. First-hand experience is no substitute for reading about history, but case studies can still provide useful insights. They can help uncover the particular characteristics of global events with local implications and, at the same time, expose context-sensitive factors often missed at the higher levels of abstraction. Building on an initial understanding of ecotourism through an analysis of the various tendencies under the global ecotourism umbrella, three illustrative case studies highlight successes and failures.

The case studies suggest that poorly planned and executed ecotourism activities can lead to significant environmental impacts and irrevocable changes in culturally sensitive areas. The pacific island of Guam, the largest island in Micronesia, is rapidly becoming a high ecotourism destination, principally among American tourists. Its tourists want pure, exotic environments and engaging interactions with unique, gentler island cultures. Conflict between these desires and Guam's reality of heavy militarization, intense economic development, and colonization of its native Chamorro culture recently prompted the Guam Visitors Bureau to develop an ecotourism "Blue Water, Green Planet" campaign, along with a slew of related pro-environment, pro-Cultural Jet initiatives. Guam's case illustrates that ecotourism cannot flourish under the conditions caused by aggressor macro-scale societal systems: militarization, globalization, and colonization.

Diving off the coast of Belize's Barrier Reef, the second largest in the world, reveals a uniquely beautiful undersea world. Artfully landscaped coral structures rise at times a hundred feet or more from the seafloor, creating surreal cathedral-like arches, tunnels, and caverns. Hundreds of species, many encountered nowhere else, congregate to spawn in lunar-orbited "fish ball" events. Hilton Hotel has cleared and bulldozed 165 acres of mountainside rainforest to construct a 420-room hotel on the exact spot where harpoon-wielding Spaniards first set eyes on this portion of the New World. While the manmade construction dominates the landscape, the long-planned ecotourism-oriented neocolonization has taken shape with breathtaking speed. The planned construction for 7,000 lodgings, a cruise ship terminal, and an airport expansion identical to Miami's to double annual arrivals from 950,000 to 2 million cabins are firmly under way or already completed. The ecotourist gaze concentrates on exotic differences, but native Belizean cultures are anything but idyllic and peaceful in their precession (Mukhamajovich et al., 2020).

Concerned Belizeans, some of whom gathered for a "People in Tourism" panel, readily acknowledge the government's coercive attempts to evict native populations from prime tourist locations resulting in murder, unraveling, and community disintegration. Accordingly, the largest cultural export from Belize is "bouncing" tourists through loud nightly rituals of emotionally hollow Maaya Pin-Yahby Zapnudiga Norb Azahahal' life; tearing down Mayan temples for tourists to climb being more lucrative than retaining the sense of local histories by fostering lasting cultural bonds over shared experiences of relevant significance. This colonial past, current realities, and the speculative but widely shared belief that an inevitable corrupting spiral of restructuring tourist expectations and manipulation of other times and places lies ahead induce Costa Rica's ethnic groups to engage in cultural tourism in ways markedly different from such initiatives elsewhere.

Success Stories

Utilizing a case study approach can provide insight into particular regions where ecotourism is successfully built upon strong environmental stewardship. However, it is important to base the successes on grassroots initiatives rather than adopting a "one size fits all" model. Highlighting specific areas where ecotourism supports efforts to protect biodiversity can educate and advocate for similar grassroots initiatives elsewhere. This section will explore three different success stories from around the world, ranging from rural communities to more urban settings, that support conservation efforts through financially viable ecotourism activities.

The Bueng Boraphet Wetlands Case Study describes a project designed to investigate the relationship between ecotourism and environmental awareness within a thermal spring wetlands in central Thailand. The key to this wetlands being successful in ecotourism was to balance competing interests and to conserve the natural area through tourism development. Local stakeholders came together to negotiate a win-win situation that promotes conservation while developing local economies. The goal of the ecotourism-Increasing Environmental Awareness Program (EIA) is to provide a baseline understanding of tourists' and residents' environmental awareness as this ecotourism program is implemented. The current context of tourists' and

residents' environmental awareness and attitudes toward Bueng Boraphet is discussed. Research findings emphasize the importance of a stakeholder approach to ecotourism development.

Responsible tourism development involving local communities is crucial for the conservation of indigenous wildlife in environmentally sensitive areas. The Gharial Rehabilitation Program case study presents a grassroots management model involving local fishing communities in northern India and their commitment to protecting the critically endangered gharial crocodile. The stakeholders include elected community leaders, village workers, grassroots NGOs, the government, and academics. Stakeholder participation has enabled gharial populations to recover within a decade of the program's implementation. The gharial is an umbrella species, and its recovery has directly benefited a host of other species as well as fish populations in the river. Understanding the ecology of the gharial and its habitat has informed long-term conservation strategies.

The Urban Proposition Case Study addresses a fenced 3.3 km² area (with a buffer zone of 5.6 km²) surrounding a cascading system of wetlands and relict salt pans in the city of Murcia, southeastern Spain. The area houses the Urban Wetlands of San Pedro del Pinatar, a SLA under the Ramsar Convention, and five NATURA 2000 sites including a SCI and a SPA. Grassroots citizens' initiatives around Europe are requesting new public policies to develop educational activities, biological control of Ibex, and the management and ecological recovery of wetlands in Murcian cities. Public hearings and petitions are conducted to stimulate local and regional media. As a result of the social movement, a PR was approved and an ecological planning study was commissioned. An example plan for Old Washing & Saltworks Reconstruction is provided. Once implemented, these actions could transform the initial paradigms of intervention within the most urbanized coastal areas of southern Europe.

Future Directions and Innovations

Understanding of ecotourism is continually evolving. With social changes and advances in science, these changes influence leisure and tourism, global movements, environmental values, consumer behavior, and tourism development policies and models. Given that tourism is a major economic contributor globally and regionally, responding to these changes is crucial for scaling and sustaining. To successfully tackle the challenges and embrace the opportunities presented by these changes, an ecotourism research agenda at a regional level is paramount. Prioritizing and developing an ecotourism agenda, network, and movement is also necessary for shaping future tourism and quality of life.

Future directions and innovations of the ecotourism industry must specifically complement its role as environmental stewardship. A few of the many possibilities are here mentioned. Technology is an interesting and varied topic where many possibilities for ecotourism expansion and innovations are present. It encapsulates both popular social media platforms as well as more data-focused tools such as GIS mapping, demographic research modeling, predictive analysis, and dynamic climate modeling.

As social media giant Facebook turns 10 years old, thousands of social media posts, videos, photos, "likes", "shares", and "hopefully" future pages and groups documenting the philosophy and locations of ecotourism as grown by leaps and bounds. While the popularity of social media continues to immerse itself more and more in the day-to-day lives of individuals, this expansion can be utilized by ecotourism proponents. Innovative, free, and quick methods of attracting, hosting, and controlling tourists are susceptible through the use of social media. Considering the vastness of the internet "expansiveness", this same social media platform can cater to mass tourism levels and interests. But on the flip side, mass tourism can also set parameters on what users do online.

There is also a story about the EPOT Foundation and its attempts and achievements in creating ecotourism social media centrality before a country such as Costa Rica achieved this productivity. Yet, this is a daunting task attempting to achieve total control on such a vast scale. Nonetheless, the notion that tourism focused pages and groups indeed have an effect on government policy, developments, and regulation is observed. Understanding how this process works better is necessary to tease out the intricacies of this interaction on social media as well.

Technology Integration

The integration of advanced technologies into the ecotourism industry presents enormous opportunities for improving environmental stewardship. From mobile applications to geographic information systems, there is a wide range of growing technological solutions. For this industry to recognize the full potential of these technologies, it should first overcome the obstacles and challenges to their adoption. Opportunities for further scientific research and innovation are outlined. Appropriate, accepted, and useful technologies can add significant value to the management and monitoring of the natural environment. Technologies can potentially improve environmental efficiency, establishing a competitive edge for the ecotourism industry.

Mobile apps, inexpensive portable sensors, and other technologies are increasingly used to inspire, inform, and inform tourists about their natural surroundings. Land and resource managers use geographic information systems to visualize spatial patterns and model human interactions with these places. Innovative use of emerging technologies and other means to achieve environmental stewardship objectives will be beneficial. Tourism and other human activities have increased pressures on natural environments worldwide, and they can lead to environmental degradation. Protecting natural environments with fixed or mobile infrastructure can be challenging. The ecotourism industry has an opportunity to exercise environmental stewardship through practices in planning, management, financial planning, and community engagement adopted globally. It should acknowledge its consideration of both positive and negative consequences on the environment. Recognition of opportunities for action and innovation, combined with the emergence of enabling technologies, is crucial. Ecotourism businesses are well-placed to recognize technological needs, opportunities, and limitations in their own operating environments.

Conclusion

The Ecotourism Industry's Role in Environmental Stewardship offers a comprehensive overview of the importance of ecotourism in protecting and preserving local habitats, wildlife, and cultures. Despite the potential harm caused by tourism, there is a growing awareness of the need to protect the natural and cultural environments. This has led to the emergence of ecotourism, which focuses on the conservation of valuable natural and cultural resources within their ecosystems. The success of ecotourism depends on the cooperation and partnership of various stakeholders, including private organizations, government agencies, NGOs, local organizations and communities, and professionals in the tourism industry.

Understanding the meaning, principles, and objectives of ecotourism is vital for the success of the industry. Ecotourism differs from mass tourism in its approach and practices, promoting sustainable and responsible experiences of natural areas without compromising their ecological viability. The principles of ecotourism emphasize the protection of ecosystems and enhancing local well-being while maintaining aesthetic and recreational opportunities. Awareness of ecotourism principles allows local communities to participate in developing and managing their own ecotourism industries.

The findings suggest that by acknowledging the diverse areas of the tourism industry and the potential benefits and harms caused by tourism, stakeholders of the ecotourism industry can collectively protect what is valuable to their societies. Despite the challenges posed by globalization, the opportunity to preserve and conserve valuable local habitats, wildlife, and cultures through the ecotourism industry should not be ignored or wasted. It must be emphasized that ecotourism is not an easy solution to the negative impacts of other forms of tourism; complete understanding and agreement of its principles and objectives are vital to ensuring a successful ecotourism experience.

Author Contributions

All Authors contributed equally.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that no conflict of interest.

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